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Reframing Success: Participatory Impacts of Storytelling in PAR Collaborative with Latinx Middle School Students

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Reframing Success: Participatory Impacts of Storytelling in a PAR Collaborative with Latinx[1] Middle School Students

This article examines the participatory impact of a storytelling project on a small group of Latinx English learners in a sixth grade classroom. The storytelling project unexpectedly emerged as a positive ripple effect from a Participatory Action Research (PAR) initiative to foster civic empowerment among middle school students in an English Language Development classroom in Northern California during the 2014-2015 academic year. As the university researcher and classroom teacher worked together on the PAR project, they came to understand the importance of storytelling for this group of students and agreed to create a safe classroom space with appropriate instructional support for the students to develop and write their stories in English. Although the PAR project failed to produce an Action Plan based on students' research findings, the storytelling ripple effect from the PAR initiative had a transformative impact on the students as they constructed counter-stories to dominant discourses that marginalize and dehumanize Latinx immigrant students and their families. Through the process of writing and reading their stories aloud in English, the Latinx English learners successfully positioned themselves as resilient, hard working students who are fully capable of participating in civic programs, projects or debates with their native English speaking peers.

Introduction

In the early 19th century, Thomas Jefferson argued that it was crucial for the United States government to establish a public system of education in order to preserve the country's

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[1] Latinx is used as a non-binary term to reflect gender inclusivity.

newly established democracy. While controversial at the time, today there is a general consensus that a central purpose of public schooling in the U.S. is to sustain the democratic institutions of civic society (Tyack 2001). However, with the adoption of the Common Core Standards that provide a common curricular framework for teaching English language arts and mathematics across 41 states, an increased focus on college and career readiness has prioritized individual achievement in academic skills and personal advancement through education over the development of an engaged and empowered citizenry (Levinson 2011; Sleeter 2002). Moreover, students from poor and minoritized U.S. communities are more likely to be disenfranchised from civic and political processes when compared to their more privileged peers, a phenomenon that Meira Levinson (2012) identifies as a civic empowerment gap (Burns, Torre, and Payne 2018; Levinson 2012).

For many educators and educational researchers committed to sustaining democratic institutions, Participatory Action Research has been used as a pedagogical approach to actively foster civic empowerment by providing young people opportunities to analyze and engage with inequitable distribution of power and resources (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Dyrness 2012; El-Haj 2007; Ginwright 2008; Torre et al. 2008). As an instructor in a teacher-credentialing program, a former elementary teacher, and an educational researcher interested in exploring the civic engagement of English language learners in California, from the onset of this study I wanted to use my privileged position to design and implement a Participatory Action Research project that would provide students an opportunity for direct civic action that is not provided in most middle schools--and particularly in segregated schools with a high population of marginalized children (Burns, Torre, and Payne 2018). Yet despite my initial aim to foster civic engagement in the students' community, in what follows below I demonstrate how the

democratic collaboration required to bring together the educational vision of a school principal, a middle school teacher, a small group of sixth grade Latinx English language learners, and a university researcher during PAR moved the focus of the project in a direction that I had not originally planned, yet led to positive ripple effects in the classroom and participatory impacts among the students.

In the following sections, I first explain a conceptual framework for understanding PAR that encourages an analysis of the ripple effects and participatory impacts of PAR rather than solely privileging outcomes based directly on the PAR findings. I also provide an overview of critical race theory to situate the unplanned focus on student storytelling that emerged as a ripple effect of PAR collaboration within the initial aim of the PAR project to develop civic empowerment among the students. Second, I turn from a theoretical discussion to explain the dual layers of the research methodology used during the project. On the one hand, the PAR project was the result of a collaboration between the school principal, the classroom teacher, the students and myself, which began with the common understanding that I would guide the students as they not only constructed their own research questions about civic society, but also participated in the development of a research methodology, helped to analyze data and developed an Action Plan based on their research findings. On the other hand, as a university researcher I employed qualitative methods throughout the academic year to analyze the project as a case study illustrating the relationship between the use of PAR in a classroom setting and the civic empowerment of marginalized youth. In this section I also explain how collaboration between the university researcher, school principal and middle school teacher led to events that reoriented the participants of the PAR collective towards a focus on student storytelling. Third, I use qualitative evidence to trace the co-construction of knowledge about the power of storytelling for

Latinx English language learners that occurred between the university researcher and classroom teacher as a ripple effect of the original PAR project. I also use qualitative evidence to illustrate the transformative impact of storytelling on the Latinx students participating in the PAR initiative once they were provided appropriately scaffolded instruction and a safe, supportive environment to explore, develop and write their stories in English. Finally, I end with a discussion that highlights the unexpected benefits of democratic collaboration in a PAR collective and encourages an analysis of the ripple effects and participatory impacts in PAR projects rather than a singular focus on outcomes created in response to PAR findings.

Beyond Findings-Based Outcomes: The Transformative Potential of the PAR Collective

McIntyre (2000) identifies three general principles that guide Participatory Action Research: the collective investigation of a problem, the use of local knowledge to understand the problem and the development of a plan of action intended to address this problem. During PAR, the dichotomous categories of 'researcher' and 'participant' are broken down and replaced with a framework for researching *with* the people most affected by a social issue—rather than conducting research *for* people or *on* people.

By blurring the boundary between researcher and participant, the collaborative approach inherent in PAR offers university researchers an increased possibility to affect public policy and professional practice through their research efforts. At the same time, however, there often exists a degree of uncertainty when entering into a PAR collaborative given the university researcher's lack of control over the project design. As one researcher reflected, if PAR is best described through the use of the metaphor 'Designing the plane while flying it,' then it is probably wise not to get on the plane (Jacobs 2017, 584). Moreover, even with a long history of collaboration with a community organization and well established relationships, during PAR the

university researcher must learn how to navigate the boundaries separating insiders working within an organization from outsiders aligned with separate institutions. Jacobs (2017) explains that as an outsider crossing this boundary, it is typically challenging for the university researcher to negotiate the initial role of project facilitator while simultaneously creating a space of flexibility that allows for a diversity of perspectives and priorities to shape the project. While Jacobs (2017) points out that insider/outsider roles are never static during PAR as participants take up multiple positionings and shift roles throughout a project, nevertheless, the social and institutional demands placed on insiders seldom align completely with the motivations of the university researcher. Thus, even as the university researcher attempts to balance the role of facilitator/collaborator during PAR, he or she may not fully understand the micro-politics operating within an organization that shape insiders' motivations and actions (Jacobs 2017).

Ayala et al. (2018) describe the alternative space where the social worlds of the outsider-researcher and insider-practitioner come together in collaboration as a space *EntreMundos*/Among Worlds. During PAR *EntreMundos*, novel attitudes, ideas and levels of awareness emerge between the members of the PAR collective, so that 'transformation occurs on personal and collective levels, making the process an important outcome of the research' (Ayala et al. 2018, 8). Yet given the inherent complexity of border crossing, it is only by first establishing democratic collaboration among the members of the PAR collective that people can begin to try different roles and take on new identities (Cammarota et al. 2018; Jacobs 2017; Trickett and Beehler 2017). A democratic approach to PAR allows the design of the project to unfold based on knowledge co-created as all participants--both insiders and outsiders--share their insights and expertise through dialogic communication (Kinloch and San Pedro 2014).   In this way, knowledge is not passed from an expert holder of information to a recipient, but rather co-

constructed as both interlocutors share and build on the ideas of one another.

Of course, democratic collaboration does not always proceed smoothly, and divergent opinions and disagreements should be expected as participants negotiate the boundaries *EntreMundos.* However, while perhaps uncomfortable, differences in perspectives do not necessarily have to be perceived as negative interactions. Torre and Ayala (2009) refer to these experiences of 'cultural collision' (390) as *choques,* and argue that they have the potential to become moments of creativity during PAR as well as confrontation. Thus, rather than attempting to avoid conflict, Torre and Ayala (2009) argue that researchers should welcome the inevitable *choques* that arise during democratic collaboration as possible opportunities to reorient PAR towards a collective purpose and process. Oftentimes, the negotiation that occurs following the loosening of control over the research design not only leads to new ideas, but also shapes the emerging attitudes and identities of participants as their existing assumptions are challenged by other members of the PAR collective.

When students are invited to join a PAR project, yet another group of stakeholders engage in democratic collaboration within the PAR collective. Cammarota and Fine (2008) recognize Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as a pedagogical approach for working with marginalized students that teaches transformational resistance. They explain that as students' critical awareness about the structural inequalities pervasive in our society reframes how students understand their own experiences of marginalization and oppression, their perceptions of themselves are also transformed. Indeed, researchers engaged in the YPAR project entitled 'The Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire' (CREDD) recognized that students' growing critical awareness and ability to engage in self-reflection was a form of action happening throughout the research project, not just at the end of

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the project (Tuck et al. 2008). Grande (2008), in a written response to the CREDD project, highlights the process of identity formation as a form of action when she writes 'we take seriously the notion that to know ourselves as revolutionary agents is more than an act of understanding who we are. It is an act of reinventing ourselves' (86).

Banks, Herrinton, and Carter (2017) argue that when researchers assess the outcome of Participatory Action Research, the simultaneous co-impacts of PAR, including the transformative effect of the project on the attitudes and identities of the PAR participants, should be equally valued. The co-impact framework for understanding the effects of PAR contrasts with the dominant, strictly linear model for evaluating the success of a PAR project that requires the use of direct findings from the research to create an Action Plan for change. Banks et al. (2017) articulate the difference between a participatory impact, in which the thinking, emotions and practices of participants change as a result of involvement in a PAR project, and a collaborative impact that is based on the use of findings to change practice or policy.

Trickett and Beehler (2017) also provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding the multiple kinds of impacts created through PAR by asking researchers to consider the ripple effects of a PAR project within the local community or organizational context of the project. They point out that PAR does not occur in a social vacuum, but rather is embedded within the social systems of communities or organizations that are always affected when PAR stakeholders come together to develop a project. While these ripple effects are unplanned, they are pervasive in participatory research and have significant consequences, including the initiation of long-term collaborative partnerships or the development of spin-off projects that ultimately create systemic change (Trickett and Beehler 2017). However, because ripple effects are not directly related to specific project goals, they can be easily overlooked

when evaluating the results of a project. Nevertheless, ripple effects can produce significant outcomes, either by initiating changes to policy and practice or by transforming the attitudes and perceptions of people within an organization.

A Ripple Effect of PAR Collaboration: Civic Empowerment through Counter-Storytelling

Although the development of critical awareness and identity formation are central to Participatory Action Research, PAR projects designed to gather data about people, institutions or social structures operating outside of the PAR collective do not necessarily provide a space for introspective reflection that encourages researchers to connect their own personal experiences with broader research findings. Thus, even as researchers within the PAR collective form new identities and attitudes through their participation in the research process, they may not be invited to share their own stories illustrating how they have personally responded when confronted with systemic inequalities in their everyday life. Critical race theorists, however, identify the act of counter-storytelling as an explicit practice essential within efforts to disrupt pervasive, dominant discourses that draw public attention towards the stark problems and perceived deficits within minority communities while overlooking the existing racialized inequalities that structure these issues (Bell 2009; Solorzano and Yosso 2001).

Lee Ann Bell (2009) defines a counter-story as a personal story that contradicts the ubiquitous narratives found in public places, including schools, that claim meritocracy, equal opportunity, and hard work provide the foundation for the current structure of our society. As critical race theorists have shown, recognizing and telling one's own story of discrimination, injustice or injury allows individuals to counter dominant discourses in our society that suggest a system of upward mobility is equally accessible to anyone willing to work hard enough to achieve the American Dream (Ladson Billings 1998; Solorzano and Yosso 2002). By sharing

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their own counter-stories, historically marginalized people not only publicly acknowledge personal acts of survival or resistance, but also work to dispel more common narratives of victimhood and defeat (Merriweather, Guy, and Manglitz 2006).

Although counter-storytelling is not necessarily a component of PAR, participation in a PAR collective can be particularly empowering when historically marginalized people are encouraged to articulate their own counter-stories in relationship to the project. For example, during the PAR project entitled *The Opportunity Gap Project* and the subsequent *Echoes Arts and Social Justice Institute*, Torre et al. (2008) deliberately created opportunities for youth to connect their personal struggles and experiences of injustice to broader historical trends and structural inequalities uncovered through research. Both projects were conducted within integrated spaces identified as contact zones--places where individuals differently positioned by race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability or religion come together to collaborate across power differences. In the *Echos* project, Torre (2005) reflects that the relational shifts and changes in perspectives that occurred within the contact zone only emerged as students shared personal experiences that, while difficult, allowed students to develop a common understanding that the process of 'coming together' in a diverse group generated different emotional and intellectual tensions for the students according to their various racial, class, gender, and sexual identities. By creating structured opportunities for youth to discuss their personal experiences in group settings, students were able to construct counter narratives to dominant discourses that dehumanize and marginalize many of the youth who participated in the research collective.

Torre (2005) argues that opportunities for contact are necessary for youth typically segregated by race and class to learn how to create democratic spaces in which they might work together to enact social change. At the same time, Torre (2005) recognizes the value of

segregated safe spaces for marginalized individuals forced to confront institutional racism and discrimination pervasive throughout integrated spaces. Likewise, Patel (2012) found that the establishment of a segregated safe space for immigrant youth working in an internship program was essential to the students' ability to draw from their personal experiences within a professional contact zone as they interrogated common explanations for upward mobility and personal success. Other scholars have argued that sharing one's story in a segregated safe space with other marginalized individuals is not simply a matter of personal preference, but rather necessary for self-preservation. Villalpando (2003), for example, explains that Latinx students in institutions of higher education commonly seek to develop relationships along ethnic lines so that they can nurture collective forms of community activism and support one another's efforts to advocate for social justice in the face of racism and discrimination. Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) also maintain that segregated safe spaces are vital to the well-being of marginalized people who are persevering within racist and sexist institutional systems. They unapologetically explain, 'we gravitated to one another for survival,' to share stories as womxn of color in predominantly white graduate programs, 'and to reject the toxicity of dominance and oppression inherent in the academy' (90).

Whenever marginalized students construct their own counter stories--either while conducting PAR, engaging with others in a contact zone, or sharing personal experiences within a segregated safe space--they create a narrative positioning themselves as capable and resilient members of society. In this way, students can articulate the varied ways in which they belong within and contribute to a diverse, democratic society. Indeed, Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) point out that the development of positive self awareness must be the first level of awareness fostered in marginalized youth before they can engage with problems in their local

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communities or confront systemic inequalities structuring their everyday experiences.   Thus, for many historically marginalized students, developing their own counter story becomes a necessary first step towards civic empowerment.

Methodology

I first met with the principal of a K-8 school in Northern California school in August 2014 to discuss the possibility of collaborating on a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project during the 2014-2015 academic school year focused on civic engagement. That year, the total enrollment at the school was 735 students, which included 597 Latino/a students (81 percent) and 572 students (78 percent) who received a free or reduced price lunch (California Department of Education). More than half of the students at the school (398) were English Learners and an additional 60 English learners had been redesignated as Fluent English Proficient that year (California Department of Education).   From the beginning of the project, I explained that my aim was to design a project with two research layers. On the one hand, I proposed collaborating with a group of students to design a PAR project within their community, analyze the data from the project and develop an Action Plan based on the students' findings. On the other hand, as a university researcher interested in the possibility of fostering civic engagement within public schools, I clarified that I would use qualitative research methods, including participant-observation, interviews, student focus groups, and the analysis of student work samples to explore the research question: How does implementing PAR in a middle school classroom create pathways towards civic empowerment for marginalized students?

The principal suggested I partner with the Literacy Coach at the school, a highly qualified, innovative teacher who had been assigned a sixth grade English Language Arts class comprised of nine English Learners, all native Spanish speakers, who were reading several

grades below grade level (kindergarten through third grade level at the beginning of the academic year). Three of these students had been born in the United States, one had arrived in the country before he began school, four students were enrolled at the school in the third or fourth grade, and one student had just immigrated the previous year.

For a little more than two hours each day, the teacher worked with the same group of students for an advisory session and two consecutive instructional periods--one period of English Language Arts and one period of English Language Development. I was invited to join the group twice a week throughout the academic year and, during one of the academic periods each day, work with a small group of four or five students on the Participatory Action Research project (i.e., each student met with me in a small group once a week). From the beginning of the school year until the winter break in December, I focused the small group work in the classroom on developing the Participatory Action Research Project. Students identified strengths and problems in students' neighborhoods through photography (students were provided disposable cameras), analyzed their photographs through writing, developed interview questions for community members based on their pictures and summarized interview results. In addition to facilitating PAR in small groups, I also conducted participant-observation, worked with individual students on class work outside of the PAR project, had regular conversations with the teacher about the classroom students and the school, periodically attended PTA or after-school events, compiled daily field notes and collected student writing samples and reflections.

Classroom instruction, interviews, focus groups and small group sessions to develop the PAR project were primarily conducted in English, although the classroom teacher occasionally spoke in Spanish to support instruction and the students frequently spoke Spanish among themselves. The students also periodically code-switched from English to Spanish when I

worked with them as they knew I had previously lived in Spain and spoke conversational Spanish.

The First Choque and Reorientation of the PAR Collective

In the beginning of December 2014, the project took an unexpected turn when an ongoing collaboration between the school principal and a Rabbi from the Jewish congregation located directly across the street from the public school resulted in an invitation to bring together a small group of middle school students from the public school and the private Jewish day school. The Rabbi envisioned developing a collaborative social justice project and the principal invited me to attend the initial meetings for this initiative since it aligned with my interest in increasing students' civic engagement. Over the course of several conversations with the principal and Rabbi, I agreed to help facilitate the group with the understanding that I would continue to advance the PAR project with the same group of students in the after-school setting and work to develop an Action Plan based on the students' PAR that fall.

Ultimately, seven of the nine Latinx students from the PAR project (two students decided they did not want to stay after school) joined eight students from the Jewish day school for eight after-school sessions beginning in January 2015. In the after-school setting, however, the focus on the collaborative development of an Action Plan began to unravel as the facilitating Rabbi and I realized it was necessary to build communication and collaboration between the two groups when our initial icebreakers failed to break the silence between the 15 participating students. Therefore, we agreed to incorporate experiential team building activities into each session, including a storytelling exchange between the students, soccer games, a hike in a nearby state park, a student guided tour of the Synagogue, a Spanish lesson, a collaborative poetry writing exercise, and a Saturday morning Earth Day event. As the weeks progressed, the intention of

folding the PAR project into the after-school program was abandoned as we were never able to

develop enough rapport between the two groups to genuinely develop a collective Action Plan.

The Second Choque and Reorientation of the PAR Collective

When the after-school program began in January I continued to conduct participant-observation

in the classroom as before, while the language arts teacher generously gave her own time and

came to most of the after-school sessions. However, once the after-school program began, the

classroom teacher told me that although she would continue to support the PAR collective in the

after-school setting, she wanted to dedicate the classroom instructional time to English literature

covered in the sixth grade curriculum and the development of students' literacy skills. To some

extent I understood her perspective. The class was, after all, an English Language Arts course,

the state examination to test the students' English language proficiency was quickly approaching,

and she wanted the students to finish the same novels as the other sixth grade classes at the

school. Moreover, most of the students in the class were now engaged in the after-school

initiative in the larger community where they were supposed to continue developing the PAR

project. Therefore, in January I stopped facilitating the PAR project in the classroom--even as

the focus on the PAR project was beginning to fade in the after-school program.

Data Analysis through the Lens of Ripple Effects and Participatory Impacts

At the end of the 2014-2015 academic year, I felt a nagging sense of disappointment that the

PAR collaborative had failed to implement an Action Plan based on students' research findings.

This disappointment, however, was somewhat tempered by the fact that no one else really

seemed to mind. In fact, although I had understood each *choque* to be a reorientation of the

collective efforts of the group away from my initial plan for PAR, I had also felt increasingly

involved in the school community and a sense that my collaboration with the classroom teacher

was having significant impacts on the students. Specifically, after an intercultural storytelling activity in the after-school program generated considerable distress among the group of Latinx students in early February, the classroom teacher decided to teach the Latinx students how to write and share a personal narrative about their family history in their own classroom and invited me to collaborate with her on the project. By the time the storytelling project culminated with students' oral presentations to one another in May, each student's story illustrated a strong sense of positive self-awareness that had been absent from their initial stories in the after-school program.

With the understanding that the storytelling project had generated shifts in the relationships, attitudes and identities among the members of the PAR collective, I coded my daily field notes, the students' writing samples, and the transcripts from three recorded focus groups that I conducted with the seven students participating in the after-school program using a theoretical lens focused on the ripple effects and participatory impacts stemming from students engagement with the PAR Collective. My grounded theory approach to data analysis not only prompted me to identify the co-construction of knowledge that occurred between the classroom teacher and myself as we agreed to collaborate on the storytelling project, but also to recognize how students oriented themselves towards their future goals and academic success as they engaged in successful storytelling. Below, I illustrate how writing and speaking about the hardships they had already endured in their young lives allowed this group of academically struggling students to reposition themselves as capable learners who could succeed in school and life despite the many challenges they faced. For these students, telling their personal stories was far more than a self-esteem building exercise, but rather central to the ways in which the students engaged in the academic material of their classroom and oriented themselves towards their

educational goals and personal ambitions.

Results

A Positive Ripple Effect of the PAR Initiative: Beginning the Storytelling Project

In January 2015, the facilitating Rabbi and I first met to create a framework outlining the after-school program and design specific activities for our first few meetings. We agreed to begin the program with an intercultural storytelling activity to facilitate group cohesion and decided to ask each student to describe how their families came to the United States, discuss a favorite family memory, and share a family artifact that reminded the student of his or her family. On first day of the after-school program, the Rabbi and I modeled this activity for the students by sharing our own histories, memories and personal artifacts. We then asked the students to come prepared to the second after school session with their own story to share.

To further support the Latinx students in developing their stories, the Language Arts teacher agreed that the students could practice this activity during their English Language Development class. Therefore, I prepared a series of sentence frames as a homework assignment to help the students brainstorm ideas for their stories and asked them to bring this assignment to further develop during class time. One question on the homework assignment, for example, asked students to complete the following sentence frames: 'One memory I have of _____ is when_____. I like this memory because it reminds me that _____.'   Students were not enthusiastic about the intercultural storytelling exchange, however, and most of them did not complete the assigned homework. Moreover, even during the classroom instructional time dedicated to practicing the storytelling exchange the students made little progress brainstorming ideas, and by the end of the class period none of the students had actually practiced telling a story.

Nonetheless, on the day of the next after-school session we paired the students together for the storytelling activity as planned.   While it was difficult to observe all of the paired students who were simultaneously talking together, as I circled the room I found the Latinx students mostly kept their stories to a brief minimum or declined to speak. Yet although it was clear the intercultural storytelling had not fostered the group cohesion that we had anticipated, the Rabbi and I remained convinced that the students could learn a great deal from one another if the activity was structured appropriately. She pointed out that while the Jewish students had participated in the activity by sharing their stories, the exchange might have been more productive if they had been active listeners when the Latinx students attempted to speak. She noted that even though the Jewish students had remained politely silent when the Latinx students were speaking, they had failed to interject questions or demonstrate obvious interest when the storyteller paused. While this was certainly not unusual for a group of middle school students, she surmised that in this context it was unsurprising that most of the Latinx students--who were all English language learners--kept their stories to a minimum and quickly ended their storytelling turn. Based on this observation, the Rabbi and I agreed to continue the storytelling activity during the next after-school session but with a new emphasis on the role of an active listener.

We began the next after-school session by modeling a conversation in which the Rabbi and I each told a story about what we had done over the previous weekend. During the exchange, one person modeled active listening while the other listener appeared uninterested, failed to engage in the conversation and remained silent. Students were asked to identify active listening behaviors they observed during the conversation, including eye contact, nonverbal encouragement, verbal encouragement, paraphrasing, recognizing emotions, and open-ended

questioning. After quickly debriefing the comical conversation, both groups of students easily began discussing their weekend activities with a partner from the opposite school.

For the next piece of the active listening exercise, we asked students to partner with someone from their own school to retell the story they had shared last week and to practice active listening. We planned to rehearse the personal story one time with a partner from the same school before sharing the story a second time with a student from the opposite school. However, we never reached the final step in the active listening activity because of the overwhelming emotional response from the Latinx students as they shared their stories, mostly in Spanish, with an active listener from their school group.

At the beginning of the exchange I sat down with one pair of Latina girls to listen to their stories. As one student began telling the story of leaving her grandmother in Guatemala to come to live with her parents in California, I was pleased to observe her partner demonstrating strong active listening skills by responding 'Eso es un poco lo que me ha pasado (That's kind of what happened to me.)' Within a few minutes, however, I was dismayed that both girls had been brought to tears as they discussed the pain of having to leave their grandparents and extended families who had raised them for many years to be reunited with their parents. Meanwhile, another Latino student who was working in a small group with a partner and his classroom teacher also began to cry as he talked about the uncertainty of not knowing when he would see his parents again because they were still living in Guatemala. With three students in tears, the classroom teacher suggested I bring my small group together with all of the Latinx students so that we could debrief the activity together.

Once all the Latinx students were seated together, the classroom teacher reassured the students that their stories were important, that she could see the students were passionate about

telling their stories, and that because we were quickly running out of time that day in the after-school program she would help them write their stories in their English Language Development class. Composed by this conversation and encouraged by the teacher's promise to continue the activity in their own classroom space, the Latinx students gave each other a collective group hug and went to board their buses to go home for the day.

After the Rabbi had escorted her students back to their school, the classroom teacher and I sat down to discuss the storytelling exchange. This conversation marked a turning point in our collaboration together. Up to this point, although the teacher had generously allowed me to work with the students in her classroom, PAR and the after-school program had always been set apart from her own teaching. I had found this separation from the daily curriculum frustrating as I had initially assumed that we would collaborate on aspects of the PAR project. In December, for example, I wrote in my field notes, 'She even said after class, 'it was nice to see it all coming together.' I just wanted more of a partnership with her. Sort of planning it out together but she is very hands off--she treats it as my project separate from her class. But we could have made direct connections to the curriculum' (field notes December 3, 2014).

That afternoon, however, as we discussed the unexpected reactions from the students we began to co-construct knowledge about the power of storytelling. During our conversation it became clear that the teacher recognized how significant these stories were to the students. She asked if I had noticed that, 'There was a visible sigh of relief' among the students after she promised they could continue to work on their stories in the classroom (field notes March 12, 2015). For my part, I had never expected such a strong emotional response from the students and had not carefully considered how to best develop family stories with this particular group of students. In my field notes from that day, I identified the teacher's skilled ability to scaffold the

storytelling process for English language learners and noted how 'she came up with a brilliant template' that would prompt the students to first identify personal strengths so that they could later connect their strengths to the hardships they were facing in their lives (field notes March 12, 2015). As the classroom teacher and I worked to co-construct knowledge about the Latinx students' experience with the storytelling exchange, we began a collaboration that ultimately created a space for the students to develop their own counter narratives to dehumanizing and marginalizing discourses about Latinx immigrants in the United States.

Transformative Impact of Storytelling in a Safe Space

The language arts teacher's decision to incorporate storytelling into her curriculum provided the students with both a scaffolded pedagogy and an emotionally safe place to explore, develop and present their stories in their second language. Rather than requiring students to begin the storytelling process with written paragraphs in an essay format, the teacher first motivated her students with an 'I am' poetry exercise that asked students to document their personal abilities, interests, and social identities. Inspired by students' engagement with the poetry activity, I designed an art project that the classroom teacher readily incorporated into the classroom schedule that allowed the students to create bright personal Mandalas with markers and colored pencils that highlighted individual attributes from their poems.   It was only after students documented their many strengths through poetry and art that they began brainstorming topics for their written stories.   Finally, after several days of brainstorming exercises, the teacher conducted individual conferences to help each student narrow his or her writing focus to a specific topic. She scheduled individual conference times during the days I was in the classroom so that I could also work one on one with the students to support their writing while she was conferencing with students.

During the individual conferences, six of the nine students in the class decided to focus on the painful story of being separated from loved ones when immigrating to California. The teacher supported her students during whole group discussions as they first articulated the many hardships they had experienced and then encouraged them to incorporate their feelings into their writing. In her final writing piece, one student described the hardship of leaving her grandmother who had raised her since she was a toddler as follows:

> When my father told me we were were going to come to the U.S. I was so paralyzed, confused, furious, and very disappointed because I was going to leave her and I felt like I was leaving most of my heart there. I know everybody says that the U.S. represents happiness and that's true, when you are with your whole family, but when you're not it is like you have money and friends but you can't experience full happiness because you are missing part of your life.

The storytelling process also allowed several students to grapple with the traumatic experience of coming to live with caregivers who they no longer remembered. One boy explained his feelings in this way:

> I felt scared because I didn't know all the other people. I didn't know my bigger sister (who first met him when he arrived).

A third student, who had also been raised by her grandmother before immigrating, explained the turmoil of being reunited with her mother after living apart for so many years:

> I did not like talking to my mom and I did not want to be with my brother. Also, in the night I cried for my grandmother because I missed her and I felt uncomfortable with my mom. My mom moved to California when I was only 5 years old.

To support her students as they wrote about these hardships, the classroom teacher met with each

student at least twice during the writing process while I worked with the other students in the classroom. During individual conferences she continually encouraged students to add feelings and specific memories to their writing. When meeting with one student who had written a brief, general sentence about arriving in California, for example, she asked him a series of questions that prompted him to articulate the details about his first few days in California. She then directed the student to go back to his desk and write down what he had said to her. In his final draft he included the following:

> I didn't know how to do stuff. I always needed help. In a few weeks I wanted to go back because I didn't know how things work in the U.S. On the first day of school I got to my class. It was the middle of the school year. I did not understand anything the teacher was saying. When she ask me if I understand I was saying yes every time because I didn't know what to say.

During the writing process the teacher frequently assured the students that writing about painful events could be therapeutic. She encouraged the entire class to embrace the opportunity to write about their difficult past rather than ignore it. One student echoed the teacher's words in her own story by writing, 'Today I live in CA, and my heart still hurts but a little less now that I write it.'

Although painful at times, the act of writing about the many hardships they had faced after coming to the United States became an empowering experience for the students because the classroom teacher required the students to consider how they had faced the challenges they were writing about in their stories. With the appropriate instructional support and the time to develop their writing, the storytelling activity now allowed students to position themselves as resilient and hardworking students, thereby countering more common depictions of poor, unfortunate immigrants who are, at best, worthy of pity or, at worst, deserving of scorn and contempt

because they immigrated to the United States. The boy who wrote about initially wanting to return to his native country concluded his story by writing:

> Fast forward to today. In 2015 I know more things. In school I know almost everything my teachers are saying. Now I know how to read in English, how to speak English, and I even talk to my teachers and even ask questions. When I don't understand something I ask for help.

One of the girls who was forced to leave her grandmother to immigrate to California ended her story by recognizing herself as a hard worker, outlining her future academic and professional goals and explaining how her grandmother had become an inspiration to her:

> I will always work hard, because I want to go to college and build my company. The name of my company will be my grandma's name because she is the most important and special person in my life forever. I will honor my grandmother as a hard working woman.

As a culminating activity in the storytelling unit, the classroom teacher asked the students to read their final drafts to the class. As they each took a turn there was a sense of pride in the classroom as each story illustrated the student's sense of positive self-awareness. Moreover, as they confidently told their stories the students were able to orient themselves towards future goals and personal ambitions. As one student explained to his classmates:

> A challenge that I always face is not being with my parents. I always remember my parents at school because my mom used to tell me to be good at school, get good grades and never never give up. When I get stuck on something and I want to give up I feel like my mom is telling me to not do it and to keep on going….I think my parents are going to be proud of me.

In the safe, supportive environment, each student shared a story in which they recognized themselves for what they are: smart, hard-working, resilient students working against enormous odds to succeed in school and pursue their ambitions in life. Thus, by repositioning themselves as capable students with promising potential, the Latinx students successfully articulated their counter stories to dominant discourses that commonly position Latinx immigrant students and their families as uneducated, lazy and undeserving of equal rights.

Discussion

When I first approached the principal of the school asking for permission to develop a PAR project, I understood that as an outsider I would not only need to negotiate the design of PAR with the students involved, but also with the principal of the school and the classroom teacher who invited me to join her classroom. Nonetheless, I was not prepared for the unexpected *choques* that occurred during our collaboration that reoriented the PAR collective towards a focus on storytelling. In contrast to the *choques* described by Torre and Ayala (2009, 388) that highlight the potential of cultural collisions that occur *EntreMundos/*Among Worlds when members of minoritized communities draw from "differently positioned/powered cultural frameworks," I was caught off guard by the *choques* that stemmed from the differing values and priorities foregrounded within the cultural contexts of the university and the public school. Thus, this study expands the ways in which researchers might conceptualize 'cultural collisions' by highlighting how differences between the cultural worlds of academia and public institutions such as K-12 schools can affect the research design. With this increased awareness, project stakeholders can better anticipate potential *choques* during democratic collaboration between insider-practitioners in the field and outsider-researchers that are not necessarily based on the hierarchical positioning of cultural frameworks within the larger society. Indeed, project

stakeholders might even share a common cultural framework but nevertheless be influenced by the values and priorities of their respective institutions.

Although the reorientation of this project following the first choque was not aligned with my initial vision for the PAR project, once I understood that the principal and the Rabbi of the neighboring school were already deeply invested in developing an ongoing partnership between the two schools I did not want to refuse to help facilitate the after-school program. Likewise, I certainly did not want to try to impose my vision for completing the PAR project in the classroom after the teacher approached me to explain that she wanted to focus on direct literacy instruction--particularly because I was sensitive to the enormous pressure on the schools' teachers to raise their students' assessed literacy levels and standardized test scores by the end of the academic year. Therefore, while these *choques* reoriented the PAR collective away from my initial goals, by the end of the year my collaboration at the school directly supported the outreach efforts of the principal and the practical concerns of the classroom teacher.

Given the unanticipated *choques* that reoriented the project to include the collective purpose of the principal and classroom teacher, the PAR project might be considered a failure since the students never implemented an Action Plan based on their research findings. However, the successful storytelling project that unexpectedly developed that year was a direct ripple effect from the PAR initiative. Indeed, it was only due to the co-construction of knowledge that occurred between the classroom teacher and myself--as we both came to recognize the importance of storytelling and discover how to best support the students in this process--that students were able to construct powerful counter-stories that increased their positive self-awareness. Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) explain that such co-construction of knowledge can only occur once dialogic communication is established. In this project, for example, the

classroom teacher and I listened and added to the ideas of one another to come to a shared understanding of the significance of storytelling that neither one of us had independently recognized. Due to this unexpected ripple effect, the participatory impact on the Latinx students who consistently engaged with the PAR collective throughout the academic year became a significant outcome of the project--even as the focus of the group shifted over the course of the academic year.

By using an analytic lens focused on ripple effects and participatory impacts, I found that the Latinx students' storytelling was a form of action in that the students had not simply come to a new understanding of their past experiences, but rather had begun to reinvent themselves as they developed and shared their stories with their peers. Just as critical race theorists have illustrated with other marginalized groups, this group of middle school English language learners successfully developed and shared personal stories that countered dehumanizing discourses portraying the Latinx immigrant community as incompetent, inferior, undeserving of equal rights, or even threatening to society. Therefore, this study extends the work of Bell (2009), Ladson-Billings (1998), Solorzano and Yosso (2002) and others who have explored the potential benefits of counter-storytelling by demonstrating that students who are English Language Learners have much to gain from sharing their own counter-stories--once they are provided a safe, supportive environment and an appropriately scaffolded pedagogy to write their stories in English.

From the beginning of the PAR initiative, I had not only wanted to collaborate with a group of students to design a PAR project, I was also committed to using qualitiative methods to trace how the implementation of PAR in a middle school classroom might create pathways to civic empowerment for marginalized students. While Cammarota and Fine (2008) have argued

that Youth Participatory Action Research is a pedagogical approach for teaching transformational resistance, this project clarifies that the development of a minoritized student's positive self-awareness is not simply a path for resistance, but also a first step towards civic engagement. For these students, the stories they ultimately shared emphasized how they had persevered under extremely challenging circumstances and highlighted the sacrifices made by their families as they strived to create better lives for themselves in California. As the students began to recognize themselves as resilient and capable students, they gained positive self-awareness necessary to participate in future civic programs, projects, and debates with their native English speaking peers. At the same time, in crafting their stories students oriented themselves towards future goals, including both long term goals such as going to college or starting a business as well as short term academic goals like working hard in school. Through the process of articulating their personal and academic ambitions, students became more likely to stay engaged with school and therefore better positioned to become empowered citizens later in life. Finally, even within their segregated classroom, the Latinx students gained competency publically reading their counter stories to an audience.

Given the students' emergent English abilities and the emotional complexity of their stories, storytelling in a supportive environment allowed the students to begin to develop public speaking skills necessary to articulate these experiences to peers coming from different backgrounds.   It is important to note, however, that this safe space was created *in addition* to the after-school program, not *in place* of the integrated program. As Patel (2012), Villalpando (2003), and Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) have argued, providing marginalized students safe spaces to learn together often promotes successful integration by supporting the well-being of students who confront institutionalized racism and discrimination on a daily basis.   Thus,

rather than replace integration efforts the opportunity to successfully share their stories in a safe space empowered the Latinx students to engage in future opportunities that require civic collaboration between diverse groups of students as they arise.

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