



Narrative Autobiography in the Video Diaries of Ecuadorian Immigrant Youth

SUMMARY

In this commentary, the author discusses the use of film as a pedagogical tool to foster cross-cultural dialogue and increase civic engagement while nurturing student voice. The *LIFE through My Eyes* project, a filmmaking and human rights program, was developed in response to a hate crime on Long Island in 2008. Through this project, immigrant students employ their talents as digital natives to share and document their own life narratives.

The decision to immigrate is more than an economic one. Immigrant families interviewed for the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study revealed that 70 percent came to the United States to provide better opportunities for their children and 18 percent emphasized the opportunity for a better education (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). However, research shows that our education system doesn't always meet all of their needs. Studies of immigrant children have shown that grade point averages decline the longer the students are in school (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Latinos, the largest single immigrant population, also suffer the highest dropout rates. Many of the children of these immigrants are also second language learners who require additional support.

The U.S. immigrant population has increased considerably since 2000. By

2008, the Ecuadorian population was double that of 1990, becoming the fourth largest Latino population in New York City. More than two-thirds of these Ecuadorians reside in Queens, N.Y. (Caro-Lopez, 2010). In the top 10 U.S. counties with the largest Hispanic population, Ecuadorians rank first in Queens and tenth in Suffolk (Pew Hispanic, 2012). In Suffolk County, the 2010 U.S. Census reported that there was a 64 percent increase in the Latino population from 2000–10. The village of Patchogue is home to the largest population of Ecuadorians on Long Island.

In Patchogue, as in other districts on Long Island and across the country, immigrant communities have changed the faces of the students in the classroom, but educators are still working to reflect those changes in their classroom practices. This raises the question of cultural competency in teaching, as in the need to have an awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about

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difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families (NEA.org, 2015). In education, cultural competency is being given a more critical role due to the acknowledgement that the linguistic, racial, cultural and class differences between students and teachers have been documented as playing significant roles in the achievement gap (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

Narratives

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) has been suggested by Ladson-Billings as a way to improve teachers' receptivity to our increasingly diverse student populations. She proposes that pedagogy focusing on student achievement, acceptance and affirmation of cultural identity, as well as the development of critical consciousness, can challenge inequities in education and society (p.469). She documents how CRP provides a way for students to achieve academic success while maintaining cultural integrity. As part of the process, she proposes that students need to identify and critique social inequities which plague their communities.

CRP aims to develop a learning environment in which the following are constitutive elements:

- “(a) Students must experience academic success;
- (b) Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and
- (c) Students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 160).”

The most current CRP has been framed within a critical race theoretical framework and addresses issues of relevance to education through curriculum, instruction, assessment, funding and desegregation. According to Ladson-Billings, school curriculum is a culturally specific artifact that can sometimes downplay the experiences of students of color, although extensive research shows that including students' culture, language, and experiences can lead to academic success (Nieto, 2002).

Many stories of youth marginalized by race and class are, however, reconstructed as counter stories (Delgado,

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Narrative Autobiography in the Video Diaries of Ecuadorian Immigrant Youth

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1989; Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). Culturally relevant pedagogy supports and encourages the retelling of stories by those people whose experiences have not been told from the perspectives of those who have lived the discrimination directly. Retelling stories is used as a tool to analyze, expose and challenge the stories of racial privilege and racial discrimination found in the dominant discourse. It is from this tradition that many scholars have used the genres of storytelling, biography, and autobiography and other methods to challenge dominant stereotypes (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado Bernal, & Solórzano, 2001). Vasudevan (2004) has named counter-storytelling as a site of discursive possibilities for learning how youth experience, live, mediate, and embody race and other subjectivities across their everyday social practices.

Over the past few years we have seen how social media, specifically video, has been used successfully as a tool in mobilizing communities. Examples include the following: transmitting the democratic uprising of the Arab Spring; documenting verbal abuse toward an Uber driver which led to the resignation of a New York City officer; the recorded death of Eric Garner resulting from an illegal police choke-hold in Staten Island and the recordings of a Suffolk County police officer caught stealing from undocumented immigrants during unauthorized stops. These recorded actions have all lead to a call for action once viewed by the public.

Several studies have documented how participatory media can be used as a tool to empower children's voices. New York's Educational Video Center offers documentary workshops to students and teachers at its own facility and at schools. Its founder, Steve Goodman, strongly defends the use of digital media as a legitimate and productive pedagogy, especially for impoverished districts, to foster critical media literacy and civic engagement, supporting the state standards.

Goodman conducted a case study in a documentary workshop, inviting a team of students to engage in a sustained video-based inquiry into a social issue within their community. The student-produced short video 'Young Gunz,' highlighting gun violence in the neighborhood, allowed students to voice ideas, questions and possible solutions regarding issues that were affecting them personally or at the systemic level.

Children in Immigration about Migration, was an action research project funded by the European Commission from 2001–04, that involved young people in cinema clubs in Sweden, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Greece and the UK. It was created to give children a voice and to promote intercultural communication through filmmaking (de Block, L., Buckingham, D., & Banaji, S, 2005). The various clubs were composed of refugee and migrant students ages 10–14, one researcher and one facilitator. Not only did participants create

short films, but the films were then shared with their international counterparts via the Internet.

The ethnographic research project, Video Culture, explored how audiovisual media production can be used to communicate between young people in different regions. This research focused on how the form of transcultural symbolic language can overcome cultural and linguistic differences. The project was conceived and first implemented in Ludwig, Germany in 1997. It included groups of young people ages 14–19, from different socioeconomic backgrounds in Germany, England, the Czech Republic, Hungary and the United States. These students produced, exchanged and interpreted thematically oriented videos based on work from different educational settings. Selected students had no previous media production experience and were given five days to complete a three-minute short film based on a specific theme (Niesyto, Buckingham, & Fisherkeller, 2003).

LIFE through My Eyes

LIFE through My Eyes, is a student-led video project focusing on film and human rights. The project was implemented shortly after the death of Ecuadorean immigrant, Marcelo Lucero, who was the victim of a hate crime in 2008. The participating families are originally from Azuay, Ecuador, which is the

largest province in Ecuador experiencing an exodus of emigrants.

Today they reside in Patchogue, a suburb of Long Island located 60 miles east of New York City, where the immigrant population has doubled in the last 10 years. Their children, the 1.5 generation Ecuadorean youth, also called DREAMERS, are currently or previously enrolled in an English as a New Language (ENL) program.

Many of these young people speak Spanish at home but English is the language of instruction at school and for socializing with friends. Although some of them scored below average on the New York State ELA test, their reading and writing skills in English are stronger than in their mother tongue. Across the board, many of these young people have experienced struggles with different types of discrimination in their community and schools and they do not know how to harness political and social capital to address the social maladies they encounter.

Mills (1959) proposed that the first step in social change is to mobilize communities with similar issues, which is one reason why the project LIFE through My Eyes was implemented.

This innovative educational project has been running in the Patchogue community as an after-school program, summer program and parent workshops and its

continued on following page

DREAMers

DREAMers are young immigrants who, in most cases, meet the criteria for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM). These individuals:

- are under the age of 31;
- arrived in the US before the age of 16;
- have lived continuously in the United States for at least five years;
- have not been convicted of a felony, or “significant” misdemeanor;
- are studying in school or college;
- received a GED or have served in the military.

Source: American Immigration Council

Narrative Autobiography in the Video Diaries of Ecuadorian Immigrant Youth

success over the years is attributed to its past funders W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; support from principals and staff, co-facilitators, the Film and Educational Research Academy at Teachers College, and the Long Island Teachers Association; and most importantly, parental support and collaboration.

The relationships with each family, nurtured through family dinners, graduation and confirmation parties, group excursions, soccer tournaments and *LIFE through My Eyes* activities, were strengthened over the years. During the project, as their confidence increased, students had no hesitation about approaching strangers in the streets to interview or investigate concerns directly affecting their lives. “I got to say my opinion and how I feel,” a student shared, “and I actually got to speak up.”¹

These participants attended several filmmaking workshops held at the Patchogue-Medford library after-school, on the weekends, and in the summer. The workshops captured the collective stories of these youth on film. These digital narratives were inspired by human rights addressing religion, language, culture, family, education, and immigration. They have been screened in film festivals at universities, local

theaters, libraries, cultural centers and recently in conjunction with the United Nations Plural + film festival. Last spring, the Suffolk County Inter-Faith Anti-Bias Taskforce recognized the program, and its facilitators through “Immigration and Diversity,” a short film created by a participant of *LIFE through My Eyes*.

Through participation in filmmaking over the past six years, my interest grew in studying how 1.5 generation Ecuadorian youth develop voice and engage in civic action. The project wouldn’t have been successful without the support of the parents. Their trust is critical for educators to successfully advocate for students. As parental approval increased so did the desire for community organizations to become more involved.

From the beginning, parents and students had input on how to organize the program and over the years they have taken on leadership roles. To run a successful program it is crucial to empower parents to become community leaders and to identify globally aware, competent educators to serve as liaisons between the community and the school. The ability to receive independent funding also allows educators more freedom to implement programs through a grass-roots framework.

¹ Student shared after film workshop addressing womens’ rights, May 2015.

In today's global community, it's important for us as educators to include the diverse perspectives our students bring to the classroom. Many of our immigrant youth can be recognized as digital natives who are capable of sharing narratives about how life is experienced through their eyes. I encourage my colleagues to support the use of film as a pedagogical tool to foster cross-cultural dialogue between our educators and newcomers. I hope through the lenses of critical pedagogy and critical race theory more teachers will explore how the process of creating digital narratives nurtures student's voices and increases civic engagement in a target population whose voice is limited by their immigration status.

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Videos and more information on the program LIFE through My Eyes can be found at the following site or email Regina.Casale@longwoodcsd.org

http://reginacasale.com/?page_id=95

<https://vimeo.com/user40117279>