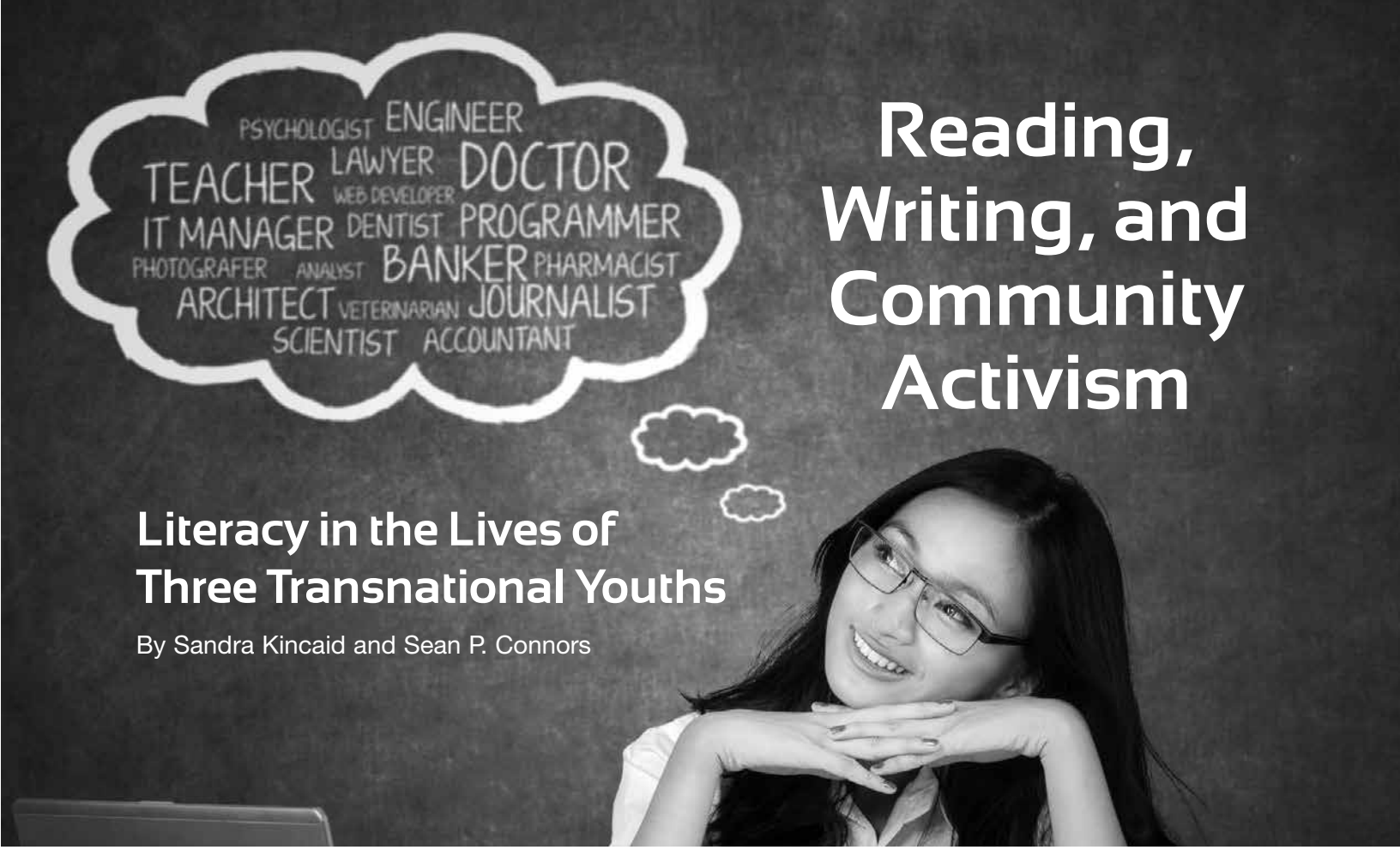

Reading, Writing, and Community Activism

Literacy in the Lives of Three Transnational Youths

By Sandra Kincaid and Sean P. Connors

Had the U.S. Congress ratified the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (or DREAM) Act in 2007, it would have created a pathway to residency (and eventually citizenship) for immigrant youth brought to the U.S. as children.

Abstract: This article draws on data from a qualitative research study that asked how six Latinos living in a southern state used literacy to enact, defend, and transform their identities as transnational youths in response to evolving social conditions they and their families encountered in the United States. In sharing the experiences of three participants, the authors demonstrate how the participants maintained their affiliation with the Latino community in part by using reading and writing to engage in community activism and highlight social and political issues facing Latino immigrants in the region where they lived. The authors conclude by discussing the implications of their research for English language arts teachers.

Keywords: transnationalism, immigration, identity, community activism, out of school literacies

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In an era of globalization, English teachers interact with culturally and linguistically diverse students who maintain relationships with two or more nations and who arrive at school each day with their own motivations and purposes for reading and writing (Skerrett, 2015). By studying literacy as it functions in the lives of transnational youth, in school as well as outside of school, educators stand to develop a greater appreciation for their diverse repertoire of literacy practices (Jiménez, Smith, & Teague, 2009). Moreover, by making time to understand how these young people use literacy to express their identities, English teachers can better support students' literacy learning.

In using the term *transnationalism,* we are referring to what Basch, Schiller, and Blanc (1994) define in part as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (p. 7). In this article, we draw on data from a qualitative research study

that asked how six Latinos living in a Southern state used literacy to enact, defend, and transform their identities as transnational youths in response to evolving social and political conditions they encountered in the United States. In sharing three participants' experiences, we demonstrate how they articulated and maintained their affiliation with the Latino community in part by using reading and writing to engage in community activism and highlight social and political issues facing Latino immigrants in the region where they lived. We conclude by discussing the implications of our research for English language arts teachers.

Literacy and Identity

Our research is premised on an assumption that people construct and maintain their identity in part through their use of language, oral as well as written. Barton (2007), for example, characterizes language as a form of representation that people utilize to mediate between the self and society (p. 46). Likewise, Farr and Reynolds (2003) argue that members of ethnic communities (in their case, transnational Latinos living in Chicago) use language in ways that allow them to distinguish themselves from other cultural groups. For Latino youth who identify as bilingual, the decision to use Spanish or English in a particular setting can constitute a form of identity enactment. As Farr and Domínguez Barajas (2005) explain, "Shifting between and among these language varieties, whether from Spanish to English or from one dialect of Spanish or English to another, often is about social attachment, signifying group membership and solidarity" (p. 12).

In the case of transnational students specifically, Jiménez, Smith, and Teague (2009) argue that language and literacy play an additional role in their lives: They allow transnational students to create and maintain relationships with family members and friends in other parts of the world. At the same time, however, maintaining ties with two nations can lead transnational youth to occupy a liminal position. Citing Trueba (2004), Bruna (2007) argues that transnational youth experience a process wherein they can "become other" to both "their country of origin and their host country" (p. 234). Recognizing this, we suggest that the purposes toward which transnational youth put their literacy—for example, using writing to advocate for a particular cultural or affinity group—can in some cases be interpreted as an outward expression of group affiliation. In the case of the three young people whose experiences we examine in this article, literacy represents a tool they used at times to express and defend their identities as Latinos living in the U.S. One way they accomplished this was through their involvement in community activism.

Each of our participants has had to balance Spanish language practices, which were valued at home and in their respective communities, with the English language practices they were expected to use in formal education settings. As will be demonstrated, their affiliation with United We Dream, a national advocacy group that seeks to promote equal access to education for immigrant youth, provided the participants with a platform for using English and Spanish to address problems that faced Latino immigrants in the region where they worked and attended school.

Had the U.S. Congress ratified the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (or DREAM) Act in 2007, it would have created a pathway to residency (and eventually citizenship) for immigrant youth brought to the U.S. as children. Instead, when the act failed to generate enough Congressional votes to pass, the United We Dream organization was forced to rethink its agenda moving forward. The prospect of the DREAM Act's passing had excited many young people, leading them to organize on the group's behalf at local levels. Rather than focus on acquiring votes in Congress, United We Dream subsequently chose to expand its mission by working to address the issue of immigrant rights. At the time of this writing, United We Dream is the "largest immigrant youth-led organization in the nation" (United We Dream, n.d., para. 1). It claims local affiliates (known as DREAMers) in 26 states, and its membership includes over 100,000 participants nationwide.

One of the participants whose experiences we examine in this article had worked on behalf of United We Dream to support the DREAM Act. Two others were actively involved with the organization's local affiliate, which aims to support the immigrant community in the region where the participants lived and worked. According to the group's Facebook page, the Arkansas Natural DREAMers is made up "of young people in the Arkansas community fighting for equality, education, and justice" (n.d., para. 1). During the group's meetings, members discuss how they can better serve the interests of Latino immigrants in Northwest Arkansas. Events the group has organized and sponsored in the past include information sessions about immigrant rights, protests intended to draw attention to legislation that adversely impacts Latinos, and tutorial sessions for people interested in applying for a work permit. In the following section, we introduce the three young people whose experiences we examine in this article, and we describe the research methodology employed to do so.

Research Methodology

The Participants

Emilio. At the time of our study, Emilio was 23 years old. After his mother and father immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico, they worked a variety of working-class jobs. According to Emilio, his parents' opportunities for employment were limited directly as a result of their immigrant status. This saddened him, as evidenced when he explained, "If you don't speak English, it's like your options are limited. Which is understandable, but at the same time, being the son of the person that is going through that doesn't seem fair, you know?" At the time of our study, Emilio was attending a local community college where he was studying broadcast journalism. As a person who actively advocated for the Latino community, he had aspirations to one day run for a position as a district representative in the state of Arkansas.

Sofía. Twenty-six years old at the time of our study, Sofía was born in Mexico, where her mother worked as an office secretary and her father struggled to run the family butchery. She recalled, "As the shop went under, my dad looked for another option. My mom and dad tried to make it work in Mexico, but once there was no

other option, they decided to move us to the U.S." Sofía described the home she grew up in as "very low income," but noted that while her family is "still very much a working-class kind of family . . . we are definitely better off than we were earlier on."

At the time of our interview, Sofía was preparing to graduate from a four-year institution in the region where she lived. While in college, she participated in several activities that included using literacy to better the lives of people in the local Latino community. This included campaigning for United We Dream, tutoring other English language learners, and helping Latino immigrants to navigate the bureaucratic channels involved in obtaining work permits and other forms of documentation. For Sofía, reading and writing were tools she used to enhance the quality of her life as well as the lives of other Latino immigrants.

Manuel. Manuel was 22 years old at the time of our study. His family immigrated to the U.S. from Bolivia when he was seven, eventually settling in a southern state. Although his family came to the country on a tourist visa with the hope of obtaining legal residency, Manuel explained that, following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, "the process we were using to get residency was terminated and then because of that my family and I became undocumented."

Manuel's status as an undocumented immigrant impacted his pursuit of education. Growing up, he changed schools frequently depending on his father's ability to find and maintain work. Later, when it came time for him to attend college, a law requiring undocumented students to pay out of state tuition to attend public universities limited his options. He eventually managed to enroll at a local community college, and when a family friend told him about a scholarship available to Bolivian students through a four-year university in another state, he applied for it. Upon receiving the scholarship, Manuel left his family and relocated, eventually graduating from college with a four-year degree.

Data Collection and Analysis

To collect data for our study, we conducted semi-structured oral history interviews with six participants. The interview protocol consisted of 25 questions, all of which invited the participants to reflect on their experiences with reading and writing over the course of their lifetime (see Appendix). To contextualize our findings, we began each interview by collecting background information about the participants. Next, we examined their experiences with reading and writing at home and at school. To conclude the interviews, we examined the ends toward which they put reading and writing in their personal and work lives. When necessary, we asked follow-up questions via email to more fully probe information the participants shared with us. On average, the audio recorded oral history interviews lasted one hour, and we transcribed each in its entirety.

To analyze our data, we met and read our interview transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the information the participants had shared. Next, using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we coded our data line-by-line, highlighting keywords and phrases that struck us as speaking to the research question we sought to address: How do young Latino immigrants use literacy to maintain a transnational identity? Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphasize the value of comparing individual concepts with the intention of constructing larger conceptual categories. With that in mind, we compared emergent concepts to one another, collapsing them when possible, with the intention of identifying recurring themes in our data that struck us as speaking to our research question. Through this process, we were able to identify a series of social, economic, and political factors that appeared to influence the participants' purposes for reading and writing. We were also able to highlight instances when the participants appeared to use literacy in ways that allowed them to express their identities as transnational Latinos living in the U.S. Among other things, this included their using literacy to call attention to social justice issues facing Latino immigrants in the region where they lived and in the U.S. more generally. We address this finding at length in the section to follow.

Findings

Reading and Writing for Activist Purposes

Emilio's involvement with the Arkansas Natural DREAMers played a central role in shaping the purposes for which he read and wrote. Motivated by a desire to work for social justice, Emilio sought out a range of texts, including newspapers, blogs, and social media, to learn more about issues that undocumented and documented Latino immigrants faced in the U.S. He also read biographies about human rights activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, noting that he was motivated to do so out of a desire to better understand their preferred methods of activism. He explained, "I just want to read things that will make me a more well-rounded leader . . . I want to be a better leader for our community." In addition to informational texts, Emilio was also drawn to literature written by Latinos because he felt that reading it allowed him to stay connected to his cultural roots. At the time of our interview, he was reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. He explained, "I wanted to read something that I feel has some Latino roots in it because all I've been reading has been just Americanized books."

For Emilio, writing constituted a tool he used to highlight issues facing Latino immigrants in the region where he lived and attended school. He explained, "I like to write things that will get people thinking in a different way and get the conversation started, most importantly." Given his interest in advocating for Latino immigrants, Emilio joined the Arkansas Natural DREAMers after graduating from high school, and his decision to do so provided him with a platform to write about social justice issues that concerned him. When he witnessed a social injustice, he responded by composing a personal testimony in which he discussed the event and explained why he found it problematic. He published his testimonies on his Facebook page, eventually cultivating a following. By writing about social justice issues and expressing his thoughts on social media—a form of work that he referred to as "social media activism"—Emilio was able

to raise public awareness about important issues facing Latino immigrants in the surrounding area.

His online postings and activist work eventually led Emilio to emerge as a leader in the local Latino community. He explained, "When anything happens in the Latino community, people will always contact me to get my opinion on it." Emilio's activism also allowed him to cultivate relationships with members of the local media, as journalists occasionally referenced his Facebook postings in news stories. At other times, they drew on his postings as a basis for news reports. For example, Emilio recalled using social media to address a discriminatory question he came across while taking a standardized test. Upon returning home from the exam, he wrote about his experience on Facebook, highlighting the reasons why he found the question problematic. Later that evening, Emilio's testimony was featured in a report that aired on a local television station.

Sharing his motivation for using writing to call attention to social justice issues, Emilio explained, "[It's] not to get myself attention or anything, but to bring light to issues that many people are not talking about, that many people don't know how to handle, or how people handle them, because they haven't experienced it themselves." Among other things, he used writing to call attention to issues that he felt the mainstream media ignored. In his own words, he said his decision to use social media as a platform was to "give voice to the Latino people," and it stemmed from his belief that "there was really nobody who would step up for them."

This was the case in 2016, when two Latina teenagers, who lived in the same community as Emilio, committed suicide, purportedly as a result of bullying. The initial suicide was reported by the area's lone Spanish language newspaper three days after it occurred. Three days later, following the second suicide, Emilio addressed both girls' deaths in a post he published on his Facebook page. In doing so, he encouraged readers to attend a fundraising event that one of the girls' families planned to host, writing, "These are the types of events our local English media never covers." A local television station finally aired a story 11 days after the first teenager's death, and four days after the second girl took her life.

Like Emilio, Sofía, whose family immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico when she was three years old, also used reading and writing to address issues that impacted Latino immigrants in the region where she lived and attended school. She chose to pursue a career in journalism in part because of her desire to maintain the integrity of representations of Latinos in the media.

As a student at a local community college, Sofía recalled reading an article in the school newspaper that, in her estimation, presented an inaccurate portrait of undocumented students. She explained, "Being an undocumented student myself and knowing several others, I knew the facts were not there in this person's piece." To push back on the article's claims, Sofía chose to write a letter to the editor of the school paper, highlighting the journalist's errors and providing news from credible sources to support her argument. Her response was eventually published in the school newspaper, thus providing her with an opportunity to offer a realistic portrait of what it means to be an undocumented student living in the U.S. Unexpectedly, Sofía's decision to reach out to the editor also landed her an invitation to join the college's newspaper staff, which she accepted, and which in turn sparked her interest in pursuing a career in journalism. As she explained, "My main motivation behind becoming a journalism student was that I was tired of people getting information wrong and perpetuating stereotypes [about Latino students]." She recently completed a four-year degree in broadcast journalism, and she continues to use her voice to advocate for Latinos, especially those who are new to the U.S.

Like Emilio, Sofía reported reading to learn more about issues that undocumented Latino immigrants faced in the U.S. She also credited reading with helping her to better understand issues that impacted her directly. For example, recounting her experience obtaining a work permit, Sofía explained:

> I did have to do a lot of reading because there was a lot of vocabulary and a lot of verbiage that I was not familiar with. It was a lot of legal information that I needed to learn and read about. I'm not a lawyer, and I am not very well-versed in law vocabulary, so I had to do a lot of research to really understand what the work permit was asking.

In this instance, reading allowed Sofía to broaden her knowledge about a complex bureaucratic process. Later, she shared her knowledge about this process with other immigrants by meeting with them and helping them to make sense of legal documents.

The relationship between literacy and identity was particularly evident in our conversation with Manuel, who began his oral history interview by describing what he recognized as differences between Americans' and Bolivians' attitudes toward education and literacy. He explained:

> Something that I really find really cool in the U.S. is how at home, education is something that is part of most families. You know, it's part of American culture. Before you guys go to bed, we would see in movies the parents reading a book to their children or always emphasizing how important it is to read. Bolivia's not really like that. . . . Education is not really something that is strived for.

When Manuel's family decided to leave Bolivia in search of work in the U.S., his parents insisted that he continue to practice reading, writing, and speaking Spanish in hopes that doing so would preserve his connectedness to his culture and country of origin. He recalled, "Once I came to the States, my mom made sure that I still remembered how to read and write in Spanish. We would read biblical verses and . . . she would correct me if I said something incorrectly or if I would write something incorrectly." In much the same way, when he accompanied his mother on trips to the grocery story, Manuel recalled her insisting that he write their shopping list in Spanish.

Prior to attending a four-year university, Manuel attended a community college. This was due in part to a state law that required undocumented immigrants to pay out of state tuition at four-year public universities. Despite his strong academic record and his history of having resided in the state since the second grade, Manuel was faced with the prospect of paying three times more in tuition than his U.S.-born classmates. It was not until he learned about a scholarship for Bolivian students available through a university in another state that he had the opportunity to attend a four-year institution.

Collectively, Manuel's experiences motivated him to develop an interest in social justice issues facing Latinos in the United States. As a college student studying computer engineering, he participated in several activist organizations, including the Arkansas Natural DREAMers, which provided him with a platform to educate his peers about issues facing undocumented students. Likewise, as a member of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, he tutored Latino students in local high schools, thus supporting their literacy learning, and he occasionally brought them to campus for tours. He also played an integral role in organizing a social justice event on campus entitled "DACAmented and Still Dreaming," which highlighted challenges facing Latino students without a work permit. As Manuel explained, the purpose of the event was to "create awareness of the struggles that undocumented students, the DREAMers, have in terms of pursuing higher education."

Not surprisingly, Manuel's involvement with "DACAmented and Still Dreaming" provided him with authentic opportunities to read and write. In addition to drafting memos, emails, and flyers, he communicated with potential keynote speakers, three of whom eventually agreed to participate in the event. The event itself attracted over 450 people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Although some students attended simply to receive extra credit in a college course they happened to be taking, Manuel believed that the event was impactful regardless of people's reasons for attending. "At the end of the day their butts were in that seat," he explained. "They were listening to the conversations that were happening. I feel like they heard some things that they probably would not have heard if they would have stayed at home."

Discussion and Implications for Teachers

As Brandt (2001) explains, situating acts of literacy in time and place helps us to appreciate more fully how people use literacy in ways that "contribute to their sense of identity, normality, possibility" (p. 11). Each participant whose story we have examined was motivated to use reading and writing to work for the betterment of Latino immigrants, and in doing so, the participants gave voice to their identities as transnational youths living in the U.S. and navigating two cultures. Moreover, each participant pointed to people and organizations beyond school that supported his or her literacy development. In some cases, they even sponsored other people's literacy, either by tutoring in afterschool programs or by helping to interpret and fill out complicated legal documents. Thus, while our small sample size prohibits broader generalizations, our study does suggest that when teachers demonstrate a willingness to learn about the people and institutions that sponsor their students' literacy, create opportunities for students to use literacy for authentic purposes, and support their understanding reading and writing as tools they can use to address problems that face their respective communities, they may increase their students' motivation to participate in meaningful literacy learning.

Each participant whose story we shared benefited from the support of literacy sponsors (Brandt, 2001) beyond teachers. Their affiliation with organizations such as United We Dream and its local affiliate not only motivated Emilio, Sofia, and Manuel to use their literacy to learn more about issues that affected the local Latino community, it also provided them with a platform to make their voices heard. Recognizing this, we recommend that teachers set aside time early in the school year to learn about the different sponsors that support their students' literacy. This can be accomplished in a number of ways.

For example, using questions similar to those found in the interview protocol (see Appendix), teachers could invite students to interview each other for the purpose of eliciting their memories of reading and writing outside of school. In doing so, they could also examine when, and why, they choose to use English or Spanish in different contexts, and what doing so allows them to accomplish. Alternatively, teachers could engage students in activities and discussions that are explicitly designed to draw their attention to people, organizations, and institutions beyond school that have supported (and continue to support) their literacy learning. Taking time to engage students in activities of this sort can help teachers to learn more about the purposes toward which students put reading and writing outside of school, thus providing them with a foundation to support students' acquisition of academic literacy.

Our study also points to the value of teachers' reconceptualizing the assignments they ask students to undertake in school, as in many instances, these assignments require them to put language and literacy toward ends that are highly decontextualized. In school, for example, students are often asked to read and write to demonstrate that they are capable of reading and writing. Moreover, in school, students generally write for an audience of one: the teacher. In contrast, meaningful literacy learning is situated and embodied (Gee, 2014). That is, students are more likely to develop as readers and writers when they are given cause to use their literacy to address real-world issues and problems. Recognizing that students are motivated to succeed when they write for an authentic purpose and an authentic audience, English teachers can strive to design assessments that position students—transnational as well as mononational—to read and write about issues that matter to them.

As one example, teachers could engage students in community inquiry to research problems that affect people in the area where they live and to propose solutions for these problems. To present their findings, students could invite stakeholders in the community to visit their school and attend a formal presentation

of the students' research. Such assignments position students as real-life researchers, which has additional positive benefits. Comber's research (2015), for example, suggests that "students can build a positive sense of their academic identities as they engage with and inquire into the everyday world" (pp. 66-67). Moreover, assignments of the sort we propose implementing in classrooms are characterized by a critical dimension because they invite students to consider how problems in their local communities are implicated in power relationships. By addressing these issues, students can come to see themselves as people who are invested in their communities.

Finally, by taking time to learn about the literacy practices and transnational identities that a growing number of our students bring to school, English teachers can use them as a basis to support students' academic literacy. Jiménez, Smith, and Teague (2009), cite research that suggests that "minority students are more likely to make progress in school when teachers understand and incorporate their home and community literacy practices as opposed to attempting simply to impose school-like practices (e.g., book reading) in the home" (p. 18). Through creating opportunities for both transnational and mononational students to share and explore their out of school literacy practices with classmates, English teachers can foster an environment that values diversity and acknowledges the rich roles that reading and writing play in the lives of all people.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. When and where were you born?
2. Where do you currently live?
3. How did you come to live in (name of town/city), and how long have you lived there?
4. How would you describe the household you grew up in?
5. Where were you parents born? Where were your grandparents born?
6. How did your parents come to live in (name of town/city), and how long have they lived there?
7. What motivated your family's decision to relocate?
8. Do you stay in touch with family members outside of the United States, and if so, how? What language(s) do you use to communicate with them, and for what reasons?
9. How would you describe your grandparents' education? How would you describe your parents' education?
10. What jobs have your parents held?
11. What schools have you attended, and what is your highest degree?
12. What are your earliest memories of reading (in both Spanish and English)?
13. Were you encouraged to read as a child, and if so, by whom? What language(s) did these people encourage you to read in, and why?
14. Who do you remember teaching you to read in Spanish/English?
15. What types of reading materials did you have access to in your home as a child? What language(s) were these materials written in?
16. Who do you remember reading in your home, and what kinds of things did they read? In what language(s) did they read?
17. Were you encouraged to write as a child? If so, by whom, and in what language(s)?
18. Who do you remember writing in your home, and what kinds of things did they write? In what language(s) did they write?
19. What are your memories of reading and writing for school?
    (a) What language did you primarily use in school?
    (b) Did you have access to Spanish language reading materials in school?
20. How would you describe the role reading plays in your personal life today? What language(s) do you read in, and for what purposes?
21. How would you describe the role writing plays in your personal life today? What language(s) do you write in, and for what purposes?
22. What kinds of reading materials do you and other members of your family have access to in your home? Which materials are written in English, and which in Spanish?
23. What is the last thing you can remember writing, and what motivated you to do so?
24. Can you tell me about jobs (or occupations) you've held? How often are you required to read and write (in either English/Spanish) in the workplace, and for what purposes?
25. Is there anything else you can tell me about your experiences with reading and writing that you think might interest us or help us with our research?

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