Changing Identities: From Troubled Youth to Educated Citizen[1]

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Abstract

In this paper, I report on research about the experience of a group of English teachers who returned from the violent gang culture of Southern California to Mexico, seeking a means of changing their identities from gang members into productive, educated members of society. On returning to Mexico, the teachers had to negotiate their otherness and differences stemming from the customs and traditions they learned to perceive as normal. They learned to adapt to and blend the culture and values they had in Southern California with those of Mexico, using their English as capital to join a new community of practice, English Teaching. Through teaching they were able to gain cultural capital and bring meaning and purpose to their lives as they adapted and their identities changed through time and space. This paper offers insight into the struggle of transnational youth and how they adapt to different communities. This is especially important in a country like Mexico, where Mexican youth often grow up in the United States and have to come back to Mexico, a country they often do not feel they belong to.

Resumen

Este artículo investiga la experiencia de un grupo de profesores de inglés que han regresado de la cultura violenta de pandillas del sur de California a México, buscando un medio para cambiar sus identidades de pandilleros a miembros productivos y educados de la sociedad. Al regresar a México, los maestros tienen que negociar su alteridad y diferencias, derivadas de las costumbres y tradiciones que aprendieron a percibir como normales. Aprenden a adaptar y combinar la cultura y los valores que tenían en el sur de California con los de México, utilizando su inglés como capital para unirse a una nueva comunidad de práctica, los enseñantes del inglés. A través de la enseñanza, pudieron obtener capital cultural y aportar significado y propósito a sus vidas a medida que adoptaban y cambiaban sus identidades a través del tiempo y el espacio. Este documento ofrece información sobre la lucha de los jóvenes transnacionales y cómo se adaptan a las diferentes comunidades. En este sentido, existe una necesidad urgente de continuar la investigación para comprender cómo estas personas tienen éxito o fracasan en diferentes comunidades.

Introduction

From 2005-2015, over 500,000 young adults between the ages of 18 to 35 returned to Mexico (Anderson, 2015). Research into the experience of the return and deportation to Mexico after living in the United States has been addressed by researchers such as Anderson and Solis in books like *Los Otros Dreamers* (2014). In this book, they report on the struggle of many of these young people who have no childhood memories of Mexico and who are more proficient in English than in Spanish. Some of these people find it difficult to adjust to a culture they are only vaguely familiar with, whereas others are able to create a new life exploiting their English language fluency. This study focuses on a similar group of transnational people, who were immersed at an early age in the inner-city culture of Southern California where drugs, gang violence, racial tensions, and draconian laws created a seemingly impenetrable glass ceiling. The participants in this study left their lives in Southern California to seek a better life in Jalisco, Mexico.

Despite the high levels of crime and large number of gangs in Jalisco, the participants were able to excel both academically and professionally. Their experience in adapting and eventually thriving in their new environment is studied using an identity approach. Through this means their relationship to their larger social world, their struggle, and their changing identity over time and space was analyzed. I believe this study is useful to the TESOL community because it introduces them to a group of English speakers they are probably acquainted with or know at a professional level, but of whose background they have little understanding. Moreover, the experience of the participants reflects the reality of many troubled youth in the U.S. as well as Mexico who live in less than ideal situations and turn to crime and gangs as a means to support themselves and create a sense of belonging they do not have in school or at home. In an interview addressing barriers to learning in public schools in Jalisco, several public middle school English teachers gave the following statements that illustrate the difficulties they and their students have to face:

> I am worried, and I get angry because I care. I care about the students. I am not working with animals. I am working with people. I am worried because those parents don't care about their children, and I am not their parents, but I care about them. Many of our students have to work at a young age. Many of our students have sexual problems because their parents rape [raped] them or their uncles or whatever. So, it's not just because of the government's

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fault or the teachers' fault. The thing is that our society nowadays—how can I express this—[is] eating the educational system. (Teacher 1)

We must not forget that in middle schools the government is obliged to give education. So, we have more kids and more kids. So the government does not have the spaces or facilities—I mean yeah, I know the ideal thing is to have thirty students in a classroom, but if you have 1,000 people who ask you for a place in your school and you only have places for five hundred—what do you do? It's like jail. (Teacher 2)

The area was filled with gangs, and narcos are the students' role models. The students want to be like Chapo, not a doctor or lawyer—that's just not what they see or hear. Not all of them, but a lot of them. And you know you gotta be really careful how far you take things with them. The director of the school—he was killed. That's when I decided to go. (Teacher 3)

Although these comments deal with teaching English in Jalisco in public middle schools and not in Southern California, they share a great deal of the hopelessness, violence, and lack of access to a positive community the participants experienced growing up. This marginalization impacts on students' ability to learn and limits the influence a teacher can have. Therefore, attention to sociocultural contexts, and how they impact one's identity as a successful student or an educated citizen, is necessary in providing the knowledge to foster an environment which leads to successful teacher-learner dynamics.

Literature review

The identity approach to second language acquisition addresses two issues. First, it serves as a way to integrate the individual and the social setting he/she is placed in. Second, it describes the importance of how power and its relationship between people influence entrance into a target language community in an often inequitable world where "Every time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship across time and space" (Norton, 2010, p. 350).

Thus, language must be understood as much more than a neutral means of communication, but rather its importance must be understood through the social surroundings and their effect on the learner. For instance, a language learner can achieve more desirable identities when appropriating new language and gaining access to a target language community within a social environment (Norton & McKinney, 2011), if they are given the access and power to do so.

Identity theory contrasts with more traditional conceptions of motivation which focus on individual differences (ID) without taking into consideration the social element. Dörnyei (2005) describes ID characteristics as "dimensions of enduring personal characteristics that are assumed to apply to everybody and on which people differ by degree" (p.4). Ushioda (2011) correctly argues that to classify a person into abstract variables ignores the uniqueness each learner has. Rather she insists that people should be looked at as "real persons, rather than as theoretical abstractions" (p. 12). This is significant because rather than focusing on individual differences, she addresses motivation as a much more complex, interconnected web of factors that influence motivation to different degrees.

Indeed, Lave and Wenger (1991) do not see success or failure in learning through ID, but as participating in a specific situation where a certain amount of knowledge and practice is needed to become active participants in a community. Newcomers to a community are engaged in learning through contact with other newcomers and more knowledgeable members. Rather than the traditional view of learning through teaching, newcomers learn through practice. Through this practice a newcomer gains legitimacy as a participant and is exposed to cultural and social dynamics that not only influences their conceptions of the world, but also their identity. This conception of identity avoids the separation of the social and the individual. Instead it embraces identity as a lived experience where both factors play an important role on the process of their mutual constitution (Wengner, 2008). What this implies is that a dichotomous view of the community and individual fails to take into account how identity is shaped and negotiated through a community of practice. According to Wengner (2008), it is through this community of practice that one deals "with the profound issue of how to be a human being" (p. 149). Thus, a person's perception of who they are is highly influenced by access to or denial into a community of practice.

Scholars such as Norton and Kanno build on this view when they demonstrate the importance of an identity approach that goes beyond communities that are accessible at the present and examines how learners' affiliation with imagined communities influence their learning trajectories (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Norton (2001) uses the term identity "to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world,

how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). What is unique about her view on identity is the emphasis on the interrelated relationship between power, identity, and learning. She uses the term *investment* to describe how these factors influence a person's learning. She concludes that a person *invests* in learning to gain cultural capital, which are the assets needed for social mobility. These assets are either symbolic (language, education, friendship) or material resources (capital goods, real estate, money) (Norton & McKinney, 2011). The value of these forms of capital is not static but negotiated in different spaces where learners transform their possessed capital into something valuable and acquire new symbolic and material resources (Norton, 2016).

The identity and investment of an individual are not only influenced by their present and past selves, but also an imagined identity in the future (Norton, 2013). The concept of imagined identity in applied linguistics was derived from Anderson's (1991) concept of "imagined communities". Here nations were referred to as "imagined communities" because most people in a nation will never meet most of their fellow countrymen, yet they are able to identify and stay connected with them through their imagination. Anderson (Anthropology Online, 2013) provided an example of this in which he described how his own students would react in a hypothetical situation where the United States would have to sell Alaska to Japan to relieve debt. His students deemed the selling of Alaska as unacceptable even though it had originally been sold to the United States and that none of his students knew anyone in Alaska or had been there themselves, and yet it had become "sacred ground". This is significant because it demonstrated that people imagined themselves bonded with fellow citizens across time and space even if these people had never met (Norton, 2013).

Norton (1995) introduced this concept of imagined communities and imagined identities to applied linguistics where a student's perception of who they are, who they want to be, and what imagined community they want to belong to play a significant role in their actual learning. According to Pavlenko and Norton (2007), these imagined identities "might have just as much impact on our current identities and learning as direct involvement in communities of our everyday life" (p. 670). Norton demonstrates the impact of identity in several studies on language learners. In one article (Norton, 2000), she describes the experience of a Polish student named Katrina who was an adult language learner in Canada. After four months of studying she left her language course in response to her teacher telling her that she was not good enough to be taking a computer course. This reaction stemmed from Katrina's history, investment, and imagined identities. In Poland, Katrina was a well-respected teacher and when she arrived in Canada, she desired to be a part of a professional community. She had joined the computer course because she felt she would be on a more equal playing field since she did not have to speak but think. When her teacher, who was a member of the imagined community she wanted to be a part of, saw her only as an immigrant and not the professional she perceived herself as, Katrina quit. Norton concludes that this was an act to preserve Katrina's identity of being a professional. What this illustrates is Katrina was motivated to learn, but not invested because she was not able to gain the culture capital she desired.

In another study done by Norton and Kamal (2003), 80 middle-school students from Pakistan donated stationery, books, and supplies, and taught English to orphans from Afghanistan. The researchers were interested in the conceptions the students had about literacy and the importance of English. They discovered the students felt that literacy was crucial for the development of a country and that literacy gave people the ability to reason more than someone who is illiterate. Indeed, in the interpretation of their data Norton and Kamal (2003) state that to the students an "imagined community that is literate, skilled in English, and technologically advanced is also a community that has food, shelter and peace" (p. 314). The use of English was seen as a means to gain access to both technology and science and in turn minimize the gap with developed countries.

Similar to language learners, language teachers are also influenced by their social context over time and space and their hopes and desires for their future (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Norton (2017) argues that "Language teachers need to navigate relations of power in the classroom and understand the possibilities and limitations of their institutions and communities" (p. 81). Indeed, this is particularly important in the case of this study where teachers navigate between two cultures. Therefore, their identity shifts and blends as they adjust and adapt to their lives as English teachers in Mexico.

The Study

My research on identity focuses on three Mexican teachers who lived in the inner city of Los Angeles (LA) in Southern California and moved back to Mexico. I sought to determine how these three participants' identities transformed from delinquent youth involved in street gangs to educated teachers. The three participants grew up with limited resources and were exposed to extreme violence which constrained their access to educational opportunities. However, their fervent desire to join a group of educated successful citizens drove them to break ties with the community they had formed and seek opportunities outside their known world. Their English language fluency gave them access to an academic community of practice in Mexico they would probably never have been exposed to in Southern California.

Methodology

To investigate how the participants gained access to this community and the role identity had in this process, they were given a semi-structured interview and then a second unstructured interview which followed up on some of the most salient issues which emerged from the first interview. For example, participants in their first interview mentioned changes in their lives, such as joining a gang, moving to Mexico, and becoming teachers. However, the impact their surroundings had and how they negotiated their identity in different contexts were not fully addressed until the second interview. Since identity changes through time and space, a statistical analysis which measures specific variables seemed inappropriate. Thus, a qualitative approach, which could subjectively analyze abstract concepts such as power, provided a more appropriate research tool.

The lived experience of the participants was explored through their narratives. These narratives provided insight into how the participants made sense of their lives in Los Angeles and later in Mexico. In both cases these narratives were stories of learning. In the former case, the participants learned how to survive on the violent streets of Los Angeles. In the latter, they learned to function as English teachers. Pavlenko (2001) emphasizes how narrative can contribute to research:

> L2 learning stories...are unique and rich sources of information about the relationship between language and identity in second language learning and socialization. It is possible that only personal narratives provide a glimpse into areas so private, personal and intimate that they are rarely—if ever—breached in the study of SLA, and at the same time are at the heart and soul of the second language socialization process. (p. 167)

Indeed, it was through their narratives that participants could make meaning of their past lives as adolescents on the streets and their lives as adults in the classroom.

Data Collection Instruments

While analyzing my data I used open coding which is described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as a procedure where "the data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena reflected in the data" (p. 102). For instance, my first interview was used to gather data from the participants to gain a broad idea of their shifting identity. The interview was recorded and transcribed. In the transcription I looked for patterns and color coded them. Once I analyzed the data from the first interview, I noticed gaps. Therefore, I gave a second interview to clarify certain aspects from the first. The emerging data coming from the codes and comments were put into categories. This gave me a more holistic view of the data and allowed me to create connections.

Findings

The reason the participants left their gang lifestyle stemmed from a desire to avoid the hardship which is associated with it. All the participants were exposed to extreme violence, incarceration, drug use and drug dealing either directly or indirectly. Despite these drawbacks the gang lifestyle provided a feeling of belonging, a sense of purpose, and even a code of ethics. These attributes, which were provided by being a member of a gang, made the decision to leave that lifestyle hard for the participants. Even though they knew that the lifestyle they were living would probably leave them dead or in prison, they were still drawn to it. It was what they knew and where they felt comfortable. However, either by force or choice, they left Southern California to live in Mexico. Initially, they did not necessarily fit in with people in Mexico and their otherness made joining a community in Mexico difficult. Nonetheless, they all overcame this barrier in a large degree because they became invested in an identity of being an educated professional, rather than a gang member. In fact, it was because they were given that opportunity to learn and become a professional as an English teacher that they decided to stay in Mexico and make the shift from being gang members to productive and educated citizens.

Getting Involved in Gangs

The participants spoke of the gang lifestyle as a way in which to protect themselves from being victimized or simply because it was a natural process of growing up in their neighborhood. All participants experienced an environment where violence was the norm and gangs provided the protection and sense of belonging the participants longed for as children and adolescents. The following statements illustrate this clearly:

> Well, I am from Mexico and moved when I was a kid to South Los Angeles and the neighborhood where I lived at, that's where one of the biggest gangs in southern California were born. So even if I didn't want to, you know, I went to school with them. I became friends with them, and I think that one of the main reasons I started getting involved was the fact that I felt alone, and I didn't have anyone to back me up. There are a lot of different races, so ah Afro-Americans, they started, you know trying to pick on me, and then I was walking down the street and they would just approach me and, you know, asking me where I was from, trying to intimidate me. So, I felt that I didn't have any back up…. So, I started becoming better friends with those gang members and they saw me hanging out with them and ah whenever they came to me they would think about it twice before they tried to pick on me. (Participant 1)

> I was in the neighborhood where our neighbors and family grew up together. We all made the transition without even noticing. You know what I mean? That's where it all starts. We were defending it because that was our neighborhood—that was our area. So, we're defending 38th street because that was our barrio, but none of us was jumped in. We were from the neighborhood. We knew the guys. Once you get into junior high, they begin to see you as potential recruits to the neighborhood, and we were already fighting, getting stabbed, getting beat up because the school that we went to in junior high. We had like six or seven neighborhoods that were our enemies. So, we're all from 38th street and a couple guys from 18 and that's when we made the alliance in the 80's because we have [had] common enemies, and we all got jumped in at the same time in 85, 86 because like I said we're already fighting for them anyways. (Participant 2)

> By the time I was 14 I was sleeping in parks. Living anywhere I could. Just trying to get away from my home life. So, I started criminal activities, and it was just normal to me because that was always around me. At school I was getting in fights all the time. People were trying to jump me all the time, so I didn't feel safe at school, and I didn't feel safe at home, so I was just running around LA and eventually I was recruited to this gang. (Participant 3)

This data clearly demonstrates that the participants joined a gang to cope with the reality they experienced in Los Angeles and to gain a sense of belonging. There is no mention of material resources being a motivating factor, rather it is a more essential need for the participants—survival. With reference to this data, it appears that it was at school where the participants felt the most vulnerable and became seriously involved with gangs. The participants expressed a need to defend themselves and a need for a gang for back up. In the case of Participant 2, he even talks about gang alliances and "getting stabbed" in junior high school. This is significant because it demonstrates the normality of violence these children were exposed to as youth in Los Angeles. The participants had to deal with a world where if they were weak, they would be victimized. However, in the cases of Participants 1 and 3, they joined a gang to avoid being a victim, whereas in the case of Participant 2, he saw joining his gang as more of a right passage—a step into manhood. The life of fighting, stabbing, gang wars and truces was simply a part of growing up in Los Angeles.

Cultural capital

The participants became invested in the gang life style for more symbolic than material resources. Partly, I believe because they were all children or adolescents when they were involved and had more serious issues to worry about such as security and belonging. The comment from Participant 3 perhaps summarizes best the views of the rest:

> I just remember as a kid I wanted to survive. I wanted to have friends, ah you know in a sense the gang gave me that, and I felt like I was part of something that was greater than myself. There is something about this really tight brotherhood that you can only get perhaps in war and in a gang where you have this loyalty, this honor, you're willing to die for your homeboy. You know, be on both sides of the trigger. And the fact that you're outside there partying with the homeboys that feeling of fraternity, the drugs, the women, it's an excess of these human instincts, your inclinations; in a sense, it's addictive. (Participant 3)

The fact that the participants joined a gang as a means to survive on the streets seems reasonable. However, it is interesting to note the emphasis the participants placed on honor even though many people outside their group would not see them as virtuous. This importance placed on loyalty and honor is still seen as a virtue by all the participants now. This can be illustrated in the following comment:

> The thing that I like about gangs is your loyalty. Whenever you become a gang member, they teach you stuff without even going to school. They teach you stuff that can only be learned out there on the streets. Like nobody teaches you how to be loyal. I mean you just see it and ah for instance how I was telling you about me being part of the

gang and my cousins backing me up and there were times when I took some blows and you know they were gonna get in trouble and I covered them. You know, I didn't snitch on them… If you are [a] true friend of mine, all you gotta do is call me up, and I'll be there for you. …Nobody is gonna take that away from me. You know you are loyal to the bone. (Participant 1)

Although none of the participants were actively involved in their gangs, they still saw the values learned in the gang as important, especially those related to honor and loyalty where one is willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. In the case of Los Angeles gang members, that seemed to be their gang. It appeared that the participants had taken a role many people would associate with family. Although these acts of virtue were spoken with admiration by the participants, there seemed to be less of a need of these "virtuous acts" from when they were involved in the gang in their professional lives now. This is demonstrated in the following statement:

When you are doing things right you are mainly by yourself. You develop friendship, and really good friendships but you develop them along the way. These are not from the same cut as the guys you grew up with. They don't know what loyalty is and [to] put your life on the line for somebody. So, the transition I did I don't consider it or associate it with the same values and the same structure of loyalty and honor and all that. You know the brotherhood. (Participant 2)

Given that the participants had a childhood where they lacked role models and grew up in constant violence, it is easy to see how the gang life style would be attractive. The gang provided the security, status, purpose, and belonging the participants desired as juveniles. People involved in this life style became like combat veterans—hardened. They worked as a team to survive. This lifestyle is in contrast to the lifestyle professionals live, where different virtues in a less violent world are necessary.

Leaving the Gang

As time transgressed, the participants began to create an imagined identity that did not involve the gang life style. They wanted a life where they could be successful outside the gang community, but their conception of loyalty and honor made leaving difficult as can be seen in the following excerpt:

I was with a friend. I had just turned 18. He was a dealer, and so we just came out of college and we're gonna get some lunch, and it was his neighborhood and he sees some guys, so he hits them up and there from a rival gang, and I don't got [sic] any beef [issues] with these guys, but I'm with the other dude so I back him up. Well, they pull out a 38. We aren't armed, so they blast [shoot at] us. I get shot in the arm and the leg, and I'm thinking what the hell I hadn't even heard about their gang, their clique, or crew, whatever. But I end up going to the hospital. I end up going to hospital, and I can't walk. I gotta go everywhere in crutches. And so, my dreams of going to college and being someone, you know all the people who had so much faith in me. I just felt like I was gonna be a permanent loser because at that time my reality was, I was deep in the set. (Participant 3)

All participants attempted to go to college in Southern California but failed. The gang lifestyle hindered the participants' ability to study. They were often concerned with survival and college was dangerous because they could be located in a certain place at a certain time, making them a target. Moreover, there was a constant struggle within themselves. They wanted to go to college and be professionals, but their love for and loyalty to their gang created a constant conflict of identity. Were they violent gang bangers from some of the most notorious gangs in the world or were they college students? They never were able to break loose from their attachment to their gang while living in Los Angeles. It was not until they came to Mexico, where they immediately let go of the gang lifestyle and began to work. The comment from Participant 2 perhaps summarizes best the views of the rest:

When I came here, I knew I was tired of the lifestyle I was used to, and I needed to do a change completely. I don't care if I was gonna work at [a] gas station or if I was gonna sell oranges on the corner. I didn't know what I was gonna do. I didn't know the possibilities that were over here at the time. So, I came and to be honest with you the first job I had was at a gas station. I worked at a gas station. I worked there and the gas station has a contract with the microbus and we would wash them and gas them up. (Participant 2)

All the participants experienced a sense of rejection and poverty when they arrived in Mexico. They worked in low paying jobs and often suffered rejection and mistreatment. However, they wanted to change their lives for a better, more intellectual, and safer life. Although they were poor, they were free. They were not confined to a street, a prison, a code. They were no longer pressured into a lifestyle where they felt they constantly had to be strong.

<u>Teaching English</u>

On their return to Mexico the participants worked in manual labor and experienced difficulty with low pay, bad working conditions, and little opportunity for professional growth. Their lack of education and Spanish language skills limited their social mobility. However, as time passed all the participants found work as English teachers where they play roles in a position of power and leadership and where they were able to be professional, empathetic, and caring. This can be illustrated in the following comments:

> *Right, right, so I felt like I was doing something with my life and that somebody looked up to me. I mean there were students who were like ah man I wanna become a teacher just like you. So, ah I guess I am a good influence, and you know that kept me from going back to the States.* (Participant 1)

> *Out of the 11 years I've been here, 10 years I've been a teacher. I run into kids all the time. I ran into this girl who was pregnant on the train, dude. And she goes "Oh my god teacher, como está [how are you]?"And it's like you can't picture—dude she was in my fourth grade class in elementary, so I looked at her, and I thought I don't know you. And I told her no te conozco [I don't know you] and she's like yeah it's me so and so, and you're like you can't be more than 17, 16. I'm like man. The pride of someone thanking you years later. The little bit that you taught them. You know you're holding a conversation with this person in Semi-English. So, I did teach her something. So, she did have more English teachers, but I gave her that base where she can get the rest.* (Participant 2)

> *I was out helping other people, teaching people to learn English which contributed to their lives and their ability to succeed in life. Funny thing was that I was able to use some of the values I learned in the gang. We used to say, you don't break a homie, you make one. This was used for the OGs [original gangsters] to create solid street soldiers. I used it to create solid students. I was always strict but understanding. I am always willing to spend that extra time to give students feedback and let them know how important they are. It's not even about the money sometimes. It's about the people. If we can help them, we should.* (Participant 3)

Although I cannot provide a definitive interpretation of the participants' investment, it is possible to argue that the satisfaction resulting from teaching English for the participants is largely derived from a sense of altruism. For instance, Participant 3 knows that providing feedback to students does not offer monetary compensation; however, that is of less importance to him than providing aid to students when needed. By the same token, participants 1 and 2 enjoy their profession not from what they gain materially but by the pride they get from being a positive influence on someone else's life.

Concluding Comments

In this study, participants discussed their experiences of being immersed in Southern Californian gang culture and returning to Mexico and later teaching English. They were escaping gang violence and were searching for a way to live a life away from the violent streets in Los Angeles. They formed their identities within a community of gang members. However, they sought a means by which they could succeed outside of that community which they found in Mexico. Initially, they had difficulty adapting and gaining entrance into Mexican society. Their lack of education and Spanish language skills created barriers to acceptance within a community in Mexico. Nonetheless, they were able to overcome these barriers and gain access to a role of power and prestige: a teacher. Given that the participants experienced a sense of rejection, isolation, and hopelessness, it is fair to conclude that this may have created a desire for them to dedicate their lives to the benefit of others through teaching where they would be important, respected, and in control: access to the community of teachers of English to speakers of other languages offered the culture capital they had been denied throughout their lives. Hence, teaching English for them became more than a means of making a living, it was a way to become respected, contributing members of society—something they may have never accomplished in Southern California.

The findings from this research demonstrate how people can dramatically change through time and space. All participants are currently studying advanced degrees and have respected positions in society. They could have all easily had a terrible ending which is often the fate of gang members. Becoming an educated citizen was not part of their reality growing up. It was an imagined identity they worked towards and in which they failed in Los Angeles. It was not until they had the freedom to create a new identity that they succeeded in achieving their imagined identity.

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