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PANEL: LEARNING, PARTICIPATION AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

*If They Tell Their Stories and No One Hears Them, Does It Challenge the Status Quo?:
The Role of Audience, Listening and Dialogue in Storytelling*

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Storytelling is cultural practice long used by African Americans, Latinxs and Native Americans to understand and resist American structures of inequity and oppression. In this paper, I explore the relationship between the social context of storytelling and the construction of Latinx student identities using ethnographic data gathered during 8 months of fieldwork with nine middle school students from Spanish speaking immigrant families in Northern California. This group of students was invited to join an after-school program together with eight students from a private Jewish day school located across the street. Although one aim of the program was to facilitate intercultural storytelling, the minoritized positionality of the Latinx students within this social context hindered their ability to tell stories about their families' histories and their personal experiences. Once the students were invited to further develop and share their stories within a segregated classroom space, however, the act of storytelling increased students' positive self-awareness in their ability to confront the many hardships and heartaches they were experiencing as immigrant children and the children of immigrants. What stands out in this case study is that although their storytelling experience allowed students to nurture a positive Latinx cultural identity, a critical component of storytelling--creating a space for listening and dialogue between participants with differing worldviews--was overlooked in the program.

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In what follows I will briefly cover four main points. First, I explain the conceptual framework guiding my analysis of the relationship between storytelling and the construction of Latinx student identity. Second, I outline my fieldwork site and the research methods used during my study. Third, I describe how the minoritized positionality of the Latinx students within the social context of an after-school program not only hindered students ability to share their personal stories with a peer audience but also became a demoralizing experience. Finally, I provide ethnographic evidence demonstrating how the act of storytelling in a segregated but safe classroom space increased students' positive self-awareness in their ability to confront the many hardships and heartaches they were experiencing as immigrant children and the children of immigrants.

I. Conceptual Framework: Analyzing Storytelling using Critical Race Theory

While teachers increase the civic potential of all students by teaching the art of storytelling, it can be particularly empowering for youth from marginalized and disenfranchised communities to learn how to successfully articulate their own stories. As critical race theorists have shown, claiming and telling one's own story of discrimination, injustice or injury allows individuals to counter a dominant narrative in our society that suggests a system of upward mobility is equally accessible to anyone willing to work hard enough to achieve the American Dream (Ladson Billings; Solorzano and Yosso "Critical Race Methodology"). Sharing one's own 'counter-story' is often an empowering experience because individuals can publicly acknowledge personal acts of survival or resistance while also dispelling more common narratives of victimhood and defeat (Merriweather et al.) Equally important, counter-stories help to facilitate group cohesion by encouraging people to connect their own experiences to those of others. Critical race theorists identify counter-storytelling as an essential

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practice within efforts to disrupt pervasive discourses that draw public attention to the stark problems and perceived deficits within minority communities but overlook existing racialized inequalities that structure these issues (Bell; Solorzano and Yosso “Critical Race and LatCrit Theory”).

Arguably the most effective storytelling in schools--both in terms of fostering democratic engagement as well as for empowering marginalized students--occurs when students are able to share their stories with others who view the world from a different perspective. Simply putting students in the same physical space, however, does not automatically lead to a cohesive community of students with a shared interest in learning from each other's stories. Torre, for example, documents the relational shifts and changes in perspective that occurred among students in an integrated Participatory Action Research project through conversations that, while difficult, developed a common understanding that the process of “coming together” in a diverse group generates different emotional and intellectual tensions for students according to their various racial, class, gender, and sexual identities (5).

II. Fieldwork Site and Research Methods

This case study focuses on a storytelling project that unexpectedly unfolded over the course of five months, January through May, as I was conducting a longer period of ethnographic fieldwork involving a Participatory Action Research project at a K-8 school in Northern California during the 2014-2015 academic year. That year, 81 percent of the students at the school identified as Latinx students and 78 percent of the children received a free or reduced price lunch (California Department of Education). In addition, more than half of the students at the school were English Learners.

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I first met with the principal of the school in August 2014 to discuss the possibility of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project at the school involving the use of student photography to explore concepts of civic engagement. The principal suggested I partner with the Literacy Coach at the school who had been assigned a sixth grade English Language Arts class comprised of nine English Learners, all native Spanish speakers, who were reading several grades below grade level.

The findings presented below are drawn from my analysis of a storytelling process that unfolded during my fieldwork after the study took an unexpected turn in December 2014. That month, an ongoing collaboration between the school principal and a Rabbi from the Jewish congregation located directly across the street from the public school resulted in an initiative to bring together a small group of middle school students from the public school and the private Jewish day school.

In the after-school setting seven of the nine Latino/a students from the PAR project joined eight middle school students from the Jewish day school. In an effort to build communication and collaboration between the two groups, the facilitating Rabbi and I planned initial icebreakers and designed the intercultural storytelling activity so that the students could get to know each other. As the project unfolded there was considerable overlap in the content between the after-school program and the Latinx students' classroom because their language arts teacher came to most of the after-school sessions. Therefore, when the intercultural storytelling project generated much silence between the two groups of students in the after-school setting, the Language Arts teacher decided to teach the Latinx students how to write and share a personal narrative about their family history in their own classroom. By the time this extended writing project concluded in May, storytelling had emerged as an unexpected theme in my research as I coded my daily field notes, the students' writing samples, and the transcripts

from a series of recorded focus groups that I conducted with the seven students participating in the after-school program. My grounded theory approach to data analysis prompted me to consider how students' positionality affected the intercultural storytelling activity and to recognize how students repositioned themselves towards academic success and future goals as they engaged in successful storytelling.

III The Role of Privilege and Positionality in Storytelling

In January 2015, the facilitating Rabbi and I agreed we would begin the after school program with icebreakers and an intercultural storytelling activity to facilitate group cohesion. We decided to ask each student to describe how their families came to the United States, discuss a favorite family memory, and share an object or a family artifact that reminded the student of his or her family. On the first day of the after-school program, the Rabbi and I modeled this activity for the students by sharing our own histories, memories and personal artifacts. We then asked the students to come prepared to the second after school session with their own story to share.

To further support the Latinx students in developing their stories, the Language Arts teacher agreed that the students could practice this activity during their English Language Development class. I prepared a series of sentence frames as a homework assignment to help the students brainstorm ideas for their stories and asked them to bring this assignment to further develop during class time. Students were not enthusiastic about the intercultural storytelling exchange, however, and most of them did not complete the assignment. Moreover, even during the classroom instructional time dedicated to practicing the storytelling exchange, the students made little progress brainstorming ideas or

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completing the written homework assignment. At the end of the class period, none of the students had actually practiced telling a story they could share.

Despite this lack of progress in story development, on the day of the next after-school session, we decided to go ahead with the activity and paired each Latinx student with a Jewish student for the storytelling exchange. While it was difficult to observe all of the paired students who were simultaneously talking together, there were moments of strained silence in the room when several Latinx students simply declined to speak after their Jewish partners had shared their family's story. At best, the Latinx students kept their stories to a brief explanation of their family's history. Our efforts to prepare the Latinx students to be equal participants in the storytelling exchange had certainly failed. As we finished the session that day, we realized that not only had the intercultural storytelling exchange failed to foster group cohesion, but also it had positioned the Latinx students as less capable than their Jewish peers.

A few days later, I met with the Latinx students in two separate focus groups to debrief the activity. My intention was to discover how the students perceived similarities and differences between the two groups of students. In fact, the students could easily generate a list of similarities between the two groups based on a debriefing activity we had completed as a whole group at the end of the after school program. They explained that both groups of students told stories of family members who had immigrated to the United States, everyone who immigrated to the United States had to struggle to learn English, and all immigrants had to overcome hardships in their efforts to pursue a better life in this country. Yet although the Latinx students could recite these similarities, they were more emphatic about the differences between the two groups. I was surprised when the students reported the main

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difference between the two groups was that the Jewish students were “courageous” when telling their stories whereas they were simply “shy.” I was also disheartened when I asked the Latinx students in an open ended question to explain what they thought about the storytelling activity and one student responded that telling her story made her feel sad about her past. The two other students participating in that focus group agreed: they felt shy about telling their stories and found their family history painful to remember.

In hindsight, I realized that it was unsurprising that the Latinx students expressed feelings of shyness given that the activity required them to place themselves in a vulnerable position by revealing their feelings to a group of peers whose own stories lacked similar emotional intensity. From the Latinx students’ perspective, sharing their stories served to emphasize how very different their experiences were from their Jewish peers--the exact opposite effect of the activity’s intended purpose to create group cohesion.

IV. Increasing Positive Self Awareness through Storytelling

After the failed attempt at storytelling in the after-school program, the language arts teacher decided to incorporate storytelling into her curriculum to provide the students with both the necessary instructional time and an emotionally safe place to explore, develop and present their stories. Although the teacher did not explicitly prompt students to write about problems they had faced, all of the students chose emotionally charged topics and six of the nine students in the class decided to focus on the painful story of being separated from loved ones when immigrating to California. The teacher supported her students during whole group discussions as they first articulated the many emotions they had experienced and encouraged them to incorporate these feelings into their writing. In her final

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writing piece, one student described the emotions of leaving her grandmother who had raised her since she was a toddler as follows:

When my father told me we were going to come to the U.S. I was so paralyzed, confused, furious, and very disappointed because I was going to leave her and I felt like I was leaving most of my heart there.

The storytelling process also allowed several students to grapple with the traumatic experience of coming to live with caregivers who they no longer remembered. One student, who had also been raised by her grandmother before immigrating, explained her conflicted emotions after being reunited with her mother:

I did not like talking to my mom and I did not want to be with my brother. Also, in the night I cried for my grandmother because I missed her and I felt uncomfortable with my mom. My mom moved to California when I was only 5 years old.

During individual writing conferences, the teacher frequently assured the students that writing about painful events could be therapeutic. She also encouraged the entire class to embrace the opportunity to write about their difficult past rather than avoid it. One student echoed the teacher's words in her own story by writing, "Today I live in CA, and my heart still hurts but a little less now that I write it."

Furthermore, the act of writing their stories became an empowering experience for the students because the classroom teacher asked the students to consider how they had faced the challenges they were writing about in their stories. With the appropriate instructional support and the time to develop their writing, the previously demoralizing storytelling activity now allowed students to position

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themselves as resilient and hardworking. One boy who wrote about initially wanting to return to his native country concluded his story by writing:

Fast forward to today. In 2015 I know more things. In school I know almost everything my teachers are saying. Now I know how to read in English, how to speak English, and I even talk to my teachers and even ask questions. When I don't understand something I ask for help.

And one of the girls who was forced to leave her grandmother to immigrate to California ended her story by recognizing herself as a hard worker and outlined her future academic and professional goals:

I will always work hard, because I want to go to college and build my company. The name of my company will be my grandma's name because she is the most important and special person in my life forever. I will honor my grandmother as a hard working woman.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Latinx students intuitively understood that sharing their stories with the Jewish students in the after school setting would not only place them in an emotionally vulnerable position, but also serve to highlight the vast differences between their experiences and those of their Jewish peers. The requirements of the storytelling exchange forced the Latinx students to make a difficult choice: remain silent or expose raw emotions that might make them appear weak and vulnerable to their peers. At the same time, the stories the students ultimately shared with their classmates in their safe classroom space emphasized how they had persevered under extremely challenging circumstances and highlighted the sacrifices made by their families as they strived to create better lives for themselves in California. As critical race theorists have argued, storytelling became a mechanism for students to counter dehumanizing discourses that portray the Latinx immigrant community as incompetent, inferior,

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undeserving of equal rights, or even threatening to society. As students began to recognize themselves as resilient and capable students, they gained positive self-awareness necessary to participate in programs, projects, and debates with diverse groups of peers as they arise.