

*Immigrant Student Identities in Literacy Spaces*

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## Immigrant Student Identities in Literacy Spaces

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*The United States has a long history of marginalizing immigrant populations. Anti-immigration laws and ideologies have not only marginalized immigrant populations, but they have shaped the American educational system. Language policies, curricula, and standardized tests threaten the erasure of immigrant students' languages, cultures, and identities while favoring and privileging white middle-class ways of learning. This is particularly true for immigrants of color. This background discusses immigrant identities in school spaces. Specifically, I provide an overview of how immigrant students' identities are constructed in literacy classrooms through literacy practices.*

The United States' current political climate is deeply rooted in anti-immigration ideologies. Travel bans, plans to end the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act), and the establishment of the zero-tolerance immigration policy send a clear message that "Making America Great Again" includes both the strategic marginalization of immigrants who reside in the U.S. and the prevention of immigrants entering the country. Immigrants living in the U.S. experience frequent discrimination and ostracization because they do not fit traditional notions of "American," and immigrants who desire to enter the country – sometimes for life-threatening reasons – are prohibited from entering the country. So, the U.S. can often feel like an unsafe place for immigrants. If there is one place where immigrant youths should feel comfortable, it should be in the place where they spend most of their time – schools. American schools, however, have a long history of the erasure of immigrant students' languages, cultures, and literacies (Enciso, 2011). Educational policies, national and local learning standards, mandated curricula, and high-stakes tests are reflective of ideologies that marginalize the diverse languages, ways of knowing, and literacies that immigrant students bring to classrooms (Ghiso & Low, 2012).

This paper provides an argument for centering immigrant students' identities in a place in a space where reading, writing, speaking, and listening is explicitly taught and assessed – the language arts classroom. Literacy policies, school structures, and standardized curricula have ideological assumptions about who belongs and does not belong and what counts and does not count as literacy knowledge (Dyson, 2012). The purpose of this overview is to provide insight into the histories, languages, and knowledge that immigrant students bring to language arts classrooms – ones that may often be overlooked. Additionally, it encourages educators to examine their role in creating space for immigrant students' identities in classrooms. Because literacy policies narrowly define literacy, it also aims to challenge policy makers to consider the languages, literacy practices, and cultural knowledge that students from diverse backgrounds possess when creating and implementing policies (Skerrett, 2016, p. 7). In addition to providing insights in these areas, this overview also contextualizes the topic of immigrant students' identities in language arts classrooms in two distinct areas: (1) the construction of immigrant students' identities through writing and (2) how language arts teachers' ideologies, curricular choices, and instructional practices influence immigrant students' identities.

### **The Construction of Immigrant Students' Identities Through Writing**

Considering that media and political discourse often create negative and stereotypical narratives about immigrants, the studies described in the subsequent sections highlight ways that writing can be used as a tool for immigrant students to construct their own identities. Through writing, immigrant students create pieces that are reflective of their lived experiences, resulting in an

identity that is unique and specific to them. They can also construct narratives that push back against biased and untruthful representations of immigrants. Writing can even communicate and share the challenges of life as an immigrant in the United States.

### **Construction of Own Identity**

Immigrant students can use writing to construct an identity that is reflective of their lived truths and experiences. Additionally, some students use writing as a means of deconstructing and countering dominant narratives about immigrants (Asher, 2008; Pacheco, 2009; Strickland, Keat, & Marinak, 2010). Asher (2008) found that Asian-American students' personal narratives revealed how they troubled the monolithic minority Indian stereotype through the creation of new ones – narratives that were reflective of their truthful and lived experiences. Close analysis of their writing revealed how their social worlds shaped their identities and portrayed who they were as individuals – not just a person in an ethnic group. Additionally, pre-kindergarten students in Strickland et al.'s (2010) study used photo-narratives to communicate with their teachers about things that were important to them, which created a space for students to build and showcase their identity in the classroom.

Other students have constructed their own identities by privileging their voice and knowledge in their writing (McLean, 2012; Schultz & Coleman-King, 2012; Van-Sluys & Carpenter, 2013). In McLean's (2012) study, two 10<sup>th</sup> grade Jamaican students wrote poetry, essay, and narratives that drew on their home/community resources, telling stories that are not often told in classroom books. Both girls positioned themselves and their voices as valuable.

Because traditional forms of writing can limit how immigrant students identify themselves through narrow writing conventions and rules, some students capitalize on the linguistic and cultural resources of the multiple worlds that they inhabit to construct writing pieces that showcase their identities. When narrow and dichotomous terms did not align with his cultural representations of themselves, the 7<sup>th</sup> grade Latino student in Honeyford's (2013) study composed a digital narrative in which he escaped to a time and place that offered a broader and more realistic way of describing himself. Similarly, students create their own truthful identities in their writing by merging fiction and non-fiction writing practices that cross time and space boundaries (Souto-Manning, 2013).

### **Countering Dominant Ways of Writing and Being**

Immigrant students use writing to resist White-middle class dominant discourses and behaviors by countering and resisting cultural portrayals of their respective ethnic groups (Asher, 2008; Keat, Strickland, & Marinak, 2009) and engaging in syncretic literacy practices (Souto-Manning, 2013). Such a resistance is reflected in Keat et al.'s (2009) study, as the teachers listened to their prekindergarten immigrant students' photo narrations, which included images of their lives outside of the classroom, in order to see if doing so would provide opportunities for enhanced connections between the teachers and students. The authors found that the students' photos and storylines exposed false assumptions that their teachers held that were constructed through their travels to their students' native countries. While conversing with their teachers, the students corrected them and provided alternative conceptions about their identities, both of which are reflective of agency. The use of images enabled children to counter their teachers' faulty cultural assumptions.

Students can challenge dominant narratives about immigration through their writing practices. For example, a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade Afro-Latino student in Souto-Manning's (2013) study countered

normative binaries set up by teachers through his diverse and varied narrative and literacy practices. He challenged official and clandestine ways of reading as he navigated across texts. He created connections “in between” reading practices, as he drew on varied sources across generations, languages, and funds of knowledge that he makes sense of the world. Other forms of countering include students drawing on discursive strategies that resist a realistic construction and understanding of their identity to create new ones, also known as magical realism (Honeyford, 2013).

Though students counter dominant narratives and engage in syncretic narrative writing, these practices do not eliminate the static identities that are often given to immigrant students. These limited identities are often what leads students to not just construct but also negotiate their identities. This was evident in Marinell’s (2008) study where the teacher saw the students as part of the community in which their school was located, but when asked how they saw themselves in the community, the students responded, “We’re not part of Lawrence” and “We’re not really part of this community” (p. 538). The teacher and the students’ varied perceptions of their place in the community is reflective of students’ resisting identities imposed on them from an authoritative figure.

When immigrant students use their writing to counter their teachers’ perceptions and dominant ways of writing, they position themselves as powerful and in control of their identities. As a result, they can counter misconceptions and provide clarity about who they really are.

### **Negotiation of Academic, Personal, and Social identities**

According to Compton-Lily et al. (2017), identity construction suggests the building of a stable entity, but identity negotiation highlights the continual and evolving nature of becoming – identity as a process, not a thing (p. 118). The concept of identity negotiation involves children claiming their places within schools and classrooms (Compton-Lily et al., 2017, p. 119). Compton-Lily et al. (2017) argue that children engage in networks of self and their identities are contextualized, negotiated, and renegotiated. In negotiating their identities, students do so in a way that reflects social and institutional contexts. Thus, students’ identity negotiations are shaped by factors outside of themselves. Because U.S. schools and classrooms favor European standards and ways of learning, immigrant students will be and are influenced by this context.

As immigrant students navigate between their school and home cultures, writing becomes a tool for refiguring boundaries, entering new worlds, and building identities (Van Sluys & Carpenter, 2003). Not all students reject their cultural and ethnic identities when they enter school spaces that threatens the erasure of them. In fact, in Van Sluys and Carpenter’s (2003) study, a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade Polish girl finds herself between home, Poland, the United States, and school cultures. Using writing as a foundation, she built an identity that did not abandon one culture for the other (p. 182). Her early school experiences helped her form an understanding of what it meant to write while drawing from lived experiences to shape her texts, and by doing so, she drew on the resources from her native culture and school culture, merging both worlds. Other students negotiate multiple identities because of labels that they have inherited as a result of their assigned linguistic abilities in conjunction with self-imposed identities. For example, in Hafner’s (2013) study, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade Latino student negotiated three different identities – immigrant, academic special education English Language Learner, and future hip-hop rapper. The student’s essay revealed how he negotiated these identities through his participation and resistance of academic tasks (based on his disability) while using Hip Hop culture to engage in writing practices for the “Coming to America” writing assignment created by his teachers. By drawing on his funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) – the skills, knowledge, and experiences accumulated through his historical and contemporary interactions

in his family, cultural life, and Hip Hop world – he was able to engage in the traditional tasks of writing.

Context and residential neighborhoods also shape immigrant students' identities (Marinell, 2008; Vo-Jutabha, Dihl, McHale, & Valsiner, 2009). Adolescent immigrants who reside in communities with people from their immigrant group have different identity-shaping experiences from adolescent immigrants who reside in communities with people who are not part of their immigrant group. The Vietnamese students' journals in Vo-Jutabha et al.'s (2009) study revealed how context influenced their identity development. For example, parental and cultural expectations demanded identity negotiation and compartmentalization of students' identities. Similarly, Marinell's (2008) study showed the relationship between immigrant students' identities and their residential neighborhoods. Though the Puerto-Rican and Dominican students in this study lived in the Lawrence community, they did not initially see themselves as part of the community. After learning about the community's history and the role that immigrants played in developing the city, they embraced their place in the community. Through the discovery of aspects of the city that reminded them of their lives in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, one student concluded, "I'm part of its history and what it's all about" (p. 539). These examples reveal the role that context plays in immigrant students' concept of self and their sense of belonging in a place that may often seem unfamiliar and distant from their home countries. They also highlight the role that both writing and looking into history play to discuss home and to create a sense of home away from home.

Institutions, as mentioned before, cause immigrant students to negotiate their identities. While in school, students have to negotiate their identity "along a preconceived model of what it means to be American, including the message that success requires shedding their ethnic identities and smoothing over their struggles" (Ghiso & Low, 2013, p. 26). McLean's (2012) study is an example of this. The study examined two 10<sup>th</sup>-grade Jamaican girls' self-exploration of self-hood in the United States, outside of their home country. The girls wrote to understand their new world in their place in it, and their writing revealed the combination of normative values and school, home, and cultural values in achieving "The American Dream" through education. It also revealed how their academic success – which is a cultural value – was directly linked to their writing. For this reason, they negotiated the use of academic factors in their writing while acknowledging the importance of their cultural values.

### **Writing Reveals the Challenges of Being an Immigrant**

Despite the genre, several studies have shown how immigrant students' writing revealed the challenges associated with being an immigrant (Hernandez et al., 2013; Stewart, 2013, Van Sluys & Carpenter, 2003). Hernandez et al. (2013) examined the autobiographic writing of low-income immigrants who wrote about what it was like to grow up as low-income immigrants in the United States. In their autobiographies, the students shed light on what it means to grow up as an undocumented youth through stories about not being able to return to their homeland, wanting to be accepted as Americans, and fear of living in the shadows. Students also write about experiences of confusion, initial experiences of not understanding English, not having any friends, and family as the most important relationships (Van Sluys & Carpenter, 2013).

Students' writing even reveals experiences of loss associated with immigration (Ghiso & Low, 2013). In Ghiso and Low's (2013) study, students' stories show how complex and multidirectional immigrant experiences are. Using multimodal writing, one of the students shared how she dealt with her family loss by using "cultural brokering" to share her experience in a classroom with people who did not share her identity through oral commentary. The combination of loss and sharing it with an unfamiliar audience presents another layer of the immigrant student

experience. Communicating tough moments are already difficult enough but finding a communication mode to share the information so that everyone understands it presents a different type of challenge for immigrant students.

### **How Language Arts Teachers' Ideologies, Curricular Choices, and Instructional Practices Influence Immigrant Students' Identities**

Whereas the previous section highlighted ways that immigrant students construct their identities through writing, this section focuses on ways that teachers influences immigrant students' identities.

#### **Multimodality & Inclusive Curricula**

Teachers invite immigrant students to partake in varied writing experiences using personal narratives (Abraham, 2015; Asher, 2008; McLean, 2012), memoir, multimodal texts (Ghiso & Low, 2013; Honeyford, 2013; Schultz & Coleman-King, 2012), photos and self-portraits (Compton-Lilly, 2017; Keat et al., 2009; Marinell, 2008; Strickland et al., 2010), oral storytelling (Enciso, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2013), historicized writing (Pacheco & Nao, 2009), essays (Hafner, 2013), journals (Vo-Jutabha et al., 2009), memoir (Van Sluys & Carpenter, 2003), autobiographies (Hernandez et al., 2011), and stories (Stewart, 2013). Ghiso and Low (2012) capture the essence and benefits of multimodality writing: "Multimodal writing opportunities can expand literacy curriculum to allow for representations of immigration that challenge monolithic trajectories and thus offer varied, contrasting and more complete understandings of student experiences. Carving out this space invites multiple representations of experience" (p. 33).

Implementing multimodal writing instruction has the potential to increase student participation and engagement. Schultz and Coleman (2012) examined what happened when a teacher incorporated digital technology and multiple modalities in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade literacy curriculum. They found that through music and sounds, photos and web-based images, their students had opportunities to share with wider audiences, including families and other classes in the schools. The combination of new audiences and wider modes of writing connected to students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and engaged them in composing activities without the challenge of a language barrier. Their study shows the impact of multimodal writing instruction on immigrant students' engagement and participation.

Teachers can implement curricula that is inclusive of immigrant students' identities and experiences. They can do this by relinquishing ideologies that privilege narrow perceptions of writing and supplementing mandated curricula with resources that reflect the realities of students' lives. Asher (2008) argued that teachers must create curricula that "draws on and represents a fluidity of identity and culture, rather than relying on fixed, often stereotypical image" (p.17). She further argued that curriculum designed to deconstruct stereotypes about minority cultures and people would incorporate reading of written pieces to foster dialogue across differences. Her argument reflects the idea that narrative spaces allow students to tell their own stories and listen closely to the stories of others. Additionally, teachers can use inclusive curricula to disrupt traditional notions of writing. For example, in Abraham's (2015) study, critical discourse analysis was used to analyze a student's narrative about her mother's arrest and deportation back to Mexico. After reflecting on the traditional writing practices used in her classroom, the teacher explained that she "wanted to open up writing to include more responses, stories, languages, and thoughts, and [she] turned to the ideas found in critical literacy studies to help [her] do this" and "[she] began to encourage students to include more forms of writing, expression, and knowledge" (p. 414-415).

Both Pacheco and Nao (2009) and Hafner's (2013) studies emphasized how deviating from the mandated curricula has implications for immigrant students' identities between their multiple worlds and beyond the classroom. Hafner sees hip hop as a third space for English Language Learners, as it "promotes productive oral and communication supported by engaging youth experiences of oppression in academic literacy" (p. 44). Pacheco and Nao believed that "implementing a curriculum that fosters students' socio-critical literacies provides a space to rethink, reexamine, and reinterpret how personal experiences and identities are implicated in broader global-historical landscapes" (p. 39).

Teachers need to be critical of existing curricula in order to identify and create spaces for writing that allows immigrant students to construct their identities. By doing so, they invite students to fully participate and engage in writing instruction.

### **Extending Recognition of Immigrant Studies and Their Stories by Valuing Them**

Creating space is reflective of recognizing the need for immigrant students to share their stories. Recognition, however, is not enough. Once the space has been created for immigrant students to share their stories, it is important for both teachers and students to recognize and value their stories. This entails listening closely and looking for opportunities to bring immigrant students' stories to the center of classroom conversations. In Marinell's (2008) study, a teacher used photojournalism – a medium that did not require language proficiency – to capture her students' transition from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic to their new community in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and to combat negative perceptions of their new community. This teacher also made a conscious decision to move to the city where she taught – an urban, industrial highly populated immigrant city – in order to have a less limiting teaching experience, like she would have if she taught in the suburb in which she grew up. While this is not feasible for all teachers, living in the communities of immigrant students can send a strong message to immigrant students that they are valued.

Even when immigrant students' stories are shared, they can easily go unheard and unnoticed. Enciso (2011) examined the story forms and contexts of immigrant and non-immigrant youth as they worked with their teachers and her to tell stories of advocacy and bigotry across two language arts classrooms (p. 22). In her study, she found that there were moments to engage in a deep analysis and conversation of immigrant students' stories, but they often went unnoticed and/or unheard because of many factors, such as classroom distractions. In the discussion section of her piece, she argued that teachers need to make a shift by valuing students' stories beyond mandated and detached curricula (p. 30). She further encouraged teachers to recognize students' stories as art and "see them as counters of the social and political worlds that they operate in and convergence of students' knowledge and new, poetic ways of using and listening to their own and other's worlds" (p. 39).

Teachers can also show that they value their students and their stories by creating relationships with them, genuinely engaging in their stories, and drawing on their cultural resources. Stewart (2013) argued that teachers have to take the time to get to know students so they can teach them effectively and that the first priority must be to genuinely care for students over academic work. Keat et al.'s (2009) study showed how teachers created genuine encounters with students while listening to them share their photo-narratives. While listening, they moved their chairs close to the child and looked in the child's face with an expression of interest. Similarly, the teachers in Strickland et al. (2010) study interacted with the children while sharing photos of their lives at home by responding in a way that opened the space for children to voice words in English previously unheard in that setting (p. 95). Doing so encouraged the students to feel comfortable to use English

as a form of communication. Immigrant students experience many changes in their lives, so relationships and genuine encounters can demonstrate care and value their place and their stories in the classroom. Care could also include drawing on their cultural, linguistic, and discursive resources that they bring to the classroom, even if they do not align with traditional writing conventions (Hafner, 2013).

These studies exemplified the ways that teachers play a critical role in ensuring that immigrant students' stories are valued and heard in language arts classrooms. While they highlighted teachers' roles, they did not examine the role that non-immigrant students play in ensuring that immigrant students' stories are valued. Examining how immigrant students' stories are perceived by their fellow classmates is an area that requires further research, as immigrant students' relationships are not solely with their teachers but their peers, too.

### **Tensions with Addressing Immigrant Students' Identities in the Classroom**

Tensions surface when immigrant students' identities are addressed through writing. One example is the role that audience and power play in the meaning and interpretations of stories (Enciso, 2011). When a story is told, it is important for the audience – including students and teachers – to actively listen. Active listening draws attention to moments that have the ability to bridge the gap between immigrant and non-immigrant students in a single classroom. Teachers can facilitate such listening by focusing on moments in students' stories that may not align with the mandated curricula writing expectations. Another tension that surfaces is teacher talk or what Keat et al. (2009) called a “tsunami of words.” In their study, Keat et al. found that teachers were eager to help students tell about their pictures. When a child became quiet, the teacher helped them speak, which resulted in students becoming more and more quiet. Similarly, the teachers in Strickland et al. (2010) study interacted with the children in a way that silenced them. This tension highlights the importance of providing wait time for immigrant students to speak and share their stories not just in writing but also in their commentary about them. A third and final tension that surfaces is identity conflict (Marinell, 2008). The teacher in Marinell's (2008) study did not share the same ethnic identity with her Latino students, which caused conflict at some points of the implementation of the curriculum. She found that her identity often prevented her from being able to connect with and understand her students' experiences. This disconnect allowed her to see how her writing curriculum – though critical in nature – was reflective of unrealistic writing expectations. Whereas she wanted her students to be positive about their place in the Lawrence community, they desired to write about real experiences (i.e. a student being shot) that were not positive. This led her to reflect on ways to allow her students to “be real” in their writing without her questioning it (p. 541).

These tensions show that centering immigrant students' identities and writing is not void of challenges. This means considering not just the teacher and students as audience members, but because teachers and students are generally the first to engage with students' stories, it is pertinent that they genuinely encounter their work, listening actively without silencing them through excessive talk or classroom distractions. Talk needs to be carefully embedded into writing so that there is a communication exchange between immigrant students, teachers, and non-immigrant students.

### **Future Directions**

It is imperative that teachers be critical of existing curricula in order to identify and create spaces for writing that allows immigrant students to construct their own identities. In order to create such spaces, teachers must be willing to deviate from mandated curricula, draw on supplement

resources, and reconceptualize what counts as writing. This also requires teachers to move beyond a culturally responsive stance and employ conflict and divergence at the center of teaching and learning (Souto-Manning, 2013). There is a clear relationship between curricula and student identity, which highlights the need for both pre-service and in-service teachers to engage in professional development related to this topic.

The mode of writing matters, too. Multimodal writing invites students to share parts of their identity that may not be visible when traditional writing styles and genres are in place. In addition to implementing multimodal writing instruction, audience and the role of talk need to be considered. Enciso (2011) challenged us to “consider audience beyond school context in order to share truthful identities, such as non-school spaces... as stories enter into relations of power that determine what is a recognizable story and who is recognizable as a storyteller” (p. 21). This means that teachers should interact with their students’ work in ways that are genuine. A key part of doing so is creating a space for talk between immigrant students, non-immigrant students, and teachers. Such talk needs to be rooted in intentional listening.

For some immigrant children, their identities are constructed and negotiated based on personal, social, cultural, and academic influences. In some cases, obtaining a good education and performing well academically is a cultural value (Asher, 2008; McLean, 2012; Vo-Jutabaha et al. 2009). This idea sheds light on further research that should address two questions: (1) How can immigrant students hold on to their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic values while pursuing academic success in U.S. classrooms? and (2) What should be done when students experience shame around their culture, home, linguistic, and ethnic values? How can teachers identify and positively influence this?

Most of the studies included in this paper focused on students from Latino and Asian backgrounds. Out of all of the studies selected, only two of them include Black immigrant students: (McLean, 2012) and Souto-Manning (2013). This highlights the underrepresentation of Black immigrants in this research area. Thus, there is a need for increased empirical studies of Black immigrant students in literacy classrooms. Researching the immigrant experiences of these students could inform how literacy practices are taken up in classrooms. It could also inform researchers and scholars of the literacies that Black immigrant students from various countries bring with them into schools. Future research should consider the reasons why Black immigrant students are underrepresented in research and should further look into the role that social contexts and cultural expectations play in Black immigrant students’ identity performance in school settings.

### **Supporting Immigrant Students’ Identities**

The articles in this critical forum – one from an emerging scholar and one from a classroom educator – further highlight the historical, political, and educational ways that immigrant students’ identities have been marginalized. They also provide strong arguments for why and how immigrant students’ identities should be centered in literacy classrooms and school as a whole.

Steven Arenas’ article examines how he uses poetry to negotiate students’ identities. He provides a historical overview of Latino students’ achievement in relation to educational practices, emphasizes the importance of Latino literature for cultural validation, and chronicles Arizona’s anti-Latino sentiments, which is reflected through the adoption of their English only policies. In his piece, he argues that students need to be provided with opportunities to explore their identities. He supports his argument with an examination of poetry work inside his own classroom where students simultaneously explore their identities and build community.

Gladys Aponte’s piece argues for centering the bilingual identities of immigrant children, as she believes that this is one of the ways that literacy classrooms can be transformed amidst a

culture of standardized reading, speaking, writing, and listening objectives. She encourages educators to combat deficit views that degrade immigrant populations, addresses institutionalized racism in United States schools, and offers translanguaging – the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system (Canagarajah, 2011) – as an approach to center their identities.

Both of these pieces add to and extend the discussion about immigrant students' identities in literacy spaces.

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