



Sofia Making Her Mark: Bridging the Cultural Divide

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ABSTRACT

The narrative focuses on the importance of Cultural Capital in the Classroom through the experiences of Sofia, a Hispanic, trilingual, engineering student at Columbia University. Through her experiences, I highlight the importance of combining cultures and viewing diversity as a source of knowledge. Sofia's narrative helps instructors understand the most critical aspects of culturally responsive teaching.

Keywords: Cultural Divide, Narrative, Cultural Diversity, Responsive Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

While considering the impact of cultural divisions within education, the conflict between cultural hegemony and the opportunity for Funds of Knowledge (FOK) is notable in our increasingly diversified world. Cultural hegemony refers to the “struggle of the powerful over the consent of those who are the oppressed” (McLaren, 2013, p. 76). Cultural hegemony does not empower students to critically incorporate their FOK into their classroom. These FOK are characterized by teachers utilizing student's backgrounds to create a more holistic image of students (Moll, 2004, p. 700). Classrooms must be able to adapt to the multifaceted perspectives that result from diverse backgrounds. This adaptation comes from equipping instructors with the tools to handle potential biases and revamping the curricula to incorporate the intersectionality of students. Sources of intersectionality include gender, ethnic, linguistic, and racial diversity. To adequately restructure our classrooms to incorporate our students' multicultural assets, one must understand the underlying structure of implicit bias that results from differences in identity.

Through this narrative research study, the researcher will demonstrate how FOK have the power to enrich education and how to maximize the potential of FOK through the utilizing the implications of CRT into United States classrooms. In this study, the reader will

see the influences of her peers and parents on how her beliefs developed, as well as conflicting societal norms versus the norms of her home life.

This narrative study centers around Sofia, a twenty-one-year-old Columbia University graduate and Master of Science candidate at Columbia – and a proud Hispanic woman in STEM – who understands and articulates barriers associated with her educational experiences due to her complex identities. The researcher focused on specific moments which were shaped by her multicultural identity.

Moreover, existing literature targets and identifies structures and key obstacles to culturally responsive teaching. In analyzing CRT, FOK, Cultural Capital and Critical Multicultural education, research findings by Banks & Banks (2016), Freire (1993), Creswell (2018), Moll & Gonzalez (2004), Yosso (2005), Delpit (2020), Ortiz & Telles (2012), and Kubik-Huch (2020) overlap with many of the themes observed through Sofia. These themes include linguistic diversity, gender bias, and implicit bias. Ultimately, in combination with the literature, this study's goal is to increase awareness teachers to embrace multicultural students and culturally responsive teaching.

CONTEXTUAL DESCRIPTION

Sofia Makes Her Mark

Sofia and her sister were brought up by her parents, who immigrated to the United States from Mexico. Sofia and her sister were born in New York, and their parents became American citizens in 2018 after being residents for fifteen years.

Sofia is pursuing a degree in engineering from Columbia University. She had a passion for learning from a young age, so much so that she moved to Boston to attend Phillips Academy Andover for two years of high school. Although her family lived in many vibrant cities, such as Mexico City, New York City, and Miami, Sofia refers to her time in Boston as, "...[her] only relocation of [her] own will. [She] wanted to attend boarding school for education and athletic opportunities. [Her] school in Mexico wasn't an academically rigorous school. [She] wanted opportunities...[she] could get as a boarding school student in Boston." Sofia's parents raised her to be trilingual in English, Spanish, and French.

Sofia's family and faith played a large part in who she has become today. Sofia's Roman Catholic upbringing led to her going to an all-girl's Catholic school for nine years. "Although [she's] not particularly religious today [...] the most important part that [her] family has tried to teach [her] through religion are the values of being kind to others, and loving people, and being accepting." These service-centered values sparked her interest in law

school, where she hopes to pursue public policy and health law to assist underserved Hispanic communities.

METHOD

To create this narrative study, I interviewed Sofia in two sessions over Zoom. We spoke while she was in her apartment in New York City, where she is a graduate student at Columbia. The first session began with a core set of questions, while the second interview began with questions tailored to both what I had already discovered about Sofia and to the research on which I had focused as a result of initial findings. This approach allowed for the discovery of more compelling themes through the intriguing and detailed experiences of her educational and personal upbringing.

FINDINGS

a. Linguistic Diversity

Through ethnography, Au (2014) highlights that “despite the evidence that properly implemented Bilingual Education works for English Language Learners, English Learners are being pushed into English-only programs or getting less instruction in their primary languages” (p.185). Sofia was thrust into an English-only format for school after only speaking Spanish at home, contributing to her trilingual competency. Sofia's parents faced ignorance and commentary about their daughters getting behind in school after having been taught only Spanish at home. Yet, at such a young age, neither Sofia nor her sister struggled with adapting to English and quickly showed potential in the classroom.

Sofia was pushed into a full English immersion setting. Although she adapted well, studies show that Dual Language programs are the most effective “because of their focus on cultural and linguistic inclusivity and quality of academic content as well as language and literacy” (Banks & Banks, 2016, p.199). ESL is one of the more promising methods but must be combined with transitional instruction in order to help bridge the gap between a student's primary and secondary language. Effective ESL teachers respect diverse viewpoints and values as well as cultural context in order to integrate students' heritage into their education.

Delpit (1993) advocates for integrating students' heritage into their education so they will understand the relationship of the material within their culture while being taught the “codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life...” (p. 45). Students will take pride in their native language and culture and be able to fully participate in the culture of power. The following are a sample of questions I asked Sofia, along with her responses.

Q: What is an event that significantly defined your heritage as a Mexican female?

A: “I grew up speaking only Spanish at home. I didn't really know the name for common household items at a sleepover when I was eight. We were baking cookies and I didn't know how to say whisk in English, so I did the whisking motion with my hands trying to explain to the other girls what I meant. Everyone just laughed at me because I didn't know how to say whisk. I felt different and feeling different when you're 8 years old isn't the best thing. You want to belong and have friends and feel like everyone else.”

Q: How do you feel about yourself as a reader, writer, speaker, and listener?

A: “I think I'm a good writer and a good listener. I struggle more with speaking. Writing is much more deliberate and slow which allows me to put more thought into everything. With speaking my brain kind of gets a little more jumbled with the two languages.”

Teachers often told Sofia's that she would get behind in school because she did not know the names of objects in English and had some trouble speaking. Nevertheless, Sofia and her sister were never at any obvious disadvantage because of their language background. Instead, they excelled at the top of their respective classes throughout grade school and now attend top universities in the United States.

b. Gender Bias

It is critical to discuss the intersectionality of Sofia's identities as a Hispanic woman. Intersectionality describes how the mixture of different identities can cause people to be treated differently. According to Banks and Banks (2016), one “can be female, African American, and disabled... they do not automatically indicate only accumulations in discrimination based on gender plus race plus disability. Rather these statuses interact with one another in ways that result in unique experiences for various groups” (p. 116). They emphasize that we cannot focus one aspect of equity without acknowledging other factors that cause individuals to be mistreated (Banks & Banks, 2016, p. 127).

Sofia has a unique take on gender bias in schools, coming primarily from single sex classrooms. She explained that, “[she has] never been afraid of being a girl and speaking up in the classroom. Although [she knows] many girls who feel intimidated in male-dominated spaces, in school, [she] was taught that [her] ideas as a woman are unique and valuable.”

Although Sofia is lucky to have felt welcome at Columbia, she still experienced gender bias. She explained, that throughout her junior year under a particular male professor, “[she] noticed a stark difference in treatment between male and female students. The professor would frequently interrupt [Sofia and her] female classmates when [they] tried to contribute ideas – yet welcomed the boys’ ideas.” While Sofia is unsure if this was deliberate, it detracted from her academic experience. She explains that, as someone who is “extroverted and very confident, speaking up with this professor was a challenge and daunting task, which is a shame because it made [her] feel like [her] ideas were not valuable like those of [her] male counterparts.”

c. **Critical Multiculturalism**

Sofia’s case study asks us to understand the definition of Cultural Capital. Yosso (2005) defines Cultural Capital as, “the social assessments that promote social mobility beyond economic means” (p. 70). These means include educational or social assets such as intellect, style of speech, dress, culture, and physical appearance. Cultural Capital has the ability to place students at an academic advantage, allowing students to think outside the box and to be more open to diverse perspectives. When these identity differences are accepted, classrooms benefit from the intersectionality of the students.

Out of the enrichment of Cultural Capital came FOK, which refer to the historical accumulation of culturally developed bodies of knowledge. Curricula and classroom structures must contend with the importance of different students’ backgrounds, traditions, religion, language, ethnicity et cetera. Only by accepting the importance of these distinct aspects of identity can FOK bring a positive light into the classroom.

For Sofia, Cultural Capital has become a major asset. Her identity as a Mexican woman in predominantly White schools affected the way she absorbed knowledge. Sofia explains that her “Hispanic background [allowed her to] take everything with a grain of salt and with the understanding that there is always a different version of the story or a different way of seeing things”. This rang especially true in US History and American Literature classes where her teachers expected to have a very homogenous group of students with the same background. Sofia’s multicultural outlook has been an important tool at her disposal as an engineering student at Columbia, allowing her to collaborate with a group of diverse peers and not only contribute her own unique ideas, but also be receptive and open to the unique ideas of others.

Cultural Capital is a phenomenon that is best fostered in communities with some level of socio-economic privilege. Rather than be uplifted as Cultural Capital, minority identities are often regarded as a burden. Studies show the academic outcomes of low-income students of color are significantly lower than that of other races. Schools assume these students “‘lack’ the social and Cultural Capital required for social mobility” (Yosso, 2005, p. 70).

Our value system for Cultural Capital must become equal on all socio-economic levels. While middle- and upper-class students are regarded in a more positive light for their cultural differences, working class students are often put at a disadvantage. Yosso (2005) argues that diversity of background can improve social mobility because “if one is not born into a family whose knowledge is already deemed valuable, one could then access the knowledges of the middle and upper class and the potential for social mobility through formal schooling” (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Both FOK and CRT applied to Cultural Capital show that we have an existing energy of cultural hegemony in our education system that must be challenged.

On all economic opportunity levels, understanding the value of asset-based learning and focusing on the individual talents and skills of each student enhances their learning experience. As instructors we should look at FOK from the objective value lens of culture. We can recognize that embodied Cultural Capital comes with implicit skills, knowledge, and practices that permit students to grow productively within academic and societal settings.

d. Implicit Bias

Implicit bias involves treating minority students differently without realizing what is happening. It refers to “attitudes, reactions, stereotypes, and categories that affect behavior and understanding. In higher education, implicit bias often refers to unconscious racial or socioeconomic bias towards students, which can be as frequent as explicit bias” (Boysen, et. al 2009). Yet, simply knowing about bias is unlikely to eliminate racism in school community as it does not automatically result in changes in a behavior by peers or teachers. There were a number of occasions in Sofia’s educational upbringing in which implicit bias was easy to recognize, including times where people had the incorrect belief that as a double minority, she had opportunities given to her. I saw a clear link between the phenomenon of implicit bias and the system of Affirmative Action. Minority students in America typically become a systemically marginalized or vulnerable population regarding educational and career opportunities. This bias becomes especially obvious when students are applying to college or university. These endeavors point to a disproportionate amount of disciplinary actions, poor

scores, or low academic level for minority students who – because of socioeconomic structures in underserved communities or bias in predominantly-white communities – have been overlooked. Affirmative Action then comes in as a system to provide room for some level of equal educational opportunities for all students in our society.

Affirmative Action is looked upon by certain people as reverse racism and an unfair advantage to minorities over white students. Sofía, and many other minority students find their own accomplishments devalued when Affirmative Action is misconstrued. Sofía explained that when she and her white, male neighbor applied to college, she got accepted to Columbia and he had not. His mom then made a comment to Sofía’s mom insinuating that Sofía had had an advantage over her son because she was a Hispanic girl. Sofía explains that her neighbor:

had brushed off [her college] acceptance by explicitly telling [her] mom that [she and her son] were not in the same pool for consideration. For [Sofía’s neighbor], the means by which [she] got accepted into university were reversely discriminatory towards her son through Affirmative Action. She invalidated all of [Sofía’s] hard work as an athlete and student throughout high school by saying that the only reason [she] got into Columbia was because [she] was a Hispanic girl in engineering.

Instead, it was the intersectionality of Sofía’s identity that affected her performance as a student. The story above proves just how severe the permeation of implicit bias is in our society, and how damaging it can be to minority students.

e. Critical Race Theory

Sofía defines herself as both Caucasian and Latina. The intersectionality of these two identities as well as her trilingual, upper middle-class, and female identities creates a very unique set of circumstances. Sofía explains that “making the distinction that [she is] a Caucasian Hispanic immigrant here is important just because of the opportunities that [she has] had as a white-passing person rather than someone who very distinctly looks like an immigrant migrant worker. This experience has protected [her] from a lot of anti-minority bigotry on the basis of race, color, and appearance” and has implications within the classroom where — other than the mild accent she had until age fourteen — Sofía was indistinguishable from her predominantly-white classmates and was treated as such. Meanwhile, her Black and Hispanic-looking peers were tokenized and called out when discussing certain topics. They

were also frequently mistaken for one another just because they were from a minority of students of color.

Sofia receives many comments saying she does not look Mexican and that she does not look like she speaks Spanish. For Sofia,

it puts into question what they would think of and how they would treat a migrant worker who comes from a lower socioeconomic situation in Latin America. It makes [her] aware that [she does] have a tremendous amount of white privilege that has shielded [her] from a lot of the anti-minority and anti-immigrant bigotry that exists in this country.

Studies of racial relations of Mexican Americans demonstrate that Sofia is astute in her observation. Vilma Ortiz and Edward Telles (2012), for example, explain that:

The long and continuous history [of Mexican-Americans] as labor migrants destined to jobs at the bottom of the economic hierarchy and their historic placement at the bottom of the racial hierarchy [...] While not as heavily excluded from economic and social integration as African Americans, Mexican origin persons have encountered severe racial barriers, which have structured opportunities for them [...] Mexican Americans lag educationally and economically even after several generations in the United States, as a result of this treatment. They have been thus limited to mostly working-class jobs and from successfully integrating into middle class society.

Furthermore, two things that place Sofia in a unique position as a Caucasian Latina are (1) that her skin is fairly light and she is Caucasian making her ethnically ambiguous; and (2) her parents were middle class and were raised comfortably in Mexico City, allowing them to get a good education. Because of this, education was a top priority in her family, as Sofia's parents' dream was for her to live an even better life than themselves. If either of those variables were altered, Sofia would have had a far different experience growing up.

DISCUSSION

My conversations with Sofia brought up the idea of CRT as discussed by Freire, Yosso, and Crenshaw. As a Catholic, Hispanic, trilingual female studying science, Sofia's identity brought about these theories through experiences of linguistic, religious, and gender diversity as unpacked by Delpit (2020) and Banks & Banks (2016). From Sofia's unique position as a minority, her experience as a student with predominantly male professors

underscores the importance of mentorship as studied by Kubik-Huch (2020) which states female role models are vital in closing the gender gap in certain professions.

As a child from a minority background and the daughter of immigrants, much of Sofia's childhood involved her attempts to assimilate into multiple cultures; not only her American culture at school, but also in embracing her Mexican heritage. This not only shaped her own view of her identity but also the way in which she incorporated her identity into creating a multicultural educational experience for herself.

While examining Sofia's upbringing, I examine the impact of identity on how American structures multicultural education efforts. Through her acute awareness of influences on her upbringing, we see implications of assets of language, ethnicity and gender on FOK and CRT.

This study emphasizes the need for awareness on how conversations and actions can be construed as prejudiced and bias, thereby diminishing the positive aspects of distinct identities. By raising awareness, more stories like Sofia will bring critical thought to pedagogy and recognition to peoples' speech and action.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Sofia's narrative helps instructors understand the most critical aspects of culturally responsive teaching. We should embrace the notion of open-mindedness when designing flexible curriculum to include our students, their Cultural Capital, and their FOK. This creates a community of good and open-minded learners. The practical implications of this endeavor are abundant and includes the development of explicit knowledge through ensuring that factual information about cultural particularities of ethnic groups and their contributions are available. Simultaneously, teachers must understand that they cannot trivialize culturally relevant pedagogy into becoming a checklist such that they aren't successfully internalized. Instead, educators must seek to create culturally relevant curricula that can be challenged, and whose meaningful themes and materials help engage students in active, open and dynamic discussions (without a set agenda). This strategy will allow students to make deliberate connections between their FOK and Cultural Capital and the class material. Finally, through demonstrating a cultural caring and building of a diverse learning community, we can eliminate implicit bias in order to foster a powerful and challenging learning environment for our students.

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