

Understanding the Complexities of Transmigration Experiences through Digital Storytelling

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This qualitative interpretive study explored how digital storytelling might provide insights into the complexities of transmigration experiences for students in U.S. schools. Specifically, this study investigated the transmigration experiences of students from Haiti, within the context of an English-only learning environment in Boston, Massachusetts, a city with a burgeoning immigrant student population. Set in a community center in Boston and drawing on ethnographic methods, the study invited participants to share their unique educational experiences of moving from Haiti to different academic programs in Boston Public Schools. The overarching research question was: How do former newcomer ELLs make sense of their transmigration experiences through a digital storytelling project? A combination of methods was used: interviews, participant observations, photography, digital storytelling to gather and analyze artifacts for themes. The findings suggest that language development, technological skill development, opportunity to tell their stories, and meeting as a Haitian student community with shared and unique experiences were outcomes that had implications for research and teaching ELLs. Adding to the body of immigration literature on how newcomers fare, the findings have implications for how teachers understand and plan for newcomers' specific needs and the utility of digital storytelling as a tool to engage in multiple content areas.

Keywords: Digital storytelling, ELLs, Haitian students, identity, transmigration

This interpretive study explored how former newcomer ELLs in Boston Public Schools made sense of their transmigration experiences through a digital storytelling project. The relationship between newcomer students' transmigration experiences and their future educational attainment has been established in the literature on immigration and education (Gozdzia & Martin, 2005). Drawing on qualitative and ethnographic methods, I facilitated a group of former newcomer students at a community center in Boston as they engaged in a digital storytelling project that captured their perceptions of how they adapted and adjusted to their new academic and social life in the city.

Newcomers are students who have moved to the United States within the last one to three years and represent a range of educational, linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. I worked with former newcomers because I wanted to learn about students' reflections on the numerous transitions they had made after spending some time living in the United States.

Newcomer ELLs bring with them additional needs that go beyond those of U.S.-born, monolingual students. Along with the pressures of taking large-scale

assessments in a relatively short amount of time, newcomers must also adjust to a new school environment, and learn a second language and culture at an intense pace. ELLs in Massachusetts are the state's fastest growing group of students and, as a group, “experience the largest proficiency gap when compared to their native English speaking peers” (MA DESE, 2014). The findings suggest that language development, technological skill development, opportunity to tell their stories, and meeting as a Haitian student community with shared and unique experiences were outcomes that had implications for research and teaching ELLs.

Background: Boston Public Schools and Haitian Migration

Boston Public Schools, the oldest school district in the United States, has 134 schools with an enrollment of 56,650 students. Student demographics indicate that learners within the district are 41% Hispanic, 35% Black, 15% White, 9% Asian, and 1% other/multiracial. ELL students in BPS speak 75 different languages, the most widely spoken being Spanish, Haitian Creole, Cape Verdean Creole, Chinese, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Somali, French, and Arabic. BPS has a sizable and diverse ELL population of 24,757 (46% of the total BPS student body), with 15,503 (29%) designated as limited English proficient (LEP) (BPS Communications Office, 2015).

Massachusetts has the third largest Haitian community in the United States (Kitchen, 2010). According to recent data, there are an estimated 41,000 Haitian-born immigrants living in the city of Boston, with Haitians comprising the second largest share of immigrants in the city (8.5%), behind China (8.6%) and ahead of the Dominican Republic (7.9%) (Boston Redevelopment Authority, 2009). This number has increased dramatically in the aftermath of the devastating 2010 earthquake but has not been accurately counted.

When Haiti was struck by the largest earthquake it had had in over two hundred years in January 2010, the country was sent into crisis mode. According to Eric Johnson, the Director of Newcomers Academy at that time, families in Boston sought to have their extended and distant relatives join them (Nicas, 2010). Although the exact total number for the years following is difficult to disaggregate, as Haitians are classified as African American, Haitians entered schools throughout the school year and most often with little notice to their new teachers that they were coming. Upon arrival, students found established Haitian Creole SEI and SIFE programs staffed with Haitian Creole speaking teachers (Merrigan, 2010).

Literature

In this section, research on identity, student voice, and social integration is discussed as they pertain to this study. The relationship between language use and identity has never been more relevant than it is today, as immigrant student populations in urban areas continue to increase. Along these lines, as teachers create spaces in their classrooms for all students to share their ideas, students can exercise their voices regarding how they integrate to their new schools and engage in their

education. Lastly, successfully integrating newcomer students into the classroom is a bi-directional process. In the section on Social Integration, I consider how teachers and students can develop mutual respect and understanding of the other's cultures, values, and beliefs (Trueba & Bartolome, 2000).

Identity

Identity theory is significant to this study because how the participants—that is, newcomer ELLs-view themselves underpin how they made sense of their transmigration experiences. At its core, identity theory is defined as “the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). Understanding how one's identity impacts his or her educational experience and role in society is at the center of one's perception of how a learner integrates socially. Identity is also a major factor in acquiring a second language; this is directly relevant to my study, as participants made sense of who they were as students before they left their home countries and how they have changed during transmigration (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011).

Children's day-to-day lives span very different worlds-home and school life-and through an immersion process in each, children form identities vis-à-vis their experiences in those communities. Language is intimately bound with identity, and whose language is used in the public sphere not only relates to political power, but also to how much one belongs. The language one uses influences how a group constructs its identity, while at the same time the identity of the group shapes the patterns of attitudes and language uses (Liebkind, 1999, as cited in García & Zakharia, 2010).

Migrants immerse themselves simultaneously in multiple sites and aspects of the transnational social fields in which they live (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). Navigation between two worlds-the homeland and the host country- is at the heart of transnationalism, as both countries shape one's identity. Thus, a transnational identity emerges when individuals hold themselves to be a reflection of two or more cultures (Pedraza, 2006, as cited in Orbe & Drummond, p. 1692). Transnational identity is pertinent to this study because it offers a means for understanding how identity is viewed from the perspectives of immigrants within the receiving communities.

Bryce-Laporte (1972) notes “Haitians are seen as Blacks by Whites and as foreigners by native-born Blacks” (as cited in Cone et al., 2014, p. 54). This is problematic because Haitian newcomers are more likely to enroll in urban schools that have a large percentage of African American students and are located in high-poverty neighborhoods. Facing prejudice from U.S. society at large and from staff and classmates at school, Haitians are frequently subject to negative peer critiques of their school identities, both by African American students and by other Haitians who have been in the United States longer and have become more “Americanized”.

Student Voice

Understanding the significance of student voice and determining how to draw on it were essential elements to this study. By building upon what has been established in literature about student voice, students shared their thinking about their unique transmigration experiences, empowering themselves and their peers in the process. Student voice represents more than physical vocalizations. Researchers and teachers alike consider student voice to be demonstrated in any activity in which students exercise a degree of control as they communicate their feelings (Johnson, 1991). Over time, student voice has come to be associated with empowerment, meaning that students have the opportunity to provide input into decisions affecting their education. Participants had complete creative control over what aspects of their transmigration experiences they chose to share.

Social Integration

Social integration and how students experience it comprise the heart of this study. Social integration is the degree to which immigrants interact positively with U.S.-born peers and the school community as a whole. Schools that implement social integration policies and procedures support immigrants as they adjust to their new environment. The reality, however, is that it is more common for schools not to recognize the unique needs of immigrant students; schools have been shown to disregard their unique emotional experiences, treating them instead in the same way they would a monolingual, U.S.-born student who is new to the school. Newcomer students are often left to themselves to negotiate the educational environment, which only further contributes to their academic difficulties. When schools neglect to establish a practice to integrate newcomers, they are at least partly responsible for the problems that arise (Lasso & Soto, 2005).

Research Design

This interpretive, qualitative study, drew on ethnographic methods and digital storytelling to investigate the following research question: How do former newcomer ELLs make sense of their transmigration experiences through a digital storytelling project? Former newcomers took pictures or used existing imagery to add to a digital story, which expressed their views of how they adapted and adjusted to their new environment. This paper is based on a larger study that examined circumstances around participants' move to Boston and the types of initial interactions they recalled having in their schools, as well as their perception of social integration at their schools in the context of an English-only education. This work informs what an inclusive school setting—that is, one which values new students' languages, cultures, and identities—"looks like" in the context of an English-only education.

In July 2014, I conducted my study at a community center in the Boston area. The community center offers youth development programs and social responsibility

programs. My rationale for choosing this locale was because it yielded a wider sample of diverse experiences than working with students from one high school. I recruited six high school students who were able to commit to the 12-session timeframe. In my convenience sample, participants who lived in the United States for one to three years were selected based on their ability to attend all the sessions (Bryman, 2001). All of the participants hailed from Haiti, and the majority had lived in the capital, Port-au-Prince, before moving to Boston after the devastating earthquake that leveled their home city in January 2010.

Data Collection Methods

I used a combination of methods to examine students' transmigration experiences: Interviews, participant observations, photography, digital storytelling, and analysis of student work. Throughout the study, my intent was for student participants to have a voice in the research as I conveyed the details about the data collection.

Instruments

Interviews. I asked the questions from an interview guide to the whole group, and the participants shared their experiences aloud and wrote their own responses in the guide. As a qualitative researcher, I am interested “not just in *what* people say but also in the *way* that they say it” (Bryman, 2001, p. 321). I developed questions that honed newcomers' ideas about how their prior educational experiences had affected their identities as students.

Participant observation. I facilitated the sessions and used digital recorders and a teaching assistant to help me spend the entire time engaged with the participants. As the researcher, I needed to rely on my memory and write down my observations as soon as each session ended. Writing down everything that was (or could have been) significant to my study while at the same time engaging with and observing participants was no small feat. Students worked on group-based activities and I observed students engaging with their peers. This was another important source of information in my research; as Hays (2004) held, case studies that involve the interaction of individuals cannot be understood without observation.

Photography. I wanted students to capture moments that were important and representative of social integration, adaptation, and adjustment in their new surroundings according to them. Photovoice and its application stem from Paulo Freire's (1970) work that grew out of critical education, feminist theory, and a participatory approach to documentary photography. Freire's problem-posing education starts with issues that people see as central to their lives and then enables them to identify common themes through dialog (as cited in Paiewonsky, 2005). In this sense, I guided participants as I explained that what they chose to photograph would be a reflection of what they perceived a visual representation of social integration to be, and that their ability to select images that expressed their

perceptions of particular issues was critical to their digital story.

Digital storytelling. Digital storytelling has come to be a vehicle for cultural analysis. Digital storytelling creates space for former newcomer ELLs to affirm their identity and become agents of social change, as it is a creative work and both represents and invites the construction of meaning (Lambert, 2010). Images-either still or moving-drive the story and explain the relationship between the narrator and the audience. The storyteller carefully selects images as he or she refines the message to be conveyed. Participants had the time and space to reflect on their experiences and describe them in as much detail as possible. In my study, participants were guided to each develop their own digital story. They wrote their own scripts highlights aspects of their transmigration experiences and selected images to convey their ideas. Each digital story was approximately three minutes long.

Data Analysis

I analyzed, memoed, categorized, and coded all of the data I collected. By conducting a thematic content analysis, I was able to determine what participants focused on and was able to connect their texts back to the thematic areas (Berg, 2001).

Findings/ Discussion

As students engaged in the digital storytelling process, it became clear that they made sense of their move from Haiti to Boston Public Schools in different ways. Furthermore, throughout the study, digital storytelling emerged as a pedagogical process that serve as an effective tool for working with newcomer ELLs, both as a means to facilitate meaning making and give significance to their transmigration experiences. As such, digital storytelling may also offer a process by which teachers may better understand the circumstances of students' transmigration and thus how better to support them. In this section, I describe some of the insights provided by students regarding their transmigration experiences and the utility of the digital storytelling process.

Participants in this project demonstrated an understanding of the circumstances regarding their move in different ways. Participants also made sense of their move in various ways. Some chose to reveal personal details, while others were vague about what they knew about their moves and when they knew it. As participants made sense of their move, some cross-cutting themes emerged. There was a change in roles within families for all of the participants, and there was separation and loss for all of them as well.

Participants changed roles within their families as they pertained to gender and moved from living with extended families to partial nuclear families. Some of the participants became the head female in their house, which meant taking on domestic responsibilities for younger siblings and fathers. Other participants transitioned from a two-parent household to a single parent home, as nearly every participant experienced separation and loss from one parent. They spoke fondly of having the

freedom to visit extended family nearby during our discussions, as they lost the ability to feel the support and connection to their extended families. They try to utilize technology, to the extent that it is possible, but Skype cannot take the place of stopping by one's grandmother's house for a home-cooked meal.

Participants had had little control over being uprooted and relocated; yet, through the storytelling project, they were given an opportunity to make meaning of their experiences, and in some sense, regain some control over their transmigration story. Some challenged themselves to use more English, while others felt the highlight was getting to collaborate with other former newcomers who are also Haitian. Their parallel journeys were difficult to put into words for them at points, for numerous reasons, but the bond that was created through doing so was invaluable to creating a cohesive group. The implication is that teachers who capture students' interest by using digital stories would be able to link content matter to aspects of students' lives. Students' sense of belonging and motivation to be part of their school community would increase, as their affective filter is lowered.

Overall, participants recognized how much had changed for them since they arrived. They expressed varying degrees of pride regarding the extent to which they have integrated socially in their schools. They all acknowledged that it took time to adjust during these major transitions, and many could cite teachers as having a direct hand in helping to ease some of the isolation that was described. Over time, the participants categorized themselves as students who fit in with the culture of their high schools, and reflexively now refer to themselves as students, per Stets and Burke's (2000) identity theory. Even though everyone could name ways in which they have integrated, exploring this topic left me wondering how they each will grow and adapt further.

Conclusion

As a pedagogical process, digital storytelling was shown to be an effective tool for working with newcomer ELLs, both as a means to facilitate meaning making and give significance to their transmigration experiences, as well as to support language development. Student voice was exercised, as participants had the ability to determine aspects of their products. The findings of this study suggest that teachers may also utilize digital storytelling as a way to better understand the circumstances of students' transmigration and thus how better to support them.

Language development, technological skill development, opportunity to tell their stories, and meeting as a Haitian student community with shared and unique experiences were other outcomes that had implications for research and teaching ELLs. The data showed that some participants challenged themselves to use more English, while others held that a highlight for them was getting to collaborate with Haitians. They demonstrated a great deal of empathy towards each other. The findings suggest that teachers may benefit from taking the time to get to know each of their students and become knowledgeable about their strengths as individuals and

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learners in order to make authentic connections with them. By utilizing digital stories in the classroom, students may be able to learn content matter as they engage in a creative approach to mastering standards.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that community centers in urban areas, such as the one where I did my study, may be able to organize and implement digital story projects with great success. Being completely removed from the high-stakes testing environment, community centers have the autonomy and resources to recruit students during after school hours, intersessions, and summer breaks. Students may be able to strengthen their voices in their own work by immersing themselves in a topic of their choosing and then interpreting the visual images that they believe best tell their stories.

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