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I Am More from Here than from There: The Role of Citizenship Schools in the Construction of Racial Identity Among Older Adult Immigrants

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Keywords: citizenship, racial identity, social construction, immigrant, older adults

Abstract: The non-formal setting of citizenship schools provide an environment for learning, critical reflection and a space to socially construct a collective racial meaning through dialogue and through a critical understanding of history and identity in the United States. This study will focus on the experiences of Spanish speaking older adult learners as they prepare for the citizenship test and explore their sense of identity as new citizens.

Introduction

The concept of participatory citizenship and citizenship schools as a counter-hegemonic vehicle against social-economic oppression and marginalization is an important element in adult education practices with immigrants who are becoming naturalized citizens. For the most part, the non-formal setting of citizenship schools creates a space for dialogue and reflection about the United States' political and social system and its relationship with the adult student's life and challenges. This study focuses on the experiences of Spanish speaking older adult learners (55 and older) as they prepare for the citizenship test, as well as explore their sense of identity as new citizens and as active participants in American society.

Citizenship courses prepare students who are resident aliens for the citizenship exam by helping them study the 100 questions required by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). During the citizenship exam, applicants older than 55 years of age must answer six questions correctly to pass. Citizenship classes can also provide an environment for learning, critical reflection and a space to socially construct a collective racial meaning through dialogue and through a critical understanding of U.S. history and political system, and their rights and their responsibilities as citizens. Students relate that learning to their own life experiences.

Their new knowledge and understanding of the U.S. from a transnational lens, both as Mexicans and as new U.S. citizens generates a collective and individual meaning that sustain their values as much as transform their approach to building a new future. Their sense of racial identity is linked to past stories prevalent in their life experience and expanded by place, legal status and an understanding of the rights and benefits of citizenship. Citizenship schools can become a knowledge site whereby this formative process is enhanced through experiential learning, dialogue, combining the familiar with the new, bringing forth the students' personal stories and values to the classroom, and exploring multiple ways of knowing and learning in an environment design for improvisation as well as for meeting the goals of each student.

This study looks at the question whether a citizenship course that engages the student in critical thinking and reflection about U.S. history and it's political system would actually result in more active citizens, and whether this entire process of the legal status change and a better knowledge of their rights and benefits can result in a shift in their racial identity or a different understanding of themselves as voters and active citizens. The participants who were interviewed

have been citizens for an average of one year and previously, permanent residents between 15-20 years. They were not eligible to vote in the U.S. as permanent resident. If race is not a fixed concept, can these elements of legal status, sense of place, and a learning environment design for critical thinking and reflection generate the impetus to reaffirm and re-evaluate their sense of racial identity?

Race Identity

The concept of race must be expanded and viewed in a constant process of formation, as a dynamic racial epistemology reflective of the experiential complexity of living in a changing world. Global migrants constantly wear their transnational identities as they travel from one geographical location to another. According to Omi and Winant (1994), the concept of race is a social-historical constructed process “by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (p. 55). The conceptualization of race, as has been generally agreed by social scientists, is a contested arena (Omi and Winant, 1986).

Race has played a central and historical role in this country’s immigration policies and subsequently, the institutionalization of those policies have perpetuated a separation of new immigrants from mainstream society because of their status and, at times, racial affiliation. New immigrants are subjected to separation from their family, to barriers to educational opportunities, lack of good paying jobs, and to the abuse by law enforcement in cases of racial profiling. As a consequence of the racialized underpinnings of a neo-liberal political system, immigrants have become political commodities to the extent that now the term “illegal” tends to signify Mexican.

From a social constructionist framework, immigrants are the recipients of a socially constructed set of codes serving a racialized system of privilege. By resisting and in turn socially constructing their own set of codes and language through dialogue and action, and through the creation of their own social, cultural institutions, immigrants can promote a sustainable self identity, manage a more complex view of race and racial relations, and participate as active citizens in social change.

Methodology

This ethnographic research of a group of older immigrant students who participated in a Spanish-language citizenship class to prepare for the 100 questions required for U.S. citizenship. Because of their age, over 55 years, they were eligible to study the questions and take the citizenship exam in Spanish. All the participants interviewed had been legal residents from 10 to 20 years.

The information was gathered through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. The participants were composed of five male and one female interviewee between the ages of 58 – 74 years of age. The interviews were held at their residences. Four participants were still employed and two were retired. All of the interviewees were still very much involved in religious, healing, social and cultural activities in their communities. Their annual earnings were between \$15,000 to \$35,000 dollars. Most of them had been employed, on average, for over 10 years with the same company. Their formal educational level ranged between no schooling and up to the 6th grade. As youngsters, they grew up in the Mexican States of Michoacan, Oaxaca, Sonora and Baja California. All of them have from five to nine adult children. Most of these children and grandchildren were residing in the U.S.

The guiding questions for this research were: What does it mean to be a U.S. citizen? How and in what ways is the participant’s racial identity shaped by their legal status? Does

integrating an experiential social justice perspective into the curriculum result in active, engaged citizens? These questions served as starting points for this study.

Findings

Three focus areas arose from this study – legal status, place and the importance of citizenship schools.

Legal Status

The participants of this study have lived in the U.S. between 16 and 33 years. Although they have paid income tax, they have spent the last 15 to 20 years as legal residents without the ability to vote or claim any federal retirement benefits. One of the incentives to becoming naturalized was to apply for legal residence for their adult children. Another reason was to vote and be able to demand their rights as citizens. This was a common response among interviewees.

Eduardo Aguirre (2004), the US Citizenship and Immigration Service director defines citizenship as “a condition of allegiance to, and participation in a governmental jurisdiction. It means, for a collective order, a pledge of loyalty, commitment to actively participate in civics and community, and willingness to serve when and where called upon. ... Citizenship begins within the individual but is nurtured by the country” (p. 2). Acquiring U.S. citizenship can occur in three ways, by birth, by the parent’s citizenship and, if the individual is a citizen from another country, by naturalization. Once a person becomes a naturalized U.S. citizen, they are entitled to rights and responsibilities equal to a native born citizen such as voting, serving in a jury, and joining the Armed Forces (USCIS, 2004).

Although the ability to read, write, and speak English is one of the requirements for naturalization, the participants in this study were exempt because they had resided in the U.S. for more than 15 years and were over 55 years of age. Many of the participants became citizens to be able to apply for legal status for their children and to take advantage of their rights as citizens.

Place

Race formation does not necessarily come about without the friction generated by the opposition of adversary communities with a different cultural point of view. New citizens maintain their sense of social and cultural identity by sustaining community relationships through organizations such as churches, community cultural events, familial gatherings like baptism, marriages or funerals that bring people together to share community rituals. Clearly, the development of community organizations and their grounding through customs and relationship act as a source of resistance to total cultural melting pot. Omi and Winant point out to the ability “to resist racial domination in entirely new ways, particularly by limiting the reach and penetration of the political system into everyday life, by generating new identities, new collectivities, new (imagined) communities that are relatively less permeable to the hegemonic system” (1993, p. 7). Cultural organizations provide both a source of resistance and of inclusion.

Study participants integrated their identity in relation to family and community. They described themselves as parental figures responsible for their children’s well being. Another interesting finding was that when asked about their race, they said “Mexican.” In Mexico, where you are from has more meaning than what race you belong to. Individual identification with race as in “raza,” did not create a strong response. They said they were from a ciudad or rancho, city or countryside. Some participants mentioned they were indigenous, indigena, but did not claim an affiliation to a tribe, but rather identified with a region or location where they were born.

Oaxacans, who speak a native language like Triqui, tend to identify more closely with their racial identity as an indigenous group. New citizens perpetuate multiple identities by integrating relevant aspects of their life experience with a newly found sense of belonging and identification.

Citizenship Schools

Citizenship schools and citizenship courses have been influential in developing a critical reflective learner by providing a space for dialogue and meaning-making among participants as an anti-hegemonic expression of resistance. In the early 1950s, the Highlander Center instigated the creation and expansion of citizenship schools in order to teach African-Americans how to read and write so they could pass the literacy exam and be able to vote. During a teacher's training in the early 1960s, Myles Horton, Highlander's co-founder, spoke to citizenship school teachers about how the way teachers think of their learners can propel them into what they can become:

“Take for instance an old man who has never learned to read and write, and who wouldn't want to go into an ordinary school where he would be treated as a kid. What happens to him in the Citizenship School? Well, of course the teacher must start with where the man *is*. But at the same time he is thought of always in terms of what he *can become*. And because the teacher thinks of him that way, this man can think of himself that way too” (2003, p. 144).

Citizenship schools are active historical sites that contribute to the engagement of the student in social action and to a better understanding of the student and teacher's positionality in the lifeworld. Horton (2003) envisioned hundreds of involved citizens who through the work of teachers would be able to read and write and become active participants because teachers “began by assuming that they *could* be citizens” (p. 145). Both students and teachers are partners in socially constructing what is to come by learning from each other through sharing stories and negotiating curricular content. The curriculum plays a major role in the construction of this complex, dynamic reality.

Miguel, who is in his 70s, missed only one question out of ten in the citizenship exam. He is currently applying for his U.S. passport. He says that he feels more American. “Right now I am more North American. I am more American, but I would like to be more Mexican. To be with my family in Mexico (Ahorita soy más norteamericano. Yo soy más Americano pero quisiera ser más Mexicano, estar en Mexico por la familia).” He equates being more Mexican when in Mexico and more American when in the United States. “I am more from here than from there (Soy más de acá que de allá).”

Pinar (1993) explains the importance of curriculum as a negotiated racial text. He says, “to understand curriculum as a racial text suggest understanding ourselves as racial texts. By exploring the denied past, we might push back the blacked-out, repressed areas and in so doing understand our nonsynchronous identity as Americans” (p. 63). An understanding of the curriculum as a racialized text is significant in the exploration of citizenship courses and their effect on learner's ability to become new citizens. According to Pinar (1993), identity responds to the constantly changing influences arising internally and through the intersection with historical events, and through gender and racial formation. He states, race is “a complex, dynamic and changing construct” (p. 61).

Miguel, who could not write nor read in Spanish, felt like he was asleep and by learning together and through a CD that was created for this class, he was able to be more awake – como

despierta un más. He said, “It gave me courage to fight on (me dió animo, le vamos a hacer la lucha).” He was feeling depressed at the thought that he wasn’t going to be able to do anything to become a citizen.

The participants’ awareness that as citizens they now had the ability to claim or demand their rights – reclamar mis derechos, and be counted through their vote was by far the most important learning from the citizenship class. Ramón said, “I remember when you taught the class and told us that when we became citizens we were going to have the same rights and support like other people. That I can never forget.” Now he wants to get registered to vote. He continues, “What I need to do now is to register to vote so that they will pay attention to me (me tomen en cuenta).”

Becoming a citizen is about managing the contradictions of the past and present by propagating strong roots, and by anticipating and acting on a preferred and negotiated future.

Discussion

The citizenship course provided the motivation to learn about U.S. civics, and about American history including the struggles of African-Americans, the right to vote and be counted, labor history and civil rights. Students began to value the importance of passing the citizenship test as a way of providing their families with economic security. The development of a political consciousness started by the student’s understanding of the importance to be counted with their vote. Being a U.S. citizen allowed them to reap the full benefits provided by this country. The citizenship course helped them overcome personal learning barriers and gave them an opportunity to challenge themselves with a “yes we can” (si se puede) attitude in order to pass the citizenship test. The social, economic and political awareness they gained from the citizenship class allowed them to see the changes in their workplace, in the way people related to them as citizens, and in their self identity as people with rights equal to other citizens. As a group, the students co-created a positive learning environment that motivated them to become more active as citizens. Does an awareness of equity and rights lead to emancipatory learning?

Imel (1999) questions the emancipatory nature of adult learning. She says, “The experiences learners and instructors bring to the classroom have an impact on everything that happens including joint knowledge construction, voice, and dialogue” but it doesn’t always result in emancipatory learning (¶ 11). As Horton mentioned above, both the teacher and student can work hand-in-hand to make the road by walking. The relationship created by their interaction carries more weight than the obsession with the task. Nevertheless, emancipatory learning is often triggered by experiences beyond the confines of the classroom. The non-formal environment of the citizenship classroom can provide a place to study, reflect and re-activate a motivation to fight back.

In Freire’s last writings compiled in a book, *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004), he wrote that a sense of just ire is a source of motivation to act. He said, “I have the right to be angry and to express that anger, to hold it as my motivation to fight, just as I have the right to love and to express my love for the world, to hold it as my motivation to fight, because while a historical being, I live history as a time of possibility, not of predetermination” (p. 59). This sense of ire is fueled by the individual’s perspective and interaction in a small group setting, and sewn together from bits of lived experience, historical events, a sense of self and place in their process of becoming a citizen. The process of becoming allows for more possibilities, more hope of what a democratic society could be.

The complexity of racial identity is influenced by a multiplicity of phenomena distributed historically over time and place. The individual is constantly influenced by collective action and the community is influenced by the individual awareness of self and place in struggle for political validation. Race as a concept of mobile societies grappling with self-identity, power and citizenship is situational, contested, and highly changeable over time. The youth who belong to the latest Millennium Generation already live in a mixed race reality that is rupturing a static view of race and shifting the racial tectonics with a new Mestizo American cultural future (Rodriguez, 2007). The tsunami they are becoming will change the face of race in America.

This study provided a window to older immigrant's life experience as they navigated the path towards citizenship, and become increasing more knowledgeable and reflective citizens about their rights, their sense of place and the importance of citizenship schools in directing them to what they can become in civic life. A longitudinal study of the experiences of older adult immigrant learners and of young people is needed to find out whether their newly established legal status correlate with their change in identity over a period of time. Adult education, as a field, must make space to confront the myth of racial differences and the discrimination and privilege that arises from those beliefs. Citizenship schools can again be the fine-grid stone where learners can hone their civil rights edge and become active citizens.

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