Pre-Service Bilingual Teachers and Their Invisible Scars: Implications for Preparation Programs

Matilde A. Sarmiento-Arribalzaga: The University of Texas Pan American
Luz A. Murillo: The University of Texas Pan American

In this paper, we describe how language "autobiographies" are used in a teacher preparation program (TEP) as a healing pedagogy to understand the impact longstanding traditions of symbolic violence in education have had on Latino students who are in the process of becoming teachers. Writing about themselves and their education experience allows them to directly confront these legacies and begin the healing process. We conclude with a discussion of what this form pedagogy might mean for other TEPs serving Latinos who run the risk of preparing teachers who will perpetuate deficit thinking about minorities and continue harmful practices in their own teaching.

Educators of historically marginalized students (Gutierrez, 2006; Gutierrez & Jaramillo, 2006; Moll, 2000; Moll & Ruiz, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999; 2002; 2008) who are seeking to become teachers face a particular challenge: How do we "deschool" longstanding traditions of symbolic violence in education and the scars they have left on students and communities of color? Without directly confronting these legacies, teacher education programs risk graduating students who will perpetuate deficit thinking about children and continue harmful practices in their own teaching. In such conditions, the act of teaching and the practice of teacher education can be conceived as forms of healing (Diaz & Flores, 2001; Flores, 2005; Soto, 2007) aimed at restoring full possibilities to groups long denied them.

This paper describes healing pedagogies developed with Mexican American pre-service teachers in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. For many years, education in the region has systematically ignored, devalued, stigmatized, and marginalized Spanish and Spanish-speaking students and families. Although state law currently provides for bilingual education in Spanish and English, resistance to the use of Spanish as an academic language remains strong (Palmer & Lynch, 2008). School districts accept funding designated for the education of bilingual students, but most learners receive instruction aimed at fostering English monolingualism rather than developing academic competencies in two languages.

Many future teachers now learning to teach in the Rio Grande Valley have experienced symbolic violence in the form of linguistic discrimination, including the "desprecio" of valuable heritage language resources (Flores, 2005; Guerrero & Guerrerro, 2009). Without healing pedagogies to counteract the long history of linguicism against Spanish speakers (Anzaldua, 1987; 2007) and persistent structural barriers to the use of Spanish

as a language of instruction, the remarkable funds of linguistic knowledge held by these future teachers are unlikely to be employed in classrooms (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Their stories

As a teacher preparation educator I realized the importance of listening to students and *their* stories. Through their stories we are able to identify an underlying theme of shame and negative ideologies about being "Mexican" but more importantly about speaking Spanish (Smith & Murillo, 2007). Maria F. writes the following about herself:

> *I had lived a very sheltered life until then…school was terrifying…I had a very hard time understanding what I was being taught… I just did not understand the language…I realized… red is not good. This made me feel very out of place and confused. I began to feel something I had not felt before, failure.*

These are not isolated expressions of shame but powerful stories that document discrimination, prejudice, unfair treatment, misrepresentation, segregation and shame. Students' stories have moved me to ask critical questions: How can we use "*their"* stories in teacher preparation to prepare conscientious Latino teachers that truly understand their experiences and how these experiences shape their teaching. But more importantly how do I help these future teachers regain/gain the value/importance of their language-Spanish in order for them to foster this in their future students? "*Reflecting on my life I now know I have never felt so out of place with out a sense of belonging as I did during this period (elementary school years) of my life*" Maria F. writes as part of her introduction to her autobiography. As a former bilingual teacher I am often startled at the remarkable degree of racial segregation and language discrimination that persists in our public schools in the RGV and almost everywhere else you go.

Educational autobiographies

During the Fall 2008 semester I taught a course entitled: Foundation of Bilingual Education to a group of Mexican and Mexican-American students who were thinking about becoming teachers. This course looks at the historical, legal and socio-cultural aspects of bilingual education in the United States. One of the required assignments for the class was an educational autobiography in which students could place into historical and legal context their education experience from kindergarten through high school. The assignment would then be used to address the sociocultural aspects of education in general but particularly the experiences of Mexican Americans in the RGV public schools. It occurred to us that we (academia) have not been listening much to our students, their voices have been missing from the whole discussion on how to ensure that English language learners (ELLs) be successful, who better to provide inside into the education process of ELLs than those who have been educated in it.

These future bilingual teachers in the school context gained a label in the 1960's when many social scientists and educators began examining what was termed "culturally deprived" or "culturally disadvantaged" because they happen to be Spanish speakers. The major premise underlying this paradigm was that children who were not White and middle class were somehow defective and lacking. Thus, the role of the school was to compensate for the children's presumed lack of cultural resources. This helped to shape a programmatic direction and a way of thinking about social differences that remains with us today (Flores, Cousin & Diaz, 1991; Gutierrez, 2006; Gutierrez & Jaramillo, 2006; Jimenez & Ooka Pang, 2006; Moll & Ruiz, 2002; Valenzuela, 2002, 2008). The federal and state programs that emerged from the cultural deprivation/

disadvantaged paradigm rest on the foundation of cultural and social inferiority of these "Spanish" speaking children. This has paved the way for negative ideologies towards Spanish and bilingualism to help make the Rio Grande Valley the site of widespread and persistent linguistic discrimination against Spanish speakers in the public schools.

Pre-service teachers

These children who have been "educated" under these conditions are now part of the bilingual teacher preparation program at UTPA and many other teacher preparation programs across the United States. Why is this important? The rationale behind our research is that pedagogical problems in our public schools are not mainly matters of injustice, inequality or segregation, but of insufficient attention paid to those that we prepare to teach our children.

Researchers such Anzaldúa (1987) and Richardson (1999) describe practices and effects of linguistic discrimination in the Rio Grande Valley. Richardson (1999) argues that this form of discrimination affects the school performance of many Mexican-American children since "the structure and content of public schools taught this lesson of Hispanic inferiority" (p. 125). Smith and Murillo (2007) also document how local perceptions of the inferiority of Mexican American students are expressed and maintained through discrimination against Spanish speakers. They argue that practices of linguistic discrimination (*linguicism*) in the Rio Grande Valley function as barriers to a quality education for students from Spanish-speaking homes.

Jeannette, a junior who arrived in the RGV during 1980 bitterly remembers the following about her schooling experience

> "*es que el espanol no me iba a servir para nada, que yo necesitaba aprender el ingles a como fuera posible…y que mi lengua natal la tenia que olvidar.*"
>
> [English translation: *it's because Spanish was not going to be useful for anything, that I needed to learn English at whatever possible… and that I had to forget my native language*].

The message was clear- she was inferior because of her Spanish so she

> "*yo no quise que mis hijos estuvieran en clases bilingües porque no quería que sufrieran como yo sufrí. Ahora me siento mal….no quieren aceptar su lenguaje de sus padres.*"
>
> [*English translation: I didn't want my children to be in bilingual classes becaue I didn't want them to suffer like I did. Now I feel bad…they don't want to accept the language of their parents.]*

According to Trueba (1993),

> Language is one of the most powerful human resources needed to maintain a sense of self-identity and self-fulfillment. Without a full command of one's own language, ethnic identity, the sharing of fundamental cultural values and norms, the social context of interpersonal communication that guides interactional understandings and the feeling of belonging within a group are not possible. (p. 259). (as cited in Valenzuela, 1999, p. 169)

Them vs. Us

So what happens where there is no "them"? This is the title of my first lecture for perspective bilingual teachers in the foundations course. This simple question causes quiet a reaction among my Mexican American pre-service teachers, without

the "them" they cannot explain why we are still struggling with Mexican and Mexican-Americans' academic performance or lack of. Then things begin to fall into place – the realization that they have become the "them". They struggle and are often conflicted with the realization that they the "oppressed" have become the "oppressors."

Freire (2005) writes:

> In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform…The oppressed can overcome the contradiction in which they are caught only when this perception enlists them in the struggle to free themselves (p. 49).

Many of my students are moved to tears during our first class session because they can relate to having arrived at school with a degree of faith and optimism, fostered by their parents, in the education system that was suppose to value them and their language, but instead the school has written them off as "at risk" because they spoke Spanish or they "looked" Mexican. Nimia writes

> "*Mi hermano menor nunca termino el colegio (high school) el decidió mejor salirse y trabajar. Siempre le pregunto por que lo hizo y dijo porque se sentía solo y perdido.*"
>
> [*English translation: my younger brother never finished high school, he decided to dropout instead and work. I always ask him why he did that and he said because he felt alone and lost*].

Throughout our initial discussion, whatever the stories or experiences students share with their classmates and myself, there seems to be a sense that there are so many more untold stories that could contribute to our knowledge.

Which is why I began to use their stories (autobiographies) as part of healing pedagogy and therefore giving ***their*** stories a place in academia. I want them to begin the process of understanding how their negative experiences influence them as both thinkers and future teachers. According to Murray (1994), understanding and sharing experience moves students (writers) from passive suffering to active participation in healing. By allowing them to tell us their story we can begin to build unity and cultural identity among these Latino teachers who will have to decide whether they will become the oppressor and provide "simultaneously subjectively additive and objectively subtractive" school experiences to their students after competing their teacher preparation program (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 162).

With this type of pedagogy we can begin to see the university classroom as a training ground from which these Latino pre-service teachers gain the capacity to critically examine certain socially accepted norms that they have lived. One result could be that they begin to enact change in the RGV public schools that have traditionally and historically underserved minority students by

> providing programs that neglect the needs of Spanish-language youth by providing an illusion of inclusion, but the institutional message they convey is that Spanish is a second-rate language and that the goals of bilingualism …. are neither worthwhile nor expedient. (Anzaldua, 1997, p. 162-163)

Writing to learn and change

Writing can be a powerful tool to motivated the students to reflect on their educational experiences by assuming different positions that permit them to help their future students. We make the assumption that autobiographies are

a way of knowing that can provide valuable insights into our social world. In the act of posing questions to students (e.g. "What can be done to prevent our students from loosing their use of the Spanish language and their identity?") Latino teachers have the opportunity to discuss a dilemma and confront their own attitudes about the language- "their" language.

In addition, the act of dialogue through written format reinforces the idea that different voices need to be listened to and respected. Through autobiographies, students learn to learn from each other and from their past experiences, acknowledging that there is not necessarily just one sanctioned truth provided by society or the educational system. In this way their writing becomes a way of knowing, of co-exploration of possible truths and reality (Freire, 2005, p. 17). This is evident in Vanessa's exploration of the "truth" behind her parent's apparent lack of interest in her schooling because a teacher had expressed this about her parents:

> *"Fue un poco difícil por la razón que mis padres no me podían ayudar con mi tarea ni con mi ingles por la razón que trabajaban todo el dia en la labor. Nunca me había puesto a pensar que esto es muy cierto, los padres no se preocupaban por la educación de nosotros, me di cuenta hasta que la Dra…. nos abrió los ojos y nos hizo ver las cosas como son. No era tanto que no les importábamos a nuestros padres solo que ellos trabajaban para la mantención de nuestro hogar.*"
>
> [English translation: *it was a bit difficult the reason why- my parents could not help me with my homework or with my English for the reason being that they had to work in the fields. I had never stop to think, but it is true, parents don't worry about our education, well until Dr.… mentioned it I realized… she opened up our eyes and made us see things they way they are. It wasn't because we didn't matter to our parents it was just that they had to work to maintain a household*.]

By creating a democratic space for dialogue and by involving pre-service teachers in their own educational process, healing pedagogy has a lot to offer them as students and future teachers. It is through these methods that new generations can educate themselves to be conscientious, determined, and involved in the bettering of their communities. In Maria's autobiography, she explained her decision to write about being sent to the principal's office every day until she learned to speak English: "I chose to write about this because I want to be a different teacher, I don't want to be like them. Everyday I have been ashamed of myself but sadly I have been more ashamed of my parents and their language." As I read her story I felt the depth of her emotional experience. I could tell Maria had struggled and continued to struggle to make meaning over an event in her life that had engulfed her in shame and anger.

I will never forget reading Maria's story of shame—because her experiences hold tremendous power. This is also true of Rodriguez story:

> *Me acuerdo que iba siempre una maestra… y me ponían en una mesa separada. Yo sufrí por que todos los niños me hacían burla por que no podía hablar el ingles como ellos. Otro dia que a mi nunca me gusta recordar y ni a mi familia lo sabe fue que cuando yo estaba en quinto grado me nominaron para correr para ser presidente de mi grado y me acuerdo que como no podía hablar ingles correctamente me dio tanta vergüenza y miedo que mejor no quise participar. Nunca le dije a mi familia nada por que tenia vergüenza de que supieran…*"

[English translation: *I remember I would always go to my teacher… and she would place me in a separate table. I suffered because the children would make fun of me because I couldn't speak English like they could. Another day I don't like to remember and not even my family knows was when I was in fifth grade they nominated me to run for class president and I remember that I couldn't speak English correctly. I was so embarrassed, I was so scared that I instead opted not to particpate. I never told my family because I was embarrassed that they would know.*]

Defining writing as a healing pedagogy

For the purpose of this research project, the process of writing autobiographies was seen as a critical part of the healing pedagogy. Writing their stories help students create texts that connect their lived experience to self, the public school context and the community within which the student lives (Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000, p. 9). " The values of these autobiographies is that it asks students to begin a journey into themselves, but the journey will take them ultimately out of themselves and back (p. 198)."

Pre-service teachers were ask to write, reflect, and learn together as they were becoming stronger thinkers and were encouraged to become more invested in making sense of their lived experiences in the public school context, as well as the experiences of those that sat around them in class every class session for fifteen weeks. The assignment invited them to tell their stories, to listen to what their stories tell them, and to hear and be heard by others who have shared similar experiences. The act of writing *their* stories recognizes the potential of public and private discourses. Their autobiographical writing explores a time period from their lives that shaped them in a significant way because they experienced loss- loss of their language, identity, and a loss of opportunity (MacGregor-Mendoza, 2000).

During the semester students were also asked to conduct fieldwork through interviews and observations, and they also began to connect to the autobiographies written by others in the class.

Students have important and meaningful things to share with us and with their fellow students, and an assignment designed around a writing and healing pedagogy invites them to take control of that learning—it encourages students to write out of their lived experiences and to become more engaged in what they have lived.

It is the assumption of my research study that those in the field of bilingual teacher preparation have not adequately studied the effect of what happens when Latino teachers write about ***their*** educational experiences and how this will shape the teacher they will become. According to Freire (2005) our capacity to imagine things that do not yet exist and our ability to create those things are major sources of our humanity. To minimize and restrict this capacity to imagine and create is to dehumanize individuals. For this reason, Freire (2005) emphasizes that those who come from the oppressor class to work with and for the oppressed to must challenge the ingrained belief that the oppressed just do not have the ability to help themselves.

Conclusion

What have we learned? The writing of their stories invites students to tell their stories, no matter what they may be. Through listening to their stories those engaged in this work of preparing teacher can penetrate cultural barriers, discover the power of the self and integrity of the other, and deepen their understanding of their respective histories and possibilities (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 4).

> We have a responsibility to participate in the struggle against the continuing effects of oppression, because effective teaching practice takes place in relationship with the teacher, student, family, school, community, as well as the broader society, keeping in mind that all of us are situated in, and affected by, the complex historical contexts of culture, race and class. (Goulet, 2001, p.80)

Graveline (1998) asserts that "resurrecting one's own history to find out how it has contributed to the history of the world" (p. 37) is essential to understanding and changing the educational system that "victimizes" Spanish-speaking students. To this Jeannette adds a final comment:

> *"ya basta de aferrarme al pasado, ahora tengo que ver por el futuro y prepárame bien para que a los niños que les vaya a ensenar en el futuro …puedan aprender… quiero enseñarles y demostrarles que ingles o español debe ser un motivo de sentirse orgulloso de ellos mismos.*"
>
> [English translation: *that's enough no more holding on to the past, now I have to look forward and prepare myself so those children I will be teaching in the future… so they can learn… I want to teach and demonstrate that English or Spanish should de a be a motive to make you feel proud of themselves.*]

My student's autobiographies provide ample opportunities to see how the praxis of empowering and healing pedagogy can be realized. By working with our pre-service bilingual teachers stories we can begin to create culturally and socially conscious, bilingual teachers who believe in their ability to enact change in the public school system. The increasing numbers of English language learners in schools require that teacher preparation programs train teachers to become effective teachers of children from Mexican-American backgrounds. Bilingual teacher preparation programs especially must take into account the attitudes that teachers bring with them to the classroom because especially when they come from the the U.S.–Mexico border, where there exists a unique language environment where both English and Spanish have existed together in a complicated interplay of culture and power for almost two centuries (Riojas-Clark & Flores, 2001). "Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself." (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 59).

What remains to be said is simply how hard this type of educational work can be. It is a process of deconstructing negative habitual ways of thinking and acting, as well as replacing them with sustaining and humanizing ones. This statement applies to both the pre-service teachers and professors: professors are asked to give some of their power over to their students, and students are asked to examine their lives and the real life implications of their actions. To ask both pre-service teachers and professor to engage in empowering forms of education is to ask them to commit on a personal level to what happens in their classroom and to their students. Through a healing pedagogy we are giving our pre-service teachers a conceptual and visceral understanding of what is just and right and good for themselves and their community, they become prepared to create change. Naturally, this is a complex task. This type of pedagogy also aims at challenging social norms. Further research on the topic of healing pedagogy needs to take place. Over the course of my research, I have come to value the wealth of information that my students have about the educational process of which they are a part.

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Author's Note

Dr. Matilde A. Sarmiento-Arribalzaga is an Assistant Professor of Bilingual Education at The University of Texas Pan American. Her areas of scholarship are language development, bi-litracy development, and Spanish Reading Process.

Dr. Luz A. Murillo is an Assistant Professor of Reading at The University of Texas Pan American. Her areas of scholarship are educational anthropology and literacy development of Second Language Development.