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Dispatches from Flyover Country: Four Appraisals of Impacts of Trump’s Immigration Policy on Families, Schools, and Communities

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Abstract

A university professor and high school ESL teacher, both based in Lincoln Nebraska, each write two short essays that detail implications of the Trump administration immigration policies for students, teachers, schools, and communities. The first two dispatches come from the transition period (after Trump won but while Obama still presided) while the latter two come from the 50-day mark of the Trump presidency. Juxtaposing voices contrasts overarching impact with the local; juxtaposing chronologies allows comparison of political promises and threats to early actions and reactions.

Keywords: Trump immigration policy, New Latino Diaspora, family separation, teacher trust, student fear

In this article, a university professor (Hamann) and high school ESL teacher (Morgenson) each write two short essays that explore implications of the Trump administration’s immigration policies and rhetoric for students, teachers, schools, and communities. Inspired by the special issue editors’ invitation to be unconventional with genre, we frame our article as four ‘dispatches’ from Lincoln Nebraska, a city of just under 300,000 and a site of significant refugee resettlement (Pipher 2003), where both of us are based. The first two dispatches were written during the transition period (after Trump won, but while Obama still presided); the latter two were written after the inauguration, approximately 50 days into the Trump Presidency. These dispatches combine elements of personal storytelling, journalistic accounting, and ethnographic analysis in order to capture our observations and reflections on the political moment as it was unfolding in our daily lives as educators. By juxtaposing our voices, we contrast the overarching impact of the 2016 election with its local manifestations. By juxtaposing chronologies, we draw attention to campaign promises and threats, as well as early actions and reactions of the administration.

Lessons from the New Latino Diaspora

Edmund Hamann, Jan. 10, 2017

LINCOLN, NE – While just what all Donald Trump’s policies will be regarding undocumented immigrants seems to be in flux—to wit his Nov. 13 “60 Minutes” adjustment of promising to deport the estimated 11 million without papers to just the 2 or 3 million “worst” ones (CBS News 2016)—we actually already know many likely effects and their educational implications. If you like community stability, family unity, and quality schooling, they aren’t good. As a professor who has studied a lot of the pertinent dynamics, here are three anticipatable community and educational transformations.

Ten years ago, in Tecumseh, Nebraska, about 50 miles southeast of the capital, Lincoln, MBA Poultry (now called Smart Chicken) decided to close its poultry processing plant and move operations to a new site 40 miles away. Prior to that move, Tecumseh Public Schools had begun the difficult but important work to build capacity for serving English learners and their parents (e.g., hiring bilingual paraprofessionals and English-as-a-Second-Language-endorsed teachers). But that came to an abrupt halt when the plant closed. Not only was the new capacity suddenly unnecessary, but the departure of so many students so reduced enrollments that there are no Tecumseh Public Schools anymore. The shrunken former district is now part of the consolidated Johnson County Central Public Schools. If, as promised, Trump expels millions of undocumented workers, it follows that hundreds of thousands or even millions of children will also go. Some of those children will be from districts so small and tenuous (like Tecumseh was) that the departure of 40 or 60 children will be enough to close school doors and consolidate districts. Teachers will lose jobs. With school so central to small town identity (Peshkin 1994), we can even anticipate some towns will become smaller and less defined.

What happened in Tecumseh (for different reasons) will happen elsewhere because of Trump. But just because immigrant labor and immigrant families may be pushed out of some places to dramatic local effect does not mean that that is likely the only fate for immigrants or small towns, large towns, and cities. In addition to not being quite sure what Trump's immigration policy as practiced is likely to be, it is also unclear how he will enact his promise to rebuild America's ports, bridges, and other infrastructure. Still, it does seem likely that a major infrastructure package with bipartisan support is coming. U.S. financial markets (which haven't been shaken so far by the election results) seem to anticipate that this investment is in the pipeline. We mention this because it is worth remembering that a large-scale, multisite investment in construction projects means thousands of contractors and subcontractors, with the latter being a major vehicle for undocumented workers to find work (Durand et al. 2005). Even in the face of an immigration crackdown, it seems likely that many without papers will risk "staying on" to find work in this new rush of activity. What seems less likely is that they will be equally intrepid in keeping their children with them.

For almost 15 years, Víctor Zúñiga, Juan Sánchez García (both of Monterrey, Mexico), and I have formed a binational team studying children in Mexican schools with prior experience in U.S. schools (see, for example, Hamann et al. 2006, 2017; Zúñiga and Hamann 2015; Zúñiga et al. 2008). It is from this work that I remember a February 2010 visit to a rural school in the Sierra Mixteca, 200 miles southeast of Mexico City, where I met a sister and brother who both had been born in Chicago but were now living with their grandparents in rural Mexico (Hamann, Zúñiga, and Sánchez García *in press*). Even though U.S. law recognizes the U.S.-born as U.S. citizens, this tandem had been sent to Mexico by their undocumented parents who, nonetheless, stayed on working in the United States and sending remittances. Trump's infrastructure construction boomlet and the concurrent fear by undocumented parents of being detained and separated from their children mean the decision to send children to be raised by relatives or friends will likely become only more common. Trump's deportations and threats of deportations may not stop the undocumented from looking for and finding work, but it will divide parents from children, including, as in this example, separating parents from children with full legal rights to stay in the United States. That's lesson number two.

As a third Heartland lesson, we can also look back to when six Swift meatpacking plants were concurrently raided by ICE on a Tuesday morning in December 2006. We have previously written about these raids in *AEQ* (Hamann and Reeves 2012), wondering how schools determined whether it was safe to send children home at the end of the day with it unclear as to whether their parents had been detained. However, in 2013 when a sabbatical allowed me (Hamann) to visit a number of these communities and to collect educators' memories of what had happened seven years earlier, a principal from the Texas Panhandle told me that the raids weren't the only profound and sudden change that year. He recounted that, about two months after the raids, he was summoned by the superintendent to district offices where he was told that the next day his elementary school would welcome

85 refugee children from Burma. The packing plant was remedying its raid-related labor shortage by bringing in refugee families from Dallas. A Texas community that had been making slow progress to become bilingual and bicultural suddenly was religiously, culturally, and linguistically much more heterogeneous. Teachers there then struggled to teach kids different than they had ever taught before. Schools found themselves accountable on standardized testing for types of children with whom they had never previously succeeded (or failed). That Texas principal explained that he thought his school had finally made the requisite adaptations and, in his view, again served all children well, but in the meantime, even if his characterization was fully accurate, several years were lost. It is possible then that Trump's immigration enforcement will precipitate *more* diversity in many communities, not less, and the need for schools to find community liaisons and teachers with specific skill sets that those schools have never needed before.

Trump's election then has consequences for communities and regions, as well as the specific precious and precarious interface of teacher and learner. In some places, echoing the experience of Tecumseh, Nebraska, we can predict that schools will close or shrink and that educators will lose jobs. Elsewhere we will see undocumented parents choose to stay on and find work in what historians may someday call the "Trump stimulus," but they will send their kids back to Mexico and Central America, scared about the prospect of their kids being stranded and defenseless if they (the parents) get arrested (even as some of the hazards of living in many parts of Central America are well known). Families will split and U.S. citizen children (and other children) will face the challenge of attending school in a new country (their parents' country) with a less familiar language. In other places, the schools won't shrink. Instead the recent pattern of growing Spanish-speaking populations will find itself at least partially displaced by a much more heterogeneous enrollment. Eventually, professional development might help teachers catch up, but in the meantime, teacher frustration and student struggles are predictable.

Be Professional: Navigating New Student-to-Student Relations

Cara Morgenson, Jan. 12, 2017

LINCOLN, NE – How students interact and what teachers will be challenged to do also seems to be changing because of the election. The students in American classrooms are sensitive to the stakes that have risen in such a tumultuous election year. With administrative reminders to "be neutral and professional" in their classrooms, classroom teachers like me have struggled to soothe the blend of anxiety, fear, and bewilderment among students, particularly those undocumented immigrant students who are hearing the hum of millions of American voters' approval to the prospect of their families' deportation. At least at my school, refugee and other documented immigrant students seem to not separate themselves from the undocumented in the perception of safety ebbing in their classroom and community spaces.

Alongside their Spanish-speaking peers, Muslim students—and those whose identities are constructed as such based upon appearance, language, and country of origin—are particularly encircled by hate speech. I saw one student come to class in tears after walking into school November 9 wearing her hijab (as on any other day) and hearing, "Look, a Muslim. Think she'll shoot us?" spoken loudly by one female white student to her friend. That comment was met with giggles.

Those whose candidate was predicted to decisively lose were suddenly the victors; they shared their triumph with chants of "Trump!" in hallways speckled with students whose families had no legal means through which to participate in this election process. Meanwhile, in ESL classrooms like mine, students shared stories of racial slurs bestowed upon them at work or while grocery shopping (and at school). They asked their teachers whom they voted for—with the trust, safety, and comfort

of that student–teacher relationship now hinging, at least in these beginning days of the aftermath, on teachers’ accounts of their voting. (To clarify, even though Lincoln, Nebraska, voted slightly in favor of Hillary Clinton, Nebraska, voted decisively for Trump. Therefore, teachers’ votes mattered symbolically, not practically.)

All fall semester, the students in my high school ESL courses had been intrigued by and invested in exploring the electoral process, particularly as consumers of the flood of digital media and posts shared via social media. They understood the symbols of democracy in the United States—a flag and the “right” to vote—but the concept of the popular vote versus the votes of the Electoral College made that part of the process as inaccessible and complex as it was to many U.S.-born American citizens. We spent the two weeks leading up to Election Day reading articles detailing the voting process and dissecting election rhetoric from the front page of the local newspaper. With content relevance an excellent condition for new language learning, we looked to identify bias alongside the usual language instruction. Still we focused on analysis more than personal reaction, striving to maintain that mandated neutrality.

In class on November 8, Election Day, I asked my students to write reflections, “How are you feeling about the election? What excites you about the election? What worries you?” I read the reflections to myself as they were handed in, at that moment still not anticipating the pending upset result. I remember being startled then by what seemed like a certain escapist fantasy in a small selection of the reflections. Two immigrant students expressed joy at the prospect of impending deportations. One hoped her family was the first on the plane back to their country and the home that they had left at the decision of a parent or guardian. Again, not anticipating the pending election outcome, both jocularly and longingly described this as “a free trip home.”

The next morning, rereading the reflections with the previous night’s stunning outcome now announced, it was with confusion and heaviness that I struggled with how to face my classes. Taking attendance on November 9, mid-morning, I counted a Honduran student absent. A student joked, “He was deported.” Another chimed in, “That was fast!” The previous day’s fantasies had been replaced by a dark and scared humor.

Among such a highly mobile population, students generally come and go through the weeks as families move for new work or housing, but now in the hallways I heard scattered mordant farewells from one student to another, awaiting what they presumed to be an inevitable exit from the United States. Humor and sarcasm were crutches for coping, masking, but also indicating anxiety. Refugee students tried to rationalize that they remained legally protected, despite that nag of anti-Muslim rhetoric and calls for tightening of regulations for those seeking refuge from home communities filled with genocide and destruction. I had never heard visas mentioned so much in a single day as on November 9. Those who were most afraid, those who possibly were undocumented (teachers are not allowed to ask), remained more quiet.

Looking toward the Trump presidency, perhaps the most poignant and harrowing change I anticipate will be in school and classroom interaction. Immigrant and refugee students are shocked. As educators, we are told to promise safety to students, but now it is even less likely that we can guarantee that. I cannot promise exemption from deportation under a new immigration policy, I cannot expect dislocated students to find much safety in the once-homes they could be returning to, but then, I cannot promise them much safety here either.

The Scholar Resister

Edmund Hamann, March 14, 2017

LINCOLN, NE – Looking back at my writing and that of my coauthor, I am struck by our matter-of-fact disbelief in the first two dispatches. Writing after the election, but before Trump assumed office,

we noted possible community changes and our students' real fears, but our accounts now seem journalistic and descriptive. We worry about them, but not so much yet about us. That "posture" (Wolcott 1992) no longer feels quite right. The Trump administration has acted on candidate Trump's promises to go after the most vulnerable first (e.g., the Muslim Travel Ban, the reiterated effort to "Build a Wall," the silence or vague and hollow acknowledgements as hate crimes spike), but it has also more fundamentally gone after large swaths of America's public and social infrastructure. As I'm writing this, the Congressional Budget Office has just released its estimate that 24 million would lose health insurance with the proposed Republican replacement for the Affordable Care Act, and the White House has just announced an Executive Order to dramatically reconfigure the Executive Branch. Dizzily, Trump's successful nomination of the least qualified Secretary of Education in U.S. history, Betsy DeVos, seems like old news.

Yet as our foreboding predictions have been replaced by the new administration's appalling practice, there have also been moments of cathartic hope and resistance, at an individual level and a public one, sometimes explicitly related to migration, other times related to other vulnerable groups. I joined 4,000 Lincolmites for our local women's march on January 21 to the state capitol and took great heart from a sign held up by college students identifying with MASA (the Mexican American Student Association) that promised, "If walls are built, we will raise our kids to tear them down." Later that afternoon I drove with five colleagues to Omaha to march along with 18,000 more protesters there. The marches were a precious symbol of fellowship and solidarity, and a reminder that even in our "red" state, we stood with thousands like us.

Recognizing that much of my professional identity has been built studying schooling in Mexico and collaborating with colleagues there, Trump's posturing against Mexico has felt not just horrifying but also as possibly jeopardizing my continued work there. So on social media, where perhaps 25 of my 300 or so Facebook friends are based in Mexico, I felt compelled to post (on January 28, 2017) the following message (with a translation following):

A mis amigos y colegas mexicanos y otros hispanohablantes, quiero asegurar a Uds. que me dan mucha vergüenza las acciones contra México, contra refugiados, y contra casi cada creencia e ideal norteamericano que están realizando la fea nueva administración estadounidense. Estoy resistiendo y millones de mis pares y ciudadanos (la mayoría de la población) también están resistiendo. No sé si vamos a tener éxito ni cuando, pero no hay otra opción. Voy a nombrar la hipocresía. Voy a oponer los esfuerzos a negar los derechos de los más vulnerables. Y voy a continuar a enseñar. Profesionalmente, soy maestro. Y nuestra obra nunca ha estado más importante que este momento.

[To my Mexican friends and colleagues and to other Spanish speakers, I want to assure you that the actions this ugly new administration is pursuing against Mexicans, against refugees, and against almost every American belief and ideal give me great shame. I am resisting, and millions of my peers and fellow citizens (the majority of the population) are also resisting. I don't know if we're going to be successful, nor when, but there is no other option. I will name hypocrisy. I will oppose the efforts to deny the rights of the most vulnerable. And I will continue to teach. Professionally, I am an educator. And our work has never been more important than in this moment.]

One of my Mexican friend's response (which matched the spirit of the ten others and, presumably, the multiple "likes") was: "Quienes te conocemos, sabemos de tu profundo respeto por México y los mexicanos. Voces como la tuya son un aliciente en este momento histórico en la relación de nuestros países. Saludos, Ted Hamann!" [We who know you, we know your profound respect for México and Mexicans. Voices like yours are encouraging in this historic moment in the relation between our countries. Regards Ted Hamann!"]



Figure 1. A day without women.

In February, for the first time ever, I attended an Education Committee hearing at Nebraska's capitol (resisting some state-level echoes of the national Republican agenda, in that case a bill for tuition vouchers for private schools) and applauded those seeking to defeat the bill. With my undergraduates I acknowledged the March 8 *Day Without Women* by taking two class photos (See Figure 1), one with female students and one without, and posted them on my personal social media accounts.

I think these stances are important and I hope they have given space or comfort to others (my students, my family, my colleagues, my friends), but they remain only stances. Since the election, I have also been trying to apply my expertise on “education in the new Latino diaspora” (Hamann and Harklau 2010, Hamann et al. 2015) and the education in Mexico of students with prior U.S. school experience (e.g., Hamann et al. 2006; Zúñiga and Hamann 2015; Zúñiga et al. 2008) help to protect the vulnerable that I may be able to help protect. Perhaps it is cynical to expect a dislocation of students with Mexican roots (but often U.S. birthplaces) to Mexico, but that does not matter if attending pragmatically to that likelihood means Mexican educators are prepared to more successfully receive such students.

Counting the night before Inauguration (i.e., January 19, 2017), three times since my first “dispatch” (see beginning of this article) I have Skyped with Mexican teachers and teacher educators in Baja California as they continue to develop capacity to serve children with prior experience in U.S. schools. Next week I head to Tijuana to a “Foro Binacional” to offer a keynote to another educator audience that wants to better understand some of their students’ prior U.S. school experience as well as their possible futures back in the United States (post-Mexican schooling) in a country (i.e., the United States) that seems to be rapidly transforming. The conference planners report that not only have the numbers of students with previous U.S. experiences spiked in Mexico since the US election but also that border cities like Mexicali and Tijuana are now starting to host Haitian children, Sudanese children, and others who previously were headed to the US through Mexico but whose final destination is now delayed or in doubt altogether.

Some of what we could predict three months ago has started to transpire. In particular, the disconcerting, unnecessary, and tragic dislocation of students and their families has accelerated. In addition to resisting and marching with others, I have tried to find ways to apply my scholarly expertise toward ameliorating the worst effects of dislocation for children and families. Through this work I hope to help teachers in two countries help their students persist but is not clear whether that will be more my wish/intent than my practice.

Some of Our Students Who May Be Scared/Confused/Frustrated

Cara Morgenson, March 14, 2017

LINCOLN, NE – In Lincoln, as the days edged further from Election Day and nearer to the January 20 Inauguration Day, those in celebration mode awaited the promised greatness of America to surface, while others battled tidal waves of emotions that felt oppressive and suffocating. At my school, which demographically continues to hover at about 40% students of color and just more than 50% free and reduced-price lunch eligible, this became a new normal. Educators counseled classes in an effort to achieve a climate temperate enough to return to curriculum calendars, becoming artists in crafting statements neutral enough to be alternately comforting and validating to *all* students in a stadium where being “good winners and good losers” felt unacceptable to many cheering and booing in opposition. The jokes among students about deportation and farewells subsided as school and work and family life went on. Teachers spoke generally of incidents in hallways, noting that some white students seemed to feel that there need not be limitations on what they could or couldn’t say now, an echo of the sentiments on display at a national level.

And then it was Inauguration Day. After Trump took office, it felt again as though our classrooms were tilted 180 degrees; we were variously tumbling over each other in glee and anger and fear once more. Reports on the executive orders and discussions from Washington were a steady stream from media outlets, and students were generally attentive reporters, sharing out with “Did you hear what Trump said?” Memes were (and continue to be) currency in recounting current events, a prime

platform for discussing reality and “alternative facts.” In my ELL classes, some students reverted to their previous mordant humor or simply to silence, unwilling to articulate their fears. On January 25, an administrator circulated the following:

It has come to my attention that some of our students may be experiencing some added stress and anxiety again in the wake of some of the executive orders/discussions happening in Washington. I have made contact with [the school district’s] Federal Programs [office] for help and ideas of ways that we can continue to support some of our students who may be scared/confused/frustrated. If you notice specific students in your classes that talk about or exhibit behaviors that make you believe that they are feeling anxious about all of this, please let us know who they are. I’m meeting with [district administrator] to figure out what things we can do to be proactive in the midst of the ambiguity and will let you know what things we come up with. Thanks! [school administrator]

The first week under President Trump felt like blows directed against America’s most marginalized citizens and families. Building educators and administrators recognized this immediately. (See the quoted memo above.) We reached out toward one another and to the district office for guidance on how to speak to our students and community. The district superintendent and administrators at buildings across the city issued messages of support, first to staff and then to students. Some acknowledged specifically the fear and uncertainty our immigrant and refugee students might feel, urging teachers (no matter how they voted) to recognize these as valid feelings in such a state of unknowing and ambiguity as we waited to see how real Trump’s promises would become.

Having described the climate in Lincoln classrooms in the days after Election Day, following the Inauguration the local newspaper reported on the effects of local immigrant and refugee families, and the support for these families rising up from classmates and community members. A front-page story (January 28, 2017) described a distraught Afghan refugee who had served as an interpreter in his country for the US military and whose family had been blocked by Trump’s first travel ban. Later updates to the story announced that his wife and children had been released from their travel hold and able to come to Lincoln.

At school, approaches urging educators and students to be tolerant and supportive varied, as did their degrees of success. Staff continued to brainstorm ways to invite students to have constructive dialogues about inclusion and acceptance. On President’s Day, many took notice of the holiday for the first time, pondering how to make it through the day under an administration that may definitively wish to exclude them from the new Great America. But we have also had a Women’s March, “A Day Without Immigrants,” “A Day Without Women,” countless local and national rallies to support LGBT rights, the Black Lives Matter movement, reproductive rights, healthcare. It’s tremendous. But still there is work to be done—on the streets and in our classrooms—including perhaps most critically, acknowledging the overwhelmingly white, middle-class, female faces (like mine) at the heads of classrooms trying to comfort immigrant and refugee children.

As Cabinet nominations began to be considered, many in my school paid close attention to the woman nominated to head the Department of Education, Betsy DeVos. It was incredible, really, how many students were now reading and paying attention to the news. I approached the topic by asking students for their thoughts on DeVos, and received back many wonderful, critical questions asking about what it means to be “qualified” and what charters, vouchers, and privatization meant for education.

The new administration has edged the nation toward massive reforms of social institutions, one of which brings us educators suddenly and with little preparation to the front lines. Educators have been given a lot of new material for teaching students to be critical, conscious, and empathetic consumers of information from a vast array of sources, but we also find ourselves responsible for moderating conversations that will, no matter how tenderly addressed, in some ways marginalize individuals,

even those carrying the greatest privilege in our classrooms. What does it mean (as I have had to negotiate) when a white, middle-class Trump supporter voices his/her discomfort during a discussion about immigration policy, noting how they feel placed at the center as a target and discriminated against? How does the conversation proceed? For proceed it must; these discussions of discomfort are critical in moving forward in search of a middle group, particularly among children and young adults, but also among educators and other school staff. Within classrooms, educators must be intentional in creating expectations for moments of disagreement and frustration, but our professionalism mandates a certain degree of neutrality, a resistance to claims of a “right” and “wrong” way of thinking so as not to exclude or discount. We need a strategy to foster the dialogue about the stances on equality and patriotism that are now presented as irremediably partisan issues.

As a silver lining to the real hazards of this election, students, particularly those immigrant and refugee students very intentionally targeted by the Trump administration, have become invested in politics and advocacy. There has never been a semester like this one—where students volunteer information about current events, ask questions, and enter in their phones reminders of when and where local protests, rallies, and vigils will be taking place to support them and their families. There has been discussion of the global impact and comparisons to home governments and policies. In my classes, as elsewhere, the election has precipitated a surge of political engagement and mobilization unlike any I have seen in my classrooms previously.

As I look out my classroom trailer window, it has become clear that it was never about just getting through the aftermath of Election Day. For me, my colleagues, and our students, this is likely the reality of at least the next four years. We must push through the haze of surrealism and not stand bleary eyed in shock or rage. We must take action. First, we must recognize how deeply traumatic these first months of the Trump administration have been for targeted groups; as educators, we must not try to counsel our students' stress and anxiety away. Instead it merits acknowledgment. Second, we must continue to have courageous conversations about privilege, hate, fear, and racism; we must not let the current political moment—with its normalization of hate speech and acts—frighten us into silence. Third, we must develop meaningful professional development to help guide teachers through a period of political and social instability, and we must work together as educators, and in solidarity with our students, their families, and communities, to support each other as we navigate this new uncharted territory.

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