

No más quería entrar con nosotros: Understanding Immigration through Children's Life Stories

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My role as a Latina researcher is to represent the complexity of life in classrooms and schools, highlighting the capabilities of students and families from linguistically, socioeconomically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Writing this research allows me to “cultivate rich, multifaceted representations of human experiences that might begin to serve as a basis for teachers to understand diverse students” and their families (Carger, 2005, p. 241). Too often the literacy practices that are significant in the lives of children of color are devalued in schools and their ways of constructing literacy are seen as an obstacle to their education (Nieto, 2002; Dudley-Marling, 2007). This is consistent with Heath's (1983) argument that when there is a mismatch between the school and home in literacy experiences, children are often viewed through a deficit lens and their home literacies are not recognized or valued in the school context. The present study examined a literacy practice that was highly valued in the lives and homes of a small group of Latino children and their mothers – telling stories.

Stories, told for centuries, are “the most time-honored way in which cultures preserve the past and shape the future” (Carger, 2005, p. 237). Everyone, regardless of linguistic, cultural or socioeconomic background, tells stories; they “are a part of the fabric of the social world” (Lawler, 2002, p. 243). Stories emerged as a significant tool for making meaning during our literature discussions/*pláticas literarias*.

Pláticas literarias are literature circles where a group of students who have read, or who have had the book read to them, discuss the meaning they are creating from their understandings and personal connections to the text (Short, 1997). During the *pláticas* the children examine their own understandings of issues raised in the literature and share these beginning understandings with their group in a “two-way reciprocal relation” with the text (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Setting and Book Selection

I worked with a small group of young Latino children and their mothers at their school about three times a month throughout the school year. During our time together we read and talked about books and participated in literacy engagements, primarily *pláticas literarias*. During our *pláticas* the children engaged in “translanguaging” to use their “linguistic resources to make meaning of their lives and their complex worlds” (García, 2011, p. 1), while their mothers communicated solely in Spanish.

The books selected for the *pláticas* represented the language and cultures of the children and their families; they were written in Spanish or contained text in both

English and Spanish. Because some of the books were about critical social issues (e.g. racism, poverty, immigration) that had directly affected the families, I was careful to have their *confianza*, a mutual trust “which is re-established or confirmed with each exchange and leads to the development of long-term relationships before delving into these deep discussions” (González, Moll, Floyd-Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales, & Amanti, 1993, p. 3). This article focuses on the *plática* about *Pablo and Pimienta/Pablo y Pimienta* (Covault, 1998) which took place at the end of the school year.

Pablo and Pimienta/Pablo y Pimienta (Covault, 1998) is a story about a little boy, Pablo, who is making the journey from Mexico to Phoenix, Arizona with his father and uncle to pick watermelon. Pablo is sitting in the back of his father’s pick-up truck trying to keep dry under a tarp and bounces out when the truck hits a bump. The truck drives on as no one notices that Pablo is gone. Pablo manages to find shelter in the desert and is befriended by a coyote pup, who he names Pimienta. Both find their way across the U.S./Mexico border and eventually are reunited with Pablo’s father and uncle.

Pláticas Literarias: Border Knowledge

One category of talk about this book was “Border Knowledge,” stories that indicated children’s knowledge of the border between the United States and Mexico in relation to their lives and families. Throughout the *plática*, the children told stories about life experiences as they tried to make meaning of the book events, reflecting Sipe’s (1998) notion that “readers actively construct meaning from text” (p. 76). Their stories demonstrated their knowledge about crossing the *frontera*/border into the United States (with or without documentation). The following excerpts are representative of the types of stories told during the discussion.



After reading aloud the book, I paused and asked the children and their mothers what they thought about the book. Minerva (all names are pseudonyms) began the *plática* by focusing on the page depicting the customs building. She looked at the illustration and told us how this page reminded her of a story her mother told about their family crossing the border at Ciudad Juárez. Minerva’s mother, María, explained that the lines were too long for everyone to wait in the car, and that she and her two sisters

(Minerva’s aunts) walked across and waited “*en el otro lado*” (on the other side) while her brother (Minerva’s uncle) and dad waited to bring the truck across.

Todos tenemos papeles pero que calor, hay me acuerdo como si hubiese pasado ayer, y yo no podía más. La niña [Minerva] apenas tenía seis meses y no, es que era mucho el

calor para ella, así que le dije a Juan [Minerva's father] que me iba. Recogí mi bebé, su bolsita, mis papeles y me puse a caminar hacia la frontera. Llegué al edificio, presenté mis papeles y los de la niña y me senté a esperar a tu papá y tío./ We all have papers but the heat – I remember as if it was yesterday – and I couldn't anymore. Minerva was only six months old and no, it is just that it was too hot for her, so I told Juan [Minerva's father] that I was leaving. I got my baby, her bag, my papers and then started walking towards the border. I got to the building, showed my papers and Minerva's and I sat to wait for your dad and uncle.

The conversation following María's story focused on the other mothers agreeing that the lines at the border are long and sometimes the heat makes it unbearable to have to wait. Additionally, they talked about people who were still in Mexico because they had no documentation.

Yolanda, mother of Graciela, another girl, commented:

Pues, al menos tenemos papeles. Y los pobres que no tienen. Allí se lo pasan luchando y tratando de pasar. Me da lástima./ Well, at least we have papers. And what about those poor people who don't have papers. They just keep on with the struggle and trying to come over. I feel sad for them.

María added:

Pues sí, es muy triste tener que dejarlos allá. Le doy gracias todos los días al Señor que me dio el chance de venir a este país./ Well yes, it is very sad to have to leave them there. I thank God every day that He gave me the chance to come to this country.

To which Minerva responded:

Me too mami porque si no vienen yo no estoy aqui y yo love mi escuela y amigos./ Me too mom, because if you didn't come then I wouldn't be here and I love my school and friends.

Flipping through the book, Jeannette suddenly stopped at the page with the illustration depicting the dogs and told us that this page frightened her because:

Los perros parecen bravos. Ellos son los que te chequean so that you don't have drugs or bad stuff that you sneak here. /The dogs look mean. They are the ones that check you so that you don't have drugs or bad stuff that you sneak here [U.S.].

Graciela then shared a story about the *perros de la migra*/border patrol dogs. As she told the story her mother looked on and shook her head in agreement.

Esos perros parecen lobos. Miren le esos dientes, que grandes y filosos. Me recuerda de cuando yo era chiquita y pasamos [la frontera]. Yo era, pues una bebita, tenía unos dos años y veníamos de ver a mi nana. Mi mami tenía papeles y mi hermano y yo, pero mi papá no. El migra nos miró y dijo que enseñáramos nuestros papeles y así pasamos mi mami, hermano y yo. Pero mi papi no pudo pasar y me acuerdo que el perro de la migra lo miro y le enseñó los dientes. Yo me puse a llorar y mi mami me calmo, pero nunca se me olvidan esos dientes feos de lobo. Te huelen así, por eso lo tienen, algunos los tienen para recolectar the drogas. Mi papi no tenía drogas ni nada el no más quería entrar con nosotros and they told him 'no' that he had to stay.

Those dogs look like wolves. Look at those teeth, how big and sharp. It reminds me of when I was little and we passed [the border]. I was, well a baby, I was about two years old and we were coming back from visiting my nana [grandmother]. My mom had papers [allowing entry into the U.S.] and my brother and me but not my dad. The border patrol [officer] looked at us and told us to show our papers and that is how my mom, brother, and I passed. But my dad couldn't and I remember that the *migra* dog looked at him and showed [my dad] his teeth. I started to cry and my mom calmed me down but I will never forget that wolf's ugly teeth. They sniff you like this, [demonstrates on my sleeve], that's why they have them some of them collect the drugs. My dad did not have drugs or anything he just wanted to come in with us.

Towards the end of the segment, Jeannette, keeping with the topic of border patrol dogs, shared:

Si hay algo extraño, ellos lo huelen y todo lo que hacen es decir wuf, wuf, y se lo llevan/ If there is something strange, they'll smell it and all they do is woof-woof, and [Border Patrol] will take it away.

The excerpts illustrate the children's knowledge about border crossing: waiting in long lines to enter the United States, presenting some kind of documentation, (referred to as *papeles*/papers; e.g. a passport, visa, green card), leaving family and friends in Mexico and an understanding of the job of the border dogs, "*los que te chequean*" /the ones that check you. Additionally, on a more personal level, Graciela's story demonstrates her understanding of what it means not to be allowed to enter the United States. She tells us that her father simply wanted to enter the country with his family but was not allowed to do so because he lacked documentation, not because he carried drugs:

Mi papi no tenía drogas ni nada el no más quería entrar con nosotros and they told him "no" that he had to stay.

In addition to sharing accounts of the families' travels between both countries, the mother's stories helped the children develop a deeper empathy for people who are not able to travel between both countries freely as they do. Minerva realized that without documentation, her family would not be able to travel to the United States and she would not be with her school and friends. Perhaps in sharing their stories with their children, the mothers are helping them develop an accurate and more humanizing view on the issue of border crossing rather than the view that is ever present (and not always accurate) in the media.

In the following excerpt, Jeannette went back to the first page of the book and told a story about travelling in the bed of her father's pick-up truck (similar to Pablo in the story).

Esta página me recordó de cuando veníamos de allá de México porque como venimos de allá de México en el troque ponen una cosa, una tarpa. So mi Ma, mi Pa, mi hermano um, se van acá en frente y yo y mi hermana nos vinimos acá atrás. Y una vez nomás, una sola vez, traía una cosa para que no nos cayéramos o fuéramos volando ni nada, y traía una cosa tapándonos and when we stopped because his turn was red porque so lo pararon y quitaron la cosa que venía tapando a nosotros y, y luego le, se me hace que le dieron un 'ticket' porque no nos podía traer así en la caja.

This page reminded me of when we used to come from Mexico because when we came from Mexico in the truck they would put a thing, a tarp. So my mom, my dad, and my brother were in the front and me, my sister, my brother would be in the back. And one time, only once, there was something that kept us from falling and flying out of there, and there was this thing covering us and when we stopped there, because his turn was red so he had to stop and they took off the thing that was covering us and – and, then, I think that they gave him a ticket, because he couldn't bring us like that in the bed of the truck.

Jeannette's experience demonstrates her first-hand border knowledge of travelling to the United States in a pick-up truck, just as Pablo did in the story. Jeannette shared how she travelled with her siblings in the truck and how *once, only one time*, her father was stopped at a red light. She is referring to a signal light (similar to a traffic light) at each of the entry lines at the border: when it is your turn to approach the booth, the light will flash either red or green. If you get green, you continue without being searched (but you must still show your passport). However, if you get red, this indicates that you were randomly selected for a search and you must pull aside to be searched by Border Patrol agents and their dogs. By mentioning red in her story, it is implied that she knows the others share this border knowledge. Jeannette ended her story by connecting back to the text and the illustration of Pablo in the truck bed, saying that she thinks that her father got a ticket because "he couldn't bring us like that, in the bed of the truck."

Sandra, Jeannette's mother, looked at the children and the other mothers and added the following:

Era tan chiquita, pero mira pues, cuanto se acuerda. Yo me acuerdo de ese día y yo estaba llena de miedo cuando llegamos a la frontera. Pues fíjense que aunque no se hizo nada mal y teníamos todos los papeles y eso, cuando hay que andar con la migra y la frontera no se juega. Hay, un día espero que no se tan difícil y feo tener que cruzar para aca. Somos todos partes de las Américas y nos debemos tratar como hermanos. No sé, eso pienso yo. Cuanto no quisiera yo que pudrieran venir mis padres a este país. Pero ni modos, no se puede. Por lo menos como dijiste antes María o Yolanda no me acuerdo cual fue, nosotros podemos pasar de aquí a allá sin miedo que no nos acepten [los papeles].

She was so young, but look how much she remembered. I remember that day; I was full of fear when we got to the border. Well, look even though we did nothing wrong and had all the papers and everything, when dealing with Border Patrol and the border, there is no playing around. Oh, I hope that one day it won't be so difficult and ugly to cross the border over here. We are all a part of the Americas and we should treat each other like brothers. I don't know, that is what I think. How I wish that my parents could come to this country. But that will not happen. At least, as you said earlier, María or Yolanda, I can't remember which one said it, we can cross from here to there without the fear that [our papers] won't be accepted.

By talking with their mothers about the books, the children learned more about their families, the events that shaped their lives and how these events were interpreted by their mothers. In turn, the mothers learned how the children interpreted particular life experiences and how those experiences have helped shape their understanding of the circumstances under which they live. The children grew in appreciation for the manner in which their families have tried to "maintain integrity and dignity in living with the ambiguity that comes with straddling multiple realities" (Villenas, 2005, p. 74).

Discussion and Implications

Pláticas literarias about issues that relate to children and their families provide an opportunity to critically examine and reflect on their lives and use their knowledge and their storytelling to share their meaning-making. Because these books are written in their native language, Spanish, the families are also able to actively participate in their child's meaning-making and to pass along their cultural way of knowing-storytelling to their children.

The *pláticas literarias* support Nieto's (2002) notion that "learning is not simply a question of transmitting knowledge, but rather of working with students so that they can reflect, theorize, and create knowledge" (p. 7). The children closely examined

their lives and their families' lives in order to create an understanding of their lived experiences at the time of the discussions. Bakhtin (1981) explains that people learn language, not from dictionaries, but from other people in particular situations, and that "it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own" (p. 295). Children are able to do this in settings where it is expected that they talk and learn from each other, and where learning is active and participatory.

The stories that the children told were representative of the complicated lives that they live and presented some of the difficult realities of their lives. At the same time, these stories also illuminated their border knowledge and demonstrated how they were able to search their own lives for stories that connected to the book we read. Rather than pity these young Latinas and their mothers, and reinforce the deficit lens from which they are often viewed, I share their stories with the hope that others will learn to see the value in the stories they tell. It is also my hope that in sharing their stories, both the children and their mothers can "challenge the deficit perspectives through which others too often interpret their lives" (Dutro & Zenkov, 2008, p. 174). The stories made us aware of the significance the U.S./Mexico border plays in their lives and remind us that "in life, we cannot parcel out certain conditions and put others aside" (Langer, 1995, p.7).

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