Title of the project: Newcomer High Schoolers’ Writing Development through Participatory Action Research

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Final Report

Motivation for Research
Latinx students constitute the largest ethnic minority in U.S. public schools (Kena et al., 2016). Unfortunately, Latinx students often encounter multiple barriers to school success, including discrimination, poverty, and low-quality schooling (Gándara, 2004; Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006). Newcomers—immigrants who have resided in the United States for four years or less (Boyson & Short, 2003; Short & Boyson, 2012)—face additional challenges; they need to learn how to navigate a new educational environment and adjust to new sociocultural contexts (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). The adjustment process can be especially difficult for adolescent newcomers because they are more likely than their younger counterparts to experience identity crises, lack of language learning support, interrupted or limited education, and interpersonal conflicts (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). Yet, scholars have paid scant attention to Latinx youth newcomers’ adaptation to the United States and to the role that writing plays in these students’ lives.

Research on how newcomer Latinx high schoolers (NLHSs) conceive writing is very scarce. Thus far, most of the studies involving NLHSs’ writing (e.g., Gilliland, 2015; McCloud, 2015; Ortmieier-Hooper, 2007; Rubinstein-Ávila, 2007) have occurred at traditional, comprehensive high schools. These studies (e.g., Rubinstein, 2007; Villalva, 2006) suggest that conceptions of writing may vary among NLHSs: Whereas some NLHSs may consider writing as a teacher-mandated, repetitive task, others may conceive writing as a liberating experience or a transformational tool. Their conceptions of writing, in turn, may shape how they engage with writing (Mateos & Solé, 2012).

Moreover, although NLHSs could learn how to conceive and use writing as a transformational tool through participatory action research (PAR), the relation between NLHSs’ involvement in PAR and their writing has not been directly studied. PAR is “a systematic, empirical research in collaboration with representatives of the population under investigation, with the goal of action or intervention into the issues or problems being studied” (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009, p. 1). PAR encourages students to become co-researchers and investigate social issues of their interest. In the process of doing PAR, the student coresearchers have multiple opportunities to use writing as an instrument to reflect on and change their worlds. Thus, unlike other inquiry programs and approaches, PAR always has the potential to help students view
writing as tool for transformation (Cammarota & Romero, 2009, 2011; de los Ríos, López, & Morrell, 2015; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; García, Mirra, Morrell, Martínez, & Scorza, 2015; Irizarry, 2008; King, 2013; LaDuke, 2010; Mirra, García, & Morrell, 2016; Morrell, 2003; 2006, 2007; Noonan, 2009). However, researchers have not investigated the impact of PAR on NLHSs’ conceptions of writing. I sought to address this research gap with my dissertation study.

**Research Questions**

This study concentrated on three research questions:
1. How do NLHSs perceive PAR?
2. How do NLHSs conceive writing before, during, and immediately after participating in a PAR process?
3. What aspects of the PAR process impact NLHSs’ conceptions of writing and how?

**Research Methodology**

The research project unfolded at Multicultural High (pseudonym,) a public high school that only serves immigrant-origin students and that is located near the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. With the support of the school personnel and my dissertation committee, I designed and implemented an afterschool program based on PAR principles (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008; Park, 1993).

The study had a “two-tiered design” (Brown, 2010). As part of the first tier, a small group of Multicultural High students (n = 15) and I met weekly for 14 weeks to establish a research team and work together, as coresearchers, in investigations. The studies focused on school-related issues (i.e., students’ sadness, teachers’ happiness, and students’ reactions to unwanted changes) that the participating youth considered important. In the first study tier, the immigrant youth coresearchers and I aimed to better understand the youth’s selected issues by collecting and analyzing data from participant observations and semi-structured interviews with both students and teachers. Throughout the research process, the youth and I frequently used written and oral language to reflect on our actions and to examine future courses of individual and collective action. In other words, we engaged in praxis by writing and talking with one another. Doing PAR (i.e. the PAR process) offered us myriad opportunities not only to tailor the afterschool program but also to use and think together about research and writing.

The second tier of the study involved taking a bird’s-eye view of what was happening in the first tier. For the second tier, I conducted a qualitative critical inquiry on the conceptions of writing and research of four focal youth coresearchers, who were newcomers to the United States, self-identified as Latinx, and were enrolled in either tenth or eleventh grades at Multicultural High. This critical inquiry was the primary focus of my dissertation. Data collection for my dissertation study included multiple ethnographic methods—namely, participant observation of the PAR activities and semi-structured interviews with the four focal students and two Multicultural High teachers who were familiar with the students’ writing. I analyzed the collected data inductively and deductively (Creswell, 2014), using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During the analysis, I considered some sensitizing concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) from critical social theories, critical pedagogy, sociocultural theories of learning, and writing scholarship.

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Summary of Findings

I answered the question of “how did NLHSs perceive PAR?” by analyzing data (namely, fieldnotes and interviews) inductively and deductively. In the first round of coding, I focused on how the focal NLHSs described their experiences in the program and used their own terms to label pieces of raw data. This inductive analysis revealed that, in general, the focal youth viewed PAR as “interesting,” “fun,” and “challenging.” In the second round of coding, I concentrated on examining the reasons why they viewed PAR in those ways and explored how conceptual constructs helped me understand the youth’s perceptions. In that analytic stage, I noticed two intriguing patterns. On one hand, the youth considered PAR as interesting/fun because it allowed them to learn not only about themselves, their selected topic, research, and writing but also about how other people thought, felt, and lived. On the other hand, they perceived PAR as a challenging process that involved communication and analysis. In the last analytic stage, I further conceptualized those patterns and concluded that the focal NLHSs perceived PAR as a relevant opportunity for challenging dialogue and conscientization—i.e., a way to understand one’s social conditions and possibilities (Freire, 1970). My data analysis also revealed that the focal youth coresearchers’ perceptions and expectations of PAR were tied to their prior research experiences.

Through my data analysis, I identified a second set of findings related to the focal youth’s writing conceptions. I began the formal analysis by reviewing how the youth defined or characterized writing in the interviews and the program sessions. I then created in vivo codes of the youth’s definitions of writing (e.g., “writing is ‘copying’”; “writing is ‘a way to express yourself’”) and used those codes to tag corresponding excerpts in fieldnotes and interviews. In subsequently identifying patterns among the codes, I discovered that the youths defined writing in three primary ways: a manual act, a way to record and remember information, and a form of expression or communication. In the last round of analysis, I examined how those three categories related to the extant literature on writing. I eventually realized—using the constant comparison method—that the first two categories mirrored a reproductive conception of writing and the third category reflected a transformational conception of writing (discussed in Villalón et al., 2015). I then re-labeled the coded data pieces the new conceptual categories and re-interpreted the meaning of the whole dataset. This round of data analysis revealed that, throughout the PAR process, the youth coresearchers placed additional emphasis on writing as a tool to express themselves, help others, and transform their worlds. Because this perspective reflects a transformational conception of writing, I argue the focal youth strengthened their transformational conception of writing over the course of the PAR process.

In addition, my analysis showed the PAR process influenced the youth’s writing conceptions by being youth-centered, offering novel writing opportunities, and promoting dialogic talks—i.e., an interaction in which both teachers and students present ideas and make arguments in order to reach agreements and common understandings (Alexander, 2000).

Implications

This study has important implications for educational practice. Education stakeholders should actively seek to establish high-quality programs in which immigrant students can investigate their own contexts. Like other studies (e.g., Cammarota, 2007; de los Ríos et al., 2015; LaDuke, 2010), my dissertation research shows that programs focused on youth-led research allow students to better comprehend and transform themselves and their worlds, which may contribute
to immigrant students’ positive socioemotional and academic development in their new home countries. School teachers can partner with university-based researchers and prospective teachers who wish to implement and examine such programs or by supporting school faculty who may be interested in creating similar educational experiences in extracurricular spaces or as part of regular school classes.

Yet, educators should recognize the uniqueness of newly arrived, Central American, immigrant youth. Compared to younger immigrants, immigrant teenagers have more life experiences and are more aware of their surrounding circumstances (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). The youth’s experiences prior to, during, and after migration generate emotions and knowledge that influence the youth’s participation in educational initiatives. For instance, like Suárez-Orozco and colleagues (2002), my youth coresearchers and I noticed that many Central American newcomer immigrant youths suffered from depression—mainly due to migration-related family separation and conflict. Their depressive episodes oftentimes reduced their school engagement and negatively affected their interpersonal relationships. Through my dissertation research and education practice, I found that the most meaningful educational initiatives and opportunities for newcomer, Central American, immigrant youth are those that address their emotions. And, as my findings suggest, writing is a powerful tool for immigrant youth to process their emotions and traumatic experiences (see also Dutro, 2011; Park & Blumberg, 2002).

My dissertation research also indicates that immigrant youth benefit emotionally and academically when their knowledge, experiences, and interests are the center, rather than the periphery, of educational enterprises. Therefore, it behooves education practitioners, administrators, and policy makers to work together to design and implement educational initiatives centered on students’ knowledge, experiences, and interests. These initiatives should begin by meeting students where they are, in terms of their learning trajectories, and leverage their individual and collective capacities in accordance with SCT and critical pedagogy principles.

Lastly, my dissertation serves as a reminder for education practitioners to provide immigrant students with multiple kinds of opportunities to write and share their own texts to expand their writing conceptions and engagement. Like previous studies (e.g., Jocson, 2012; Linares, 2017, 2019), my research shows that when NLHSs are allowed to compose various types of texts for different purposes and audiences, they are likely to increase their engagement with writing and change how they view writing. I also found that immigrant youth especially appreciate opportunities to create multimodal texts in which they can express their opinions, reflect on their lived experiences (including, their emotions and traumas), and/or promote social changes. Further, students may view writing as a more valuable enterprise when they have opportunities to talk about their texts and present them to others. Thus, educators who wish to support immigrant youth in expanding their writing conceptions and engagement should encourage them to compose various types of texts and share their texts with others, in and beyond the classroom and school.
References


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