

The Power of Personal Narrative: Latina Adolescent Youth in a Third Space-Imagined Community

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As a doctoral student and ESL Middle School Teacher, the researcher in this study interviews former students to revisit their reflections on a year-long, student-led inquiry of ‘Immigration in the United States.’ The researcher draws from the thinking of Kris Gutierrez and Chandra Mohanty to propose a hybridized notion of a ‘third space-imagined community,’ a dialogical and collaborative space created in the midst of contestation, in which the voices of participants are privileged to generate understanding and development. Through analysis of instructional artifacts, the class’ self-published personal narratives of immigration, and three student interviews, the researcher unravels the power of personal narrative for first and second generation immigrant Latina adolescents.

I served as the English as a second language (ESL) Teacher for nearly a decade in a large, urban-fringe middle school in the Midwestern United States. Like typical adolescents, the 1,350 students who attended this school were all met with the challenge of developing and discovering their independent identities. The students that I served, however, encountered additional layers of identity-searching – those of bicultural, bilingual, and biliterate identities.

The state in which the school is located has the third fastest growing Latino population in the United States. Anti-immigrant, and more specifically, anti-Hispanic sentiment is pervasive within the political and social discourse of the midwestern United States. Adolescents are neither immune nor ignorant of these sentiments. Students frequently share their worries and frustrations of the discrimination, hatred, fear, and ignorance they experience in their daily lives – both in and out of school.

Informal conversations between colleagues reveal the mounting frustrations that teachers experience in trying to meet policy expectations in the midst of rapid cultural and political changes. The focus and outcome of discussions tend to position minority students in deficit-based roles. These assumptions and assessments of Latino immigrant children contribute to a discourse of subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999). In a meeting focused on minority students’ standardized test scores, for example, one sixth-grade teacher commented, “Every year, we get dumber and dumber kids coming

to us.” On another occasion, one teacher scolded a Latino boy, who needed to make up missing homework assignments, “You really need to start acting more responsibly. I don’t see how you’re going to end up anywhere but homeless and living on the streets.” More commonly, outwardly well-intentioned and sympathetic teachers and administrators reference a term coined by the state - “LEP” or limited English proficiency - as opposed to Spanish dominance or potential bilingualism. The rhetoric embedded throughout fails to recognize the myriad funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994) the students and their families possess, leaving Latino immigrant student voices and perspectives out of the conversation, either silenced or unheard.

In the fall of 2008, several of my Latino/a students informally approached me with questions and concerns about the growing anti-immigrant, and more specifically, anti-Hispanic sentiments they were hearing at school, in their neighborhoods, and on the news. We decided to engage this issue more deeply in, what turned into, a year-long inquiry on “Immigration in the United States.” Student-derived questions began our inquiry: Why did President Bush want to put a wall between here and Mexico? Why don’t they want us here? Can Obama help the immigrants? Curious to learn more about critical pedagogy that helps to emancipate and empower students in the midst of unreceptive environments, several questions emerged for me as well. Among them, What do these students have to offer our schools and communities because of their immigrant experience? How can critical literacy be used for emancipation and self-efficacy in the classroom and school environments? How can written personal narrative be used as a tool of emancipation? We investigated different immigrant groups across history: Irish immigrants after the potato famine, Japanese immigrants and the internment camps, African immigrants during the slave trade, Jewish immigrants during the Holocaust, Chinese immigrants during the Gold Rush, Latino immigrants during NAFTA negotiations, and current Rwandan refugees seeking asylum. These group inquiries led to some deeply critical, student-led conversations about the varying reasons people immigrate, immigration laws that allow and exclude certain populations, religious persecution, and racial inequalities. Students came to acknowledge their privileged social location as people who can understand issues of power and discrimination from their own life experiences, the embodiment of what Moya (2002) refers to as “epistemic privilege.” Students ultimately decided it was important to share their own stories of immigration, now self-published in their book, *Different Worlds: Stories of Immigrant Youth by Immigrant Youth* (Greene, 2009).

One year after the book’s publication, some of the students who participated in the inquiry project continued to engage me in conversations about how their stories helped them think through personal and global issues of immigration and racial disparity. In a study to examine the personal

narrative writing experiences of ESL students through reflective interviews and analysis of their writings, the following research questions were explored: What are the experiences of ESL adolescents who participate in inquiry-based learning? How do first and second generation immigrant adolescents respond to and interact with personal narrative?

Of the 16 student authors, half remained at the middle school at the time of the study; the other eight students had advanced onto high school. Three of the eight middle school students who were invited to participate in the pilot study assented to be interviewed and thus, were the main focus for this study. Interview transcripts, the published personal narratives, and instructional artifacts from the previous unit of study were thematically coded for analysis. All student names are pseudonyms.

THE STUDENTS

Lola was a 12-year-old, first-generation Latina who immigrated to the United States from Mexico just before starting first grade in U.S. schools. She is the younger sibling of two other students at the same school, and at the time of the study, I had known her family for three years. I had observed her to be a thoughtful and conscientious student, concerned not only with getting good grades, but also with understanding the world around her, both of which she managed successfully.

Marta was a 13-year-old, second-generation Latina who was born in Texas. Her large family is Spanish language dominant, but both Spanish and English were spoken in the home. Amongst her teachers and peers, Marta was known as outgoing and friendly, rarely seen without a smile, and actively engaged in all classroom-based discussions.

Nadine was a 13-year-old, second-generation Latina who was born in Mississippi. Her parents are Spanish-language dominant, and Nadine and her siblings are bilingual. Her older brother had formerly been a student of mine, so at the time of the study, I had known Nadine's family for seven years. At school, Nadine intermingled with friends across racial and cultural lines, but spent most of her time with bilingual peers.

Much of my own teaching philosophy is built upon the writings of Brazilian activist, Paulo Freire. I believe that teaching is a human act, and that a democratic teaching practice assumes that learning derives from curiosity (Freire, 1998). At the time of the study, I was on an educational sabbatical from the school site where I had been the ESL Teacher for the previous six years.

While working on doctoral studies, I continued to communicate informally with some of the students via email and during visits I made to the school for formal and informal observations, as well as proctoring for standardized tests. As a teacher-researcher in this study, I used ethnographic methods to frame the work and analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

Gutierrez (2001) proposes the concept of hybridity as a resource to resist essentializing or static forms of cultural identity development. In her work, hybridity is conceptualized as third space, “a discursive space in which alternative and competing discourses and positioning transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning” (Gutierrez & Stone, 2000, p. 157). Similarly, Mohanty (2002) offers the notion of “imagined community” as a way for third-world women to conceptualize the potential for space for forming alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries. Mohanty writes:

The idea of imagined community is useful because it leads us away from essentialist notions of third world feminist struggles, suggesting political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance. Thus, it is not color or sex which constructs the ground for these struggles. Rather, it is the way we think about race, class, and gender – the political links we choose to make among and between struggles.... However, clearly our relation to and centrality in particular struggles depend on our different, often conflictual, locations and histories. (p. 196)

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I draw heavily from these two thinkers to propose a hybridized notion of a ‘third space-imagined community’, a dialogical and collaborative space created in the midst of contestation, in which the voices of participants are privileged to generate understanding and development. This conception of space and community can be used to help elucidate some of the way in which the Latina girls’ in this study experience sociocultural and sociopolitical tensions. In her personal narrative, Nadine acknowledged the complexity of contested sociopolitical space in which she lives:

I think my parents made a good choice to immigrate to the U.S. because now they have a better life, not like in Mexico where they

struggled a lot. In addition, my brother and I have a better life, a good education, and we speak two languages-Spanish and English. I think that this will help us understand people and have a good future...

I also hate that some Americans tell the Hispanics to not speak in Spanish. When I speak in Spanish, some people are afraid that I am talking about them. They also say that it is annoying to hear us talk Spanish. It also makes me mad that some teachers don't let us use our language at school. I think that we should have the freedom to talk in our native-language because we grew up speaking in Spanish and we are used to it. (Greene, 2009, pp. 42-43)

In the first paragraph, she articulates the way her bilingual abilities are viewed as an asset in her home community. She expresses understanding of her parents' struggle, appreciation for the opportunity to have a "good education", and an astuteness that speaking two languages will help her and her brother to understand people. Yet, within the same narrative, language also seems to serve as a barrier to social capital. She observes that non-Spanish speakers often make negative assumptions about the content of her communication with Spanish-speaking peers, and expresses resentment for some teachers banning her native language at school. These statements demonstrate Nadine's keen awareness of the political stigma tied to Spanish language use outside of her home community. The contested issue of language use at school surfaced in the interview with Nadine and Marta as well.

Nadine: Well...people, you know, in school, they don't like when we talk Spanish 'cause you know they say it's annoying or "Oh, it's America, you should talk English."

Marta: Or like they do that little face and say like, "Can you stop?"

Nadine: Or like, "You don't belong here. Go back to Mexico."

Researcher: How does that make you feel?

Nadine : Like I don't fit in.

Marta: Yeah, like we don't belong here. (M. Greene, personal communication, March 17, 2010)

Lola also expresses the struggle to negotiate her bilingual role within U.S. school culture, revealing how she reads her world but also how she envisions a better world:

Being a Latina in the US is very hard for me. I have to speak both languages and teachers teach new things that I sometimes do not

understand. ...I hope that one day, the Americas will not have borders and everyone will learn each other's languages. (Greene, 2009, p. 10)

These iterations are representative of countless other conversations that emerged during the inquiry unit. Students' consciousness of school as a contested space served as the impetus for creating a hybridized community for dialogue. Within our 'third space-imagined community', the reading and writing process for personal narratives became a central part of the work.

Significant to the analysis of students' engagement with personal narratives is the Vygotskian notion of the zone of proximal development (zoped), defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). While Vygotsky's work applied the zoped to conceptualize ways a progressive educator might approach learning development for her students, for the purposes of this study, I propose that the literacy acts of reading and writing personal narratives served as primary tools for mediating student academic and identity development.

Vygotsky considered all human activity as mediated by means of tools. Within the context of our classroom learning environment, the data reveal that, in addition to collaboration between teacher and students, the reading and writing of personal narratives served as activity tools of mediation for students' academic and identity development. Reading the personal narratives of immigrants throughout the history of the United States provided first and second generation immigrant students with relevant text that built upon their background knowledge. For example, after reading a Reader's Digest article (Boykin, 2009), which included the personal narratives of first generation immigrants to the United States, students were able to draw personal connections to the text, and then use those connections to compare and contrast their own stories of immigration. For example, these two students shared on the class online discussion board:

At first he was a lil (*sic*) scared because he knew they were not welcomed...I compare this story to mine because my mom and grandma went to the border.

Well, the other people's story are different from mine. My story does not include wars, being as refugees and not being a prisoner and escaping. But, it includes lots of moving and those are one of my themes. (M. Greene, personal communication, April 23, 2009)

The reading of other people's personal narratives served as a meditational tool for students to practice reading comprehension skills and refine their own writing and story development. The data also suggest that personal narratives helped to mediate Lola's developing understanding of her sociopolitical world.

Lola: ...I hear...on TV saying that the border – they put...a wire, or something like that so people won't cross...and they cross over and people get killed too much.

Researcher: Yeah. How does that make you feel?

Lola: Oh, that makes me feel angry cause you know...I think Mexico used to be a part of the United States and just the president sold it. And that could've been a better place. 'Cause you know that Mexicans, Mexico produces beans, potatoes, corn, and America produces other things such as clothes and gas, cars, and other things...it could be like a nation together and work together, so we could have a better life and no discrimination. (M. Greene, personal communication, March 17, 2010)

Writing personal narratives also served as a tool of mediation for self-actualization and legitimization of their own identity development. Here, I adopt a realist theory of identity development, which acknowledges that while cultural identities are neither predetermined nor permanent, they are socially constructed, and therefore, limited to the sociocultural and sociopolitical context in which they exist. With respect to these Latina adolescents, however, realist theory also privileges their voices and experiences. In the words of Moya (2002) "a realist theory of identity gives women of color a way to substantiate that we *do* possess knowledge – knowledge important not only for ourselves but also for all who wish to more accurately understand the world – and that we possess it partly as a result of the fact that we are women of color" (p. 57). In our interview together, as well as in the online class forum discussions, Lola repeatedly articulated how the writing of her personal narrative invoked a therapeutic sense of legitimization.

...[writing my immigration story] makes me feel fine...not only my story's gonna be ... read and remembered, but other people, like my friends, they got the chance to express their feelings. (M. Greene, personal communication, March 17, 2010)

I think that writing our immigration stories was a really good idea because people can learned from our stories a lot and they can get that idea of writing their immigration story too. I'm so proud of

myself because I got to write my story and got all my feelings out.
(M. Greene, personal communication, April 23, 2009)

Here, Lola reflects on the meaning of her narrative being read by others, hinting at the significance of the written word as heard and, therefore, legitimate. She acknowledges her sense of pride for writing her story but also expresses the therapeutic value of writing down her feelings. The personal narrative facilitated a sense of self-validation in her identity development.

CONCLUSIONS

Diaz and Flores (2001) offer, “If the students’ language and cultural experiences are not included in socioeducational contexts, then they will have great difficulty reaching their level of potential development” (p. 33). The contested space of these students’ school environment served as an impetus for creating a ‘third space-imagined community’ in which they could examine their own histories and identities. Because the inquiry was student initiated, the instructional unit of study was reflective of the students’ background cultural knowledge and experience. Accordingly, the students in this study found the personal narratives on immigration to be culturally significant and relevant to their own lived experiences. The process of writing personal narratives of immigration revealed therapeutic and legitimizing qualities. Thus, reading and writing personal narratives served as meditational tools that facilitated students’ academic and identity development.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings in this research have direct instructional implications for schools serving Latina adolescents. When instruction is culturally relevant to students, it augments their access to academic development. Therefore, schools need to create space where the cultural backgrounds of their students are reflected in daily classroom instructional activities. To avoid essentializing culture or imposing a western lens on non-western cultures, the student voice is critical in representation. In the cases of these Latina adolescents, the personal narrative is one tool of mediation that can help facilitate their growth as a whole person, in academic development, as well as identity development. Future research on other potential tools of mediation would benefit educators who work with underrepresented students.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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