

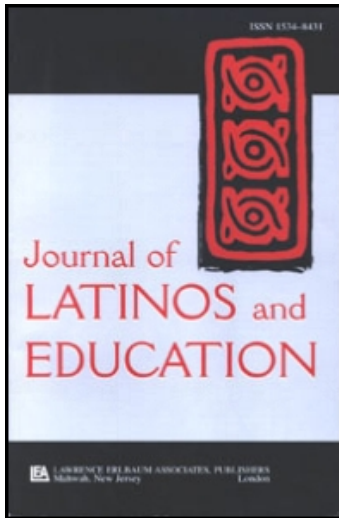
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Essays and Interviews: Testimonios de Inmigrantes: Students Educating Future Teachers

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ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS

*Testimonios de Inmigrantes: Students
Educating Future Teachers*

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Using *testimonios*, this article calls attention to the identities and plight of undocumented immigrant children in U.S. schools. Often ignored in the literature, immigrant children face many hardships and endure racist experiences as non-English speakers in U.S. society. We urge that *testimonios* be used as pedagogy, especially to educate future teachers and to raise the consciousness of people who do not have sympathy for immigrants, especially immigrant children, as they encounter an unfriendly and often hostile educational system.

Key words: Immigrants, immigrant children, *testimonio*, bilingual education, racism, internalized racism

The complexity of an immigrant identity as a child, especially that of an undocumented immigrant child, is often ignored. Children are at times brought to this country without being asked if they want to come, against their will, or are left behind with relatives until one, or both parents, get established economically in the United States. The risks involved in crossing the border as an undocumented child are dismissed or never mentioned, but are equally if not more dangerous than for adults. Ironically, parents make the decision to come and make a “better” life for themselves and their children, but it is the children that first come face to face with U.S. racism, classism, sexism, and so on, through institutions like schooling.

Testimonio is the form of narrative account used in this article. Rich in its Latin American roots, especially in indigenous villages, the *testimonio* is used by the narrator as a denunciation of violence, especially state violence and as a demonstration of subaltern resistance (Warren, 1998). The power of such first person, novel length accounts is in their metaphor of “witnessing” through real-life experience (Beverly, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 2001; Zimmerman, 1995). The urgency of the *testimonio* aims to bring immediate and emotive attention to an issue, and has been called by Jara and Vidal (1986) a “*narración de urgencia*” in an effort to raise the reader’s consciousness.

I first listened to the following student *testimonios* as a guest speaker in a Mathematics methods class for future teachers at a state university in Southern California. Mario Torres, my colleague, asked if I could speak about my experiences as a former middle school teacher and how those experiences shaped my views on how to better work with immigrant, non-English-speaking students. My task was to “paint the big systemic picture” for his class by briefly lecturing on the social and structural conditions of inequality in American society. Our former eighth-grade students, now in college, would bravely come before this unconvinced audience and relate their painful past experiences as monolingual, Spanish-speaking students in K–12 U.S. classrooms.

Needless to say, the audience was not very receptive to my academic interpretation of the U.S. educational system and its false promises to some and special privileges to others. Because of similar past experiences, their lack of receptivity did not shock me, but I did fear their lack of critical awareness might turn to a hurtful experience for the student presenters. I was wrong. One by one each presenter skillfully gave her or his *testimonio*. Amazed by their words and ability to bear witness to their experiences with prejudice, bigotry, violence, persistence, and courage in U.S. schools, Mario and I agreed on the importance of their *testimonios* in educating future teachers. Out of that idea arose multiple presentations to other university classes, pedagogy to educate future teachers, and now this short article produced collectively.

BETRAYED BY THE SYSTEM

I was about to turn 11 years old when my family and I migrated to the United States from Mexico City. I was in the sixth grade. Although I found myself in a new environment, adapting was unexpectedly easy. But, I failed to foresee the many obstacles yet to come.

I was enrolled in basic bilingual education, where the empathy of my classmates provided a warm welcome. They spoke my tongue and shared much of my cultural values. Most important, I eased into my new life thanks to our teacher, whose Spanish had not deteriorated with the presence of the English language hovering over it, and who shared with us an immigrant experience. Regardless, whether she had run away from war in Central America and I from domestic violence in Mexico, the immigrant experience ultimately brought us together in 1994.

In U.S. schools, I was granted the gift of intelligence. I was at least 2 years ahead of my class in almost every subject and while in Mexico I was characterized with academic mediocrity, here I was considered a genius! Never had I felt so elevated.

By the time I was in the eighth grade, I'd become apathetic about making new friends, but devoted instead most of my time and energy to mastering the English language. In fact, I was no longer placed in English as a Second Language (ESL), but in a transitional English class taught by a man who touched my life and led it in an unexpected direction. He made me read literature that was well beyond the scope of my English language abilities, works like *Heart of Darkness*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and my personal torture, Machiavelli's *The Prince*. It would seem like a plan worthy of a lunatic, but it goes to show that he had a genuine conviction that I was capable of many things, and I was.

Because of him, I found myself in the honor's program in high school doing perfectly fine and loving the academic challenge, but my personal life was void and lonely. I was an outsider joining a group of students of a different ethnic group, kids who had been in the gifted program since the dawn of their education and had practically grown up together. They were of much higher economic status, had impeccable English accents; unlike me, who carried herself awkwardly, dressed out of style, had a heavy Spanish accent, and could not help but look poor and immigrant-like.

Despite my furtive attempts to blend in, their proximity instilled in me new and higher standards for myself. Such was the influence that after my sophomore year, there was not a trace of my Spanish-speaking past in my tongue. I'd joined a number of student clubs and activities, including journalism and drill team, not to mention my complete enrollment in advanced placement and honors classes. I had taken it upon myself to do anything to become eligible for admission to an Ivy League school. That year was the most rigorous, and it stands as the peak of my

scholastic achievement. Yet my family problems, together with my failure to fit in, were great an obstacle to overcome, because they had me worn out and exhausted by the end of the school year.

I would finish my homework at two in the morning, continue working correcting papers until four so I could make extra cash to pay my drill team uniform. I would sleep for an hour and a half, then headed back to school to do it all over again, and still get a 4.38 GPA for all quarters. That was the only year I can remember being able to go two or three consecutive nights without sleep. I cried for hours and then made myself look like I had not been crying at all. I hid and withstood the pain of loneliness. I was degraded by my teammates at school and by my mother at home, yet I still believed that I had a chance at getting accepted to an Ivy League school.

Then, during the summer of 1999, it hit me. By law, I was not able to go to college at all. I entered the United States with a tourist visa, which had expired. I was an undocumented student, an “illegal,” a *mojada*. I was not entitled to receive financial aid, and schools would charge me over 10 times the regular tuition. My mother, a single parent, was supporting three children while earning minimum wage. She would not have earned enough to send me to a private school even if I *did* get accepted. One of the most awful things in my life at that time was to witness how my most treasured dreams were nothing more than mere illusions that crumbled into a million little pieces before my very eyes. Even more painful than that was the cruel sensation of failure and impotence. The final stage was surrender.

I figured that my mother could have cared less about my academic accomplishments, my peers didn't take the time to even acknowledge my presence in the classroom, and since I would not go to college anyway, then why bother? I was exhausted of working in vain. I convinced myself that my dreams were just simply out of reach. I quit the school paper, drill team, and dropped most of my AP and honors classes. My junior year, I lived my lifeless life working only enough to get by and survive with a 2.5 GPA. From then on I did not shed a tear of regret until my graduation ceremony, when I found myself in my seat after having walked the stage, watching how my classmates did the same, with an honor rope hanging from their necks. They stood proud at the sound of their names, “with honors, with highest honors.” Tears of happiness came to their eyes, but tears of self-deception ran down my face, lowered in shame.

That night my mother took me to an Italian restaurant to celebrate. My eyes were still swollen from crying so much. Two of the girls who had graduated with highest honors entered the restaurant in their white gowns, honor ropes still hanging from their necks. They greeted me, which they never did in 4 years of being classmates, as if they were used to it. My eyes followed them walking toward the back room, where a splendid banquet awaited them. Mother noticed my melancholic stare and saw right through me. “*Mija*, in my eyes and in my heart, you graduated with the highest honors. You have nothing and no one to envy. I'm very proud of you, and I'm sorry for having stepped in your way so many times. *Salud*.” We toasted to that.

That was all I needed to hear to once again rise from my ambivalent tomb of apathy and despair. I enrolled in a community college far from my community, where no one knew me, for a fresh start. The first two terms cost us an arm and a leg, but to my surprise my mother had worked overtime for a while and was able to amass the money needed to cover all expenses. I was able to regain my confidence and my caliber as a scholar, but nonetheless worried about the day when we ran out of funds.

But as providence has it, a miracle occurred. One day I came home from school and greeted my mother, who worked extra hours at home with the television on. There appeared Assemblyman Marco Firebaugh, giving an account of the new law he introduced to the state assembly for undocumented students to pay in-state tuition. Our hearts filled with so much joy and hope we couldn't contain it. That day I renewed my long lost belief in God. He was by my side after all.

As a college sophomore I still struggle with the demoralizing label of *illegal*, although I understand that there is no such thing as an illegal human being, anywhere and for any circumstance. I still cry when I lose hope and courage. I get nervous whenever new friends ask why I don't drive, or when there is no hope of finding a job where they will overlook my "situation." But every time I'm about to surrender, I re-emerge from the abyss of desperation with renewed hope, stronger than before and grateful for those who have uttered words of empowerment throughout my journey and didn't let me surrender to the restraints of the system, my beloved family and teachers.

I can only think of the thousands of undocumented students today, who overcome poverty, family problems, and a system that turns against them and betrays them. I, like them, feel I owe it in great part to empathetic teachers, teachers aware that teaching is a political act, because they participate in the distribution of power, and dare to empower those who are not meant to be powerful. We will overcome the system that betrays us, because as great an obstacle as it might be, *it*, too, is not impenetrable.

IMMIGRANT, ALSO KNOWN AS "WETBACK"

My mother always told me to learn as much as I could but never to learn too much, because too much knowledge would kill me. Not once did I question my mother, until one day I realized she was right. My mother, with no formal education at all, gave me the best philosophical advice. She showed me that we do not need a formal education to be teachers, because people are already born with the privilege to teach those around them. At that moment I realized that, from the second our lungs are filled with air, we receive a degree that not even the best educational institutions can offer, the degree of life. With this degree, we are instantly given the power to teach.

I do not have a lot of memories of my parents and myself as an infant; they had both immigrated to the United States when I was very young. An aunt in Mexico helped to raise my brother and I. August is full of memories for our *familia*. August 18th is a day we always remember because it is my father's birthday, but more importantly, it is when it all began. That day my dad had sent my brother and I a pair of T-shirts to wear. The T-shirts would identify us. When we arrived at the airport at the border, we saw a lady screaming our names, a total stranger. We went with her and got into a van where she hid us in a coffin underneath the backseats.

For 3 hours, I saw my whole past life slip away. Through the darkness, the only comfort I had was the faint outlines of my brother's new T-shirt. At times, I thought I would never get out of the coffin alive because I had seen old people never come out of them. I then blamed my faith and myself for my juvenile gullibility, for not knowing what was going on. Finally, I saw a bright light and heard someone say, "*Ya llegamos, pueden salir;*" which meant, "We are finally here. You can come out." Those four words were all I needed to hear to realize that my life was about to change. I was going to have parents at last.

I got out of the van and saw a woman that I had seen so many times before in pictures. Beside her was the man who so many times said, "*Ya pronto nos vamos a ver*" (Soon we will see one another). I had heard their voices over the phone during special occasions. At that moment, I felt a pain in my heart and a joy in my soul unlike anything I had ever experienced before. It was mother and she ran toward my brother and I and gave us a hug. She kissed us and tearfully said, "*Mis hijos los quiero mucho.*"

I cried that day and shed the tears my parents should have wiped when I was a baby. I hugged my dad, and it felt so good to call him *papá* and my mom *mamá*. It felt so good that I repeated it a thousand times that day. I could not believe what I was experiencing that moment and thanked God for giving me my parents. To this day, I thank God for making August 18th the beginning of the rest of my life.

That day, my life took a radical 180-degree turn and brought me to a place similar to my childhood home, yet different. The people looked the same, but the kids were different, very different. They moved their lips just like I did, but foreign sounds came out. I was confused. The only thing that did not confuse me was their laughter and their fingers pointing at me as if I was an amusing animal. The kids at school were cruel with me every morning when it was time for me to say that word, "here," and they would laugh and make fun of my mispronunciation. Those laughs only made me want to run away and go back to where I came from. They only made me hate them more and their stupid language, especially their stupid "here." It only made me feel a burning hunger within me that I could not yet describe.

Every morning at 9:15 a.m., the teacher would let us out to recess for about 15 minutes. During those daily 15 minutes, I experienced the true meaning of racism. However, this kind of racism was not the one we see on television all the time. This was different and felt worse than any other. People of my own race

and culture were putting me down. *My people* were stepping on me as if I was some kind of wasted soil. My people were telling me to bleed as if they wanted me dead. My people were letting me see how words could change the race, blood, culture and skin color of *Mexicanos*. It was then that I realized what I was hungry for.

Day after day I went to recess and lunch searching to feed that hunger. I searched for those hate words that came out of my people's mouths. *Wetback* was what I was called and the phrase I was searching for. That phrase needed no translation because the speaker's tone already implied hate and nothing but hate. It was then when I realized that I was hungry for something to fight against them with. I was hungry for language; I was hungry to know what *here* and *wetback* meant. I was hungry to make these *mestizos* understand that I was in fact a "wetback," but more important, that their parents were, or had been too. I was hungry to tell those students in their English language that if I was a "wetback," so were they, because their parents, or their grandparents, were also "wetbacks." I saw who picked them up from school. My mom didn't look any differently than theirs, nor did my mom speak any differently than theirs. So I asked myself, why the hatred? Then I understood—it was all because of language.

I realized that I was not going to shut them up in Spanish. I needed to learn their English and shut them up using their own words. The only way to shut them up was to learn as much as I could and use it against them. They inspired me to go to school and learn more of that language that was eating me alive. Every word and every look haunted me day after day, but also gave me the strength that I needed to want to learn and someday shut them up.

In December of that same year, I was the Student of the Month. That made me happy and I felt glad that I achieved that goal before most of them. I remember when the principal called my name and my mom was there, proudly looking at me. She skipped work that day just to see me. I was happy she was there, but that sweet victory over my peers took the best of me. Instead of looking at my mom, I looked at those students and wanted to tell them what revenge felt like. This was one experience I remember to the second because I enjoyed every instant of it.

From that day on, I knew that the one thing that hurt me the most and what separated me from everybody was language. But I also found out that my biggest influence was the racism and the ignorance of those kids that looked just like me. I aspire to become a writer, but unfortunately ignorance and racism are turning out to be by biggest inspiration.

THE EDUCATION OF AN IMMIGRANT

During the month of December 1995, my mother decided to leave everything in Mexico and bring my sisters and [me] to the United States. We were to be re-

united with my father and brother, who had already been in the country for a few months. I was happy about the decision, because I felt that I was going to achieve all my goals.

I completed sixth grade in Mexico. This transition was really difficult due to the obstacles my mother put in my way. Because education beyond the sixth grade was not mandatory, she did not want me to continue going to school. It's not her fault, she comes from a family that oppressed its women and believed that they were to learn to sew, cook, and be good housewives. My mother wanted me to be what she had become, so that a man could take me as his wife.

I did want the lifestyle that my mother wanted for me, but I also wanted to have a career. When we came to the United States, I was really happy. Here, my mother was forced to send me to school. I felt like a bird that had suddenly been freed from captivity. I started setting up my goals believing that my only obstacle was going to be not wanting to achieve them.

I started seventh grade before winter break. I was placed in the wrong classes, because the first semester was almost over, and my counselor gave me the classes that were available, not the ones I needed. I did not know a single word in English, and most of the classes I had were totally in that language. I had a drama class, for example, where I could not understand what was happening because the teacher did not speak Spanish, nor did my classmates. I used to cry because I wanted to belong, but the teacher did not make any effort to try to help me understand what was going on. Instead, she acted as if I was not part of the class, leaving me alone with my "ignorance."

There was a day when the teacher instructed the class to take out a piece of paper, because they had to read a play and write a summary about it. I was just sitting there, trying to figure out what I needed to do. I felt embarrassed when the class was over, because everybody's paper had something written on it, and mine just had my name and date on it. I had a feeling that my teacher did not care when she looked at my blank paper. So, the next day I decided to go see my counselor and ask if I could be sent to another class, where I could learn something. My counselor advised me to stay in that class, and said that the next semester she would try to place me in the correct classes.

During the second semester, most of my classes were bilingual because my counselor said that I needed to be in that system for me to absorb the language. I was comfortable because most of my classmates were in the same condition as me, and I was able to feel confident again. As days went by, I knew I was placed in the wrong classes again, but this time language was not the problem. The problem was that the classes were very basic, and I had already seen all the material in Mexico. For example, I had a math class where the teacher was covering material that I was taught in the third and fourth grades. I felt that the semester was going to be a waste of time, and I talked to my counselor again to see if she would at least put me in a pre-algebra class.

She did not transfer me to pre-algebra, because there were no teachers providing those courses in Spanish, or at least bilingually. She also told me that she had a feeling that I was not ready to be in more advanced classes. This is when I started realizing that some people placed labels on me like, "You don't know anything because you don't speak English." I wanted my counselor to understand that just because I did not speak English, that did not mean that I was ignorant in other subjects, but she did not give me the opportunity to at least try and see if I could handle the work or not.

I thought eighth grade was going to be the same as the last one. To my surprise, not only did most of my teachers speak Spanish, but also had similar backgrounds to mine. They made me feel that they cared about my education and gave me the opportunity to learn the same material that kids in regular classes were learning, and more. For example, my math teacher sent me to a regular algebra class in ninth grade. Such a thing was not allowed because counselors believed that Spanish-speaking students could not survive in those classes, but Mr. Torres, with all his connections, helped me and others who were in my same situation to be placed in the correct math level. With hard work, I proved that I was capable of learning "advanced" material, and at last my counselor allowed me to be in a class where I felt challenged.

My language arts and social studies teacher also taught me a lot of material that I was going to need in high school and for the rest of my life. He taught me to appreciate my culture, because in part it made me who I was. This great person was one of the only teachers who did not look down on the Spanish-speaking students. Instead, he made the class as challenging as his regular English class and taught us the same material he taught them. He, as well as Mr. Torres, helped change the perspective that the school had toward Spanish-speaking students. I still believe school districts need teachers like them, who are willing to really help immigrant students succeed in school.

I confronted another big obstacle in the 10th grade with a biology class. During ninth grade, I took general science in Spanish and passed it with an "A." So, my teacher recommended that I take a regular biology class in English. This was during the time when instruction in Spanish or bilingual education was abolished in the school districts. When I registered for the 10th grade, I told my counselor that I wanted to be in the biology class, but arguing that I was not ready, she said no.

I was not happy with her decision, because I saw that people in the same English level as me were able to take the class, but they had another counselor. I went and talked to my science teacher, and she tried to help me get into the class, but neither my counselor nor the principal wanted to give the approval. Supposedly, there was a rule in the school district that stated that to get into a regular biology class, students had to have taken the first level of English. The problem that my counselor found was that I had just finished with the last level of ESL, and I was going to start

with regular English that year. I do not know what my science teacher said about me, but the next day I was informed that I was accepted in the class.

I found my biology class very challenging because at first I could not understand almost anything of what I was reading, and my teacher did not speak Spanish. I had to work twice as hard as the rest of the students. My teacher saw the effort that I was putting into the class and offered to help me. I used to stay after school almost every day to review the lecture until I understood most of the material covered. The hard work I put into the class did not only help me succeed in the class, but by the end of the year I was able to understand what I was reading, and I had more confidence in myself.

I did not have any problems getting into any classes the last 2 years of high school. In June 2001, I graduated from high school. I continue my studies at the local community college. Even though English is my biggest weakness I have achieved most of my goals through my education. I am still attending community college, and I am planning to transfer soon to a public university.

CONCLUSION

We have sought to make available to a broader audience the *testimonios* of immigrant students and how they can be used as pedagogy to educate future teachers. Although *testimonios* are meant to be oral we are now turning to the written word in an effort to send the message out to larger audiences. Similar approaches to using *testimonios*, especially by students, may be quite effective in teaching future teachers of the realities of immigrant children, especially undocumented immigrant children, in U.S. schools.

There are many denunciations to be made through these *testimonios*, but perhaps those that stand out the most relate to survival in hostile and often cruel schooling environments. Their words bear witness to that struggle for survival, and also to educational success not necessarily because of the system, but despite the system. Who or what is to blame for such pain we can all speculate, but regardless of our speculation, we can no longer ignore or erase our knowledge of these experiences and of countless others like them.

In North Carolina, Arkansas, Washington, or the streets of Houston, New York, Chicago, and East L. A., immigrant students are being "massacred in the playgrounds." We too, including you the reader, are involved, even if only for this moment in questioning and passing judgment on a society that would create such alienation and emotional pain in innocent children. What we do about it, or what is the next step is an individual decision that falls on each of us who is aware, and often consciously or unconsciously participating in such educational cruelty.

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