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Playwriting as a Mechanism for Language Development and Personal Expression

INTRODUCTION

The Northfield School District serves 3,000 students; 82% of these students are White, 13% are Hispanic, 2.5% are Black, 2.5% are Asian, and .3% are American Indian (Chikkatur, 2015). Furthermore, while 71% of White students at Northfield High School passed state tests, only 31% of Latin@¹ students did (Chikkatur, 2015). One space in which the nationwide discrepancy in test scores is being addressed is English Language Learner (ELL) programs, which serve primarily Latin@ students. One ELL teacher at Northfield High School, Jennifer Lompart, created a playwriting course in 2011 with the goal of serving student needs, both academic and personal. Each year, students in the course write plays and ultimately perform them for Northfield's Annual Latino Play Fest. Our research inside and outside of Ms. Lompart's classroom serves to explain the purpose of the playwriting course, what students gain from the course, how arts education supports language development, and how the performance of the students' play enhances intercultural understanding within the Northfield community. The research compiled here summarizes our findings about ELL arts education and its benefits in comparison to Ms. Lompart's ELL playwriting class. Furthermore, the research demonstrates the importance of a course like this one for students in the class, other students in the school, and members of the Northfield community.

¹ Latin@ is a gender-neutral term that replaces Latino and Latina. It can be pronounced "Latin-at" or "Latino and Latina." We will use this term in this paper, unless we are quoting from research sources that use other terms.

This paper will be divided into three main sections: a *literature review*, a review of sources discussing the practice of arts education as it pertains to teaching English Language Learners; our *data analysis*, a compilation of our classroom observations, informal student interviews, an interview with a community member, and an interview with Ms. Lompart; and a *discussion*, synthesizing academic sources regarding ELL arts education with our data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiences of Latin@ students in U.S. schools and majority White schools

Latin@ students are often marginalized in American high schools, which is likely to lead to negative feelings about school and academic achievement. Sherry Marx gives an example of this marginalization in her study of the students and teachers of a high school that was 95% White and 5% Latin@ (2008a, p. 69). In this study, it becomes clear that teachers contribute to the marginalization of their own students. In a survey of 26 adult staff members, teachers reported feeling, on average, that “Latinos are not strong students” (Marx, 2008a, p. 69). Some teachers reinforced this notion, with one teacher saying that “[Latin@ students] are lazy and want me to problematize everything. They are defiant and call me names, telling me I am mean because I want them to learn” (Marx, 2008a, p. 80).

However, in a separate study in California at an urban high school, where 77% of the students were Latin@ and 100% of the teachers were White, Marx (2008b) studied four popular teachers for the (a) ways in which they could relate to students, (b) ways in which they could not relate, and (c) influence of teacher’s Whiteness on how well they could relate to students. Ultimately, Marx (2009) found that White teachers who were considered popular among their students related well to Latin@ students “who struggled academically through their own personal experiences of being shy, having unstable backgrounds, dealing with addictions, and

even living through abuse” (p. 89). The relationship between teacher and student is one that becomes important in the context of a supposedly post-racial society. Misunderstandings most likely happen in instances where White educators are unfamiliar with the cultural backgrounds and experiences of their Latin@ students. The White educators’ inability to relate to their students does nothing to protect the students from the stereotypical attitudes perpetuated by peers and by educators themselves. When students and teachers embody negative feelings about Latin@ students, it is unsurprising that those same students develop negative attitudes towards school. When White students were asked about their comfort at the school, their sentiment towards the teachers and administration, and the relationship between their home language and culture and that of the school, their responses tended to be more positive than those of Latin@ students to the same questions (Marx, 2008a, p. 74).

ELL programs, which often serve predominantly Latin@ students, intend to help rectify the students’ negative experiences. However, in some cases, ELL programs only reinforce the marginalization of the students they seek to serve. Sherry Marx and Cynthia Saavedra discuss an attempt they made to work with a local school district to reform its ESL (English as a Second Language)² program. The collaboration failed, with Marx and Saavedra being dismissed rudely from the ESL planning committee. The authors locate the reason for the collapse of this partnership in differing “epistemologies” of ESL education (Marx & Saavedra, 2014, p. 418). They cite an overemphasis in the school district ESL programs on vocabulary memorization and insufficient opportunities for “authentic language experiences” as primary sources of disagreement (Marx & Saavedra, 2014, p. 430). The authors also criticize, more broadly, a failure by the school district to see language education as anything more than the acquisition of

² ELL and ESL are both programs that teach and improve students’ fluency in English. Whether the program is called ELL or ESL is a choice made by individual school districts.

disjointed facts and a corresponding failure to think about the experiences of students within the ESL program outside of “achievement scores” (Marx and Saavedra, 2014, p. 424). The authors lament the fact that the district did not recognize the racist assumptions inherent in its practices (Marx and Saavedra, 2014).

The relationship between racism and ineffective ELL teaching is also explored by Amanda Morales and Socorro Herrera in a study of White teachers at a junior high school where most students were the children of Mexican immigrants. The interviews concerned teachers’ approaches to working with “Culturally and Linguistically Diverse” (CLD) students (Herrera & Morales, 2009, p. 197-8). Two problematic themes in the teachers’ approaches were “colorblindness” and “nonaccommodative denial” (Herrera & Morales, 2009, p. 197).

Colorblindness is the tendency of teachers to downplay the importance of their students’ racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Herrera & Morales, 2009, p. 201-202). This practice led some teachers to believe that it was not important or necessary to address the oppression their students faced (Herrera & Morales, 2009, p. 202). In classrooms where teachers demonstrated and enabled colorblind ideology, Herrera and Morales (2009) concluded that “[education] is the avenue for assimilating CLD students without acknowledging or supporting their cultural differences” (p. 203). In other words, colorblindness actually facilitates cultural assimilation, forcing students to switch to the dominant culture in the classroom in order to be accepted.

Another related practice is nonaccommodative denial, which is the notion that teachers do not need to provide “culture-specific accommodation” for students (Herrera & Morales, 2009, p. 203-204). This practice sometimes manifested itself in teachers’ attempts to obtain control and enforce rules in the classroom. The authors explain that nonaccommodative denial was justified, in part, by the teachers’ belief that students “eventually had to follow the rules” (Herrera &

Morales, 2009, p. 206). Teachers believed that the world outside of school would not take into consideration differences in cultural backgrounds, and so students should begin to face that reality in the classroom. Thus, classroom rules and policies were created without consideration for students' backgrounds, and functioned as tools for assimilation. Nonaccommodative denial, by ignoring students' desires for a culturally sensitive classroom environment, suggests to students that their voices are irrelevant, effectively preventing them from asserting autonomy over their education. While schools and teachers are rarely intentionally malicious in their behavior toward students, their frequent refusal to account for diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds results in students feeling marginalized, unheard, and disrespected.

Arts education and language development

Drama and playwriting provide approaches for addressing the marginalization of ELL students through “authentic language experiences” and through the development of cultural understanding among students (Marx & Saavedra, 2014, p. 430). Playwriting has been shown to support language development for ELL students, improving their writing and confidence in their writing. Researcher Alexander Chizhik (2009) investigated whether a playwriting program integrated with a language arts curriculum improves the expository writing skills and writing confidence of urban, low-income immigrant middle school students³ more than traditional language arts instruction. The study's findings support the notion that a playwriting program improves students' writing skills to a greater extent than traditional language arts instruction. The quantitative results, measured by standardized writing assessment scores, showed a significant difference in the students' District Writing Sample posttest scores, increasing to an average of 2.62 from the pretest score average of 2.28 (Chizhik, 2009, p. 403). Additionally, quantitative

³At this particular school, 40% of the students are classified as English Language Learners (ELL).

analyses revealed significant improvement in the writing self-efficacy of the playwriting program participants. Chizhik (2009) found that students started the semester with an average rating score of 68.41 (on a 10–100 scale, with 100 being “real sure” of their writing abilities) and ended the semester with an average rating score of 78.21 (p. 401). The playwriting program made students both better and more confident writers.

Not only does arts education help ELL students to improve as writers, but it also helps them improve as critical readers. Author and teacher Penny Bernal (2007) explains that reading play scripts teaches her ELL students about grammar, pronunciation, intonation, paraphrasing, and underlying meanings in text. Because plays consist largely of dialogue, scripts do not contain the obviously analytical sections of, for instance, a textbook. Instead, students must analyze for themselves the deeper meanings of figurative language and context cues. Bernal (2007) also believes that exposure to the genre of drama is important because it is a subject that is prevalent in reading sections of standardized tests. In fact, Bernal (2007) has seen an increase in the reading comprehension scores of her students since the incorporation of drama in her ELL class. For many ELL students, drama is a genre they would otherwise have limited access to outside of school. ELL students frequently have limited access to cultural capital—resources deemed of value within a dominant culture. When schools provide students with access to cultural capital in the form of an important genre of literature (drama), they also provide students with access to greater human capital—a larger skill set and also a better chance of success on standardized tests.

Chizhik and Bernal both found that using the genre of drama with ELL students improved students’ writing and reading skills. Likewise, in a meta-analysis of 80 studies, Anderson and Loughlin (2014) found “moderate-to-large effects of classroom drama” on “oral and written measures of story understanding, reading achievement, reading readiness, oral

language development, and writing” (p. 268). The authors’ research framed progress in relation to state-mandated standards in elementary school classrooms (Anderson & Loughlin, 2014). It is generally accepted that language is best learned when it is contextualized—when language is associated with familiar topics and shared knowledge, when language is paired with extra-linguistic context clues (e.g. gestures), and when language is practiced as a dialogue with other students (Anderson & Loughlin, 2014). Yet, ELL students are often taught language in decontextualized forms, such as listening to lectures, memorizing vocabulary lists, or reading a textbook. Anderson and Loughlin (2014) argue that English Language Learners need to be engaged with “meaningful and expressive academic language” and that classroom drama is one venue for accomplishing this (p. 264).

As such, Anderson and Loughlin argue that drama-integrated language arts classes are more relevant to ELL students than in regular language arts classes. For instance, they observe that while teachers produced “an equivalent amount of language across conventional and drama-integrated contexts,” teachers posed more questions during drama-integrated lessons, which “facilitated academic language use through literate language use (e.g. complex noun phrases, adverbs, and mental/linguistic verbs)” (Anderson & Loughlin, 2014, p. 278). During drama-integrated lessons, students use language to “interact, critique, question, and revise their ideas in collaboration with their peers,” whereas in conventional contexts students have “limited opportunities to interact with each other or with their teacher about the concepts and information” (Anderson & Loughlin, 2014, p. 278). The general findings of this study are that drama-integrated ELL teaching provides students with greater opportunities to utilize language in a productive and contextualized manner. It is especially crucial to increase ELL and Latin@ students’ reading and writing skills in order for their test scores to improve. Furthermore,

because the development of these skills serves to promote confidence in students, improving reading and writing skills is a pathway to combat the marginalization of Latin@ and ELL students within schools.

Arts education and student autonomy

While improvements in reading and writing are key benefits of drama for ELL students, increased confidence and independence are equally important. Chizhik cites Bolton (1985) to note that by incorporating drama into the language arts curriculum, students are provided with the opportunity to meet their psychological need for freedom and autonomy. He also cites Flynn (2000) to report that playwriting offers students the opportunity to create writing that has meaning for them, which establishes personal empowerment and ownership of their work. Chizhik believes that the combination of these two ideas develops student autonomy.

Likewise, authors Anderson and Loughlin (2014) argue that in addition to improving students' access to their non-native language, classroom drama is a tool for learning about social issues through the telling of their own stories. Furthermore, doing so is seen as “empowering” (Anderson and Loughlin, 2014, p. 264). As students gain a voice in the classroom, some power is transferred from the teacher to the students (Anderson and Loughlin, 2014). Additionally, researchers have identified “necessary connections between arts participation and storytelling for addressing social justice issues in schools and communities” (Anderson & Loughlin, 2014, p. 264). The empowerment fostered through arts education is crucial to creating connections between students and the greater community.

One program that empowers students to understand their world is TeenStreet, a theater group for Chicago teens. Writing about the program, Christopher Worthman (2002) explains that TeenStreet built nuanced understandings of literacy among student participants, allowing them to

use it in a way that “fosters reflection on the human condition and offers ways of coming to alternative views of the world” (p. 462). He extolls the program for allowing the students to deconstruct “ordinary lived experiences” and for helping them “see the variety and possibility of life” (Worthman, 2002, p. 460, 467). TeenStreet, by providing students with a greater world perspective, helps students to recognize their full potentials. Not only does arts education for ELL students enhance their academic abilities, boost their confidence, and allow for autonomy, but it can also help students understand their place in the world while giving consideration to their identities and experiences.

DATA ANALYSIS

In order to understand how Ms. Lompart’s class works to support students, we observed 12 class sessions over the course of six weeks. Shortly after beginning our observations, we interviewed Ms. Lompart about the course’s origins, nature, and goals. To gain a sense of an outsider’s perceptions of the course, we also interviewed an adult ESL teacher and member of the Northfield community, who will be referred to as Leslie Johnson, and who had seen a previous performance of the play.

Finally, we created a 10-item survey, as shown in Appendix A, and administered it to students in the class. This survey asked them to rank their agreement with a number of statements about Ms. Lompart’s class on a scale from 1 to 10 (with **1** corresponding to *strongly disagree* and **10** corresponding to *strongly agree*). The survey included statements such as “Taking Ms. Lompart’s course has made me a better writer,” “I feel more comfortable in Ms. Lompart’s class than in my English classes,” and “Ms. Lompart’s classroom is generally a place where everyone’s ideas are respected.” Additionally, we asked the students to indicate the gender with which they most identify and whether they had taken the course before this year, but

assured them that their responses would be anonymous. Finally, space was provided for them to include additional comments if they wished. The survey was created with the intention of gauging student perceptions of Ms. Lompart's playwriting course, placing emphasis on the themes we believe make the course effective: language development, cultural understanding, student autonomy, and creating a safe space for the exchange of ideas. The first three themes are related to the benefits of an arts education that were discussed in the research we reviewed.

a. Ms. Lompart's class and language development

Based on our observations of Ms. Lompart's class, the overwhelming majority of the students are verbally fluent in English. The activities that Ms. Lompart uses in class focus more on improving the students' abilities as writers than on their speaking abilities. For instance, Ms. Lompart instructs the students on creative writing techniques. She often cites the importance of imagery, saying, "imagery adds relatability" (Observations, February 11, 2015). In another instance, students spent an entire class period speedwriting dialogues on topics selected from a group of pre-determined options (health care, racism, immigration, minimum wage, and domestic violence). Through their scripts, Ms. Lompart encouraged the students to focus on creating realistic conversations around these topics and invited the students to "speak from the heart" (Observations, February 19, 2015). Students are encouraged to use imagery as a writing technique, while ensuring that their pieces are meaningful for them and the community. Moreover, these activities were designed to make students more aware of the intricacies of dialogue writing and more specifically, writing a performance-worthy play that allows students to convey accurately their experiences and thoughts.

The students felt that the class contributed to their writing skills. Their responses to the statement "Taking Ms. Lompart's playwriting course has made me a better writer" indicated

agreement, averaging a score of 8.00 out of 10. While it is clear that the course improves students' language abilities, it was even more apparent to us that students gain confidence, an enhanced perspective on Latin@ issues, and a sense of being heard and respected by the class.

The success of Ms. Lompart's class: exploring what students gain

Ms. Lompart's playwriting class was student-initiated and continues to serve the needs and interests of the students. The course was first suggested by a student who, according to Ms. Lompart, said "I will get my grades up if you create an acting class" (J. Lompart, personal communication, February 11, 2015). Moreover, according to Ms. Lompart, one student who took the class for four years said, "I have to have this class. It's a place where I can talk about anything. It's something I can look forward to every day. It carries me through the school year" (J. Lompart, personal communication, February 11, 2015). Of the 13 students who responded to the survey, 69% (n = 9) have only been enrolled in the course once and 31% (n = 4) have been enrolled more than once. Students who had taken the class more than once responded more positively to the statements on the survey (Fig. 1).

Relationship between times enrolled in course and student ratings of Ms Lompart's Playwriting course

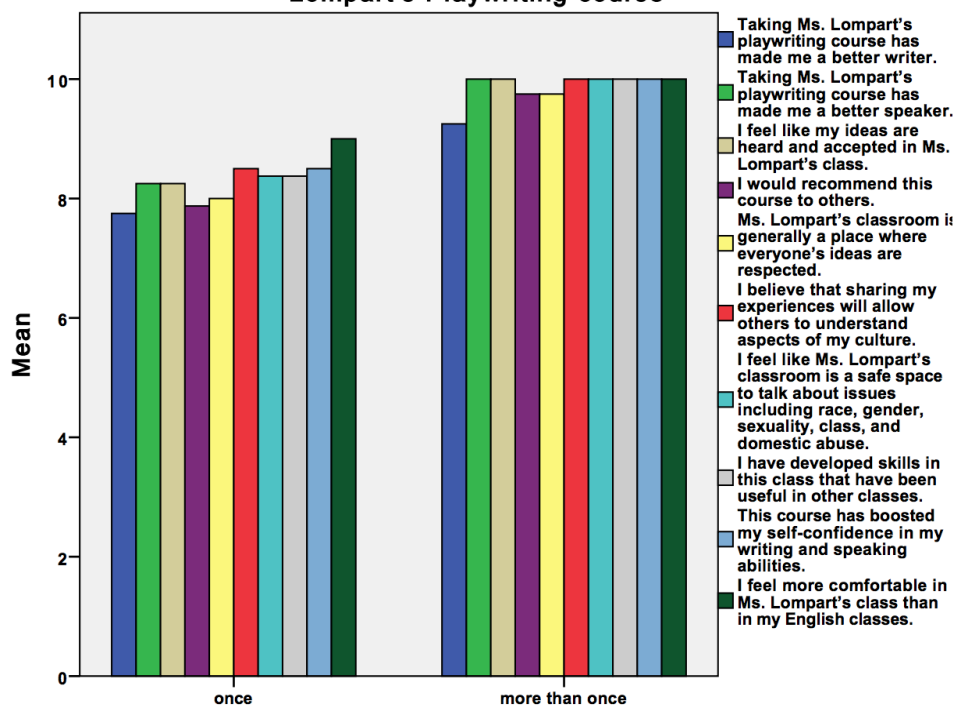


Figure 1 This graph compares the averages of the responses given by students taking the class for the first time with the averages of those who had taken the class previously.

Our data are not able to explain this pattern, but potential explanations include the possibilities that students who enjoy the course more tend to re-enroll, that the course has been better in past years, and that the course is most useful when taken multiple times. Another hypothesis is that students gain a lot from the performance itself and do not realize all of the benefits of the class until the culmination of the class-- the performance of the play.

Ms. Lompart explains that her playwriting course gives her students control and allows for free expression. For Ms. Lompart, teaching the course is “a lot of work and controlling all of this really good energy is really difficult” (J. Lompart, personal communication, February 11, 2015). However, Ms. Lompart acknowledges that the class is student-centered, saying, “I like more control, but it’s not about me. It’s not about my teaching style, it’s about them and giving them some control” (J. Lompart, personal communication, February 11, 2015).

Throughout our visits, the balance of teacher and student control was visible. During one visit, a student read a poem about sexual abuse (Observations, February 12, 2015). The ensuing discussion among the students illustrated the way that control over playwriting is distributed in the classroom. After the student finished reading her poem, the class began to discuss how the poem would be performed at the end of the year (Observations, February 12, 2015). Students were initially supportive of Ms. Lompart’s suggestion that the story be read by all of the girls in the class, as a statement on how girls’ bodies too often become “toys for boys” and as an attempt to start a conversation about sexual abuse and assault (Observations, February 12, 2015). Ms. Lompart also checked in with the student who had introduced the topic of sexual abuse to the class, ensuring that she would still be able to perform in the piece if she wished to (Observations, February 12, 2015).

Later in the class, some students suggested that the male students in the class should join in performing the poem in order to support the female students and to recognize male victims of sexual abuse (Observations, February 12, 2015). This collaborative decision-making process is characteristic of her classroom's dynamics, and for the most part is merely facilitated, not controlled, by Ms. Lompart. Similarly, the themes of the performed play are created starting with one idea and other students respond and build on the idea. Although Ms. Lompart works to organize the play's script, she makes clear that the play is created based on the ideas and creativity of the students. Students responded positively to the course's openness to their creativity. When students were asked to rank their agreement or disagreement with the statement "I feel like my ideas are heard and accepted in Ms. Lompart's class." their responses averaged 8.83 out of 10, indicating strong agreement.

During class time, students have control not only over their plays, but also over their behavior. Ms. Lompart's classroom tends to have relaxed rules on most days. When students are sharing their plays, they lie on the ground or sit in a circle and read their work aloud to each other on iPads, cell phones, or pieces of paper (Observations, February 12, 2015). Participation is generally free-flowing and relaxed, with students giving each other feedback and asking questions without waiting for Ms. Lompart's approval (Observations, February 12, 2015). When students share stories, they ask each other questions freely and provide detailed feedback, often trying to help the student sharing to clarify the details, both physical and emotional, of the scene they are constructing. During class, students often socialize with their peers, not paying attention to Ms. Lompart and to the larger class. This misbehavior is sometimes threatened with detention, but more often than not, students who are disruptive are told only to "take five" or to step outside of the classroom for a short period of time (Observations, February 12 & 26, 2015).

An adult ESL teacher and community member⁴, whom we later interviewed, also noted the informality of the class. She volunteered in Ms. Lompart's classroom and recounted that during class, "one boy went and just laid down on the counter" (community member, personal communication, February 23, 2015). Johnson seemed surprised by this behavior and by Ms. Lompart's non-reaction to it. Although this behavior was off-putting to this volunteer and, at first, to us as observers, it is an integral part of the nature of the class. While some more traditional classroom policies remain, Ms. Lompart tries to give her students the freedom they need to feel comfortable in the classroom.

Throughout our time at the school, the concept of "ownership" has come up many times. Ms. Lompart works diligently to ensure that her students recognize that stories belong to someone. For example, when a student read a poem about his mother's sexual assault, Ms. Lompart paused to gently remind him that the story belongs to his mother and that he would need her permission to tell it (Observations, February 18, 2015). Another aspect of ownership is recognizing that students share intensely personal experiences and that they have a right to those stories. Ms. Lompart acknowledges this by telling students, "if you don't want to answer the question, just say pass" (Observations, February 18, 2015). Through promoting the importance of ownership, students learn that they own their stories, their experiences, and their writing. Ms. Lompart hopes that by the end of the course the students believe "maybe these stories that they didn't think mattered are important" (J. Lompart, personal communication, February 11, 2015). Likewise, Ms. Lompart believes that by producing a play and acting out their own life experiences, the students are able to express themselves. She hopes that the students are able to look at their performance in the play and say, "I'm proud that I made it through this struggle and

⁴ To protect this person's confidentiality, we will refer to this person as Leslie Johnson.

I'm gonna show how it made me a stronger person" (J. Lompart, personal communication, February 11, 2015).

c. Enhancing the students' cultural understanding

In past years, the playwriting course has been racially and ethnically diverse. During the 2013-2014 school year the class had "seven White kids, one boy from Nigeria, and six Latinos" (J. Lompart, personal communication, February 11, 2015). The stereotypes students held about their classmates led to "misunderstandings between the kids" (J. Lompart, personal communication, February 11, 2015). Each year, Ms. Lompart assesses the needs of the particular students in the class and focuses her teaching accordingly. During the 2013-2014 school year, she explains, "We went through the stereotypes and talked about that. They would come together, but race relations are hard and it takes a lot of work" (J. Lompart, personal communication, February 11, 2015). During that year especially, Ms. Lompart had to address racism explicitly to accomplish her goals of creating a collaborative community environment, providing a student-directed space, and encouraging language development through writing, reading, and reviewing/revising.

This year, the play focuses on racism and police brutality, immigration issues, living wage, health care, and sexual assault. One student wrote a play about her aunt, an undocumented immigrant who returned to Mexico to escape the isolation she felt in the United States due to her lack of English fluency, even though it meant leaving her husband and son behind (Observations, February 4, 2015). Another student wrote a poignant line of poetry that reads, "Crossing the Rio Grande—my arms wrapped around everyone's dreams," discussing how her mother stopped living for herself and began living for her children once she entered the United States (Observations, February 11, 2015). Still another student discussed his desire for undocumented

immigrants to be able to obtain driving licenses (Observations, February 11, 2015). These and many other plays, poems, and comments reflect that the classroom functions as a place where students can have an open forum on what it means to be Latin@, the challenges of being undocumented, and the potential for addressing societal injustices experienced by the Latin@ community.

Enhancing the community's understanding of Latin@ culture

Our interview with a community member, Leslie Johnson, provided us with an enriched perspective of the older residents in Northfield community about the newer town residents. Johnson was raised in Northfield and returned to the community around two years ago after spending time living in Montana. She currently teaches adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, in which her students are immigrants. Although the immigrant population is diverse, her class is largely made up of immigrants from Mexico. Her perception of the community is that the majority community tends to think of Northfield as better than the surrounding towns, “better than Faribault, better than Farmington.”⁵

According to Johnson, the superiority stems from a feeling that bad things do not happen in Northfield. However, when bad things do happen, they are often blamed on minorities and immigrants. For instance, Johnson said that one common refrain among longer-term residents in the Northfield community is that “crimes have really gone up because Latinos moved to town.” Our subject described Northfield as a town that is predominantly liberal, yet covertly racist and classist. However, she also noted how the divides between race and class changed over time. While growing up in Northfield, she remembered the town being “99.9% White, highly White, Catholic, Lutheran.” She noted that the town’s demographics remained the same during her

⁵ All the quotes in this section are from an interview conducted with Leslie Johnson on February 23, 2015.

childhood, except for a small population of Vietnamese refugees who came after the Vietnam War.

When Johnson moved back to Northfield, a few waves of Latin@ immigrants had already started settling in town, and as the community grew more diverse, she started hearing problematic statements made by some town residents, including her own family and friends. She felt that the discourse surrounding the Latin@ community in Northfield gave an unfair, stereotypical portrayal of Spanish-speaking immigrants. For example, she might hear non-Latin@ people say “the Spanish kids are the bad kids” and that “these Hispanics are overrunning the schools and the hospitals and the health care system.”. She notes that these statements sometimes come from “people who are really liberal, really caring, really concerned about social justice,” a fact that makes her worry.

Johnson has also worked with Northfield High School students as a volunteer with the TORCH⁶ program and has helped with Ms. Lompart’s classroom a couple of times. These opportunities gave her a chance to interact with the students and gave her some context for the play’s contents when she saw Ms. Lompart’s students perform their play two years ago. As a member of the community, she saw the play as a form of pushback against covert racism and the far too common denial of the bad things that occur in Northfield. In general, the play and Ms. Lompart’s class act as “a really helpful tool for helping kids navigate these issues and to share that those issues are also happening in Northfield.” Our survey results corroborated Ms. Johnson’s statement: Students in the class are confident that sharing their stories will improve the community’s perception of them, responding to the statement “I believe that sharing my

⁶ TORCH, Tackling Obstacles and Raising College Hopes, is a program at Northfield High School that aims to close the achievement gap between white and minority students in the Northfield School District by providing tutoring and mentoring services, test prep, and assist with the college search and application process for minority, low-income students.

experiences will allow others to understand aspects of my culture.” with an average of 8.69 out of 10.

DISCUSSION

Language development

Much of the research literature about the use of playwriting and drama in ELL classrooms discusses the benefits for language development, effects that were also visible from our observations of Ms. Lompart’s class as well. For example, as students read their plays to classmates, they gain exposure to complex syntax. For author Penny Bernal’s (2007) students, “speaking in a second language is difficult,” (p. 27) whereas, based on our classroom observations, all of the students in Ms. Lompart’s class appear to be orally fluent in English. While the students in Ms. Lompart’s class vary in English abilities, on the whole, they seem confident in their ability to communicate and hold conversations in English. Since Ms. Lompart’s efforts are geared toward increasing the English reading and writing abilities of her students, in contrast to Bernal’s class, Ms. Lompart’s students write their own plays. Additionally, students often read their plays aloud to the class and critique the plays of other students, a process which provides a space for students to demonstrate their capabilities for critical analysis of language. This process is supported by Anderson and Loughlin (2014), who state that the ability of classroom drama to provide students with the opportunity to critique and respond to each others work reinforces its effectiveness in developing language skills among non-native speakers.

The contrast between Ms. Lompart’s classroom and the ESL programs studied by Marx and Saavedra (2014) further supports Ms. Lompart’s class’s effectiveness. In contrast to Marx and Saavedra’s study, where language classes were “repetitive, highly controlled, and scripted,”

Ms. Lompart's students are given the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the language they are using (2014, p. 433). For instance, one of Ms. Lompart's students wrote a play about the experience of transitioning from thinking in Spanish to thinking in English (Observations, February 12th, 2015). As students give each other feedback on their pieces, they also correct each other's grammar, because they are trying to help each other communicate their stories more clearly. Moreover, they are receptive when they receive this feedback, and in this way, Ms. Lompart gives her students space to express themselves and to use language for their own purposes.

Student autonomy

Even though much of the literature indicates language development as the primary benefit of incorporating playwriting into the Language Arts curriculum, another benefit is the development of student autonomy. Because of the way Ms. Lompart designed her class, there is an extra emphasis placed on creating space for students' autonomy and freedom of expression. Similar to the findings of Anderson and Loughlin, Flynn, and Chizhik, playwriting allows students the opportunity to create work that is meaningful for them and gives them a sense of empowerment. Ms. Lompart does not dictate the topic for students to write about. Rather, the students largely write without prompts about the issues and experiences they are passionate about. In the second half of the second semester of the course, Ms. Lompart collects what the students have written and decides on the themes that are present throughout the students' work. Thus, the themes of the play are decided collaboratively, rather than established at the beginning of the course. Ms. Lompart explained this choice saying, "That's the only thing I've come up with that works. Otherwise they'll say, 'what's our theme, what should I be writing about?' and that really stumps them" (J. Lompart, personal communication, February 11, 2015). Students are

passionately engaged in the material because they create the course material, and that proves to be helpful in allowing them the opportunity for free expression and creativity. Together with student intellectual freedom, Ms. Lompart's generally lax classroom discipline further facilitates student autonomy. By relaxing rules, both academic and behavioral, in the classroom, Ms. Lompart avoids the tendency of non-accommodative denial, observed by Herrera and Morales (2014), in which classroom rules are used to deny student needs.

The classroom as a safe space

By giving students ownership of their stories and allowing a relatively large degree of control over both their behavior and writing, Ms. Lompart's classroom acts as a safe space for students. Student responses to the statement, "I feel like Ms. Lompart's classroom is a safe space to talk about issues including race, gender, sexuality, class, and domestic abuse." averaged 8.92 out of 10, indicating strong agreement. The classroom, facilitated by Ms. Lompart, is a space where students feel comfortable and respected enough to share their thoughts on issues like race, domestic abuse, and sexuality without fear of repercussion from Ms. Lompart and the other students. In the survey we distributed to Ms. Lompart's class, one of the students provided more insight on the classroom as a safe space, commenting:

You can trust in the class and you have the class's trust. If this class is not the first step to reduce the discrimination problem, the teenager's self-confidence problem, the hidden everyday, life problems, then I don't know what would be!

Just like the students Worthman observed, Ms. Lompart's students created their plays in a "dialogical" process, sharing their experiences and building stories and characters from them, as was apparent when they shared their writing with the class (Worthman, 2002, p. 460). Able to share and discuss their stories freely during class discussions, Ms. Lompart's students broach difficult subjects with ease (Observations, February 12th, 2015). When students were asked to

rate their agreement with the statement “I feel more comfortable in Ms. Lompart’s class than in my English classes.” the average of their responses was 8.75 out of 10, indicating strong agreement.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The research compiled within this paper is crucial for understanding the importance of Northfield High School’s playwriting course. We have learned that marginalization is an all too common experience for ELL students, and this is the case at Northfield High School. Ms. Lompart and her students describe the school as highly segregated along lines of race and between ELL versus non-ELL students (J. Lompart, personal communication, February 11, 2015). Furthermore, students feel that other students in the school demonstrate negative attitudes toward them (Observations, February 25, 2015). Students also express feeling discriminated against in the Northfield community. One student, for instance, describes her goal of being able to walk into Target without feeling as though she is suspected of being a thief (Observations, February 25, 2015). Another student felt that Latin@ students were perceived by the Northfield community as bad influences (Observations, February 5, 2015). With discrimination being felt acutely by students, it is essential that Ms. Lompart’s class functions as a space that combats stereotypes and discrimination. Further work looking at Ms. Lompart’s class may try to find ways to extend Ms. Lompart’s classroom techniques of student autonomy to reach other classes, in order to also extend the benefits of the class. This might include extension of the relaxed, informal class structure used by Ms. Lompart to other subject areas.

Through participation in Ms. Lompart’s class, students gain confidence in their right to express themselves and to discuss the issues that are important to them. Ms. Lompart interacts with students as complete people, considering their academic success as well as their personal

well-being and the importance of their experiences. Her students do not merely learn how to hone their voices as readers and writers of English, they also learn that their voices matter.

Appendix A

Survey for Ms. Lompart's students

We created this survey in order to gain a better understanding of the students' perceptions of the playwriting class. We handed surveys to the students during our classroom visits, and we received twelve surveys out of a total of sixteen students enrolled in the class.

How many times have you taken Ms. Lompart's class? (circle one) once more than once

Please indicate the gender with which you most identify. _____

Instructions: Please carefully read each statement below. After reading each statement, write in the space a number that corresponds to how much you agree or disagree with that statement (**1** being *strongly disagree* and **10** being *strongly agree*). Please respond to each statement honestly. Your responses will be kept anonymous.

1. Taking Ms. Lompart's playwriting course has made me a better writer. _____
2. Taking Ms. Lompart's playwriting course has made me a better speaker. _____
3. I feel like my ideas are heard and accepted in Ms. Lompart's class. _____
4. I would recommend this course to others. _____
5. Ms. Lompart's classroom is generally a place where everyone's ideas are respected. _____
6. I believe that sharing my experiences will allow others to understand aspects of my culture. _____
7. I feel like Ms. Lompart's classroom is a safe space to talk about issues including race, gender, sexuality, class, and domestic abuse. _____
8. I have developed skills in this class that have been useful in other classes. _____

9. This course has boosted my self-confidence in my writing and speaking abilities. _____

10. I feel more comfortable in Ms. Lompart's class than in my English classes. _____

If you have any other comments about the course, please feel free to write them in below, but know that this section is completely optional.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Ms. Lompart

Ms. Lompart's Background

- How long have you been teaching?
- What other courses do you teach at NHS?
- How long have you been teaching this course?

General data about the course

- Could you tell us a little more as to how the idea for the course came to be?
 - Did you come up with the structure by yourself or did you model it on something?
 - Why exactly did you choose playwriting/theatre?
- Are all of the students in the class also receiving ELL services in the school?
- Is every student who wants to take the class able to do so? If not, how does the application process work?
- How does the course fit into students' graduation requirements and their academic path through Northfield High School?
- What are lessons plans/curricula like for the year?
 - What does a normal day in class look like? What are some different things you might do?
- How does the curriculum of the course change year to year?
- How many students are generally in the course?
 - This year there are 16 students, is this an optimal number?
- Are there recurring themes that you observe when you teach this course?

Arts Education

- Some of the students have taken the course before. What do students gain by taking the course multiple times?
- How do you evaluate the students' work?
- What are your expectations for the final performance?
 - What would be lost if the students wrote their poems/stories/monologues/plays but did not ultimately perform them?
- What do you want students to get out of the course? In what ways do you hope it will benefit them?
- Why do you think students take the course?
- What challenges, if any, do you believe this course presents for the students?
- Are there any skills developed in this course that students have reported as being useful in their other classes?

Community perceptions and benefits for students

- Have there been any obstacles in creating and/or offering this course?
- What are community (from both inside and outside the school) perceptions of the course and its final product in the spring?
- Have you heard any feedback from the students' families about the course?
- How would you describe relationship between ELL students and non-ELL students in the high school?

Do you think that this course influences those social dynamics?

Appendix C

Interview Protocol for Community Member

- How did you learn about Ms. Lompart's playwriting class?
- Have you had the chance to talk with students who have taken the class? What have they said?
- Can you tell us about your work with TORCH?
 - What type of exposure to the high school community has TORCH provided you?
 - What types of students have you worked with through the program?
 - What are students' post-graduation plans?
- Have you seen the performance?
 - What themes have been discussed in the plays?
 - How would you characterize the students' command of the English language?
- What impact do you think the performance has on the community?
 - When you saw the play, was the audience largely parents, or other community members?
 - What do you think the audience was intended to take away as the "message" from the play?
 - Did the play succeed in promoting that message?
- Do you think the play had a different impact for you based on your career as an Adult ESL teacher?
- How do you think the class functions within the larger community?

- Do you think that the conversations that the students have in class (about race, diversity, gender, mental health, sexual abuse) and in the performance extend outside the classroom and into the broader community?

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