

THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN A VILLAGE HIGH SCHOOL IN THE PHILIPPINES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Gina A. Fontejon-Bonior

Abstract

This article presents the conclusions and limitations of a critical ethnographic study on the experiences of apprenticeship and advancement of agency of secondary school students in a rural public school in the Philippines. Findings of the study show that well-intentioned educational programs for socio-economically disadvantaged communities could result in the further marginalization of students. This study discusses four factors that contribute to such marginalization: 1) the limited agency of students, teachers, administrators, and the school as a collective identity; 2) the silencing of critical voices; 3) the beliefs of teachers and other school authorities that students are created equal and attend school bringing with them the same amount of "social capital"; and 4) the educators' lack of awareness of the need for explicit instruction and apprenticeship on the secondary Discourses used in school. The article then suggests concrete means of addressing such concerns especially in the context of implementing educational development programs in socio-economically and culturally disadvantaged communities.

Introduction

This paper is the fourth of a series of articles I wrote in relation to the research project I conducted while completing the MA-ESL degree at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. The first article *The "I" in Interpretive Research: Positionality in Qualitative Studies* (Fontejon-Bonior, 2004) describes the perspective I took as a participant-observer in the research site. The article reviews the theoretical bases for such an approach and

describes why I took such a perspective. The article attempts to answer the following questions:

- What is positionality in qualitative research?
- What is ethnographic research?
- What is reflexive, critical ethnography?
- How can the ethnographer establish the validity, reliability, and generalizability in critical autoethnography?
- Why is ethnography a rich alternative in doing educational research?

To quote the editor's introduction to the article, the essay "argues that the dynamics of the research process and the subsequent writing of results cannot be objective or neutral, influenced as they are by powerful stakeholders, such as the authorities in the academic institution, the participants, the community, among others, all of them exerting an influence not only on the research process but also on the results" (Pioquinto, 2004, p. 16). The researcher-writer should therefore **not** "hide behind the cloak of alleged neutrality" (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000, p. 109). Instead, s/he needs to describe his/her positionality in the research process and product so that the reader will be in an informed position to evaluate the research output.

The second article *Schooling as Investment* (Fontejon-Bonior, 2004) describes the theoretical perspectives considered in the study. Particularly, the article presents a rationale for the use of post-structuralist framework in ethnographic educational research. Two major theories ground the interpretation of data. First is the concept of agency, i.e., one's ability to "resist the subject position and even set up counter discourses which position ... a person in a powerful rather than marginalized position" (Peirce, 1995, pp. 15-16).

The second major theory is Gee's Discourse theory. Gee (1996) defines Discourses (capital letter D to distinguish it from the concept, discourses) as "a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize" (p. 127). Gee classified Discourses as either Primary or Secondary. Primary Discourses are "the ways of acting, talking, and writing" that one acquires at home. Secondary Discourses are those one learns in contexts other than the home, e.g., the Discourses children learn in school. Gee argues that students whose primary Discourses are not congruent to the Discourses used in school tend to be disadvantaged as they could be perceived as ill-prepared or unintelligent by their peers and teachers, and will be further marginalized in school. In the Philippines, for example, some children are raised in homes where bedtime story-telling of English fairy tales is a ritual. These children are therefore apprenticed into the structure of story-telling in English as well as the question and answer pattern and western narrative structure that are normally used in schools. Moreover, they are immersed in the language of instruction even before their entry to school. As a result, these children go to school with a wealth of resources that facilitate their apprenticeship in schooling.

Majority of the students in this study, however, do not have the socio-economic means to enjoy such privilege; they do not come from families where English literacy resources and practices are readily available. Teachers and school administrators who believe that children attend school with equal status and expect the same socio-economic, literacy, and cultural background from all students are more inclined to dismiss those who do not meet the expectations as ill-prepared for schooling or, as one teacher in this research stated, "*gabinutol ug gatinapol*" (dull and lazy).

Such beliefs influence teachers' practices and the social interactions with students and further marginalize those who are already disadvantaged in their initial entry to the school.

Bourdieu (1982) advanced a similar contention when he argued that students participate in schooling bringing with them "varying amounts of 'cultural capital' based on the degree of congruence between their socioeconomic/cultural background and that of the school" (in Davis, 1995, p. 558). When teachers and school administrators do not have a heightened awareness of this possibility, then schooling becomes a space where further marginalization of an already socio-economically disadvantaged group is reinforced.

One way of addressing this is to enculturate students to the secondary Discourses in the academic environment while acknowledging student's home/primary Discourses. This may be done through apprenticeship with the aid of "oldtimers" or individuals who have already mastered the Discourses of the academe. This is because, according to Gee, "Discourses are mastered through acquisition, not through learning.... [They are] not mastered by overt instruction, but by enculturation (apprenticeship) into social practices through scaffolded and supported interactions with people who have already mastered the Discourses" (Gee, 1996, p. 139). The need for learners to acknowledge and learn the Discourses used in school, such as the registers and genres used in conducting science experiments and reporting the results orally and in writing, cannot be overestimated. Such Discourses provide students access to a wealth of "symbolic and material resources," which, according to Norton and Toohey (in press), "will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital" and subsequently vest in them the power to re-examine their identities.

This article presents the summary of observations and analysis made in the study as well as

their implications for the implementation of educational development programs in the Philippines, such as the Secondary Education Development and Improvement Program (SEDIP). In sum, the research explores the extent of students' agency in a potentially disempowering school context—a village high school in the Philippines. It examines the strategies students employ to counter practices that marginalize and silence their critical voices, and describes the dynamics and practices both in the micro level, i.e., the school system, and the macro level, i.e., provincial and national educational policies that hegemonically place certain groups of students in a disadvantaged position.

This study further presents a case of marginalization that did not result in students' collective identity of opposition but rather in their silence and compliance. In this school context, students who share and openly discuss experiences of marginalization do not forge a collective oppositional identity. Instead, they unknowingly participate in their own marginalization by adhering to the "habitus" or the accepted "common sense" (Bourne, 2001, p. 108) that teachers are always highly esteemed, administrators cannot be questioned, and schooling is intrinsically just and liberating, thereby claiming personal and collective responsibility for their marginalized position and their perceived failure.

All participants in the study—students, parents, teachers, and the administration—recognize the role of the school as last frontier for social mobility and the acquisition of the much-needed cultural capital. Most of the participants recognize that students' imagined communities are essential for their continued investment in schooling as a potentially liberating enterprise. For instance, the district Congressman initiated the plan to make available more public village schools for families who could not afford to send their children to municipal and city schools. The municipal principal, with the assistance of the Municipal Mayor,

encouraged the local officials at *Paglaum* village to prepare a resolution for the establishment of the village high school as satellite or extension school of the municipal (*Kaugmaon*) high school. They followed up the resolution closely so that residents in the five neighboring barangays, especially the *Taga-bukid* [people from the hinterlands], will have easy access to free public secondary education. Even the principal's grading policy was established to protect the students and the school from criticisms and embarrassment.

Yet, ironically, the very school system that aims to provide students with access to opportunities for socio-economic mobility places the school and the students in a marginalized position. This continued marginalization is due to three factors: (1) the school was established for the "*taga-bukid*", a term loaded with pejorative meanings including impoverishment, ignorance, and provinciality; (2) the absence or scarcity of "oldtimers" needed to provide scaffolding to students in their apprenticeship in schooling, and; (3) inability of the students to articulate themselves in the language of the academia – English. These three factors all conspire not only to designate the marginalized position of students but also to underscore the marginalized position of the school itself.

It appears that students at *Paglaum Extension School* need to overcome the four major barriers in minority students' academic investment (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1993). **Students at Paglaum have to overcome sociocultural barriers.** They are viewed as inferior because of their cultural orientation, being "*taga-bukid*". **They need to counter socio-economic barriers**, i.e., financial problems that prevent students from "fully participating" in the daily life of the school. **They need to counter linguistic barriers**, which include not only the expectation that they participate effectively in subjects where English, a foreign language to many, is the medium of instruction but also the expectation that

they can decode the secondary Discourses employed in schools. Finally, **they need to employ strategies to overcome structural barriers**, “features in the school environment that impede, or discourage students from engaging fully in learning, for instance, social or academic” such as inadequate academic resources, e.g., library, counseling programs, and tutorials (in Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 59).

Overcoming such barriers and resisting the “exclusionary forces” in school requires “developing resiliency through supportive ties with protective agents within the home and the community” and the ability to “*decode the system*” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 25). In the context of *Paglaum*, where such protective agents (e.g., old-timers, parents, and teachers) may not be available or are preoccupied seeking financial subsistence, and where the school has no coherent program to address differences between primary and secondary Discourses, most students take on the responsibility of overcoming such barriers. In addition, they have to employ strategies to address observed power inequalities while ensuring that they realize the immediate goal of getting a diploma the soonest time possible. The urgency to complete high school and seek immediate employment so they can assist their parents in raising their siblings is an investment students consider of utmost priority.

The school is considered by the participants as a “third space” – a context where students can forge new identities and participate in networks of power that scaffold them in their desire for socio-economic mobility. However, if learning is indeed “limited to the range of our identities” and if, as Wenger suggests, that learning transforms who we are and what we can do” (1998, p.215), then what the students learn at *Paglaum Satellite School* is how to survive the odds of schooling, how schools oppress socio-economically marginalized students, and how negotiation and opposition limit

their opportunities for apprenticeship in schooling. Students of the *Paglaum Extension School* soon learn that self-imposed silence and marginalization could provide them the convenient default strategies for gaining immediate rewards from schooling. This is risky because, as Peirce (1995) pointed out, such students may develop an identity of resignation and "a sense of powerlessness" that will continue to place them in marginalized positions for the rest of their lives.

In this study, the students do articulate their agency by positioning themselves in stances of power. They initiate signature campaigns, negotiate with teachers, and openly oppose observed inequalities. In the absence of school resources and coherent programs for apprenticeship for college, they borrow materials from neighbors, and articulate their suggestions to some teachers. When they see that their teachers are occupied with an overload of work and cannot assist them in their academic concerns, they seek out "oldtimers" in the community such as local politicians and the few community members who have gone to college.

However, such agency is limited (Foucault, 1985). Students' agency to situate themselves in positions that would allow "access to institutional resources and opportunities ultimately appears dependent upon effective participation" in what Delpit (1998) calls the dominant "culture of power" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 25). In the context of *Paglaum Extension School* critical voices are silenced both by authoritative speech acts and disciplinary technologies. This includes the "common understanding" that schools are intrinsically liberating and just, and that teachers and school administrators are authority figures that should not be questioned because they inherently desire what is best for the school and the students. Any attempt at questioning their statements and practices is usually considered deviant and is dealt with accordingly.

This study, however, presents data to corroborate other researchers' position that, indeed, critical dialogues must be set up to counter the hegemonic beliefs and practices that oppress socio-economically disadvantaged students (Bourdieu, 1982; Davis, 1995; Willis, 1977). Without an active, on-going dialogue among the participants in the program, the goals of any well-intentioned program could be undermined by existing authoritative discourses and disciplinary technologies. Although disciplinary technologies such as tracking are not practiced at *Paglaum*, the school itself is an academic track established for a marginalized group, the "*taga-bukid*" [people from the hinterlands]. *Paglaum Extension School*, being a barrio school "*ra*" (only a village school) is not accorded the same respect and recognition as the *Kaugmaon High School* or the secondary schools in the city. Teachers, students, parents, the community, school administration, and local political leaders therefore must initiate dialogues to facilitate community networks of support necessary to counter "the alienating effects" of the idea that all students are created equal, and that they come to school with the same amount of cultural capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 25).

For example, Davis's ethnographic study in the US on teacher adoption of culturally responsive pedagogy found that although the preservice teachers in her study were "sincere about helping their students succeed in school, they have become entrapped by their beliefs about why students fail." For instance, although they are "not mistaken in their beliefs that minority students need to acquire English and other skills necessary for succeeding within a mainstream system of education, their strongly held beliefs that achievement is based on individual ability and 'proper' training at home" prevent them from understanding that treating minority children as deficient results in low self-esteem and poor academic performance among these children

(Cazden, 1988; Erickson, 1987; Mehan, 1980). In the case of *Paglaum Extension School*, some teachers attributed students' difficulties or failure in schooling not to the lack of literacy resources or the incongruence of students' Primary Discourse and the Secondary Discourses used in school, or to the scarcity of oldtimers in their community but to students' laziness and lack of intelligence. In her ethnographic research, Davis observed that

[such] values and beliefs held by educators and which are translated into school practices are the result of the historical and sociocultural traditions they have experienced at home and through schooling. These historical and sociocultural traditions involve not only cultural attitudes about what constitutes appropriate classroom interaction; but also a wide range of other factors affecting teaching behavior such as values and beliefs about intelligence, the purpose of schooling, and reasons for student failure (1995, p. 553).

Davis (1995) therefore proposes that teachers engage in programs that would heighten their awareness of a pedagogy that is "both culturally responsive and incorporate learning the language of power" (p. 559). She further posits that since teachers' "views of schooling are framed within a particular historical and sociopolitical context and through... [their] specific social and educational experiences," they must engage in "the kind of critical examination [of their beliefs and experiences] which will lead to curricular reform intended to foster alternatives to hegemonic experiences and beliefs" (p. 561).

Limitations and Implications

What this study needs to consider further are the strategies successful students at *Paglaum Extension School* use to counter power inequalities and to gain

entry in powerful networks that provide the opportunities to participate in what Delpit (1993) calls the *culture of power*. It would be beneficial for students at *Paglaum Extension School* and others who are similarly situated to be explicitly informed about the rules of the culture of power, the means of gaining cultural capital, the ways of decoding secondary Discourses in school, and the strategies that can be employed as they apprentice in schooling as a community of practice. This is because "knowledge is always biased and shot through with class meaning." Indeed, working class students like those at *Paglaum Extension School* must overcome their "inbuilt disadvantage of possessing the wrong class culture and the wrong educational decoders to start with.... [The working class] enjoys its privilege not by virtue of inheritance or birth, but by virtue of an apparently proven greater competence and merit" (Willis, 1977, p. 128).

Institutions like *Paglaum Extension School* need to consider conducting ethnographic studies like this, examine school practices and dynamics that are delimiting or empowering, and address power inequalities and marginalization through a well-informed coherent program aimed at legitimizing students' critical voices and engaging them in schooling as a worthwhile investment. Programs that explicitly inform students on how to decode secondary Discourses such as raising objections, note-taking, student organizing, and approaching "oldtimers" are necessary in their apprenticeship to the academia.

Moreover, administrative initiatives for school reforms such as the one student-one book program of former Department of Education secretary Raul Roco should be viewed in light of the micro-context of public schools such as *Paglaum Extension School*. The US\$57.9 million 2000-2006 Secondary Education Development and Improvement Project (SEDIP), for instance, which aims for the improvement and "relevance of secondary

[high school] education" in the provinces can be made more relevant to socio-economically challenged regions if implemented in light of micro, critical autoethnographic studies such as this.

Among others, SEDIP aims to support the "new textbook procurement and delivery system" (<http://www.deped.gov.ph/sedip.htm>). As shown in this study, the procurement and delivery of textbooks to schools is a complex system that is closely related to local school socio-political context such as teachers' tenure and salary, and students' socio-economic background. Specifically, teachers as property custodians are required to remit to the local school authorities the cost of lost and missing books. When the students themselves are unable to pay for their lost books, teachers are therefore compelled to pay for them. Consequently, although books are delivered to schools, most of the teachers, being paid an honorarium of P3000 per month, hesitate to distribute them to students for fear of the potential financial burden this entails. As a result, while hundreds of unopened boxes of new books collect dust in school libraries and store rooms, students spend the first several days per week copying long texts from the teacher's copy and spend one day listening to teachers' explanation or lectures in preparation for a test usually held on Fridays. There is therefore very little opportunity for collaborative activities and other exercises that would enhance students' critical thinking.

Also, textbooks in subjects crucial to high school graduates' entry to college, i.e., English, Science, and Mathematics, are written in English. Thus, programs such as SEDIP should focus on informing teachers and administrators on the differences between Discourse students use at home and the Secondary Discourses in school as well as the differences between the English they may be exposed to through the mass media and the type of English used for academic purposes. Such

heightened awareness could facilitate a more productive dialogue among teachers, administrators, students and their parents, and the community, and pave the way for a culturally-responsive pedagogy that considers students Primary Discourse as a resource for learning the Secondary Discourses used in school. Since language learning entails "not simply memorizing vocabulary lists or working on grammar exercises" but also encompasses embracing a new identity, a new way of communicating, and ... a new way of knowing (Gee, 1987, in Zamel & Spack, 1998, p. 56), students and teachers must be explicitly taught such novel secondary Discourses.

Government programs must facilitate the schools' formulation of a coherent program that explicitly apprentice students to the secondary Discourses in school such as taking notes in English, outlining, summarizing, paraphrasing and reporting English texts to an academic audience, preparing and presenting academic reports, planning and facilitating school activities, student organizing, and collectively representing students' concerns. Most of these activities are conducted in English, so the schools need to initiate a program that addresses this need. Sibayan (1999) showed the same concern for students who cannot afford the much-needed good English language instruction:

I am deeply concerned about those Filipinos, especially those with talent and there are many, those who go to inferior schools, mostly public, in the rural areas who do not have access to a good language education. Something must be done for them (p. 14).

The second goal of SEDIP, "improving access to secondary education" through the establishment of new schools in "underserved areas," can be examined through the experience of *Paglaum Extension School*.

Although the establishment of schools provides students from low socio-economic classes access to high school education, such an opportunity may just be another system that further marginalizes them. Instead of providing a free space for potentially liberating experiences that facilitate their upward socio-economic mobility and the construction of a powerful social identity, it may further oppress marginalized populations.

The success of programs such as SEDIP cannot be determined by the production and publication of statistical data showing increase in the number of schools, reduction of drop out rates, or increase in student attendance in traditionally "underserved" regions. Ethnographic studies should be done in the localities to collect data on how such programs are implemented. Ethnographic studies of a sampling of local schools provide a more robust description of how the network of participants in the school system—the students, parents, teachers, administration, and local and provincial governments—engage in dialogue and actions that allow for or further inhibit the positive transformation of the material conditions and power relations of economically depressed areas, as well as provide communities access to the cultural capital.

On a more personal note, this research has allowed me, a supposed "native researcher," to reflect on possibilities of my own participation in the silencing of the people I seek to represent. During my stay at *Paglaum Extension School*, I continually reconsidered the decisions I made and the actions I took to highlight my concern to be with the students and the volunteer teachers who needed someone with whom to share their frustration. I attempted never to mention the word research and researcher as I communicated with participants because I did not want to be perceived as an authority in the community. Yet, I was the participants' teacher, and a scholar who had returned

to study the community I thought I had so much knowledge of but realized I had very little familiarity with.

In the end, I could only hope that majority of the students accepted me as a person raised in the same community, one familiar with experiences of marginalization and silencing in academic settings and desiring to represent their voices and contribute to the setting up of necessary community network of support. If this first attempt at conducting a reflexive auto-ethnography manages to articulate what Ford (1998) suggests as one of the major requirements of critical ethnography: "the work should articulate the politics of hope" (Lincoln, & Denzin, 2000, p. 1054), then my own efforts have been wisely invested.

For Lincoln and Denzin (2000), this requires "a political vulnerability that goes beyond what Behar describes as "anthropology that breaks your heart (1996, p. 177)."

It [critical ethnography] is more than writing that inserts the personal into the ethnographic. It is more than stories that move others into tears, more than first person narratives that turn the self and its experiences into the site of inquiry. It is more than ethnography born of regret, fear, self-loathing, and anger. This is writing that angers and sorrows the reader, writing that challenges the reader to take action into the world..."
(Lincoln, & Denzin, 2000, p. 1054)

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