

Using Literacy to Understand Mexican Boys' Perspectives of Life

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Abstract

Many nine- and ten-year-old boys find reading interesting but begin to feel insecure about themselves as readers and avoid reading whenever they can. Reading avoidance starts early and for many boys, especially those of color living in poverty, fourth grade seems to be the time when this downward spiral begins. National and state assessment data consistently and currently indicates a gap and stall in the reading achievement of male Latino and English Language Learners living in poverty. However, as Weaver-Hightower (2008) notes, when educators talk about boys and their literacy achievement, they must not only ask *which* boys are failing but must also ask *why*? The goal of this study was to answer the *why* to Weaver-Hightower's questions for Mexican boys living in Phoenix, Arizona in the early part of 2010. Toward this goal, we established a fourth grade boys' book club in a neighborhood which presented many challenges for its inhabitants but especially for the Mexican boys who were learning English at their local school. Immigration sweeps and State Bill 1070 permeated their lives and skewed their vision of academic and social success. Regardless, our book club members emerged as tolerant, courageous, and generous individuals who do enjoy reading but too often find themselves reading alone. From these findings implications for educators are provided.

Introduction

Over our collective twenty years plus of teaching, we have found the early elementary years especially important in boys' views of literacy. Many nine- and ten-year-old boys find reading interesting but too soon begin to feel insecure about themselves as readers, perceive reading to be a feminine task, and avoid reading whenever they can (Brozo, 2002; Payne & Slocumb, 2011; Smith & Wilhelm, 2009). In elementary school, struggling male readers earn the lowest grades, boys are retained more often than girls, and males dominate special education and remedial classes (O'Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006). Reading avoidance starts early for many boys and boys of color living in poverty often begin a downward spiral in fourth grade (Brozo, 2002). National and state assessment data consistently and currently indicates a gap and stall in the reading achievement of male Latino, African American, and English Language Learners living in poverty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

However, as Weaver-Hightower (2008) notes, when we talk about boys and their academic and literacy achievement, we must not only ask *which* boys are failing but must also ask *why*? Reflecting on these questions prompted a study designed to investigate how fourth grade boys living in an inner city transacted with text and to shed light on their interpretations of manhood through talk about men in stories. A safe place to think and talk about storybook characters would help these boys learn themselves, literacy, and honorable traits of manhood.

To do this we read books that focused on archetypes, or modes of thought about honorable manhood derived from experience because their traits (e.g., tolerance, courage, generosity, persistence) are valued and consistent cross-culturally. These archetypes teach boys how to act for the common good and how to cope with the inward and outward struggles they face on their journey to manhood (Zambo & Hansen, 2010). Then we listened to the boys' genuine response to story and engaged them in relevant learning activities including drawing and writing.

Theoretical Frameworks

We filtered our work through a systems perspective and complex ecology. We use

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological model of development because it allows us to understand the importance of context on children's lives. Every child lives in a *microsystem*, or immediate setting, an *exosystem*, a distant social setting, and a *macrosystem*, the bigger picture that influences his/her development. A systems perspective highlights how environments affect children and that children have the agency needed to affect the systems in their world. Lee's (2010) complex ecology, or theory of learning that focuses on the interplay between human dispositions, physiology, cultural practices, and environment, builds on previous systems perspectives, and includes the child and the environment.

As teacher educators and early childhood researchers, we believe honorable manhood and literacy relies on both internal and external factors. Honorable manhood, as Brozo (2002) notes, is an idea or mode of thought derived from cultural and personal experience that points a boy in the way honored by tradition in his society. Honorable manhood means having values like cooperation, courage, generosity, honesty, perseverance, responsibility and respectfulness (Zambo & Brozo, 2009). Tales of honorable manhood began as oral stories passed down from generation to generation and today, are found in the words and illustrations in children's picture books.

Self and literacy are shaped by one's own biology, disposition, use, and motivation; these are nested in one's cultural, social, and political landscape. Literacy in this sense becomes transformative and much more than a skill. For example, Freire (1970) helped Brazilian students understand the unforeseen structures suppressing their lives through photographs of their impoverished surroundings. Through visual literacy and texts, Freire helped students beware of their situations, to think critically about them, and begin to think that things do not have to remain the same. Effectively, he led students to empowerment through literacy. Therefore, when it comes to literacy a boy must have a reason to read, the understanding he will be transformed by literacy, and perceive that he is respected as a learner and young man.

While there is no doubt boys of all ethnicities need the insights literacy provides this is not always the case due to poverty. Poverty affects children of all racial and ethnic backgrounds but living in the inner city and being a black, Hispanic, or Native American male places one more at risk. Too often, Mexican children attend impoverished inner city schools, are in segregated classrooms, and cannot use their native language to learn. This situation is growing and becoming more severe. According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2011), the number of Hispanic children living in poverty jumped by 36 percent from 2007 to 2010 and the youth of this group and recession were factors as to why. Children living in young households with young earners earning below minimum wage struggle to put food on the table. However, even with older parents, Hispanics suffered more than some ethnicities in the recession because their heads of household were employed in service-oriented occupations that experienced sharp declines. Furthermore, if a breadwinner was an immigrant or spoke Spanish they were more likely to be cut. Of the 6.1 million Latino children living in poverty, more than two-thirds have immigrant parents even though they themselves were born in the United States.

Nowhere in our country is this more prevalent than Arizona (Oakes, 2008). Stevens and Stovall (2010) note that xenophobia (fear of foreigners) is enacted in Arizona with the passage of Arizona State Senate Bill 1070 (which requires that immigrants have registration documents in their possession at all times, allows those without registration documents to be imprisoned, and enforces jail time for anyone who shelters, hires, or transports an illegal), and Arizona Revised Statutes § 15-756.01 (which places children learning English in sheltered English immersion programs). Such legislation promotes intolerance, racism, and the suppression of Mexicans.

Our study will rely on these points to investigate the influence of race, class, and gender as the boys in our club responded to literature and to understand the complex ecologies that surrounded the boys, any xenophobia they felt, and how each of these intertwined and affected their perceptions of themselves as readers and young men.

Methodology

The goal of our book club was to provide a safe place where a group of inner city Mexican boys could listen to stories with male characters, do activities, and talk about what they knew and felt. To help the boys feel comfortable club sessions had a routine. The second author always read the stories while the first author

managed the tape recorder, gathered field notes, and led the activities.

Both researchers selected the books that were used and planned response activities. Two weeks was spent on each book and in sum 10 books were read. We chose books with male characters because we felt they would help the boys make text-to-self connections and that this would benefit their literacy and language development. We also thought that these characters and discussions about them could be a vehicle to help us understand why these boys were not faring well. Weaver-Hightower (2008) reminds us of the importance of this work and encourages educators and researchers to not only look at *which* boys are failing but to also question *why* certain boys fail. Aligned with this idea O'Connor and Fernandez (2006) remind us that if we do not, "examine "what" (poor) minority students "are," we will lose sight of what we can do. While there are many strategies and curricula for English Language Learners, there is little deep insight into these children and why, despite policy and efforts, they continue to struggle so much. The literacy field needs this research because it has the potential to reveal how political forces against certain groups impact the academic success of younger generations.

Participants

All of the boys were Mexican, a subgroup of the Hispanic population which is the fastest-growing group in the United States (Sadker & Zittleman, 2012). The boys were first generation English speakers and were not doing well on standardized tests of English, were classified as limited in English proficiency, and they were typical of many others in our state and nation. National Assessment of Educational Progress scores for fourth grade reading indicate that Latino males trail behind other ethnicities and behind the nation as a whole. This was true for the 23 members of our club. The boys were all struggling readers between the ages of 9 and 11. The boys in our club walked to school and came from the impoverished neighborhood surrounding it. Boys were recruited into our club through their teacher, Rosa. We had both parent and child consents to participate in the study. To keep the names of boys confidential and meet IRB requirements, each boy created a code name which we use in this manuscript. Examples of names are Junior, Shredder, Brain, PitBull, Pepe, 2Pac, Superman, and Wrestler.

Rosa (also a pseudonym), the boys' teacher with 15 years experience, was interested in our study because she grew up in Mexico and immigrated to the United States as an adult. Conversations with Rosa after book club served as a member check and a source of data through field notes.

Setting

Our book club operated from January to April 2010 in a classroom nested in a district surrounded by iterative poverty defined in terms of substandard housing, low median salaries, and struggling families. District scores indicated that 19% of its students fell below the standard in reading, 36% were approaching, 43% met, and only 2% exceeded. Saguaro (a pseudonym for the school) fell below these district percents. The average growth index at Saguaro was -8 in reading and students did not meet annual yearly progress. Labeled as underperforming, Saguaro was in its second year of Corrective Action. Students included 97% Latino/a population with 48% of students labeled as limited in English proficiency. Ninety-two percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch programs (Arizona Department of Education, 2013). The median household income in the neighborhood was \$25,562, an amount slightly above than the federal poverty level of \$21,200 but significantly below the U.S. average of \$56,604 (Prior, 2010). These figures must be taken with caution because of the mobility of immigrant families and their fear of being counted in any type of census data (Berliner, 2006; Pew Hispanic Center, 2009; Zacher, 2008).

Data Sources

Our data consisted of 1) one opened-ended survey we created to learn about the boys' reading preferences, which was given once midway through the study. Sample items on this survey include: Tell us about the type of books you like to read. Where do you like to read? Who do you like to read with? When do you

like to read?; 2) 100+ response activities, including drawings, produced by the boys; 3) 60 transcribed pages of book conversations; and 4) field notes gathered every moment we were with the boys and their teacher, Rosa. Every Thursday for twenty weeks, we read and discussed picture books for one or up to two hours. We present results from four of the ten books in this article.

Data Analysis

Through a constant comparative approach, we moved between our data sets, codes we developed, and final assertions that linked to both a systems perspective of literacy development and complex equality (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Un-packing the Data into Codes

Both researchers read and reread all data independently. At this stage, initial labels, key words, and broad codes, were established. Next, one researcher linked data to these codes question by question in a partially ordered matrix checklist (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Using a spreadsheet format, raw data was housed in the right column and emerging codes on the left. Our choice to link codes to questions at this phase was careful and inductive. Data were labeled systematically and examined for confirming and disconfirming ideas. Nascent codes were discussed, clarified, and refined with the other researcher.

Re-packaging and Aggregating Data and Developing Themes

Both researchers met and discussed prominent codes, ordering, and how codes fit into themes. To achieve transparency, preconceived beliefs were discussed and ideas were continually compared to participants' perspectives, words, and pictures.

Next, data were examined for relationships and the writing of analytical memos began. We moved inductively from our data set, to the matrix, to the themes looking for linkages (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We then broke apart the matrix and created a conceptual map. Themes were fit together to show relationships and hierarchies. Salient, repeated findings allowed us to formulate nascent assertions.

Solidifying Assertions and Creating an Emergent Framework

The conceptual map and nodes solidified emerging assertions. Narrative assertions supported participants' words, and linked to theories. As assertions were drawn, we constantly reflected on our analysis and data. Using this constant comparative approach ensured that patterns, not merely two dimensional pictures of the boys, revealed the more complex, multidimensional ecology around each boy individually and as a book club member.

To assure our findings were inclusive, trustworthy, and credible we met often. To assure the correctness of our analyses, we took our assertions to Rosa and the boys for member checks. With a few minor exceptions, the interpretations of participants' responses were consistent with their intentions.

As a result of carefully applying the previous analytical procedures, we claim process validity. Additionally, reflectivity, detailed procedures, a clear and comprehensive audit trail, and member checks warranted for credibility. However, despite this detailed process, we cannot claim generalizability nor do we present our findings as true or the only perspective known. We simply tell our story as honestly and truthfully as we can.

Results

Challenges

A bothersome trend started early. Our club started with 32 boys but the number of boys constantly went up and down. New boys transferred in for a short time, boys who left came back, and some boys simply

disappeared. Rosa informed us that even though there was a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy at the school, most of her students were legal but most of their families were not. The political world influenced attendance, success in school, and had major implications for the boys.

Sheriff Arpaio was conducting immigrant sweeps. Families, relatives, and friends could be jailed and deported. Governor Brewer was about to sign Senate Bill 1070 which would require immigrants to have registration documents in their possession at all times. Those without required documents would be imprisoned and anyone who helped them would also face jail time. Daily attendance at school and consistent participation in our book club paled in importance to the bigger issues in their lives.

Language emerged as our second challenge. Arizona Revised Statutes § 15-756.01 was requiring children classified as English Learners to be educated in a sheltered English immersion program. Rosa was required to provide four hours of English language development daily with English materials. A glance around the classroom showed a disrespect for the boys’ native language. Even though they were proficient in Spanish not a book, poster, or any other educational material ever appeared in Spanish. This was obviously hampering the boys’ reading achievement because as research shows, children the boys’ age learn best when they are allowed to learn in their native language then transition to their second language (Garcia Bedolla, 2012). Being that the boys were placed in Rosa’s classroom because of their lack of proficiency in English, this was a challenge each boy faced.

Despite Arizona’s law, it was evident that the boys were below grade level in speaking, reading, and writing English. Language caused us to rely on the boys’ ability and passion to draw and willingness to act out what they could not express in words.

Tolerant Men Look at the Inside, Not the Outside

Teammates (Golenback, 1992) the story of Jackie Robinson, the first Negro player in major league baseball, was our first book. *Teammates* engaged the boys in conversations about tolerance and as we listened, we came to understand that they were very aware of tolerant and intolerant men.

When asked to present examples of the tolerant men, the boys identified fathers, stepfathers, uncles, teachers, the principal, and the janitor. To Pocho, tolerant men were respectful, patient, did not fight with their mother, and spoke kindly to everyone regardless of the color of their skin. Tolerant men, in 2Pac’s words “Look at the inside of a person and do not think they are better or smarter than anyone.” Junior and Wrestler experienced tolerance when men taught them to throw a ball or ride a bike. The boys felt tolerant men were patient with them when they made mistakes.

The boys also identified with the intolerance Jackie faced. Four boys strongly and repeatedly objected to using the word “Negro” in the book because it was “mean.” Three expressed bewilderment when hearing Jackie could not drink from the White drinking fountain. Wrestler said Jackie’s situation was, “messed up” and Brain said he felt like Jackie when, “people look funny at him.” The boys’ lives taught them about intolerance first hand. Rosa told us that Junior and Shredder had been called “inhuman” when they marched against SB 1070 with their parents. Pepe stated the local sheriff was an intolerant man. PitBull said, “He is not respectful to somebody that’s a different color.”

PitBull’s words align with a picture he drew of tolerance. When asked to draw his perspective of tolerance, PitBull drew a man with a gun smiling as he shoots another man (explained to be Mexican). Critically examining this image shows PitBull’s realities, identities, and subjectivities as a Mexican boy growing up in poverty in Phoenix, Arizona (Kincheloe, 2010). PitBull and his classmates were nested in a neighborhood, state, and nation where due to policy, poverty, and their gender, language and ethnicity, violence and intolerance were a part of their world.

Several boys noted that they felt divided because of the intolerance they faced. The boys talked about achieving the American Dream but also yearned to return to Mexico where their families lived. They felt caught between two countries, cultures, and languages. When asked to draw a picture of their family, Wrestler and Soul revealed their divided lives. Their families stand under the Mexican *and* American flag.



Courageous Men Do What They Have to Do



We read *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* (Gerstein, 2003) about Philippe Petit, because he was courageous and defied odds to live his dream. Philippe knew it was illegal to tight rope between the twin towers but he defied authority to do it. We investigated the boys' perspective of courage by asking them to write and draw what they thought Philippe was thinking as he pondered his plan. Results reveal that all the boys thought Philippe was justified in walking across the towers and agreed that they would have done the same thing. Superman said Philippe was thinking, "I'm not going to listen to the police," "I don't care what the police say, I am going to cross it." Wrestler recognized that Philippe would face consequences because he wrote, "I know I am going to get arrested but I don't care." There were also words of determination like, "I know I can do this, I can," "I have to concintrade [concentrate], and "I am not going to fall."

When we asked the boys about the courageous men they knew, their answers were similar to the tolerant men they knew. Their number one choice was their fathers, followed by their stepfathers, uncles, and the school janitor. To find out what the boys thought about fatherhood, we presented five images of men and their sons (Peter and Stewie Griffin, Homer and Bart Simpson, an African American father and his son, a Latino father and his son, and a Caucasian father and his son). The boys selected who was the best father and explained why. Twelve boys chose Peter Griffin, six chose Homer Simpson, three chose the African American father, two chose the Hispanic father, and no boy chose the Anglo father. The boys felt the best fathers worried about their sons, spent time with them, allowed them to do whatever they wanted to do, and were generous. Important to Shredder was a father who was cool, caring, and funny. Important to Wrestler, Pocho, Superman and Wrestler were fathers who spent time with them, acted responsibly, and were not angry or mean. Pepe and PitBull had different opinions reflecting the pressure they felt to be tough and manly. To them fathers and sons, "hate, do pranks, and steal stuff together." When we talked with Rosa after this club session her words added insight:

Most Hispanic families are very traditional and they want their boys to be tough and manly. Fathers, especially, are like this. They don't want their sons to cry, wear bright colors such as pink, and they have a great fear of them becoming homosexuals. Some fathers include their sons in mafia or gang related activities. Most of the time boys feel they do not have a choice with the decisions their families make for them.

Asking boys to be tough causes them to grow up fast and the book we discussed helped us understand what this meant to the boys.

Fathers are Generous Men

Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* (Grodin, 2006) tells the story of a fancy Prince statue overlooking his kingdom and becoming aware of the poverty and despair below. The Prince befriends a swallow that removes a ruby from his crown, gold paint from his body, and sapphires from his eyes to give to the needy people below. Their generosity comes at the expense of their own demise.

The number one generous man the boys knew was their father. Junior said his father was generous when he, "helped him with his homework". Shredder said his father was generous like the Happy Prince and because of this it has changed his life. When asked to draw a picture of a generous man, Shredder drew his father going off to work at a Mexican restaurant (with a Mexican flag outside) where he washes dishes. Soul said his Father was generous because he "gives all his money to his family and keeps only a little for himself sometime." Beside fathers, the boys also mentioned President Obama, Cesar Chavez, God, and Michael Jackson as generous men because they give things away and ask nothing in return. Pocho and Wrestler said generous men worked at their church and gave away food boxes at Christmas time.



The Boys in Our Club Read What They Enjoy

More Than Anything Else (Bradby, 1995) is a fictionalized account of the life of Booker T. Washington, an ex-slave who became a leader in the African-American community. Nine-year-old Booker did not go to school or learn to read because he worked from sunup to sundown in a salt mine. His real dream was to become literate and gain the knowledge books contain. Booker's dream seemed unattainable until he met a man, as brown as him, who taught him how to read.

More than Anything Else helped the boys understand perseverance as it related to themselves as readers. We used this book conversation and the *All About Me* survey to explain book and reading preferences. All 23 of the boys felt that reading was important and that they did read outside of school if they could, "read what they wanted to read." Typical boy preferences included comics to make them laugh, scary stories, and non-fiction books for facts. Superman and Wrestler especially liked books about UFOs and monsters "just in case they are real." PitBull liked books like *More than Anything Else* because Booker overcame obstacles and came out on top.

The boys knew reading was important. On our survey 12 of them felt positive personal connections to reading but 9 boys noted that when they read at home, it was typically alone. The other 11 boys relegated reading to times of boredom or unhappiness. 2Pac "never does and never will like to read."

Conclusions

The goal of our book club was to understand the reading passions and habits of the fourth grade Mexican boys in our club and how these were influenced by the contexts surrounding their lives. We also sought to know if our use of male characters displaying positive traits would allow us to gain insight into the boys' perceptions of these qualities and their own lives. Our theoretical frameworks, varied forms of data, and careful analysis allow us to make assertions that explain why *these* boys are struggling and how important literature is to their lives.

Our book club was situated in a school surrounded by generational poverty and a political storm that

picked up force in the early months of 2010. It took place in Phoenix, Arizona as SB 1070 was about to be signed, immigration sweeps were in the news, and sheltered immersion became a reality in schools. As researchers, we had an opportunity to witness first hand, the impact these actions and legislation had on young Mexican boys. Through literacy we discovered that even though the boys in our club were only in fourth grade, they were very aware of what was going on around them. Some of the boys marched against SB 1070 with their parents and all of the boys knew someone who had been affected by immigrant sweeps. Characters like Booker T. Washington and Jackie Robinson resonated with the boys and helped us understand that the boys in our club did not live in a world that was neutral or color-blind (Stevens & Stovall, 2010).

Living in a xenophobic society relegated the boys' caregivers to long hours in low paying jobs that left little time for them to read at home with their children. Generational poverty and literacy struggles are recursive and spread across our country but in Phoenix, Arizona they seem to be particularly harsh. The boys and their families did not live in a meritocracy. The boys faced adult-like problems and we can only conclude that these were not good for their literacy or language development (Bernard, 2004; Lee, 2010).

Our club was also nested in a classroom full of kindness and care. Rosa worked tirelessly. She reminded her students how lucky they were to be in the U.S. and have an opportunity to achieve the American dream. Rosa knew literacy was the way to do this and she worked very hard to help her students become literate. But not being able to teach in Spanish or use Spanish materials made her job very difficult. Even though the intent of English immersion may have been for the good of children it was obvious it was not working for *these* boys. The boys in our club were struggling with reading and writing so we had to use alternate activities that asked the boys to respond to texts through short segments of writing, discussion, and drawing. Instead of looking at worksheets, or tests the boys could not do, we discovered how clever, creative, and good they were. Like Booker T. Washington, Jackie Robinson, Philippe Petit, and The Happy Prince the boys in our club were persistent, tolerant, courageous, and generous. They were tolerant with us every Thursday when we came to their class to read and they were persistent as they worked on response activities.

The boys generously gave us their drawings, words, and stories and, as we analyzed these data sources, we came to understand how the systems surrounding their lives affected their literacy, language, and social-emotional development. Over time we came to realize just how courageous the boys in our club were. They faced media portrayals of illegal immigrants as thieves and drug lords and they were fearful of intolerant men who were ready to sweep their loved ones away. Through literacy we discovered that *these* boys were failing because the systems around them are just too harsh to nurture literacy development. If we want *these* boys to become literate, we need to work to remove xenophobia, provide systems of support for their families, lead them to literacy in ways that fit their needs, and simply listen to what they have to say. The field of literacy strives for scholarship, curriculum, and instruction that address diversity and equality but it overlooks how systems around certain groups allow them to develop the persistence and courage they need to become literate. The school experience of Mexican boys, like those in our club, is preparing them to become citizens, fathers, and workers who will embrace literacy and democracy or turn their backs on both (Garcia Bedolla, 2012). More research on the lived experience of these boys is needed.

Ecological systems surround children and seem to be recursive for Mexican boys. The 1946 *Mendez v. Westminster* case challenged the segregated schooling of Mexican and Mexican American students in California. The plaintiff's most enduring vision was that there would be educational equity for all children; that schools would treat every child with dignity and respect, and accommodate children's realities as much as they ask children to respect and accommodate the realities that schools pose (Cole, 2010). Yet, 65 years later Mexican boys, like the ones in our club, still attend schools isolated by poverty and need, are placed in segregated classrooms, and fail to receive the dignity and respect they need to become literate young men.

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