

Chapter 16

Development of Language and Identity Through Author's Chair and Draw and Tell in the Context of Storytelling in Early Childhood Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is powerful. Young children use stories to share experiences, cultural beliefs, and thoughts in their early years. This chapter aims to examine the impact of traditional and digital storytelling on language development and identity among young immigrant children. In a study conducted with young children, they were encouraged to tell and share their personal stories with their classmates in a comfortable and engaging environment created by the author's chair and the draw and tell technique. The authors observed and analyzed the children's work in the after-school program over time and saw that they developed social skills and became confident communicating in their newly acquired language by sharing their own stories. The power of language and culture immersion intertwines with stories that encourage young children to freely communicate and share in a safe space, which fosters children's identity and language development.

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INTRODUCTION

This study's authors are doctoral students with different cultural backgrounds. The authors share the same passion for young children and are curious to explore children's abilities to acquire language and develop their identity. Both authors were part of a team participating in a qualitative study of an after-school program located in South Florida in the United States of America (USA). The program serves Central American immigrant children who have emigrated to the USA in the last three years.

One author is from China, a country that has 129 dialects, making every region unique and special. Nevertheless, some languages are considered nonstandard since they do not follow the same rules as the standard, thus such languages put those speakers at a social disadvantage (Agar, 1996). This author speaks the Sichuan dialect. She did not realize that language possesses such great power until she went to Canton with her parents when she was 9 years old. The Sichuan and Cantonese dialects differ in accents, pronunciation, and spelling, which posed a huge challenge for her to learn and comprehend Cantonese. Therefore, she instead spoke Mandarin with a Sichuan accent when communicating with her classmates. Language differences unfortunately created an invisible wall between her and her classmates. It became worse when they talked to her with an air of superiority. As a result, the superiority they perceived of one language and culture over another hindered their communication and ability to connect. She has avoided speaking the Sichuan dialect in public since then, despite once being very proud of it. She felt the need to hide her dialect and where she was from, but language is supposed to bring people closer through sounds and humanized culture (Agar, 1996).

We can lose our identity and even develop hostility toward our own language when adapting to other cultures and languages. The other author is a native of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, who emigrated to the USA in her early twenties. She studied and worked in a new society where the language and the culture were different from her own. She had a hard transition immersing herself into a new culture, values, costumes, and language. The fact of being a cultural outsider made her feel uncomfortable at times, especially when interacting socially with others. At school, she preferred to work in small groups where she felt more comfortable sharing ideas. However, it has taken longer than expected for her to feel comfortable speaking the new language freely. One factor she feels slowed down her transition to adapting to the new language was the fact that she speaks her native language at home with her family and friends. She believes her family could marginalize her for speaking English, her second language. With time she understood the value of being bilingual in a city where crossing from English to Spanish is the norm.

Having experienced the process of adapting to a new language to fit in socially, both authors decided to investigate how young children process leaving their home and family to embrace a new language, customs, and values. The authors would invite the children to tell their own stories through storytelling using Draw and Tell and Author's Chair techniques.

Educators and students encounter challenges regarding immigration issues related to diverse cultures and languages. The high number of families fleeing oppressive countries around the world and technological developments in the education field have led to the development of global competencies. Global competence refers to the dispositions and abilities children must develop that will prepare them to embrace a global society in a changing economy and multicultural linguistic society (Boix-Mansilla et al., 2013).

Different major educational public systems show how children who emigrate to the United States acquire English as a second or even third language. Students should be respected and valued for their background and the rich experiences they may add to a classroom. The curriculum should include social-emotional competencies through which children can develop empathy for others. It should intro-

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