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Australian Spanish-speaking background secondary school students and the construction and reconstruction of their cultural identity: a "wog" experience

David Alejandro Plaza-Coral

University of Wollongong

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**AUSTRALIAN SPANISH-SPEAKING BACKGROUND SECONDARY
SCHOOL STUDENTS AND THE CONSTRUCTION AND
RECONSTRUCTION OF THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITY:
A "WOG" EXPERIENCE**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

DAVID ALEJANDRO PLAZA-CORAL
M.Ed. (Brazil), B.A. in Philosophy (Chile)

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

1998

D E C L A R A T I O N

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signed

.....

David Alejandro Plaza-Coral

D E D I C A T I O N

To Erica, my wife, whose constant support and encouragement has always been present in the almost four years we have spent in Australia. She stoically left behind her work, relatives and friends in Brazil to accompany me on my academic journey.

I owe her a debt of gratitude for her love, patience and devotion.

In this time she bravely and determinedly faced the English language and now can communicate almost without accent, making in that way her stay away from home a less painful experience. Now she speaks three languages: Portuguese, Spanish and English.

Because of her wonderful personality she made a lot of friends from all around the world. "You will be missed" have been the words they said when they saw us off.

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

I would like to express my profound thanks and gratitude to my supervisors Dr. Janice Wright and Dr. Christine Fox who, during the process and writing of this study were, in addition to being persistent and careful critics, a constant source of motivation and encouragement. Their copious and wise advice, and enthusiasm to discuss prolonged and intently many aspects of this project, were invaluable and much welcome. These things, combined with their limitless kindness and enormous consideration, helped to make the writing of this thesis a labour of satisfaction.

I thank the faculty librarian Keith Gaymer for helping me to get some of the statistical data

I also wish to thank all the children, parents, teachers and staff from the schools where I carried out this study. I really appreciate their collaboration and willingness to participate in this study.

A B S T R A C T

There are significant numbers of Spanish-speaking background students in Australian secondary schools, but as a linguistic cohort their experiences have generally been underrepresented in educational research. This study was undertaken to explore the ways in which one group of secondary school Spanish-speaking background students from three different countries negotiated their cultural identity in classrooms, at school and at home.

In any nation where the majority of its inhabitants has a migrant history, there are socio-economic, political, cultural and educational issues that specifically affect immigrants and the children of immigrants. This study deals with concepts of cultural identity and their relationships to education, immigration, language, multiculturalism and racism. Much of the literature does not speak for the subordinated "other" in society, particularly when looking within a multicultural society, as opposed to say, oppressed people in "other" countries. The literature tends to be about the relationships from the dominant society's viewpoints, or about the minority group's material gains and failures, and there is little in the literature which explains the richness of culture and identity of the "other" when seen from within that group.

This qualitative, multiple case study of twenty two students has allowed the participants the opportunity to tell their own stories about their lives and about their school experiences. The conceptual framework of the present study can be defined as an attempt to investigate the formation of identity in the context of those places where it is likely to be formed; that is to say the family, the school and the spaces in between.

The study was designed to be carried out in two phases. First, the students and their parents were interviewed about their experiences as immigrants or children of immigrants in Australia. Second, the students were observed when participating in Science, Mathematicss and English lessons, so that critical incidents and interactions could be recorded. These data were checked with the students, and where possible their teachers were also interviewed either before or after the classes. The data were analysed to throw light upon those factors which both at home and at school appeared to play a crucial part in helping the students to define themselves in terms of their own subjectivities and their possible futures, as well as in relation to their family members, their peers, and other significant people in their lives.

It was found that these students move in an out of two different worlds, the one maintained mainly by their parents at home and the other of the wider society, mirrored in the school. It was also found that the complexities, puzzles and potential conflicts of the spaces in between these worlds were individually constructed, yet at the same time driven by the specific context in which the students found themselves — a context encompassing a particular political/ideological era (which favours certain, sometimes negative, attitudes towards notions of difference), the family's economic and educational background, the expectations of the parents, and the students' own age, experience, hopes and desires. Unlike their parents who appear caught in a cultural bubble, possibly because of their perceived deficiencies in the English language, the students are much freer to construct different, mulit-faceted identities, while generally appreciating their place in the family's heritage.

R E S U M E N

Números significativos de estudiantes que tienen como origen lingüístico la lengua española estudian en escuelas secundarias australianas, sin embargo como grupo lingüístico sus experiencias han estado generalmente mal representadas en la investigación educacional. Este estudio fue llevado a cabo para explorar las formas en que un grupo de estudiantes secundarios de origen lingüístico español de tres diferentes países negociaban su identidad cultural en la sala de clases, en la escuela y en el hogar.

En cualquier nación donde la mayoría de sus habitantes tiene una historia de inmigrante, hay problemas socio-económicos, políticos, culturales y educacionales que específicamente afectan a los inmigrantes y a los hijos de inmigrantes. Este estudio tiene que ver con conceptos de identidad cultural y sus relaciones con educación, inmigración, lenguaje, multiculturalismo y racismo. La mayoría de la literatura no habla por el subordinado "otro" en la sociedad, particularmente cuando se trata dentro de una sociedad multicultural, en oposición digamos, a la gente oprimida en "otros" países. La literatura tiende a ser acerca de las relaciones desde puntos de vista de la sociedad dominante, o acerca del grupo minoritario y sus ganos materiales y sus fracasos, y hay poco en la literatura que explique la riqueza de cultura y identidad del "otro" cuando es visto desde dentro de ese grupo.

Este estudio cualitativo de casos múltiples de veinte y dos estudiantes ha permitido que los participantes tengan la oportunidad de contar sus propias historias acerca de sus vidas y acerca de sus experiencias en la escuela. El marco conceptual del presente estudio puede ser definido como un intento para investigar la formación de la identidad en el contexto de aquellos

lugares donde es más probable que se forme, es decir la familia, la escuela y los espacios intermedios.

El estudio fue diseñado para ser llevado a cabo en dos fases. Primero, los estudiantes y sus padres fueron entrevistados acerca de sus experiencias como inmigrantes o hijos de inmigrantes en Australia. Segundo, los estudiantes fueron observados cuando participaban en las clases de ciencia, matemáticas e inglés, para así poder grabar las interacciones y los incidentes críticos. Esta información fue analizada para iluminar aquellos factores que tanto en casa como en la escuela parecen jugar una parte crucial en ayudar a los estudiantes a definirse a sí mismos en términos de su propia subjetividad y sus posibles futuros, así como también en relación con sus familia, sus compañeros, y otras personas significativas en la vida de ellos.

Se encontró que estos estudiantes se mueven dentro y fuera de dos mundos diferentes, el mantenido principalmente por sus padres y el otro el de la sociedad en general, que se refleja en la escuela. Se encontró también que las complejidades, los enigmas y conflictos potenciales de los espacios intermedios de estos mundos eran individualmente contruidos, sin embargo al mismo tiempo derivados del contexto específico en el cual los estudiantes se encontraban a sí mismos — un contexto que acompaña una era particular, política/ideológica (que favorece ciertas, a veces negativas actitudes hacia aquellas nociones de diferencia), el trasfondo económico y educacional de la familia, las expectativas de los padres y la edad, experiencia, esperanzas y deseos de los propios estudiantes. Diferente de sus padres que parecen atrapados en una burbuja cultural, posiblemente debido a sus percibidas deficiencias en la lengua inglesa, los estudiantes son mucho más libres para construir identidades diferentes y multifacéticas, al mismo tiempo que aprecian su lugar en la herencia familiar.

A B B R E V I A T I O N S

ALP	Australian Labour Party
CMEP	Child Migrant Education Program
DEET	Department of Employment, Education and Training
DEETYA	Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.
DELE	Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera (Certificate of Spanish as a Foreign Language)
DIEA	Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs
EAPS	Ethnic Affairs Policy Statement
ESL	English as a Second Language
HSC	Higher School Certificate
LBOTE	Language Background other than English
LOTE	Language Other Than English
MERCOSUR	Free Trade Market among Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay
NAATI	National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters
NACCME	National Advisory and Co-ordinating Committee on Multicultural Education
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NESB	Non-English speaking background
NSW	New South Wales
SAE	Standard Australian English
SC	School Certificate
TAFE	Tertiary and Further Education

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Emigrar

Emigran los pájaros, las mariposas,
también los peces,
¿por qué no emigrar los hombres?

Los pajaros, las mariposas y los peces
emigran estimulados por la naturaleza
y casi siempre regresan a su lugar de origen.

Los hombres emigran
forzados por otros hombres
y casi nunca regresan a su natal terruño.

(Belarmino Sarna, 1992).

To Emigrate

Birds, butterflies emigrate
fish too,
why not people?

Birds, butterflies and fish
emigrate stimulated by nature
and they almost always return to their place of origin.

People emigrate
forced by other people
and they almost never return to their home land.

(My own translation).