Protean Literacy: Extending the Discourse on Empowerment

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I happily dedicate this book to Maya, my little angel and to all children for their enduring hope and love which have been the inspiration for my work.
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Introduction

‘Sembrando Semillas Juntos’

Había una vez un viejito que tenía una semilla y la sembró en la tierra y le tardó en crecer. Entonces un niño le echo agua y creció y creció y el viejito necesitaba ayuda. El niño le dijo que el le ayudaba a cortar el árbol que había crecido tan grande. Le dijo que lo cortaba con un cerrucho. Cuando terminaron de cuidar al árbol dió manzanas. Y después niños se juntaron para ayudarle al señor. Cuando ya todos los niños agarraron toda las manzanas, él le dió a cada quien un dolar. Después el viejito les dijo, ‘Gracias’ y todos los niños se hicieron amigos del viejito y el viejito fue a su casa contento.

‘Planting Seeds Together’
(Story told by 7-year-old, Maria)

Once there was an old man who had one seed to plant it in the earth and it delayed in growing. Then a little boy watered it and it grew and grew and the old man needed help. The young boy told him that he would help him cut the tree that had grown so big. He told him to cut it with a saw. When they finished taking care of the tree, the tree produced apples. Then children gathered to help the man. When all the children collected all of the apples, he gave each one a dollar. Later the old man said, ‘Thank you’, and all of children became friends with the old man and the old man went home happy.

Convinced that stories about our lives provide a continuity for humankind to relate, I realize the compelling message which this Carpinteria story represents. By learning about each other’s worlds we become more knowledgeable about the sociocultural, socioeconomic and sociopolitical nature of our discontinuities while simultaneously embracing our commonalities.

Without question the act of writing this book challenged many of my earlier understandings of culture, research and my presence as an ethno­grapher in the field. The importance of delivering this portrayal of a decade of study involving people’s complex lives and their process of learning literacy prevailed.¹ An expressive logic at the center of their daily lives allowed me to confront the contradictions of conducting research in linguistically and ethnically diverse communities in the United States in this historical period. After concretized thinking, talking and reading with the people in Carpinteria, I become convinced that no single theory of culture suffices to understand the
family values that influenced the cultural transformation and their relationship within their families, schools and the community. The people's cultural identity, language and common historical immigrant experience sustained their activism which simultaneously challenged and affirmed their beliefs and values as they placed children and literacy at center stage.

Issues which have long concerned me as standards for measuring literacy and family-school relationships remain bound by competitive, capitalistic principles of the educational system. My research convinces me that many attempts to promote literacy and family-school relationships have limited effectiveness because they are driven by modernistic capitalist premises void of cultural affirmation and engagement of the local communities. The school system demands that parents advocate for their children in order to achieve academic success. A basic tenet holds that those with greater knowledge of how the system operates increase their access to educational resources.

Conducting research on literacy and family-school relationships in Latino communities has meant that I have had to wrestle with the dualities of modern and postmodern theories related to the educational arena because postmodern tenets reject modernistic scientific theories. Although major academic trends locate themselves in either modernity or postmodernity discourses, concurrently, we need to remain open to alternative possibilities for people who choose to build communities founded on their particular cultural experience. I considered carefully the thinking of the people in Carpinteria in order to capture a more holistic understanding of the potential they envisioned for themselves in creating a dynamic community. These are people that even modernity forgot with respect to educational options. And where postmodern analyses also ignores their cultural history or possibilities for new social constellations. When there was an educational option, it was as an exit from racial, linguistic and economic oppressive conditions.

I assert that formulas based on positivistic assumptions in research limit our understanding about Latinos in the United States. Our real work begins in learning how Latinos perceive their cultural, historical, political and social experience which receives little attention in the sphere of social science, social policy and education. Our social mandate urges another consideration — to revisit and reconsider the outcome in the era that precedes the current postmodern period. Put differently, postmodern narrative discards past explanations of deficits but generates primarily critique and query with respect to marginalized communities. I believe that today's poor women, immigrants, people of color and other underrepresented cultural groups who have profited little from the prescriptive theories and projects of modernity deserve a place in the economic, social, political and educational arenas construed from their own perspective in order to claim their identity in this nation's history. A truly democratic society must account for the complexity of all its groups. When the oppressive systems move beyond the denial of differences, equity and justice, peace may begin to evolve — inspired only by the inclusion of all our histories in this country. This means that the cohesion we all desire will surface only
from our particular yet complex history inclusive of all peoples as participants
in a truly democratic process. Critical theory and pedagogy have addressed
participatory pedagogies but as yet, much of the critical pedagogy narrative
fails to incorporate the day-to-day experience of people of color in a local
setting where they have achieved great works of empowerment through col­
lective political labor.\textsuperscript{5a} Collective community efforts form a fundamental
component of a democracy, and Carpinteria Latinos embrace the Comite de
Padres Latinos (COPLA) as a crucial process of their empowerment.

Empowerment for Latinos in Carpinteria extends far beyond the simp­
listic impression of 'feeling good about themselves'. It has meant a cultural
transformation. The trivialization of empowerment defined as merely any
change, dismisses the perception of self that is influenced by sociocultural
and sociopolitical conditions. Empowerment is not something that one does
to another. No one can empower someone else. Power, the pivotal construct
in empowerment is inherent in every person as an inner source of know­
ledge, strength and ability. The potential, to exercise power resides within
everyone and is developed through one's life journey — dislodged everytime
we deal with common issues. Critical reflection is the expression of people's
cultural experience in a collective context. It characterizes the concept of
empowerment which I believe describes the lives of the people I observed
during the ten years of research in Carpinteria.

When people challenge their thinking about the obstacles that impede
their participation in their communities and opportunities for growth, unpre­
dictable possibilities occur. The following interaction took place during one of
the first meetings held by Latino parents who later became COPLA. Present at
the initial meeting were Maria Rosario, Rebeca Cortina, Manuel Peña, Rosa
Martinez, Roberto Rodriguez, Antonia Juarez, and Juan Ramirez.

\textit{Rebeca:} Ay muchos problemas que tenemos que confrontar entre nosotros.
Es decir, no podemos alegrarle mucho a las escuelas porque no tenemos medios ni conocimiento ni idioma con que hacerlo.

\textit{Antonia:} Yo digo que lo importante es el querer hacerlo y es por eso que entre todos unidos podemos aprender lo que tenemos que saber para ayudar a nuestros hijos.

\textit{Maria:} Pues, ya sabemos como criar nuestros hijos. Nadie nos tiene que enseñar como amar a nuestros niños.

\textit{We have many problems to confront among ourselves. That is, we cannot argue with the schools because we have neither the means nor the language with which to do it.}

\textit{I would say that the important thing is to want to do it and it is for that reason that collectively we can learn what we need to know to help our children.}

\textit{Well, we already know how to raise our children. Nobody needs to teach us how to love our children.}
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**Roberto:** A mi me parece que algunas familias Latinas aquí sí tienen que aprender cómo cuidar a sus hijos porque yo veo algunos niños chicos sueltos en las calles y los padres no se encuentran por ninguna parte.

**Maria:** Es cierto que algunos padres no tienen dinero para pagarle a alguien capaz de cuidar a niños. A veces los [los padres] dejan con personas irresponsables.

**Manuel:** Lo que comprendo por lo que dicen es que todos tenemos la capacidad de ser responsable pero hay algunos padre que necesitan más ayuda.

**Roberto:** Muchas veces las escuelas tienen razón por lo que dicen de nosotros, los Mejicanos porque uno se debe de presentar con confianza y ánimo aunque no sepa como navegar al sistema.

**Juan:** Pues yo no iba a decir nada pero la verdad es que desde que comensamos a hablar de que tenemos que ir a las escuelas para hablar con los directores, me ha costado mucho sueño. No se como es posible hacer algo así que nunca he hecho solo cuando me llaman con quejas de mi hijo mayor.

**Rebeca:** Usted ya nos ha dicho que tiene miedo ir solo a las escuelas y le hemos asegurado que nadie va tener que ir solo porque vamos en grupo.