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Book Review of *Immigrant Students and Literacy: Reading, Writing and Remembering* by Gerald Campano

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Prepare to be moved by reading *Immigrant Students and Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Remembering* by Gerald Campano (2007). Through touching student accounts, Campano promotes insight into the experience of children from immigrant, migrant, and refugee families and helps the reader to discover how to provide beneficial literacy experiences that respect and encourage students' identification with their ethnic origins. In *Immigrant Students and Literacy*, Campano introduces the reader to children who take on the responsibilities of adults during their time away from the classroom, children with poignant insight into the social origins of their circumstance, and children for whom school often offers little hope of advancement. Campano, a descendent of Filipino immigrants, presents himself as a teacher who drew upon his own family history to explore the literacy practices of immigrants, practices that engaged and resonated in deeply meaningful ways with the lives of his fifth-grade students. An advocate of the stance of educator as activist, Campano took on a teacher researcher role as he studied the effects of drawing from students' lives to promote literacy.

Student Lives as Curriculum

Throughout this study, Campano asked himself, "What would happen if I invited children from immigrant and migrant backgrounds to read, write, and speak from their own experiences and the realities of their lives?" (p. 31) Campano had engaged in such a journey of self-discovery, inquiring into his own family history, making connections with his Filipino heritage, forging a new view of himself, and integrating both the Filipino and the American. He had discovered that his grandfather's immigration story was a story of strength, survival, aspiration,

and creative adaptation to the circumstances of life in a new country with its harsh realities. The experience was empowering and inspired him to wonder what would happen if he used a similar inquiry approach with his students. Through inquiring into their own families and histories, the children could work through their own experiences, defining themselves as both their native ethnicity and also American, valuing their heritage from their native country as a treasured part of who they were, while at the same time developing the schooled literacy practices needed for life in American society.

Campano's focus on student inquiry into familial histories and transnational connections proved to be a prolific source of curricular content and literacy development. Campano shared the stories of students who had endured great suffering, who were older than their years, and perhaps wiser than their peers as a result. The insights of these fifth-grade students demonstrated their keen awareness of the socially-generated difficulties they faced in American schools and society. For example, ten-year-old Simon wrote about problems in his neighborhood in his autobiographical piece:

The people who go to jail make wrong choices because someone treated them without respect, or they didn't get many compliments to encourage them. We should stop making criminals, but we should make intelligent people by giving youth an education. Minorities should be treated with the same respect as people in the majority. Just because they have color does not mean that they are not smart. As Martin Luther King said, "Judge people not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." It's not the skin color that counts, but the heart and brain. (p. 49)

Simon and his classmates wrote not only of social injustice, but also of hope and aspirations, of continuity of life, of cooperation and community. They wrote to redefine stereotypes, to present alternate perspectives on life and schooling, and to share their rich cultural discoveries. Many such discoveries were made through correspondence with relatives in the students' home countries. Simon's classmate shared a piece of correspondence from his uncle in the Philippines; the uncle's letter demonstrated not only the sharing of cultural and familial information that occurred in Campano's classroom, but also the degree of connectivity and acceptance fostered through literacy experiences:

I received your letter and am very happy, that you take concern for the family here.... Your grandfather was born in a small village which was part of Talisayan. It is a beautiful place with a small wharf facing the Pacific Ocean. The people are peace-loving and pure Catholic. Fishing, farming and some handicraft are the only source of livelihood. But now the village is progressive with sea and land transportation. If you want to visit the Philippines, just inform us in advance.... Good night and sweet dreams across the miles. (p. 86)

This letter was one of many posted on the bulletin board. The students' inquiries not only yielded a rich cultural and social curriculum, but also a multifaceted literacy curriculum that transcended the bounds of the classroom.

The Second Classroom

Much of the work Campano and his students engaged in occurred in what he referred to as the "second classroom," a space possible between and around formal classroom experiences as they intersect with the daily lives and family histories of students. Conversations during lunch

and recess, international correspondences with relatives in distant countries, and research at home and in the community were all part of the second classroom. Campano defined the second classroom as “an alternative pedagogical space” which develops “organically by following the students’ leads, interests, desires, forms of cultural expression, and especially stories” (p. 40). He identified its location as “beyond the immediate classroom walls, into homes and community spaces” (p. 40). Essential to Campano’s notion of a second classroom was the sense of community that developed among students; he stated that “the buried histories that our narratives materialize, the sense of community we establish through memory, the relationships we nurture and sustain, and the children’s own life experiences would all become important intellectual and academic resources” (p. 40).

In the second classroom, students shared their inquiries with one another and took interest in each other. For some students, this work was a way to sort out the struggles of their lives, define their identities, or reconnect with a heritage that was not valued in their new world. For others, it was a way to share their world, to show an alternative perspective, or to speak out against unfounded assumptions about the nature of immigrants, migrants, and refugees. Work in the second classroom served to create a web of connectivity among students, their teachers, their familial cultures, and their American community. At the same time, it produced substantial literate products through which standard literacy skills could be effectively developed.

Campano employed literacy practices that created a space for his students to explore their lives and experiences in meaningful and motivating ways. Students participated in a wide range of literacy activities including a variety of writing such as autobiography, biography, multilingual response journals, letter writing, and defining transnational identities. They also engaged in “writing back,” which Campano explained was a means of giving voice to students to “counteract negative preconceptions of the neighborhood” (p. 48). In addition, students engaged in literacy activities that used other modes of representation such as bulletin board displays, informal discussion groups, storytelling, intergenerational storytelling, dance, improvisation, puppetry, and drama. One project combined several literacy activities with the content of various inquiries. The students worked with a student teacher, Angelica, who was well versed in dance and teatro (p. 90), to create a professional development program for teachers and teacher educators. They wrote a powerful script and prepared a dramatic performance entitled “What the Teacher Didn’t Know” (p. 99-101), depicting the various viewpoints of students and teachers involved in the school experience of students from immigrant, migrant, and refugee families. Campano’s approach not only generated rich curricula and promoted literacy proficiency, but also opened a venue for student voice and agency.

Teacher Research and Educational Activism

Campano’s desire to empower his students is consistent with his philosophy of educator as activist. Throughout *Immigrant Students and Literacy*, Campano underscored that the failure of some student populations to succeed in school represented a deficit in the social system of schooling, not a deficit in student abilities. He encouraged teachers to engage in teacher research, to discover truths for themselves, and to resist dominant assumptions from within the system in order to promote social justice in schooling. One particularly poignant example provided by Campano involved the student teacher, Angelica, who engaged her students in an improvisational drama on poetry and other writings. She was reprimanded by a school

administrator for using the designated literacy block for this activity as evidently this activity did not count as literacy (p. 90). Resisting individualized skills approaches and decontextualized instruction as a basis for literacy development, Campano defended Angelica's collaborative, student-centered approaches to literacy:

Angelica created a safe space in school in which to live alternative ways of knowing and being and to ask, Why is it? Her work with the students privileged cooperation and collaborative creativity over individual achievement and competition, directed improvisation over preset objectives, ongoing group response over alienating individual assessment, and multiliteracy over monolingualism. More than anything, Angelica helped create a world that fostered joyful interdependence by putting the beautiful variations of student identity, knowledge and expression on stage. (p. 103)

Campano also reported that his approach yielded strong student outcomes even on standardized tests in language arts and mathematics; he reported initial gains of ten to fifteen percentile points on these measures. His students scored well despite the lack of focus on a decontextualized curriculum. Campano only briefly mentioned a schedule of skill development activities but did not explain if, or how, those activities emerged from the inquiry. Additional information about his approach to teaching skills would be appreciated; teachers might find it helpful to see in greater detail how this part of the program was implemented. In this volume, however, Campano chose to focus on the power of his inquiry approach to reach, teach, and give voice to students. By tapping into student lived experiences, he was able to accomplish the literacy goals prescribed by the school, but in more engaging and meaningful ways—through intimate relationships, inquiry, and empathy.

Teacher Sensitivity

A concept alluded to, but not extensively discussed by Campano, suggested the question of whether or not teachers need to have similar life experiences in order to be effective with immigrant and migrant populations. Campano's familial background gave him insight into the lived experience of his students; likewise, Angelica's migrant upbringing was connected to her success with students. According to Campano, "it was Angelica's direct experience with loss – with abrupt geographical, cultural, and emotional dislocation – that has provided her with special insight into the lives of so many of our students." (p. 93). Perhaps unintentionally, Campano pointed to potential research questions about teacher recruitment and/or teacher education: Is there a correlation between teacher background and the academic success of students from immigrant, migrant, and refugee backgrounds? If teacher background is important, how can teacher recruitment efforts ensure better representation of these populations in the professional ranks of teaching? Is it possible to develop teacher sensitivity toward student lived experiences that differ from the mainstream? If so, in what ways can teacher education programs strive to promote that sensitivity?

Used as a required reading for all preservice teachers, *Immigrant Students and Literacy* could prove to be an important text for a teacher's initial development of the knowledge and understanding needed for working with students of culturally different backgrounds. This book is a worthy companion to other volumes that foreground students' lived experience in the teaching and learning process, such as *Ways with Words* (Heath, 1983), *Other People's Words* (Purcell-Gates, 1995), *Other People's Children* (Delpit, 2006), and *Funds of Knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll

& Amanti, 2005). Campano's thought-provoking text would be of interest to those who subscribe to sociocultural, sociopolitical, and social justice philosophies of literacy education.

References

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