

Storytelling in critical literacy pedagogy: Removing the walls between immigrant and non-immigrant youth

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No hay soledad inexpugnable. Todos los caminos llevan al mismo punto; a la comunicación de lo que somos. (There is no insurmountable solitude. All paths lead to the same point: to convey to others what we are). (Pablo Neruda, 1971)

Storytelling is so ubiquitous an everyday practice among youth that it seems inconsequential as the focus for literacy education. And yet, as numerous critical literacy scholars have argued, when youth have the opportunity to explain and expand on the images, emotions and meaning of their lives, they may be recognised in new ways as people with complex social histories and insights about equity and justice (c.f. Blackburn, 2005; Campano, 2007; Daiute, 2010; Janks, 2010; Kinloch, 2009; Medina, 2010). The twelve- and thirteen-year-old youth I work with are usually acknowledged among one another for the entertainment value of their stories. Quite often, however, their purposes in storytelling align with the aims of critical literacy: to name what matters to them, to speculate about what is possible in their lives, to unravel contradictions, to make sense of what is senseless, to claim or question a point of view, to wonder and to act. These are the beginnings of what Morrell (2008) describes as critical textual production, texts that “serve as the manifestation of an alternate reality or a not-yet-realized present that only enters into the imagination through the interaction with new and authentically liberating words that are created by writers as cultural workers” (p. 115).

Stories told among peers have tremendous potential to engage students in sustained social critique if they are heard and considered. All stories, however, are not perceived as meaningful; indeed, as Blommaert (2008) asserts, in his understated assessment of the problems faced by refugees and immigrants as they convey or defend their experiences, “some stories do not travel well.” No matter how familiar or unfamiliar people may be with one another as they speak in formal or informal situations, every story enters into relations of power that determine what is recognisable as a story and who is recognisable as a storyteller. Especially in school settings, when a narrative is introduced, it is preceded by a set of expectations for conventional performances and interpretations of meaning; and these conventions are established through recent or extended histories of social practice that categorise language, people and their meanings. Blommaert (2008) argues that immigrant students’ stories, in particular, enter into “little sites of struggle – a struggle to make sense and to make oneself understood under exacting and restraining conditions” (p. 447).

This is not to say that a story can never break through conventions and presuppositions; on the contrary, storytellers are attuned to the particular forms and functions of stories that have preceded their telling and that immediately respond to their language choices and manner. Anthropologists and linguists have made evident (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983; Hymes, 1996; Mehan, 1979) that storytellers of all ages are adept discourse analysts who make sense of and respond to what is known, anticipated and valued among those present in a particular situation. Through the

ingenuity of a well-told story, they might transform the situation and provoke the possibility of new identities, relations of power, and narrative forms and functions. However, those in power (teachers, administrators, evaluators of proficiency) may not recognise students' competency with stories or their implicit insights about audiences and social relations if they rely only on linguistic accuracy as a measure of a student's achievement. Again, Blommaert (2008) insists that researchers examine the poetics of narratives, or the patterns, genre features, and specific word choices being used that reflect the symbolic and social resources travelling with people across complex situations.

Students, whose voices have been marginalised in school and society, will usually need informed adult mediation to facilitate changes in institutionalised presuppositions and hierarchical relations related to languages in use. I have worked with immigrant and non-immigrant youth in a high-poverty community in the Midwestern U.S. for the past two years to document their stories about themselves and others, and to mediate their narratives by engaging them in literature, drama, digital videos and group compositions, so that their voices might be more fully considered by one another, their school peers and wider community. As described by many critical educators, this work addresses and intervenes in stratifications of recognition; that is, systems of meaning-making instantiated in their school and society that reproduce how and when someone is seen and heard within and across communities.

In this article, I examine the story forms and contexts that immigrant and non-immigrant youth composed as they worked with their teachers and me to tell stories of advocacy and bigotry across two language arts classrooms. The stories we told were sometimes speculative and fictionalised, but more often reflected the everyday realities and relationships the students had formed in the school and community. As students and teachers (and researchers) in a U.S. middle school, we participated in school structures that segregated immigrant and non-immigrant students from one another in ways that essentialised their differences and diminished the value of immigrant students' heritage language and proficiency in specific forms of English usage. For example, urban Appalachian and African American students and students from Somalia, Jordan, Cambodia, Mexico and the Dominican Republic, who had recently immigrated to the US or were the first generation of foreign born parents, had only limited interactions with one another in school about their lives, interests or perspectives.

In addition, the youth in this study live in Alltown (pseudonym), where people are loyal to their community and to their ethnic and racial group memberships. Often children reported fighting with peers, as they defended their ethnic and racial identities. Many immigrant students, in particular, reported that they often had to defend themselves against slurs from non-immigrant peers who challenged their right to belong in school, their neighbourhood and nation. Given few opportunities to develop shared narratives about their lives, some of the students in both groups openly articulated negative stereotypes about each other. Our stories of advocacy and bigotry were informed, therefore, by our embodied relationships in school and neighbourhood spaces and the discourses of immigration, nationality and citizenship that were implied or explicitly represented in local and national media and the language arts curriculum.

MULTIPLE CONTEXTS FOR STORYTELLING: RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The central focus of this research¹ has been to document immigrant and non-immigrant students' storytelling practices and cultural knowledge and identify how these might be adapted as "cultural data sets" (Lee, 2007) for academic literary study in ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous, middle-grade classrooms (Enciso, Volz, Price-Dennis & Durriyah, 2010; Enciso & Ryan, 2011). Such data sets, however, have limited use when students' voices are not sustained or heard by the students themselves or by adults. This article focuses, then, on reworking relations of power in classroom practices and across school spaces so that students' voices and purposes for telling stories are recognised within school settings (Weis & Fine, 2004). The three stories I analyse were told within and, eventually, across two, different, sixth-grade language arts classroom spaces, located side by side, and separated by a concrete block wall. Despite their close proximity, the two groups of students might as well have been studying language arts in two different parts of the city – or world. The English as a Second Language (ESL) class included eleven children, three girls and eight boys, from Cambodia, Somalia, Jordan, Kenya, Mexico and the Dominican Republic; and the second, sixth-grade class, where all subjects were taught, included two African American boys and three white Appalachian boys, who grew up in Alltown or the Midwest. The numbers of students were relatively small in both classes due to specific needs identified for each group.

From mid-January through mid-March 2009, in both classrooms, students read *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007), *Of Beetles and Angels: A boy's remarkable journey from refugee camp to Harvard* (Asgedom, 2002) and *Something About America* (Testa, 2005). In connection with the latter book, we read articles about and viewed excerpts from the film, *The Letter: An American Town and the "Somali Invasion"* (Hamzeh, 2003), based on the true story of Lewiston, Maine, where the town's mayor called for the end of welcoming new Somali immigrants. As depicted in the book and in the real life events, the community was eventually faced with the arrival of a white supremacist group who spread fear and hate about the town's immigrant population.

In both classrooms, I planned with classroom teachers and introduced and implemented approaches to literary reading that included the use of visual art, drama, storytelling and discussion. I worked in each classroom for 1.5 hours each week and documented this teaching with the support of a co-researcher who kept fieldnotes and assisted in monitoring audio and video recordings. As a co-teacher and teacher researcher I needed to respect the curricular requirements established by the school district, while extending the literature study to include and elaborate on students' academic literary understanding. Following Lee's (2007) analysis of the disciplinary habits of thought associated with literary reading, I aimed to read literary texts in ways that would help students identify points of contradiction or unusual descriptions, hypothesise about possible meanings, evaluate their propositions, and notice metaphors and their connections with characterisation and theme. As Smagorinsky (2001) suggests, in his analysis of Vygotsky's (1987) concepts of "sense" and "meaning" (p. 145), I wanted to engage students in keeping their "sense" or "storm cloud of thought" open for play and speculation versus their usual experience of

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reciting already finalised or stable meanings about stories and language (Lee 2007; Smagorinsky, 2001). In fact, both aspects of meaning-making are important to literary reading; but in many classrooms, dominated by regimes of standardised assessment preparation, finalised meaning quickly displaces practices of speculation.

In addition to reading and telling stories in class, six to eight students from both classrooms agreed to regularly participate in an informal, weekly story club during their lunchtime. The children in story club represented the diversity of the two classrooms, and could be described as a thirdspace (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Tejada, 1999) for exploring new forms of relationship and meaning. Because it was located in the liminal, relatively unregulated space of the school library and during a student-oriented time (lunch and recess) it was possible to collect individual and jointly told stories and patterns of storytelling without presuming or pre-planning the content and interpretative practices the students wanted to explore. From a theoretical and research perspective, the story club enabled me to document students' oral stories and consider how they might become meaningful "cultural data sets" (Lee, 2007; Enciso et al., 2010) with a highly heterogeneous group of students. From a teaching perspective, however, the story club heightened my awareness of the ways students' stories were structurally isolated from one another in school, in ways that maintained mono-cultural, mono-lingual and mono-national curricular goals.

In this analysis, I draw on Blommaert's (2005) sociolinguistic and ethnographic theories of voice and their relation to specific functions of power or the "orders of indexicality" that position meanings and forms of meaning-making as they "travel" from an originating place (for example, a child's life experience) to an institution such as school. The concept of "orders of indexicality" is developed by Blommaert (2005) to explain the degrees of authority that limit what might be heard as a speaker enters into a new space. He argues that indexical orders, including the norms and rules of language usage, can be a significant and useful concept for describing the barriers to language mobility, especially among immigrant youth in transnational spaces like a U.S., highly diverse middle school.

I argue that orders of indexicality in school and classroom practices, associated with presuppositions of immigrant and non-immigrant linguistic and cultural segregation, are prevalent in multiple aspects of classroom storytelling and critical literature study. The particular functions of linguistic and narrative norms in classroom practices can be disrupted, however, by understanding students' spontaneous storytelling as poetic and critical performative art. Furthermore, students' meaning may be more recognisable as their storytelling is transformed through the use of drama and digital video technology. In this research, the students' critical textual production became a group poem displayed in the school that was jointly created by immigrant and non-immigrant youth who addressed the bigotry of anti-immigrant fears and hatred.

VOICE AND INDEXICALITY

Voice

Based on decades of sociolinguistic, ethnographic and critical analyses of immigrant and refugee narratives, Jan Blommaert argues for perspectives on language and context that account for the power structures and histories of linguistic knowledge that

people understand and carry with them as they cross borders and encounter new assumptions about the value of different forms and functions of language. Informed by an ethnographic view of culture and language, Blommaert (2009) argues that voice is produced through linguistic and other semiotic means as people “make themselves understood by others under conditions of empowerment” (p. 272). Being understood happens, however, across spaces that are “...always somebody else’s space” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 73). In school and other institutional settings, immigrant and non-immigrant students and their family members are expected to produce voice within a social process “with clear connections to social structure, history, culture, power.” Their narrative and symbolic repertoires are not only marginalised and misunderstood, they are usually “structurally misunderstood” (Blommaert, 2008); that is, defined by structures of inequality that systematically declare that what is unfamiliar (to dominant norms and expectations) is also inferior (p. 24). Thus, as students tell and interpret stories, they have to negotiate peer, school and related institutional and global discourses of “misunderstanding”. As such, Blommaert (2005) argues, voice should be understood as a social material product “subject to selection and exclusion” requiring all participants to work on “the practical conversion of socially ‘loaded’ resources into socially ‘loaded’ semiotic action, every aspect of which shows traces of the patterns of distribution of the resources” (p. 77). In effect, students in this research have had to ask themselves, what their story might carry and how it might move into this particular space? Can it be mobile? How will their story be understood? These questions reflect students’ implicit understanding of what Blommaert calls “pretextual gaps” (2005, p. 77); the space that has already determined how a text will be understood.

In the ESL and all-subject classrooms, students and teachers produced voice, using their available linguistic and semiotic repertoires. But their stories’ meanings depended on the extent to which students and teachers not only heard the story, but also oriented it to the forms and function of voice valued in school. In other words, if a story could be interpreted as evidence of predetermined curricular knowledge then voice could be valued. Some students worked toward this kind of conversion of linguistic and semiotic resources to standardised forms of knowledge assessment. Many students were less interested in converting their knowledge into semiotic action for the purposes of being assessed.

In story club, by contrast, the conversion of voice into action was situated within the presence of peers who enjoyed being entertained and who wanted to play with or question one another’s propositions. As immigrant and non-immigrant students worked to make themselves understood by others, they often repeated stories, elaborated on meaning, answered their peers’ questions, or initiated another story in response to those already told. In this sense, storytelling became a collective production of voice within a liminal space that was orchestrated, primarily, by the tellers (Enciso et al., 2010). Across the first year of storytelling, the children’s diverse story forms and topics were treated by one another as a source of play with “sense” rather than a resource subject to finalised meanings.

Ethnopoetic representations of voice

As a co-teacher and researcher attending to the ways stories were told among diverse students, I wanted to represent their stories in ways that highlighted the telling or form

as much as the content. Working with the philosophy and methods of Dell Hymes' (1996) ethnographic linguistics, Blommaert points to the value of ethnopoetic narrative transcription, which enables researchers to pay attention to what mattered in the telling to the storyteller, and what form that telling took for the particular situation in which it was created, delivered and transformed by others.

Hymes (1996) argues that ethnopoetic patterning can be seen in three key aspects of narratives: parallelism, repetition, and anticipation of an audience's expectations (pp. 200-206). For Hymes, the storyteller's "gift involves a skill specifically linguistic and literary...a pointed shaping of emphasis" (p. 202). Hymes argues for a transcription organised, like a poem, into lines, verses and stanzas, thus showing the relationship between the form of the telling and its function to entertain, persuade, emphasise, elaborate among other possibilities. The researcher also discerns a story's organisation through attention to equivalences within the narrative. For example, storytellers often use markers of time such as "well", "so" or "and" to create parallelism and indicate relationships among events; or, within a verse, tellers use repetitions that emphasise and hold meanings together. Tense changes may also indicate shifts in the speaker's relationship to an event. Similarly, pronouns across a verse and stanza point to the equivalences in relationships within events. For example, Sara's story, which will be analysed in greater detail in a subsequent section, opens with an episode made up of three verses that establish setting (first grade) and a set of equivalences related to "people". She uses several pronouns to name herself (I, me) and then defines her difference –"the only dark skin girl in there"– in counterpoint with "people" who are, presumably, light skinned, and who "stayed away from me".

1. When I was at the first grade
2. people like stayed away from me
3. because I was the only dark skin girl in there.

In the second verse, Sara seems to anticipate her listeners' need for detail while she also emphasises the intensity and repetition of her own experience with the bully.

She contrasts the actors' actions (2. stayed away from me/ 6. came up to my face), then emphasises those differences by bringing the audience closer to details of the setting (4. a private school), character (5. a bully), and action (7. And said, "Why are you in this school?" 8. You're ugly!" and "You're a different colour!"):

4. It was a private school.
5. And then a girl...she was a bully...
6. And she came up to my face
7. And said, "Why are you in this school?"
8. "You're ugly." And, "You're [a] different colour."
9. And everything.

As Blommaert and Hymes note, increased detail, as in a literary text, can signal an intensification of meaning and a call to the listener to pay closer attention. Through ethnopoetic transcription it is possible to recognise the remarkable literary skills of young storytellers as well as their efforts to bring those same skills to bear in classroom settings, where peers and teachers are not usually "cued" to listen closely to one another's stories.

Orders of Indexicality

The term indexicality has linguistic and ethnographic connotations that point to the ways language can be used to refer to (index) a wider system of meaning and relationships. In Blommaert's (2005) definition, orders of indexicality are "systematically reproduced, stratified meanings often called 'norms' or 'rules' of language, and typically associated with particular [registers] of language" (p. 73). In Sara's storytelling, for example, she used precise language that reflects her understanding of the language situation as a formal classroom setting with multiple audiences. That precision is especially evident in line 3 when she describes the setting as "there" and then elaborates in line 4 by informing her listeners that she is referring to a private school. However, she does not make evident to her classmates that she is referring to a school in Jordan. Because I am holding a video camera and looking directly at her, she seems to rely on my presence as someone who already knows the location of her early school years. For Sara, orders of indexicality for her story may have been interpreted as less restrictive, because of our shared knowledge and the trust we developed through story club. On the other hand, her regular teacher and classmates were not certain how her story made sense; given their assumption that it was located in a U.S. context.

In addition to the immediate context of her telling, Sara's references to the conditions of racism in her early schooling, can be explained in terms of Bakhtin's (1986) theory of language, in which he argues that speakers respond to the immediate context of people and situations as well as to "non-immediate complexes of perceived meaning". (Blommaert, 2005, p. 75). In Sara's case, racism functioned as a high-order, complex of meaning that is evident, and referenced, at many (or all) levels of social life. Her story points to her growing awareness of the social structures of the school that would allow a student to use racist taunts with impunity.

For youth in schools, stories move into and across spaces that have already established valuations for different forms of language use. As narratives move, their form and function may be replaced and given other functions (for example, a student's story is evaluated as a test of English competency) that effectively erase any reference to the original intent (Mehan, 1996, cited in Blommaert 2005, p. 76). In Sara's case, her use of added detail was still not sufficient information for the classroom setting, because her peers and the classroom teacher did not understand or pay attention to her description of attending school in another country. In effect, her efforts to be heard were confounded by non-immediate orders of indexicality or revaluations in the curriculum that systematically orient teachers' attention to U.S. settings and devalue the extensive linguistic and global, social knowledge immigrant students bring with them to school. Such recontextualisations and revaluations are even more pronounced when the subjects of storytelling are racism, immigration and exclusion – topics that are personal and painful for students and often not framed for critical analysis or social change in school settings.

THREE STORIES: RACISM, RETALIATION AND (POETIC) RECONSTRUCTION

The stories I present are brief, yet striking for their literary form and content. And yet two of the stories, told by Sara and Chris, were barely heard in the classroom setting.

I argue that their stories, like many told in classrooms where critical literacy is valued, can be lost because: 1) they are not understood as stories and revalued to serve another function; 2) they are interrupted or misinterpreted by peers and teachers who are more focused on the ongoing interactions among other students; and 3) the “non-immediate” complex of meanings associated with segregating immigrant and non-immigrant youth profoundly restricts the audiences for such stories as part of a globalised flow of knowledge and symbolic repertoires. Given these potential barriers, it is not surprising that even when informal storytelling is supported, immigrant and non-immigrant youth are still not hearing one another. Their stories, if actually heard in one location in the school, will be isolated from the very audience that may be most interested in extending, questioning and acting on their meaning.

In the following sections, I focus first on Chris’s story and the way it was revalued by me, as I shifted the purpose of his storytelling from interpreting a young refugee’s allegorical tale of discrimination to identifying a literary term. Sara’s story is indicative of the second reason stories are not heard. As she told the complex tale of her victimisation and retaliation against racism, her peers were distracted by a game of hiding an object under the table where they were all seated. Her story was interrupted several times and, in the end, none of her peers responded to the substance or form of her telling. The third story, or multi-voiced poem, is the culminating product of a pedagogical transformation from mono-national to transnational critical textual production – a production that depended on identifying and temporarily disrupting the ideological and actual walls between immigrant and non-immigrant youth.

Chris’s story: Mixed. Like I am

In Chris’s class, five boys met with their classroom teacher all day to study all subject areas, including language arts, which I taught one morning a week. In February 2009, we began a study of Mawi Asgedom’s (2002) memoir, *Of Beetles and Angels: One boy’s remarkable journey from refugee camp to Harvard*. We had read aloud and tried to imagine Asgedom’s perspective as he described his family’s resettlement in Wheaton, Illinois. In the latter part of the story, Asgedom shifts narrators from his own voice to his mother’s as she describes her exodus and perilous journey from Ethiopia to a Kenyan refugee camp; at which point it became more difficult for the boys to interpret the distances and dangers, as well as the prejudices she and her young children faced every step of the way. In search of images and first person accounts that might offer a more immediate and young person’s perspective on fleeing war and violence, I found Wilkes’ (1995) *One Day We Had to Run*, a UNHCR photojournalistic book that features photos, maps, interviews, drawings, first person accounts and short stories told by children who have fled war and violence.

The story I shared with the boys is an allegory, describing a bat’s dilemma because it could not attend the party with animals (who have teeth), or the party with birds (who do not have teeth). According to the book’s editor, this traditional story was told by a fourteen-year old Sudanese child from the Dinka tribe, who explained the prejudices and systematic exclusion experienced by children who are not definitively understood to be a member of one tribal group or another. I began to read the story aloud and was interrupted by Chris who questioned whether a vulture should be the guardian of the birds’ party:

Chris: Vultures have teeth.
 Pat Enciso: Okay. That's not the point of the story.
 Chris: Oh.

After finishing the story I invited the boys to make a comparison with their own lives:

Pat Enciso: So the bat had to leave without going to the party. Do you think we ever do this? This sort of you know, "You're not, you don't have teeth, you don't have wings, you can't be in the party." That kind of...?

One of the boy's suggested that people could be prejudiced about the kind of shoes someone is wearing, and Chris spontaneously enacted someone who stopped another person by pointing to their shoes. Then I continued with a focus on the story's form:

Pat Enciso: Well there's something happening in this story. It's called an allegory. Where it's talking about animals but you could talk about people.

Chris quickly began to tell a parallel story, located in the history of U.S. post-Civil War (circa 1870) era race relations:

1. That's what happened with slavery.
2. When slavery was first over.
3. Blacks, if you was like mixed. Like I am.
4. And you tried to go to a [White] party,
5. they'd try to say, "No you're Black."
6. But if you try to go to a Black party,
7. they would say, "No you're White."
8. And like.

I responded without hesitation, "Thank you Chris. You've got the allegory." This declaration was followed by laughter from Chris and his teacher. Importantly, however, we did not pick up the ideas inherent in his story that race and exclusion operated in his life in ways that were similar to those implied by the Sudanese storyteller. Almost without notice, I had revalued Chris's story and the originating intent that he and I had seemed to construct. My authority and related norms for focusing on a literary disciplinary knowledge in school halted the potential movement of both stories.

Parallels and prejudices

Chris's story has many features that show he was emotionally and intellectually invested in understanding the allegory and in being a storyteller himself. He opens with the deictic "that", referencing the story he just heard and signalling his intent to make a relevant statement. He sets the story, initially, in a distant past (lines 1 and 2), but then relates post-slavery with his present reality, in line 3. Here Chris uses a series of qualifiers for "Blacks" (*you, mixed, like I am*) that align his experience with those of "mixed" people in the past and those in the original refugee story, all of whom experienced racial binaries and, therefore, exclusion. He repeats the pronoun, "you" in line 4 and links it implicitly back to "Black", "mixed", and "like I am". By

emphasising “you”, he is able to be inclusive of a range of people, not only himself. In line 5, Chris introduces the contrast between “you” and “they,” so that “they” references first White people then Black people (Line 7). He also creates a parallel construction in lines 4-5 and lines 6-7 that accentuates the absence of a mixed race space. In addition, by imagining and voicing the commands of those who are Black and White, he echoes the allegorical story’s structure, while he also engages listeners in a more immediate expression of racialised categories and their effects on his own and others’ identities and belonging.

Orders of indexicality: Revaluating sense and story

This well-crafted story, with its voices, contrasts and relationship between a history of oppression and current practices of racism, had the potential to be heard as an extension of the original, allegorical analysis of struggling to live between worlds, as it was most likely intended. Chris’s story allowed him to both respond to my question and illustrate an important dimension of his daily life experience. His story, in turn, had the potential to extend immigrant and non-immigrant students’ understanding of how racism and the loss of a homeland can be interrelated.

By focusing on literary knowledge (allegory), however, I recontextualised and revalued his “sense-making” story as a finalised right answer. Such shifts in the valuation of students’ stories happen frequently in classroom literature studies and especially around topics that require critical frames of reference for understanding race, power and oppression. Chris’s knowledge and storytelling art could have been expanded through an exploration of the identities and exclusion experienced by people from around the world – including his schoolmates sitting in the room next door.

Ironically, at the same time as I struggled to recognise Chris’s story, we were reading Asgedom’s (2002) memoir, a book assigned by the school district for all middle-grade students, that addressed the life experiences of adults and children who immigrate from African refugee camps to the U.S. The memoir was engaging in parts, especially when the author details his experiences as a young Somali refugee living in all-white Wheaton, Illinois. Within the school district’s pre-set curriculum, however, the story was often used merely as a background for skill development, for example, to learn to “compare and contrast” using the author’s experience in contrast with the students’ personal experience. No mention is made in the curriculum guide that the experiences might be related, in terms of oppression, racism or the violence they face, whether in Kenya or Alltown. Throughout the curriculum guide, readers are never assumed to be immigrant students themselves or subject to racism (Enciso et al., 2010). In terms of orders of indexicality, the mandated curriculum establishes a detached, universalising frame for all readers, so that a student’s story will most readily become material for conversion to predetermined, mono-cultural learning goals.

Sara’s story: Why are you in this school?

Sara told her story in early March, as both classes were midway through a study of *Something About America* (Testa, 2005), a story told in free verse poetry by a young Kosovan refugee girl as she and her parents interpret their lives and identities, while also questioning and eventually protesting the increasing divisions between immigrants and non-immigrants in nearby Lewiston, Maine. Two weeks before, I had

created an imagined newsroom with Chris's class and gave them the responsibility of putting together the evening program that would show local responses and concerns about the tensions surrounding immigrants in their community. I pre-recorded their teacher as an imagined citizen of Lewiston who spoke matter-of-factly but negatively about the increasing numbers of immigrants in the town. For example, as the video showed her in close up, she stated, "I think they should go back to their country. They're not American. I don't want anything to change." In contrast, a second adult interviewee gave a more positive, pragmatic view of immigrants in which she stated that as a business owner she found her Somali employees to be reliable, hard-working, and dedicated to their families. The students in both classes saw these videos, asked about the "truthfulness" of them; at which point we assured all students that the teacher was expressing an imagined perspective not her own beliefs. We then asked the students to respond, on video, as people who wanted to give more information about living in America, being American, and living as immigrants in America.

This was the first time that communication crossed the two rooms, creating a surprising rupture (temporarily) in the patterns of interaction in both classes. Students were riveted by the video cameos featuring their school peers and teachers; they wanted to lean in close to the computer screen to hear every word and then replay the videos to ask questions and interpret what they saw and heard. A week after viewing the newsroom videos, students in Sara's class were asked, on video, by the boys in Chris's class to address if and how they had been hurt as immigrants while going to school. Again, "school" implicitly referenced their middle school. But Sara's story travelled across (or against) that specific meaning.

In the story presented below, Sara explains that she was the target of racism as a first grade student (in Jordan), where her identity was highly racialised in an all-white private school and adults acted with severe and swift authority to punish her for fighting a child who used racist taunts against her. Sara was the first person in the class to respond to the video recorded question. She was often eager to express her ideas and answers in class and regarded herself (as did her teachers) as a talented and capable student who had the power, knowledge and perseverance to succeed in her education.

In this event, however, most students participated, initially, as though nothing unusual had happened in terms of the question asked or answers that might be given. They performed their usual classroom interaction pattern, enforced by the classroom teacher, that began with a teacher-initiated question, followed by a student's answer (usually Sara's), and concluded with the teacher's explanation to other students who did not usually extend or initiate another topic. This practice meant that her peers simply did not listen to Sara. Even when an external audience was invoked that called on their specific knowledge, most of the other twelve students revalued the invitation and Sara's story as the first part of a typical classroom IRE pattern in which the teacher initiates a topic or question, students respond, and the teacher evaluates the response.

Reliving racism in Jordan

Even so, Sara's story-telling skills were impressive and compelling. The story is transcribed using ethnopoetic principles to make visible the structure of her telling,

including her use of repetitions, rhythm, introduction of actions and actors, changes in setting and use of detail. This transcription also indicates, through her use of “no” and “yeah”, that she had to stop and clarify or wait for someone else to speak before she continued. Yet, despite the disruptive behaviour among her peers, who were distracted by a game of hiding an object under the table, she persists with the story to explain that she was hurt – indeed, hit many times – but, nevertheless, won an apology from the girl who bullied her.

The story is presented in 5 stanzas, each one reflecting a change in scene or time frame. Stanza A introduces the theme of racism (line 3), the setting (Line 1), and the actors in her story (Line 1-3). In Stanza B, Sara takes us closer to the action, using details and dialogue to position the listener alongside her (Lines 7-10), feeling the threatening closeness of the antagonist’s presence and words. Throughout, Sara’s use of “and” enables a steady, forward-motion in the rhythm of her telling.

A

1. When I was at the first grade
2. people like stayed away from me
3. because I was the only dark skin girl
4. in there.

B

5. It was a private school.
6. And then a girl...she was a bully...
7. and she came up to my face
8. and said “Why are you in this school?”
9. You’re ugly.
10. And you’re [a] different colour
11. and everything.”

Next, in Line 13, Sara shifts the focus to her own action: “I hit her.” Then, using “and” and “so” to link actions and actors, she outlines the sequence of consequences she endured.

12. Yeah.
13. I hit her.
14. And the teacher came,
15. and said “Stop fighting with people.”
16. And I got into trouble.
17. So the principal, the principal hit me.
18. And I come back home.
19. After I went to see the principal,
20. they hit me.
21. Then they called my dad.

Although the story seems to be told in a dispassionate manner, her repeated descriptions of being hit and her emphasis on all that happened to her before her dad was called, highlight her vulnerability in the face of systemic racism. In line 16 she introduces a general description, “And I got into trouble,” then follows with elaborated descriptions of that event. This pattern of story-telling works well for her

as she explains a highly personal, painful event to people who may not recognise or understand what she is trying to describe.

As Sara continues her story, she seems to anticipate her father's allegiance (lines 24-25) but is met, instead, by his disbelief (Line 26). In Line 26, she adds a new descriptor, "even", in a sequence of statements that, up to this point, included no evaluative language about her emotional state.

C

- 22. No. I, I, yeah. (inaudible) stick with me.
- 23. And they called my dad.
- 24. And I told him
- 25. that she hit me.
- 26. But he didn't even believe me.
- 27. He was mad and everything.

It is clear, by the end of Stanza C, that Sara has several emotional "scenes" to manage, including her father being "mad and everything".

D

- 28. Yeah.
- 29. Principals, teachers,
- 30. sometimes if you had long nails on Monday
- 31. they would hit your hand.

In Stanza D Sara responds to a question about where and how it was possible for children to be hit so readily. Her answer implies that the arbitrary authority teachers held, to hit and judge people, extended beyond skin colour to include hands and even fingernails (Line 30-31): "Sometimes if you had long nails on Monday, they would hit your hand." This level of detail is unusual in the story, and as a unique break in the pattern of her telling, can be understood as a form of emphasis, in this case, to illustrate the extent to which children were powerless and subject to surveillance with regard to their appearance. One can assume this was especially true for a dark-skinned girl in an overwhelmingly white school setting.

In Stanza E, Sara concludes with two interrelated events that feature a truce and an apology, and provide a sense of resolution and restoration of Sara's power.

E

- 32. And she [bully] stopped talking to me.
- 33. And then later she apologised.

In Stanzas B, C and D, Sara was interrupted either by her classroom teacher, who was not sure where or when Sara's story happened – or even if it was real – and by me, as I reprimanded her classmates for ignoring the story and "fooling around". Even though they appeared to pay attention when Sara retold her story, none of the students seemed particularly concerned for Sara or the implications of what she had described.

Orders of indexicality: Who is implicated?

Unlike Chris's story, Sara's narrative had the advantage of being framed by a sequence of videos, shared between the two classrooms, in which teachers and students imagined themselves as interviewees in a nightly newscast. However, just as I revalued Chris's story, by responding to it as a right answer to a literary question, Sara's story was revalued as "background noise", when her peers attended to one another's behaviour more than to the form or substance of her story. Implied by the students' reaction is their assumption that the audience for Sara's story was located outside the classroom and whatever might be done with it was the responsibility of other people. Sara's classmates did not view themselves as implicated in the context of the newsroom, nor were they responsible for the conversion of her narrative into action. In this particular space, Sara's story "did not travel well".

In order for students to take action on one another's behalf, they first have to hear and interpret what might be of concern. Schooling, however, rewards individual rather than collective voices and Sara's class was no exception. Indeed, student achievement was usually framed by her classroom teacher as the result of individual merit, that is, some people were deserving of good grades because of their individual efforts, while others received no reward due to their lack of individual motivation.

Listening to Sara's story required a measure of respect for her voice and courage. The orders of indexicality working against such respect were embedded in the daily interactions among students and their teacher, who had limited knowledge of the histories of language use and (im)migrations among one another. Of course, ESL and other curricular aims produced at the national, state and district levels function as guides to the erasure of multilingual and transnational identities. In that sense, the teacher was responsible for converting students' stories into material for individualised English learning. Global, social justice stories like Sara's were not intended to travel beyond the orders of indexicality that manage and measure English linguistic proficiency.

A third story: This is my country.

The poem described next was created in the context of an imagined scenario in which I facilitated a change in the relationship between student and teacher roles. By imagining ourselves in the setting of Lewiston, Maine, as described in the novel (*Something About America*) and in the film (*The Letter*), we could imagine and express the voices of advocates representing immigrant and non-immigrant community members, who would collectively confront the bigoted words and intimidating manner of a white supremacist group. Dramatic improvisation and inquiry are especially valuable as mediums for changing how students and teachers participate in meaning-making (Edmiston & Enciso, 2002). Through the imagined context, it was possible to create a mutually constructed relationship that relied on our joint interpretation of bigotry and advocacy.

I asked the students, first in Chris's class, then in Sara's, if they would want to meet this person who planned to leave hateful leaflets on their doorsteps and throughout the town of Lewiston. They were sceptical, but interested, so I said that they could decide how intimidating or scary I should be in my portrayal of this person. We tried out several phrases that white supremacists might use, including, "Get out of my

country!"; "This is MY country," and "You don't belong here." Following the students' direction, I changed the tone and volume of these claims until everyone said they could hear the words but still find them believable. I also showed the students that I would wear a battered leather coat when I was acting in role as the bigot.

Next I asked the students to imagine they saw this person walking down the street, and they knew what she/he thought of them. What would they want to say? They began sharing some of their ideas and I asked them to write on note cards what came to mind as a persuasive response. We heard a couple of these responses and they continued to write on as many cards as they liked. Most wrote on 2-3 cards. Testing out the feel of the bigot role with them, I put on the jacket and then used the language we had agreed on for the white supremacist perspective.

I asked the students again if they were ready to meet the person who only knew how to hate immigrants. In both classes, the students became quite serious and focused and waited for the teacher-in-role to begin speaking. I told them I would walk to each of them in turn and wait for their response. I told them that after they spoke, they would see in my face and manner whether I questioned my decision to attack their community with hateful words. Instead of a discussion, then, we began a face-to-face enactment of the discourses of bigotry and advocacy. The students began to read some of their notes as I walked slowly around the room and looked at them, daring them to persuade me. Their spoken voices began to rise in the class: "Why are you saying those things?" "You have no right." "Maybe we came here for peace." Once I had circled through every student, I returned again to see if they had more to say. At this point, students had felt the power of one another's words and began improvising in order to persuade and clearly reject the bigot's assumptions.

What follows are the words that students in each class spoke and that I (as teacher-in-role) repeated throughout our enactments. After transcribing their voices, I divided each idea into lines and verse to reflect the structure of a poem, and to highlight their distinct ideas and arguments in response to the repetition produced through a bigoted perspective. The repetitions, rhythm, juxtapositions of assumptions, and increasing depth and emotional impact of their statements, indicate the intensity of their attention to the dialogue they had entered.

Voices 1: will you dare to be an advocate?

This is my America.

But people come to
America for freedom.

Get out of my country.

Maybe your ancestors were immigrants.

I am American.

You have no right
to say all of those mean things.
It's wrong.

We all should be treated the same way.
It doesn't matter where you came from.

I don't like the way you live.

Nobody is different.
Even if we are different colours,
religions
and nationalities.

We are all the same.
We are all human.

I live the same way you do.

Get out of my country.

In our country we did not have peace.

This is a place where we can make peace.

You don't belong here.

Why would you do this?

Do you hate yourself too?

I don't like the way you live.

Maybe you want a better life than me.
Maybe I have a better life than you.

You don't belong here.

I am who I am. That will not change.

I am still here.

Get out of my country.

This is everybody's country. It is the people's country.

You don't belong here.

Who are you to judge?
This is a free country. We have the same rights as you.

Freedom of religion

Freedom of speech

Freedom of assembly

I am an American.

We all are.

This is the United States.

Everybody comes from
all around the world.

That's why it is called

the United States

Voices 2: The voices that fight against bigotry: A chorus

This is my Country. Get out of here.

It's like a civil war.

If you believe in God then we're all brothers and sisters.

Get out.

You can't kick me out of this country.

My people built this country.

It takes more than one person to build a state.

You don't belong here.

Do you know how this feels?

I don't know why you say that.

Because you need us.

You don't even speak English.

You never tried to talk to me.

Just get out.

Think about that for a second.

Haters.

If you

Were in *my* position

How would you feel?

What you are saying is distasteful and mean.

You hurt us by saying that.

Get out.

Do you believe that?

You don't even know me.

After transcribing their words into a poetic script, I guided students in each class to read aloud their words in small groups as readers' theatre scripts, with multiple voices, using different tones and volume, and with gestures that might intensify meaning. Hearing their own voices and the power of their cumulative argument against bigotry encouraged students to consider whether other people in the school should hear their words. During a story-club meeting, students discussed how they could best present the poems to the whole school. Given time constraints on planning and encroaching preparations for high-stakes testing, we decided to include the poems in a large poster that could be displayed in the school hallway. The poster included both poems, images of story-club members standing together and waving to the viewer, photos taken from the internet depicting newly inducted U.S. citizens, an American flag and an image of the U.S made up of the world's national flags.

Altering orders of indexicality: A multi-voiced pedagogy

Through our dramatic improvisation, the immediate orders of indexicality associated with who listens to whom, who holds the floor and for what purposes, were temporarily shifted so that all students listened to one another as they produced the script for a critical story in response to an imagined threat to their collective community. Unlike unmediated discussion or explicit instructional modes of communication in classrooms, dramatic enactment and invented personas displaces assumptions of what is known and knowable about oneself and others (Edmiston &

Enciso, 2002; Gallagher, 2007). All students had something to say about the humanity of people who are living in a divided but pluralistic society.

Further, the words we generated were transformed into a poetic script that became available in written form and presented to one another, and eventually the school, as a testimony of our support for advocacy in the face of bigotry. The story moved across spaces, despite orders of indexicality at all levels – classroom interactions, the curriculum, political ideologies, segregated spaces – and made visible the material conversion and trajectory of a story into critical action.

DISCUSSION

Walls, once built, have an appearance of permanence, a blinding effect that makes movement through their space seem impossible. It is difficult to imagine storytelling as a force capable of toppling walls, but I believe this is possible. As described in the ethnopoetic analyses of Chris and Sara's stories, as well as our group-scripted poem, storytellers are responsive in the moment to orders of power, so that their tacit knowledge of social norms and relations can call forth their cultural knowledge and symbolic repertoires. As Blommaert (2005) writes, it is possible to respond to norms "by flouting them, reversing them, or performing a *bricolage* of several norms. Ideology offers semiotic opportunities through the availability of multiple meaningful batteries of indexicality" (p. 173). A story told in common among students who were "ordered" to be separate, is indeed a reversal of norms.

A story, told together, became a critical literacy practice in the context of Alltown and its middle school. To continue the movement and recognition of voice made possible in this space, the assumption of hierarchies of language and related practices of linguistic and national segregation must be addressed across all spaces. Chris's story was not heard, in part, because his audience revalued his telling, not only as a literary answer, but also as a tale for non-immigrant listeners – those people sitting next to one another in the classroom. Had the students in Sara's class been actually present to hear Chris's interpretation of the Sudanese folktale, they would have, in all likelihood, returned to the subject of living in between worlds. Similarly, if Sara's classmates had more continuous engagement with their non-immigrant peers, their voices would be part of an ongoing dialogue about how adults and youth are implicated in the production of racism.

In a number of story-club meetings, where immigrant and non-immigrant children shared and questioned one another's stories across six months, stories were revisited, retold, elaborated on, and their themes became increasingly evident as problems of belief, power, representation, and knowledge. Such continuous opportunity to tell and interpret stories meant that almost every story had mobility – and therefore every story had meaning.

To create the conditions for meaning and mobility of students' stories in formal literacy education requires a convergence of students' knowledge and new, poetic, ways of using and listening to their own and others' words. In terms of organising for and supporting a transnational critical literacy education, teachers have to recognise storytellers' art and their implicit insight into the social and political forces that restrict or revalue their words and ideas.

An even greater challenge for critical educators will be addressing the deeply held fear among colleagues, parents and students that, when multiple cultural values are present in a group, one of these must supersede all others. In other words, those values that shape identities and community relations, that sustain people as participants in a larger system of belief and practices, are invariably presumed by the receiving members to be readily changed by processes of assimilation (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998; Daiute, 2010; Li, 2008). Educators and policymakers, even those who hold the most liberal, pro-immigrant viewpoints, will have to accept that significant differences in cultural norms must be welcomed and that a multiplicity of such norms can create both tension and shared power among people who participate together in social institutions.

In classrooms where a highly heterogeneous cultural and linguistic group of children constitute the student population, teachers can create dynamic spaces for critical textual production, where students can imagine and make manifest “a not-yet-realized present” (Morrell, 2008). Through storytelling, dramatic improvisation, the use of digital tools that carry images and language over time and space, and through informal student-led spaces where stories are anticipated and encouraged, it is possible to hear voices and lift them over walls.

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