Narratives of Disability and the Other Latino: Stories of Diversity and Inclusion in a Teacher Preparation Program at an Urban University

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Abstract

This self-reflective article describes my experience as a disabled-Latino faculty member in a teacher preparation program at a minority-serving urban university. This personal narrative of the physical, emotional, attitudinal, and resource aspects of the author's experience highlights barriers and challenges experienced in the educational and working environment while identifying strategies that assisted in overcoming these barriers. The article specifically relates my progression through my teaching career as I encounter issues of equality and diversity. With this article, disabled faculty and other minority groups are encouraged to incorporate practices that encourage teacher candidates to explore teaching practices for diverse populations in urban settings.

Keywords: disabled faculty, teacher education, urban schools

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I still remember the day clearly from that interview. I was so excited. The department chair offered me a job as an adjunct. My dream of working in academia was finally becoming a reality. It did not matter that it was just an adjunct position. I finally opened that door. Even more, I was going to teach what I loved to teach: social studies methods. I remember my days in graduate school and how I immersed myself in the readings of Peter McLaren, Joe Kincheloe, Henry Giroux, Mary Cowhey, David Purpel, and more. My mentor in graduate school, Dr. Cameron White, showed us so many teaching ideas. It did not matter how long the days were going to be, teaching at a high school during the day and teaching evening classes at the university. I did not care about commuting twice a week to downtown. The idea of teaching in an urban setting was appealing and exciting. I was ready to start the semester and conquer the world!

As soon as the semester started, everything just fell apart. A combination of inexperience, unpreparedness, and not knowing the difference between teaching public school and college classes proved to be a disaster. Lessons on diversity, equity, and social justice became painful exercises on touching the students' raw nerves. Some students openly displayed their frustration and anger. Others vocally shared that they were offended. In the end, I ended the semester frustrated, angry, and with serious doubts about whether teaching at the university level was for me.

The above story encapsulates my experience of starting teaching in higher education in 2009. As a novice instructor, it was a very rude wake-up call. I did not know the intricate world of teaching at the college level, and it clearly showed during my first semester. In this article, through tensions, emotions, and reflections, I capture my evolving personal story moving inward and outward/forward and backward (Craig, 2020) through my personal professional teaching landscape knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). In this self-narrative inquiry (Bruner, 1991a), I trace my trajectory as a disabled-Latino faculty of stories-to-live-by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) in a minority-serving institution with a predominantly white administration and faculty body. This self-narrative of my accounts breathes life into the tension-filled environment of an urban institution within the experience of finding my own personal space and identity.

Despite the accolades that often come with being part of the academy, there are many hurdles, roadblocks, and tensions associated with surviving the academic environment. Tilley-Lubs (2014) narrates the emotionally draining experience of earning tenure and

promotion. Porcher (2020) discusses the tense ordeals that are often endured by Black female faculty members teaching equality and social justice at predominantly white universities. Smith and Andrews (2015) and Waterfield et al. (2018) explore issues of deficient institutional support for disabled faculty members. As such, this self-reflection explores the motivation and challenges of a disabled faculty member to stay in academia. First, it aims to explore the most challenging experience and friction experienced in teaching equality and social justice to pre-service teachers (PST). Second, it unfolds possible points of resolution for making the teaching of diversity, equality, and inclusion a more rewarding experience. Despite an array of studies that have researched the experience of teaching social justice and equality in academia (Hickling-Hudson, 2011; Joseph, 2012; Schlemmer, 2017), research is absent in exploring the narrative experience of teaching these issues by a disabled faculty member.

Literature Review

The conceptual framework of this article is framed by the following themes: 1) personal identities, 2) professional teacher identities, and 3) stories as identity building.

Personal Identities

The first theme of my literature review covers issues of personal identities. As I entered the world of academia, there were many conflicting views within. I was an academic, but I was Brown and disabled. I was part of the silent ones—those who belong on the sidelines—while trying to navigate a white-male-dominated environment where 90% of the faculty do not reflect the ethnic diversity of the student body.

As an immigrant, my biggest doubt has been language. I am an English-language learner (ELL), and language has also been a barrier for me. I also have a speech disability. Many studies about narrative inquiry have addressed the issue of identity construction (e.g., Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007), especially in Latino and disabled communities. For example, Kayi-Aidar (2019) studied the interconnection of language construction and personal identity in the professional landscape of a Mexican-American teacher situated within the context of being an English-language learner who in turn teaches ELL students. The findings detail the teacher's professional/personal identity within the structure of an academic setting that places doubt about the language abilities of this teacher, which cast doubts in the ability of this person to be a legitimate member of the academy as a teacher and graduate student. The

narrator also revealed moments where the gatekeeping aspect of the academic institution played a significant role in casting moments of self-doubt and feelings of a lack of competency for this teacher, something that Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) relate as the obscure relationship of power and race.

Rodriguez and Cho (2011) reported the results of a longitudinal study exploring the identity formation of two bilingual teachers, one Latino and the other Pacific-Islander-Asian. Theoretically framed by Bruner's (1990) construction of agency, the authors argue for the importance of creating spaces where voices that are often "silent" or "silenced" in academic settings can freely express themselves (Rodriguez & Cho, 2011, pp. 498–499). A promising result of this study is that teacher education programs do have the potential for allowing novice teachers the opportunity of exploring the depth of narrated identity agency (see Rodriguez & Cho, 2011, p. 503).

Disability also plays a significant role in a person's identity. I am disabled, but I am a professional. I have always seen myself as capable. But that is not how society sees us. For example, in a study of 25 teenagers with cerebral palsy, Spirtos and Gilligan (2020) explore the identity construction during this crucial moment in the social and emotional development of a person's view of the world. Grounded in the social model of disability (Oliver, 2009), they argue that the identity of the social self is how "we define ourselves in relation to our position within a social group" (Spirtos & Gilligan, 2020, p. 3). Their study highlights the importance of the disabled dealing with issues of difference, society's attitude toward their difference, and the dominant narrative of forced compassion for the disabled. In a study conducted by Gillespie (2003), we see how successful, high-achieving disabled adults wrestled with their notion of capability and the social lens that often renders the disabled incapable, often creating identity tensions. And Valentine (2007) argues for the importance of creating avenues where the disabled can start exploring and narrating their identity social construction.

Professional Teacher Identity

The second theme of the literature review is professional vision and the construction of personal identity within the professional knowledge landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). In my case, like any teacher, I entered a field full of dreams and goals. I wanted to be an innovative teacher who was going to teach something meaningful to my students. Yet, I have always wrestled with institutional impositions on my profession: schedules, evaluation,

tracking, standards, and guidelines. As time passed, my uneasiness about this situation became stronger.

Studies have shown the conceptualization of the self within professional settings and the power of what those social interactions produce (Craig, 2020; Smith & Andrews, 2015; Waterfield et al., 2018). In researching the social framing of the self within schools, for example, Craig (2014) researched a teacher's realization and position within an educational setting from "stories to live by" to "stories to leave by" (p. 81). In this study, the construction of the self becomes an act of reconciliation between personal visions of teaching and the institutional imposition within the person. The researcher concludes that the school milieu plays a significant role in how teachers view themselves within the profession and institution, along with the personal and professional decisions that teachers make about their lives (Craig, 2014, pp. 108–110).

Professional and personal identity plays a crucial role in a teacher's life. In their research, Correa et al. (2014) investigated incidents within the school setting that promotes the professional construct of a teacher in a practicum course for new teachers. In their studies they record that several incidents within the school challenged the preconceived notions of the new teachers about what the profession entailed. Their results show that often these incidents create emotional, personal, and professional conflicts that affect the new teacher's identity within the profession (Correa et al., 2014, pp. 459–461). Harfitt (2015) also highlights how important it is to explore the identity of teachers. Theoretically grounded in Clandinin and Connelly's (1998) stories to live by, Harfitt's study explores the narratives of two teachers who leave the profession and then return, reflecting on their professional formation as the environment of their teaching changed. From this study, we can see two teachers moving inward and outward, forward and backward (Craig, 2020) as they adapted to their reality (Harfitt, 2015, p. 32).

Stories as Identity Building

The third theme of this literature review is stories as identity building. Over the years, using narrative has been important to me. It has allowed me to explore my life and my professional landscape. And at times, how very personal aspects of my life have influenced my profession. In essence, we are story-telling animals (Craig, 2000), and we seek stories to talk about ourselves (Ellis, 2002). According to Lumsdaine and Lord (2021), narrative is the process of how we claim our identity. As such, we seek to tell our stories to validate our lives (Frank,

2016). In telling the stories about our lives, Frank (2014) asserts that people not only narrate their experiences, but people take "seriously" the actions of their lives (p. 16). And it is within this role that this article focuses on narrative and stories as an act of identity building by exploring those experiences that shape our knowledge about ourselves (Ellis, 1997; Lumsdaine & Lord, 2021). Stories about ourselves are not about simply retelling our experiences, but about exploring and dissecting the events that form our knowledge landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

Teaching at an Urban University

Research regarding urban universities has been centered around issues of character, policies, and environment (Cohen, 1986; Kincheloe, 2007b). For the most part, studies regarding urban universities have focused on the service that public universities can provide in sustaining the ecology of the urban life within the city (Pothukuchi & Molnar, 2015; Scanlan et al., 2021), preserving the character of urban higher education (Adamany, 1994; Mundt, 1998), and promoting the social role of urban universities within the city landscape (Klein-Banai & Theis, 2011). However, research regarding the politics and environment of urban universities itself continues to be extremely scarce (Mundt, 1998; Riposa, 2003).

According to Riposa (2003), teaching and studying at an urban public institution of higher education proposes a set of unique challenges not present at traditional universities or prestigious urban universities. A great majority of those fortunate enough to pursue a degree in higher education at public urban colleges or universities will continue to experience similar conditions experienced at urban public schools. They will most likely attend urban community colleges and universities that offer limited career and degree options with reduced course schedules not tailored to address their working schedule, under-resourced facilities, deficient academic advising and financial aid services, underpaid faculty and staff, and limited campus life (Riposa, 2003). In addition, many of the students will be full-time workers, second-career seekers, the first ones in their family to attend college, adults still living in multi-generational homes by necessity, and/or single parents and main breadwinners.

The politics of urban university systems is another aspect that Riposa (2003) addresses in the study, focusing on the contentious relationship between more prestigious research (R1)

universities and-less prestigious, teaching-oriented universities within the same geographic area or system. And it is within this context that my narrative is situated. I teach at a Hispanic/African-American minority-serving urban institution at a major urban center in the southern United States, which is severely underfunded and under-resourced. It is situated in a university system where the majority of the resources and funds are allocated to satisfy the more prestigious, newly anointed R1 university within the system. Politics that influence the situation include a university-system chancellor who is also the president of the research campus, creating an ostensible conflict of interest. The chancellor being the main decision maker for the entire system generally means that the flagship campus is favored at the expense of the satellite campuses.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this article is narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), which acts as a tool to explore the personal and professional landscape of our lives (Craig, 2020; Harfitt, 2015). This process involves constructing and reconstructing our lived stories in order to narrate our personal stories (Sharma, 2015). This research approach is used broadly across many disciplines such as psychology (Bruner, 1985), religion (Crites, 1971), history (Carr, 1986), and disability studies (Gabel, 2002; Valentine, 2007).

In education, narrative inquiry has been used extensively as an accepted form of research (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007), and this includes accounts of profound personal exploration (Ellis, 1996; Erevelles, 2005). As such, narrative inquiry has been used to explore personal stories of the researcher (Zou et al., 2016), stories of teaching (DeMik, 2008), and stories of the curriculum maker (Ross, 2005).

Finally, narrative inquiry separates itself from a simple narrative. According to Craig (2001), narrative inquiry negotiates the events of our lives that occur to create educative experiences (Olson & Craig, 2009). Craig (2020) explains that educative experiences are when "individuals find new ways to interpret their own/other's experience," which are founded in Connelly and Clandinin's concept of "experiential meaning" (p. 728). In essence, what makes narrative inquiry more than narrative is the reflection of how our experiences shape our acts, allowing us to understand our past to make sense of our present and future (Craig, 2000).

Trustworthiness

One of the most important aspects of increasing trustworthiness in qualitative research is to establish specific guidelines. For one, qualitative research in narrative inquiry is about the meaning behind the story (Snelgrove & Havitz, 2010). As such, we focus on the experience behind the account and the messages that these experiences produce. In this case, trustworthiness is found through the validation of the story through other stories. An example is to what extent experiential accounts in one study (e.g., sexuality, disability, parenting, incarceration) will yield similar conclusions about humans experiencing similar experiences in other studies (e.g., youth homelessness, poverty, school bullying, violence against the LGTBQ community) (Heikkinen et al., 2007; Polkinghorne, 2007; Snelgrove & Havitz, 2010). Furthermore, validity and trustworthiness are about validating the message through the reader's eye (Shen & Seung, 2018). In other words, at what point does the narrator's story becomes the reader's story (Irvine, 2000).

Narratives of Inclusion and Equality

In a narrative inquiry, storytelling is a fundamental and important component of the analytical process. In order to contextualize my experience, I present several vignettes of my experience as a disabled person who became a professor of social studies methods focusing on issues of inclusion, social justice, and equality. Embedded within these vignettes, I introduce the reader to what molded me into a position of better understanding and a reflective position of my reality (Bruner, 1991b).

Navigating the Inclusive/Non-inclusive World

I never confronted what it meant to be disabled and have cerebral palsy until I became a graduate student. Before that, my disability was part of my life, but it was not what defined me (Valente, 2011). The accepted social narrative of the incapable disabled, unable to properly function in society (Erevelles, 2002), was never part of my narrative (Barbieri & Pohl, 2021). Growing up in a supportive home, my parents always sought to give my siblings and me a rich and fulfilling life surrounded by a lot of intellectual endeavors such as art, music, and reading.

Additionally, the concept of special education, common in American schools that promote a watered-down, non-challenging curriculum, was not something that I ever confronted until I arrived in seventh grade to the United States. I attended elementary and

part of middle school overseas, where the concept of special education as we know it (Valentine, 2007; Whitburn, 2017) does not exist. Yes, teachers gave me extra time to finish assignments and tests, and classmates helped me with notetaking, but I was expected to perform at the same level as everyone else and make the grade. There were no modified exams or shortened assignments. I also participated in competitive sports. When I arrived in seventh grade in the United States, everything changed. I was tracked and placed on remedial courses. I was considered academically inferior. From playing competitive baseball at my school in South America, I found myself playing cards and board games in adaptive physical education in seventh grade, and that experience for me was detrimental. Throughout my childhood, I saw myself as capable (Shah et al., 2004), and it did impact my view of myself within the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) and how I reacted to it (Bruner, 1991a).

In my case, my childhood experience played a huge role in how I saw my disability (Lumsdaine & Thurston, 2017; Shah et al., 2004). For my mother, education has always been everything. Thrown out of the house at the age of nine by her own family, she spent her teenage years living independently and fending for herself. As a teenager and during her early twenties, she worked and helped her foster family run a hotel in Argentina. Education was robbed from her, and she has always resented that. Since we were little, she was the "bad cop" who demanded the very best from our schoolwork. A letter grade of A was the only acceptable grade for her; earning a B was failing. In the case of my dad, he grew up with his grandparents, escaping the schizophrenic and abusive behavior of his father. He inspired us to explore and discover our talents. In my case, I always wanted to be an architect, and I eventually earned a Bachelor of Architecture. My dad built me my first drafting table; I would spend entire afternoons drawing beside him as he worked on his drafting drawings for the oil company that he worked for. And it is perhaps because I grew up as intellectually capable that many experiences during my teenage years were hard to accept. As a teenager, I wanted desperately to take drafting classes, which was always denied to me. My counselor always told me that it would be too hard for me. The denial did not sit well with me, and I spent countless hours in my counselor's office trying to convince him to allow me to enroll in the class. Eventually, I was allowed to enroll in the class.

For me, the non-inclusive world of special education was not something that consumed me (Barbieri & Pohl, 2021). I created mechanisms to deal with my disability as a child and teenager, and I just confronted it. My disability was a fact of my life, but it never was

what shaped my personality. If anything, I always felt more excluded and disenfranchised as an English Language Learner (ELL) and Latino than as disabled. Attending a high school that was 90% white did feel different to me, and I did not feel welcomed. School here was different from the parochial school in Venezuela. It did not matter that we came here because of my dad's work for an oil company with a very lucrative job offer. It made no difference that I had German and Spanish ancestry. For many of my peers, we were the new "wet backs." My classification as an ELL felt like I was treated as an illiterate (Barbieri & Pohl 2021). My English was rusty, but I was fluent in Portuguese, and I could manage to converse in Italian. By the time I was in seventh grade, I had already read the Spanish version of *Lord of the Flies* at my previous school in South America. In the end, this duality of maneuvering the social barriers imposed on me and my visions of normalcy would play a big role later in life, and it manifested itself as my teaching career took shape.

Entering the World of Social Justice

Despite graduating with an undergraduate degree in architecture, I never practiced the profession. Life would take me on a different route, and I became a teacher in 2003. Eventually, I would attend graduate school to earn master's and doctorate degrees in curriculum and instruction. And it was there when I confronted my most enlightening moments about who I was.

I became a teacher in 2003. I was hired to teach social studies and special education. For some reason, my principal and department chair believed that the students would connect with me, and I thought the same. After all, according to my chair, I was one of them. She said that openly during my interview. However, that never happened. Many of my students resented having a disabled teacher. Some were angry. I was very naive about their academic expectations, and I became very irritated with their lack of commitment. I spent my first year just surviving and wrestling with their attitudes. My high expectations did not match the reality in the classroom. By the end of my first year of teaching, I was ready to quit.

At the same time that I started teaching, I also started to work on my doctorate. And to some extent, attending evening classes became my escape valve after having one stressful day after another. I started to doubt myself as a teacher, and attending graduate school was what kept me sane. During my doctorate studies, I became immersed in researching social justice. I became exposed to the work of Peter McLaren, Joe Kincheloe, Henry Giroux, Shirley Steinberg, and David Purpel. Eventually, I met all of them at several national conferences. Joe

Kincheloe became the sponsor of my first book, and he was going to be on my doctoral committee. Unfortunately, Joe passed away during the Christmas before my defense.

My exposure to critical pedagogy had a big impact on me. The notion of exploring the hegemonic power structure in education intrigued me (Giroux, 2016; Kincheloe, 2007b; McLaren, 2003b), and I started to see those elements playing out in my life and profession. McLaren's (1997) argument about educational capitalism struck a deep chord inside of me. At the same time, I also became an avid reader of David Purpel (1989). His argument about our discord in education was something that I took to heart. Our mismatched notion of what we envisioned our schools to be and the current reality of schools today resonated with me (Purpel, 1989).

Additionally, I was also taking classes with renowned Canadian narrative inquirer Cheryl Craig. Through her, I was introduced to the work of her professors, Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly. Narrative inquiry became very appealing to me. It allowed me to make sense of my reality and understand what I was experiencing as a teacher. Eventually, I would use my doctoral work to explore my life as a disabled teacher working at a public school.

I never considered myself a good teacher. My students and I did not connect. I was more successful teaching upper-level, honor classes than special education classes. My doctoral research made me angry about public schools and the political forces that entangled the system. I became very cynical about education. In particular, special education became a very repressive system in my eyes, and I did not want to be part of it. In 2013, I left my teaching job in public schools to join the academic ranks. Frustrated, angry, and burnt-out, I was ready for a change and left without looking back.

Teacher Preparation

As I stated at the beginning of the article, after earning my doctorate I became an adjunct professor. My first year as an adjunct did not go well for me. I did not know my students. I was teaching at a predominantly Hispanic-serving university, but the world of my students and my world did not match. I was ready and eager to share with them my passion for social justice. They were eager to learn how to teach social studies to elementary students, and our trajectories did not coincide. My inexperience with teaching a college course did become evident on many occasions, and my students were angry. My end-of-course evaluations did not paint a favorable picture of me. To this day, I still wonder how I was kept around.

In the fall of 2012, a tenure-track line for a faculty position in the teacher preparation program became available at the university where I was an adjunct. I was not interested initially, but my supervisor at the university, who was a faculty member, insisted that I apply. I was not going to. By that time, my experience as an adjunct was a mixed bag. Some classes went very well, and students told me I was the best instructor they had. In other classes, students were not thrilled, and they showed their displeasure in their course evaluations. However, my supervisor kept insisting that I apply for the job, and I submitted my application the day before the deadline. My initial thoughts were not positive, and my hopes were not very high. By that time, I had given up looking for a job in higher education. I spent a year and a half after earning my doctorate looking for a university job without success, so I was not expecting too much from it. If anything, I did it to please my supervisor, who was very persistent about me applying for the position; he was thrilled when he learned that I submitted an application. And the interviews came, and the offer was made. In 2013, I became an assistant professor.

I wanted to use my new job as a chance to reset and start over. My university supervisor was now my mentor, and we partnered to teach the same courses. As an adjunct, my attempts to introduce discussions about inclusion and diversity were mixed. In the social studies method courses, I was not very successful; in the special education courses, I was. I spent an entire summer working with my mentor on my class. With his guidance, I decided to introduce new and more engaging assignments that would help my students understand their culture and life.

The idea of not being a truly successful instructor always haunted me. After all, we were not just talking about students not doing well in a class. These were students attending a teacher preparation program. They were relying on me to become the best teachers they could become. They were looking up to me. Therefore, I made it my mission not to fail them. However, I wanted them to learn more than lesson planning and assignment design. I wanted to engage them, help them become as passionate about social studies as I was, and take bold steps toward their teaching goals. The question that kept circling in my mind was how I would do that.

Diversity, Inclusion, Urban Education, and the Other Latino

When I started to teach college courses, I was very naive about what urban education was all about. After all, I grew up my entire life in the suburbs. In the United States, I lived my

teenage and adult years in the comfort of quintessential suburban Americana. I was a high school teacher at a suburban school surrounded by high-end, gated neighborhoods and shopping centers. However, soon, I would discover what makes urban education unique.

There are several things that make urban education unique, and nobody has been able to encapsulate better what is urban education than Steinberg and Kincheloe (2007). Urban education is unique because teachers are required to teach more with less. The urban curriculum often fails because it is designed to evaluate everyone as a whole and often only a handful are successful (Kincheloe, 2007b). Urban education is unique because is often tailored around political motivations, not educational ones, and often is designed to satisfy the desires of the few and powerful who often do not have the best intentions for students. Urban education is singular because the students often come to school dealing with the intricacies of the city with its run-down public transportation system, impoverished neighborhoods situated inside food deserts, and communities that lack proper access to decent social services.

The majority of students (60%) at my university are Hispanic with Mexican or Central American heritage; 25% of our students are African American. The significant majority of them attended public schools in the urban areas of the city. In addition, we serve about 300 students who are Dreamers (Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals [DACA]). Despite teaching at a minority-serving institution, in the beginning, something felt different. Yes, I have Hispanic heritage. I speak Spanish, and I lived my childhood in South America. However, my background was different. Their struggles were never my struggles. My family did not cross a river or a desert. My siblings and I did not grow up in El Barrio. We always lived in the suburbs, even in Argentina. But I wanted to relate to them. I wanted us to share our stories. But how? After all, my previous attempts to simply stand in front of the classroom and discuss topics of diversity and inclusion did not work. If anything, they were epic failures that almost cost me my job.

Despite the differences, I made an effort to allow the students to explore their identities. I introduced literature like Mary Cowhey's (2006) *Black Ants and Buddhists*. Her story of growing up poor, working with Puerto Rican immigrants as a social worker, and living on food stamps resonated with them. In 2015, I invited Mary to join us for a two-hour Skype session, to which she suprisingly agreed. My students loved the book and were looking forward to meeting her. Two hours became three hours. And by the end of the session, her

vision of teaching critically to capture students' unique cultures and backgrounds resonated with my students.

In 2015, the opportunity to work with our local African American library became available. We were asked to develop lesson plans and workshops for their summer camps. Despite the fact that many of my students studied African American history in school, the local history of the African American community was virtually unknown to them. Therefore, having my students explore our local heritage was a very eye-opening experience. They were thrilled to know about the history of our neighborhoods and the stories of the people who built them. What started as a one-semester project became a multi-year collaboration with many rich moments for my students.

I made a conscious effort for my student to freely explore their heritage as time went on. I introduced assignments such as the Digital Personal Artifact Box. In this assignment, the students were asked to talk about their personal stories in relation to history. Many of them talked about their parents immigrating to the United States and working to provide their families with a better life. Others talked about being service members in the armed forces. Some talked about their African American or Hispanic heritage. And a few discussed being the first one in their family to attend college and earn a degree. Suddenly, a door was opening that allowed us to talk about really hot topics that otherwise I was not successfully able to encourage them to talk about. Through this project, a few of my students discussed their lives as Dreamers. We were connecting and sharing who we were, showing the class what made our lives special.

As time went on, I discovered that including issues of diversity and inclusion in my class was not about imposing a discussion on a hot topic, but about having my students express their feelings freely. We discussed Mary Cowhey's book extensively in my classes. In our online discussion, many of the students expressed the need to include more multiculturalism while teaching. Others have expressed how we seldom explore culture in the bilingual classroom and how often bilingual education is about linguistic mechanics. We often discuss the detrimental effects of standardized testing, something that Mary Cowhey told my students was immoral.

I have introduced the concept of the other Latino before (Pohl, 2015), where I discussed my South American heritage. Dad was born in Argentina with strong German influence. He did not speak Spanish or English until he was eight. Mom was born in Chile with Spanish

roots. I grew up listening to my grandparents speak to my Dad and uncles in Flemish, and they respond in German or French. My dad's job in the oil industry took us to Brazil, Peru, Venezuela, and eventually the United States. And although technically my status classifies me as an immigrant in this country, I never fully considered myself an immigrant in the popular sense of the word. It is my students who have the stories of coming to this country with nothing but a suitcase and a bag full of hopes to start a new and better life. It is they who have the stories of a taco stand or a laundromat becoming a city-wide business chain. It is they who have the stories of the parents working in the flea market or the parking lot carnival to pay for their sons' or daughters' education. They have the stories of the California farmworkers staging the strikes with Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez. And it is them who have the stories of their grandparents, uncles, and parents serving this country at a tender young age in Vietnam, Afghanistan, or Iraq.

And for me, this is what matters the most. I learned to cherish the importance of their stories over my story, which for me has been a very humble experience. I talk extensively about inclusion and diversity in my courses. And over the years, my students have been very comfortable in opening up and talking freely about what is on their minds. In the end, this is what inclusion has meant for me as a faculty member.

Parting Words

In this article, I move inward and outward, forward and backward (Craig, 2020) to explore my position as a faculty member struggling with my teaching craft in regard to diversity and inclusion. My disability and ethnic background should have equipped me well to deal with issues of equity and social justice (Erevelles, 2011), but they did not. My story positions me in the halls of the academy and schools (Miller, 1990); however, my upbringing and my battles to fit in the mainstream (Lumsdaine & Thurston, 2017) made me foreign to many of the struggles and experiences that my students faced. As a public school teacher, my story reflects someone who became part of the establishment. I quickly forgot what it meant to deal with Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings and what an overwhelming experience that was for me as a student. The notion of putting myself in my students' shoes did not register with me until one afternoon when I was driving to one of my evening classes after having a very emotional and contentious annual IEP meeting that morning for one of my students. At that moment, I felt like a failure. Did I forget how much I despised my own

annual IEP meetings? I felt like if there was someone who should relate to the students and understand their plight, it was me, but I was not. And I felt like I failed them.

However, my story is also a story of redemption. I discuss learning how to empower my college students and allowing them to explore their world (Kincheloe, 2007b). As a high school teacher, I was never allowed to do that. I was another one from the group who was following the cookie-cutter curriculum and top-down mandates (Purpel & McLaurin, 2004). And although it did not sit well with me, I still did it as an act of career preservation (Craig, 2000, 2014). However, at some point, my experience morphed from my own story to live by to my story to leave by (Craig, 2014). In the end, it was the academy that gave me the power and strength to empower my students to explore their own reality (Cowhey, 2006; Dewey, 1957; Freire, 1970), visualizing a more empowering pedagogy.

The purpose of this self narrative was to explore my experience as an educator who is very passionate about social justice, inclusion, and diversity, but was not very successful in the beginning. As a teacher, I wished to provide these opportunities to my students. I hoped to show my students my own story of success, empowering them to follow theirs. Yet, I lacked the training, experience, and opportunity to do so. In that sense, I had to seek opportunities away from the public-school setting that allowed me to grow. In that sense, I had to pursue what Craig (2020) describes as the re-making of the self as an opportunity to seek new places to grow professionally and personally. The academy gave me that opportunity. However, my experience was not without some serious growing pains. Initial failures engulfed me with doubt. Nevertheless, the vision of not seeing another alternative or way out forced me to work on my teaching craft at the university level.

The last takeaway from this narrative inquiry confirms the importance of personal growth. Dewey expressed it best when he said that we should "hunger not to have, but to be" (quoted in Craig, 2020, p. 739). My narrative shows that having a disability and a diverse ethnic background means very little if I am not empowering my students to explore their own reality, because at the end of the day it's not what I brought to them but what they brought to me (Cowhey, 2006). At some point, preserving their integrity as valuable human beings became more important to me as I realized the value of their stories (Freire, 1970).

Finally, my story is a story of opportunity. As a teacher, my students were silenced because I was silenced (Kozol, 1967). It was in the academy where spaces became available for me to regain a voice and freely express it (Rodriguez & Cho, 2011). However, more than using

this voice to dispatch my harsh criticism of the public school system's inability to properly attend to this nation's cultural and spiritual needs (Miller, 1990; Purpel, 1989), I joined the ranks of those who have personally taught and mentored me to promote a curriculum of social justice and love (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Kincheloe, 2007a; McLaren, 2003a; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2007; White, 2011).

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