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# **TEACHING ESPERANZA: EMPOWERING STUDENTS THROUGH PERSONAL NARRATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

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**Abstract:** The House on Mango Street is a novel that deals with many of the challenges that struggling students, whether impoverished or immigrant or both, tend to face. Its relevance to their own lives makes the text a useful and engaging one for students. By using free writes, read-aloud/think-alouds and group discussions with each new reading, students are provided with access to challenging material, and gain an understanding of how it connects to their lives. By writing responses to literature and doing so in the form of personal narrative, students gain a powerful voice and exercise their critical literacy. By applying participatory action research to defining and researching their own particular problems, students are able to appreciate the transformative power of words and build functional, critical, and academic literacy.

**Keywords:** Literacy, Participatory Action Research, Personal Narrative, Poverty, Youth.

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**Introduction:** “Those who don’t know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we’re dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake” (Cisneros, p. 29).

These are the plaintive words of Esperanza, the nine-year-old protagonist of Sandra Cisneros’ novel, *The House on Mango Street*, a coming of age story about a Mexican girl growing up in the barrios of Chicago. Along with the usual challenges faced by a young girl growing up and navigating the world of home, family, neighborhood, friends and school, nine-year-old Esperanza struggles with the additional burdens of poverty and being the child of immigrant parents. In the vivid vignettes of her childhood, she struggles with poverty, with racism, with stereotypes, and with unattainable dreams. What Esperanza does not personally suffer, she encounters among the characters who inhabit her world. There is the young man who works hard to send money home and is killed in an accident. There is the young woman who wants to attend school but must play caretaker to her father and siblings. There are those who seek to escape their circumstances through drugs, crime, and gangs. There are others who resist losing their culture to the engulfing jaws of assimilation, fighting to maintain their language. There is her own mother, who regrets not having pursued her education because of poverty. There is her father, who wakes up tired in the dark to work hard at a low paying job, devastated by the death of his own father back home in Mexico, struggling to maintain a decent life abroad for his wife and children.

In California, where I teach, we have a very large population of immigrant students, many of whom like Esperanza endure poverty, struggle with language barriers, and are surrounded by a gang culture which demands allegiance of young men in order to avoid harassment and even death at the hands of gang members.

Especialy in the Central Valley of California, many laborers work in the fields, picking strawberries, grapes, oranges, olives and figs. Their children often end up working alongside them, going to school during the week and working in the fields in the evenings or on weekends. It is back breaking work, with very little pay and terrible working conditions. Laborers struggle in the fierce heat, hoisting bags heavy with ripened fruit. The children of these field workers are faced with many of the challenges

Esperanza faces, and school for them becomes a struggle, a punishment, a place that promises great rewards but doesn't enable access to goals that seem out of reach and unattainable to many. Demoralized by extreme poverty, often living in fear of violence, and struggling with learning English as a second language, students often drop out of school or do so poorly, that they are unable to graduate or benefit from their education. For such students, the democratic promise of an equal America often seems unattainable.

The struggle and demoralization these students experience is one that I have experienced to some extent. Having immigrated with my parents from India while in the fifth grade, I began school in a blue-collar Italian neighborhood in Chicago. Taunted and physically bullied regarding my accent, my appearance and my background, I quickly shut down as a learner, despite having achieved excellent grades in my native country. Although I was able to catch up over the next few years, this was a very stressful and unproductive period in my education. First as a high school teacher and now as a professor who trains teachers in the credential program, my research has therefore focused on how best to help students like Esperanza attain academic success and remain engaged. With education being the only effective means of enabling these students to participate fully in a democratic society, it is imperative that they pursue that education and gain the valuable tools of academic, functional and critical literacy needed for success. Yet, with a disproportionately high dropout rate and failure rate, students from impoverished, immigrant, and migrant families find themselves disconnected from school and academics.

I have spent the past decade looking at ways in which we can bridge that gap. Some solutions have been arrived at through a process of trial and error, while others have been based on Paulo Freire's model of problem posing education (Freire, 1979) and Allan Luke's emphasis on building functional and critical literacy in order to achieve academic literacy (Luke, 1986). By combining these methods, along with the knowledge that education should go beyond measurable learning outcomes and contribute to student happiness (Khanna, 2015) and using relevant texts such as *The House on Mango Street*, (Cisneros, 1980), I have seen a tremendous difference in engagement levels, a drastic drop in absentee rates, and a prolific amount of reading and writing in secondary classrooms among struggling readers and English learners.

**Identifying with Esperanza:** I first began using *The House on Mango Street* with my high school freshmen in English class. It was part of our curriculum that included many other classic literary texts. Using literary texts is an engaging and effective way of building language skills as well as literacy (Sobhan, 2015). However, no other text engendered the kind of connection and engagement that this particular text did. Initially, I attributed this difference to the text's structure. Consisting of short vignettes, no more than a short page or two at the most, and using simple understandable language written in the voice of a nine-year-old girl, *The House on Mango Street* is easy to read and grasp, especially for struggling readers and second language learners. What I soon realized, however, is that the seemingly simple text had a number of other factors to recommend it to students.

The heroine of the novel is a young Mexican girl growing up in an impoverished neighborhood, as many of my students do. The girl is struck by tragedy, as so many of my students are. The characters that populate this novel are authentic, flawed, approachable and recognizable to the students. As a result, they are characters with whom they can identify and empathize. Using such a text is one of the most important ways in which we can build engagement in the classroom. Keis (2006) found that texts which celebrate and validate the life experiences of readers lead to reading engagement and reading proficiency. Such engagement is a stronger predictor of reading achievement than any other factor, according to Guthrie, Schafer, and Huang (2001). In *Esperanza*, for the first time, many of my students saw themselves reflected in a classroom text.

**The Power of Personal Narrative:** While the mere act of using such a text goes a long way toward building student engagement, it is not enough in itself to increase academic literacy and proficiency in reading and writing. Students also need a way to respond to such texts, and personal narrative is a powerful method of creating that response. Researchers agree that individuals begin constructing their

life stories during adolescence and continue to work on them throughout their lives (Birren, Kenyon, Ruth, Shroots, & Svendsen, 1996; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). These stories are a way for young people to come to terms with their lives and to find their own identity within society. By using personal narrative along with relevant texts, students are able to develop their reading skills as well as their writing skills while gaining a sense of identity.

I began using *The House on Mango Street* to create a unit where students could write their own personal narratives. Using Esperanza's narrative as a model, we discussed students' homes, family, friends, neighborhoods and relationships. The novel organically moves in an ever-widening trajectory from self to world, with Esperanza gradually defining herself through a series of encounters and reflections on her circumstances and the characters she encounters. By using the vignettes as scaffolding and a model for their own writing, students also learned to define themselves in terms of their setting, their interactions with others, their circumstances and their aspirations.

Paulo Freire (1979) writes that "Human existence cannot be silent nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist humanly is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection."

Through the act of naming their world by writing their own stories, students gain a powerful voice and begin to see that they have the power to change that world. The first step however, is to name the world, however bleak or hopeless it may seem.

As one of my students, Gabriel, writes, "Life is full of obstacles and I am just a Mexican that lives in a messed-up town with the worst people in it." (Bathina, 2007, p. 110). Despondent as it may seem, Gabriel's declaration is the first step in finding a way to change his world. Many of our students never reach this crucial stage of voicing their reality, internalizing it instead as a prison from which they cannot escape. By naming his world for the first time, Angel can now begin to transform it. By acknowledging what is holding him back, he can start to look for ways to overcome the obstacles in his path.

**YPAR: Education for Social Transformation:** The function of literature should not be merely to entertain or inform but to empower (Cummins, 2001). Education thus becomes a tool for social and individual transformation and progress, sorely needed by Angel and the impoverished student populations I work with. The unit I designed needed to encompass both a model for writing and a venue for such transformation. This is where Youth Participatory Action Research was an invaluable addition.

Michelle Fine at the City University of New York has done some groundbreaking work proving the effectiveness of involving students in researching and taking action to transform their own circumstances. Working with urban teens, Dr. Fine found that allowing impoverished youth to research their own circumstances and take concrete steps toward correcting them was a powerful impetus toward academic learning and building a sense of social justice (Camarota & Fine, 2008). Rather than feeling helpless and lashing out at the system that has shortchanged them, students participating in action research felt a sense of empowerment and connectedness with the world around them. No longer marginalized, they were eager to effect positive change in their lives and in their homes and neighborhoods. Her group participated in projects ranging from cleaning up graffiti to protesting laws and lobbying for environmental awareness. They went from being passive and often angry victims to channeling their energy into constructive efforts. Youth Participatory Action Research, or YPAR as it is called for short, calls for an active engagement with text, whether presented in the form of laws, media images, movies, popular culture, or propaganda. By learning to navigate such texts, students learn to understand and control the world around them, a powerful incentive to become literate. Often academic learning and especially learning English, reading, writing, persuasive speech, literary analysis,

are considered irrelevant and unnecessary skills by impoverished youth. When they are shown however, that out of those skills comes the power for immediate action, they are not only willing, but eager to learn them.

After implementing *The House on Mango Street* literacy unit and seeing firsthand the effectiveness of using personal narrative, it seemed a logical next step to combine the relevance of story with the power of participatory action research. If my students were excited and interested in writing their lives and documenting their circumstances, it made sense to show them how they could use this newfound skill to create change. While I had experienced success with helping them find their own voice and thereby expressing a variety of emotions, including rage, disappointment or hope, YPAR would help build essential critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills, social awareness, as well as valuable tools with which to navigate the world. Students were introduced to the process of YPAR, which involves the following steps:

1. Defining a problem
2. Discovering the root of the problem
3. Researching possible solutions
4. Choosing the most appropriate solution for their circumstance
5. Solving the problem
6. Sharing their success with others. (Camarotta and Fine, 2008)

The problems students chose to explore ranged from abuse, to poverty, to racism, to working conditions in the fields, to bullying in schools. All subsequent writing by students was then filtered through this particular lens, so that they could not only write about their lives, but to perform the necessary research and explore solutions to their problems. Here is an example of how Gabriel, who had written initially about being a Mexican in a messed-up town, used the steps of YPAR to examine his own situation.

1. **Define the problem:** Gabriel defined his problem as not being able to go to a good art school to pursue his dream of being an artist.
2. **Discover the root of the problem:** Gabriel determined that the root of the problem lay in his poverty, which prevented him from paying the necessary application fees.
3. **Research possible solutions:** Gabriel spoke with teachers and counselors regarding possible grants and fee waivers he could use to work around the lack of funds. He interviewed friends and family members who shared similar circumstances but were able to pursue their dreams. He got in touch with local groups who were willing to exhibit his art.
4. **Choose the most appropriate solution:** Gabriel decided to use a combination of avenues to reach his goal. Although he was unable to receive a fee waiver to the art academy, he did choose to exhibit his art to gain exposure while he collected the fees he needed to apply. He decided to follow in his cousin's footsteps and become an art teacher first so that he could receive college funding and pursue his dreams of being an artist on the side.
5. **Solve the problem:** Far from satisfied with what he found, Gabriel still resolved to succeed and thus renamed his world by writing: "We have to learn how to make it on our own. Teachers will help a little but they don't know what we go through...just to find out that we can't go to a high-quality school. That still isn't going to stop me...People say that we can do a lot around here to display my art and attract the eyes of the world...My cousin had a hard time and so will I, but I might get farther than him. This is just the beginning." (Bathina, 2007, p. 110). While Gabriel knows that it won't be easy, the process of writing his story while implementing YPAR has given him a clear view of the obstacles he faces as well as a guarded hope, a defined path, and a firm resolve to succeed. By writing about his hopes and dreams, he shares his solution with others.

**Method:** The goal of the unit is to build critical literacy as well as academic literacy while empowering students to transform their circumstances. The text is *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and the teaching method is through read aloud think aloud, class discussion, literary analysis and written responses. A new vignette from the novel is covered each week and once students produce a vignette of their own, they work on peer editing and final drafts. Final drafts are edited by the teacher, and the vignettes are then published as an anthology.

The vignettes in *The House on Mango Street* move organically from self to world in an ever-widening point of view on the part of the narrator Esperanza. Building off of that natural progression, the unit starts with the “Name” chapter, where Esperanza discusses her name and individual identity and concludes with the “Dreams” chapter, which describes the goals and hopes of young Esperanza for her future and for her place in the world.

**The Life Map:** The very first step in the process is that of sharing individual life maps. To model the process of documenting life experience and presenting it from an analytical perspective, I share a powerpoint presentation outlining my ups and downs as a learner, describing some common life challenges and how I overcame them. This is a crucial part of the process since the act of sharing the personal and demonstrating how we face or deal with our circumstances, creates a powerful bond between instructor and students. Many students feel a deep sense of isolation in school and the life map exercise seems to break down some of the barriers that prevent them from integrating fully within their academic environment. Some of the events I share include my own difficulties as an immigrant, my efforts to master a new accent, my struggles with adolescence, my rebellious phase, my interest in school, my favorite teacher who inspired me to do better, despite obstacles. Given the universal aspect of many of these experiences, most students can identify with these events and are engaged and interested as a result.

The other purpose of the life map is to model personal narrative. While students have many stories to tell, they are not often equipped with the language, the descriptive power, the oral or written communication skills, or the ability to accurately summarize their experiences. Modeling for them how to write and tell a vivid story, especially when it is about their own life, inspires them to learn the requisite skills to do the same. Allan Luke talks about the importance of functional literacy, the literacy that enables us to read a map, figure out a bus schedule, or write a resume. He argues that such literacy allows students to see the relevance of their academic learning in concrete and useful forms that have immediate application in their own lives (Luke, 1986).

**Free Write:** The second step in the process is to have students free write a response to an overarching set of questions that while simple, lead to meaningful discussion regarding the text. For example, for the “Name” chapter, some questions might be:

What is your name? Does it reflect who you are? Why or why not? Do you like or dislike your name and why? What is the history of your name? If you could change your name what name would you choose and why?

Students are given five minutes to jot down their responses to the questions and are then asked to share with one another and the class. This series of questions leads to a lively class discussion, with students relating stories to explain why they like or dislike their name. Students often have very strong feelings regarding their name and many cite the fact that others mispronounce their names as a reason for not liking them. We then discuss why they care so deeply about their names and how identity is often inextricable from one's name.

Fabian, a ninth-grader, writes, “My name means bean grower but I don't want it to mean that. I want it to mean sole survivor; someone who has overcome all odds...It describes the race that my family is and what most people judge with the corner of their eyes” (Bathina, 2007, p. 5).

The process of writing about and discussing the topic with each other and the instructor in personal terms gets students thinking about the why behind their visceral responses, a simple exercise in critical thinking. The collaborative sharing and discussion also develops interpersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1994) and allows students to practice inter-psychological processing, a crucial element in social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978). It also prepares students to engage meaningfully with the “Name” chapter by



getting them actively involved in the subject. As a result, they are genuinely curious as to how Esperanza deals with the issue of her name and her identity.

**Read Aloud Think Aloud:** The next step is to actually read the selection out loud. This is an important process because it models prosody, intonation and expression, and the animation that makes text come alive (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Reading aloud is a key component in developing literacy. In fact, it is considered the most effective element for reading success (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000). Not only do Read Alouds demonstrate proper reading, they actually increase a student's desire to read (Mooney, 1990).

The Read Aloud process is especially effective for English learners, since children can actually comprehend a higher level of language when they are listening than when they are reading it on the page. By reading the text out loud, we allow students to gain access to more complex ideas than they would if they were reading on their own. At the same time, we expose them to patterns of language and levels of vocabulary that they would not come across in everyday speech. As a result, students are equipped with tools to tackle new readings on their own (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Along with modeling how to read, the process of thinking aloud as we read is extremely effective in creating engagement and practicing critical literacy. When the instructor pauses to predict, infer, question authorial intent, and to make text to text, text to self, and text to world connections, students are exposed to the proper way to actively interact with text rather than being passive readers. Further, the process of connecting the current text to prior knowledge builds scaffolding for struggling readers, connecting it to one's own life makes it relevant, and connecting it to the larger world helps students see that text is not a static entity existing in a vacuum, but a highly interpretative medium that has powerful connections to the real world. Using a culturally relevant text like *The House on Mango Street* makes these connections clearly visible to the students. (Greene, 1994).

With the "Name" chapter for example, we begin by discussing the ways in which Esperanza describes her name in terms of music, numbers, and colors, and infer that she doesn't like her name. We make a text to text connection with *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), another coming of age story, and relate Esperanza's idea of the real self to the concept of social identity versus personal identity. Each of these exercises provides students with a new way to access the material and establishes the importance of gaining the academic skills being demonstrated.

**Written Response:** Once modeling and discussion ends, students are asked to respond to the text by writing a vignette of their own regarding their name and identity. The instructor first models the assignment by sharing a vignette of her own, which follows the pattern of Cisneros' story. Students are given photocopies of the vignette and the instructor goes over the pattern, pointing out how the story begins with a comparison of Esperanza's name to color, music, mood and number, then goes on to discuss the history of her name. Students are made aware that the story proceeds to family history and culture, then how Esperanza fits into the world around her, and finally her longing for a name that fits her true identity. Students are given the choice of either following the pattern exactly while writing about their own name, or varying the pattern to suit their own tastes, or not following the pattern at all. By providing this kind of scaffolding, the instructor is able to differentiate instruction according to student readiness and ability level, while holding all students accountable to a common rubric. Responses include faithful imitations of the pattern from students like Armando: "When I think about my name...It makes me think of the color yellow because for me, my name is as bright as the sun, and interesting like the number zero. I think about a melody that my mom would always sing me, a song about my name" (Bathina, 2012, p. 1-2).

Others, like Eduardo, choose to depart from Cisneros' pattern, using it as a starting point to create their own unique description of their name: "When people hear my name they expect some burnt out kid with a thick accent and a strange obsession for Spanglish. Underestimated is the one word that defines me. I have ambitions, I have goals in life" Bathina, 2010, p. 3).

**Peer Editing:** Students must have interaction with others and materials in order to learn. The traditional models of teaching through lecture and recitation do not work efficiently. (Hillocks, 2002). This is why the final step in the process is to have students bring in their rough drafts for peer editing. Students are placed in groups of four, where they share their work and provide constructive criticism for each of their group members. Students work with a rubric in order to effectively edit each other's work. This process not only helps students gain valuable feedback from their peers, it encourages them to look critically at their own work and to hold it by the same rubric. The process of editing and revising allows students to gain insight into the writing process, deepening their appreciation of the author as well as the work. They in turn become more careful writers, choosing words carefully and striving to make their meaning perfectly clear to their readers. Peer feedback has an additional advantage for EL students. Brazil (2001), writes: "Research around L2 feedback appears to be moving more and more toward a trend in 'dialogue' between students and teachers – in other words, collaboration and communication during the writing and revision process...feedback in response to successive multiple drafts better empowers students to improve in their writing."

**The Point of Publishing:** Once all students have completed writing their ten vignettes, they are asked to choose the five vignettes they are most proud of. The best vignettes of each student are then compiled and published as an anthology. While the idea of having their work published is a powerful incentive for students to participate, it is also very effective in building functional literacy. As authors who will be selling their book for profit, students have a high stake in learning proper spelling, punctuation, and literary devices. No longer working merely for a grade, students work assiduously to become better writers whose work readers will understand, appreciate and purchase. Along with the desire to have a voice, and the power to transform, the idea of making a personal profit on their own work combines to create a powerful trio of incentives for students to succeed academically by building their literacy skills.

**Discussion:** Having successfully completed six such projects in California's impoverished Central Valley, I believe that combining relevant texts, personal narrative and participatory action research is an extremely effective way of reaching and teaching immigrant children. Displaced as they are, belonging neither to their old country nor fully to the new, confused by the new customs, culture, language and social mores of a new country, and looked down on and ostracized by both teachers and fellow students for their difficulty communicating their ideas, many such students disengage with school and thus with the advantages that education can bring. Some turn instead to drugs, gangs, and crime as a way of surviving and of belonging to a group.

As a result of working on the book projects, students attend school much more often and participate more in class. They read more and write extensively during the process. As a result, they improve their reading, writing and comprehension skills. They begin to use with the English language as a means of representing themselves and connecting with each other (Vootla, 2014). Finally, students report a tremendous increase in self-esteem and self-confidence as a result of becoming published authors. Nearly all of the students who complete the book project show a new or renewed interest in completing their studies and pursuing higher education.

**Conclusion:** In order to gain and keep the attention of disengaged students it is important to use texts that reflect their personal experience rather than texts with which they cannot identify. Beginning instruction by sharing one's own personal experience allows students to feel safe and connected to the instructor and to each other.

It is also extremely important to provide students with as many points of access to challenging material as possible. Making connections, modeling questioning and predictions, and reading out loud to the class provides important patterns for students to follow as they begin to read on their own.

Honest group discussions allow students to share ideas and hear new points of view. Finally, pointing out the existing patterns within text provides students with necessary scaffolding for writing their own responses.

Provided with the incentive of writing and selling their own work, both for profit and to effect change in their lives, students work doubly hard to gain academic, functional and critical literacy, all necessary skills for their success.

By combining all of these methods, we can give all of our students a chance to succeed in school and in life. We can encourage them to become critically literate human beings who are able to successfully navigate the world and become productive members of society.

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