Constructions of Difference and Deficit, A Case Study: Nicaraguan Families and Children on the Margins in Costa Rica

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Abstract

This analysis examines the nexus of marginalization and education, particularly the literacy potential and achievement of young children from socially and politically marginalized communities. Drawing on data from a study of literacy practice among Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica and the schooling of the Nicaraguan children in Costa Rican schools, this analysis reveals the ways that constructs such as *difference* and *deficit* are constructed within historical, economic, and cultural contexts, for the most part in the absence of empirical evidence. The data used for this analysis was collected as part of a six-month, ethnographic case study of literacy practice within Costa Rican and the Nicaraguan immigrant communities. Data came from (a) observations in kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2 classes in a public school near San José; (b) interviews with public school administrators and teachers; (c) community observations of literacy practices in Costa Rican contexts and within the *precarios* where Nicaraguan immigrants live; (d) semi-structured home literacy interviews with Nicaraguan participants from one prominent *precario*; (e) early literacy assessment results for children in the kindergarten and first grade; (f) expert interviews with administrators of NGOs who focus on the "Nicaraguan problem"; and (g) reading and writing artifacts from the communities and the schools.

Keywords

education; literacy; emergent literacy; equity, marginalization and education, deficit theory

Introduction

What does it mean to be "on the margins" of society and how does that relate to the abiding fact that students who live in families and communities that are "on the margins" do less well in school as compared to those who come from positions of power and status? This analysis examines the nexus of marginalization and education, particularly the literacy potential and achievement of young children from socially and politically marginalized communities. Drawing on data from a study of literacy practice among Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica and the schooling of the Nicaraguan children in

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Costa Rican schools, this analysis reveals the ways that constructs such as *difference* and *deficit* are constructed within historical, economic, and cultural contexts, for the most part in the absence of empirical evidence.

The data used for this analysis was collected as part of a case study of literacy practice of the Nicaraguan immigrant community in Costa Rica. This case study is one of more than 24 other case studies that have been conducted under the umbrella of the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS), (University of British Columbia. Retrieved from www.cpls.educ.ubc.ca).

Situating the Study

The study and analysis presented here is based on data drawn from a larger case study of the Nicaraguan immigrant community and their young children in the Costa Rican schools. As such, the data presented in this report reflect the goals and methods of the larger study, which is situated within an even larger project – the CPLS project mentioned above. I will briefly describe these layers of context to facilitate the reading of this particular analysis of the construction of difference and deficit assigned to the Nicaraguan immigrant community by the Costa Rican people.

The Cultural Practices of Literacy Study

The CPLS project has as one of its focusing goals the exploration of marginalization and educational achievement. Other CPLS goals include (a) the study and theorizing of literacy as it is practiced within different cultural contexts and (b) the development of culturally congruent literacy instruction, informed by the ways that people within different social and cultural contexts read and write: the types of texts and the social purposes for which each is read and written. Each CPLS case study addresses specific research questions regarding literacy as it is

practiced by adults, children, and within communities and homes, and as the literacy practices reflect the lives (social, economic, cultural, and political) of the participants. Many of the case studies also include a focus on the literacy instruction experienced by the children in the families, documenting the literacy activities that are present in the instruction and looking for relationships with practices with which they are familiar from their homes and communities (Purcell-Gates, 2007).

Theoretical Frames and Related Research for CPLS Case Studies

The case studies within the CPLS project implicitly reflect Paolo Freire's theories of literacy and liberation (1993). Freire theorized a pedagogy that is based on the belief that the true purpose of education should be to facilitate individuals' achievement of their full potential -- -- their true humanity (McLaren & Leonard, 1993; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000). Especially relevant to this analysis is Freire's belief that people in power view marginalized people as objects, not fully human. The oppression and control exercised by those in power maintains their monopoly on privilege. This Freirean frame provides the basis for the focus on marginalization and schooling for the CPLS project and cases studies.

The perspective taken by CPLS on literacy learning is a socio-cognitive one (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004) that situates learning within sociocultural contexts. This perspective views print literacy development in school within the context of literacy practice outside of school in homes and communities. Within CPLS, we view literacy practice, including the literacy practiced in schools, as cultural practice, reflecting values, beliefs, history, and power relationships (Au, 2002; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Brandt, 2001; Fishman, 1988; Freire, 1993; Moje, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 1995, 1996; Scribner & Cole, 1981;

Street 1984 & 1995). Further, we embed our study of literacy practice in cultural communities within an understanding of schooling as primarily involved in social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1991) and of language as always "language-in-use" within social activity contexts (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky; 1962; Wertsch, 1981).

The CPLS focus on literacy and marginalized communities is based on the research on the relationships between literacy abilities and economic and political status. The ability to read and write is considered to be essential and foundational to personal and social well- being. Literacy abilities affect economic, educational, social, and health outcomes for individuals and social groups (Kirsch, 2001; Institute of Medicine, 2004). National well-being and development are also highly associated with levels of literacy (Coulombe, Tremblay, & Marchand, 2004). While research confirms that these relationships are not simple, causal ones (Graff, 1979; Tyler, Murnane, & Willett, 2000), nevertheless all assert that ensuring equal access to education and effective literacy instruction is a national and global priority (UNESCO, 2001).

Examining the research and the data on literacy development and achievement world-wide, it becomes quite clear that children from socially, linguistically, and politically marginalized groups consistently fail to achieve at the same rates as children from main-stream communities (Freire, 1993; Kaestle, C.F., Damon-Moore, H., Stedman, L.C., Tinsley, K., & Trollinger, Jr., W.V. (1991); UNESCO, 2001). This achievement gap has never been eliminated since literacy levels were first measured and compared, despite recurring efforts at school and curricular reform. This was the problem addressed by the study: to understand literacy development at the community and school levels and to use this knowledge to create functional and relevant early literacy instruction designed

to increase achievement for children from marginalized groups.

Emergent Literacy Development

The research on emergent literacy, conducted over the last few decades, provides another influence on the CPLS focus on the study of literacy use within communities and homes in order to better understand the relationship between sociopolitical marginalization and school success. Emergent literacy research has shown that young children begin to learn about literacy within their homes and communities before they begin formal literacy instruction (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995, 1996; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Taylor, 1985; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Within these home and community contexts they learn values and beliefs about literacy and literacy practices as they experience and participate in them. They acquire cognitive models for how and why literacy is practiced, who is involved in different literacy events, and emergent literacy concepts (Purcell-Gates, 2003; 2004). Children take all of this to school with them when they begin formal literacy instruction. In order to better understand the reported high failure rate of children of Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica, I chose to focus on the early literacy knowledge and abilities the children brought to school with them as well as the literacy practices of their homes and communities.

The Case Study of the Nicaraguan Community in Costa Rica

One of the major intents of the larger case study was to work collaboratively with the Costa Rica Ministry of Public Education to explore new ways of designing and delivering instruction in literacy during the early grades. Personnel from the Ministry aided in finding schools for the research, and a professor at the National University as well as a social activist priest, facilitated access to a Nicaraguan community for data collection. The results were disseminated

by the Ministry to all elementary school teachers, their supervisors, all librarians, and all elementary English teachers of the country via a videoconference, featuring my report and the suggested curriculum changes, and through individual presentations to teachers, supervisors, and administrators. Thus, this study and report reflected collaborative efforts throughout.

I chose to study the underachievement of Nicaraguan children in the schools of Costa Rica from several presuppositions: First, I assumed that the Nicaraguan parents and families cared deeply about the education of their children. Second, I assumed that literacy mediated the lives of the Nicaraguan immigrants just as it does the lives of other communities. Third, I assumed that in order for the Nicaraguan children to achieve at higher levels in school, the official curriculum would need to be based upon the lived realities of the Nicaraguan community, including the ways that literacy is practiced in those communities. Thus, my goal was to learn of the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) regarding literacy and to use that knowledge to suggest curricular changes that would be culturally congruent within the Costa Rican context.

My goal for the larger case study was to understand literacy development and underdevelopment at the community and school levels and to use this knowledge to create functional and relevant early literacy instruction designed to increase achievement for children from marginalized groups. I sought to describe through ethnographic means: (a) the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical reality of immigrants from Nicaragua in Costa Rica; (b) the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical context of Costa Rica as the host country; (c) the literacy practices of the mainstream Costa Rican context; (d) the literacy practices within the Nicaraguan community; (e) the literacy practices of the Costa Rican schools attended by the Nicaraguan children; and (f)

transactions between the children's experiences with reading and writing in their lives outside of school – in their homes and communities – and those within their classrooms.

Methods for the Case Study

I conducted the case study within an ethnographic case study design (Barone, 2011; Purcell-Gates, 2011; Yin, 1994). With the belief that marginalization can only be understood in context (after all, one needs a defining context(s) within which instances of marginalization can occur), methodologies that call for documenting and analyzing context – such as ethnography and case study – are called for. While results from such studies cannot be generalized to other contexts, they can provide rich detail and insights that provide ways of thinking about other instances of the issue, in this case marginalization and school achievement.

Data Collection for the Case Study

I sought to describe through ethnographic means: (a) the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical reality of immigrants from Nicaragua in Costa Rica; (b) the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts of Costa Rica as the host country; (c) the literacy practices of the mainstream Costa Rican context; (d) the literacy practices within the Nicaraguan community; (e) the literacy practices of the Costa Rican schools attended by the Nicaraguan children; and (f) transactions between the children's experiences with reading and writing in their lives outside of school – in their homes and communities – and those within their classrooms.

To address the foregoing foci, I observed one class each at the kindergarten, first and second grade for a total of 150 hours at a school in an area close to the capitol city, San José. During these observations, I noted ways teachers taught literacy and other content areas, texts they used, purposes for reading and writing, and the general tenor and operations of the school.

At the same time, I noted through observations and field notes how the Nicaraguan children were taking from their literacy instruction: How they were making sense of it; what knowledge and understandings about literacy they were bringing to the task of learning to read and write in school; and how were they progressing. I also collected reading and writing artifacts, and during the final month I assessed the early literacy knowledge of the children in kindergarten and grade one with (a) the *Instrumento de Observación De Los Logros De La Lecto-Escitura Iniciál*, the Spanish reconstruction of Clay's *Concepts of Print Test*: *Conceptos del Texto Impreso* (Concepts About Print) and *Escritura de Vocabulario* (Writing Vocabulary), *Spanish Version* (Escamilla, Andrade, Basurto, & Ruiz [1996]). I visited three other public schools near *precarios* – the "shantytowns" that housed primarily Nicaraguan immigrants and that were scattered throughout the San José metro area and elsewhere in the country -- to judge the typicality of the school in which I was a participant observer. For comparison, I also visited a private school near San José and observed in the kindergarten, first, and second-grade classes. I also interviewed the director, and the kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers of this school regarding their views on literacy curriculum and literacy learning in school.

The area of the school where I observed for six months was middle-class and completely Costa Rican (i.e. it is not the part of the city where foreigners visit and own homes) with pockets of real poverty. The families with children in the school were low/middle to low-income. The wealthier families in the area sent their children to private schools. I lived in this area in a small home. During my six months living in the country, I also observed and noted the literacy practices in the Costa Rican social, cultural, and political context.

Beginning in March (schools begin in February), after gaining access, I noted public literacy practices in a nearby *precario,* where I also conducted in-home semi-structured interviews of literacy practice. I also conducted interviews of literacy practices in the homes of the Nicaraguan and poor Costa Rican children in the classes where I observed. For this study, the term "literacy practice" refers to both the texts that people read and write and the purposes for which (and contexts within) they read and write them. Finally, I visited three other large precarios in the country to assess the typicality of the one in which I was working.

To provide essential context for the research, I also interviewed Ministry of Education officials, teachers, community leaders, and officials of organizations devoted to working with children and immigrant children, in particular, in areas of schooling and human rights. I collected curriculum documents and consulted with University of Costa Rica and National University psychology and education faculty regarding the literacy curriculum in the country and the socio-political situation of Nicaraguan immigrants. I recorded a total of 34 interviews, with a total of 264 pages of English transcripts and 400 pages of Spanish transcripts. Field notes for textual practices in the Costa Rican contexts numbered 250 pages; collected artifacts documenting textual genres within the mainstream contexts and social and political contexts of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica numbered 600 pages (from newspapers, magazine articles, flyers, etc.).

Throughout data collection, a Costa Rican assistant, Claudia, who spoke basic English accompanied me. The assistant was working toward her credential to teach elementary school, and, thus, provided me with translations when I needed them and with insider knowledge on how schools and literacy curriculum worked in Costa Rica. A Spanish speaker from Mexico, located at my university, transcribed all of the recorded interviews in both Spanish and English. Transcribed talk included that of me,

Claudia, and the participant. Thus, the Spanish and English transcriptions allowed me to monitor potential disjunctions between what was said by the participant and by Claudia, the translator.

Reports of the findings of this larger case study can be found at www.cpls.ubc.ca under Working Papers # 13 and #20 in both Spanish and English.

Analysis for Constructions of Difference and Deficit

While the larger case study was specifically situated within Costa Rica and focuses on the Nicaraguan immigrants within Costa Rica, this analysis addresses the larger issue outlined above: What is happening in situations of marginalization that can be understood as related to the underachievement of children from marginalized communities? Within this analysis, I look at a phenomenon that arose in the data that I originally mused about as one of "perception," in this case perception of difference and deficit. For purposes of this paper, though, I am referring to this as "construction" of difference/deficit, with the working understanding that perception is the result of constructions of realities, granting that perceptions of realities reinforce constructions of realities and in the process develop them further. I will further address this thought in the conclusion section.

Data for Analysis

The analysis on constructions of difference and deficit, presented in this report, is based on (a) school observations; (b) interviews with Ministry of Public Education personnel regarding the "Nicaraguan problem"; (c) interviews with teachers, regarding curriculum and the Nicaraguan children in their classes; (d) interviews with directors of international NGOs concerned with immigration and immigrant children in school; (e) interviews with university faculty and students regarding the "Nicaraguan

problem"; (f) interviews with a social justice activist and director of a language school regarding the Costa Rican context and the marginalization of different cultural groups; (g) interviews with community and church activists who were working with the Nicaraguan community; (h) field notes that captured comments and analyses of the "Nicaraguan problem" made by various members of the public such as taxi drivers, store owners, doctors, nurses, and neighbors as well as my own observations; and (i) newspaper accounts regarding the Nicaraguan situation in general and the education of Nicaraguans in particular. I used all of the above sources to triangulate during analysis to explore the ways that perceptions of difference and deficit of a marginalized group contributed to the "Nicaraguan problem" in Costa Rican schools.

Procedures for Analysis

I entered all of my field notes, interview transcripts, photos of public texts, and scanned documents into the qualitative data analysis program *Atlas.ti* (2007). *Atlas.ti* is a powerful and versatile tool for qualitative analysis of large bodies of text, graphical, audio, and video data, in any of their most common formats. This program allows researchers to arrange, reassemble, manage, and code all types of collected materials in a systematic way. The program is designed for, or allows, coding, search and retrieval, database management, memoing, data linking, matrix building, network displays, and theory building.

During the original coding process for the larger study, I had noted instances of what seemed to me to be misguided, or incorrect, perceptions by informants of Nicaraguan adults and children. Turning to the analysis for this report, I focused on the code "perception," adopting instances in the data coded thusly as my unit of analysis. I reviewed all of my data for this code, and broke it into sub-codes that captured the source and type of negative and incorrect perceptions of the Nicaraguan community, adults, and children. In addition, I

reanalyzed the early concepts of print assessment for comparisons of the scores of the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican children.

Results

Historical Context: Costa Rica and Nicaragua

Costa Rica in the 21st century is Central America's most developed country. It began as one of Spain's poorest colonies, and its history of small farming and independent small business owners reveals itself in its long-treasured cultural narrative of the value of individual effort and focus on human rights. It has no standing army (as of 1948), and instead has invested its money in universal health care and education. It reports the highest literacy rate (97%) in Central America, although I could find no explicit operational definition of "literate" in the reports concerning this rate.

The country has a long history of democratic process, and recently the voters were becoming more and more restive at the economic consequences of globalization and the impoverishment of their neighbors by the World Bank procedures of re-structuralization. Nicaragua, in particular, had suffered economically as the result of the revolution during the 1970s and the Contra offensive waged by the U.S. that destroyed many of the educational and health initiatives begun by the victorious revolutionary party. In the five years preceding this investigation, Nicaraguans had been crossing the border in large numbers into Costa Rica as economic immigrants, seeking work and basic necessities for their families.

This influx, which continues to the current time, has put a tremendous strain on the economy of Costa Rica, which was already weakened due to global economic events. This has been especially felt in the areas of health and education. As a result, at the time of the beginning of this study, resentment and prejudice had grown within the Costa Rican population against the Nicaraguan immigrants, the majority of whom are illegal in status.

The relationship between Costa Rica(ns) and Nicaragua(ns) is complex, and to understand it, one must take a historical view. The Nicaraguans and the Costa Ricans have struggled over a common border since Costa Rica liberated itself and later Nicaragua in 1856 from William Walker, a U.S. citizen bent on conquering countries in Central America (www.wikipedia.org. Retrieved July 7, 2013). This also liberated the San Juan River (part of the border between the two countries and the lake which guided the rest of the border). The Cañas-Jérez Treaty gave Costa Rica free rights of navigation on the San Juan River and Lake Nicaragua for commercial and fiscal purposes, while also stipulating that Costa Rica could not navigate with vessels of war. It was signed in 1888. During the Nicaraguan Civil War in the '80s, Costa Rica provided Nicaraguans sanctuary and allowed some camps in northern Costa Rica. According to Arguedas Arias (2006), Commandante Cero planned his assault on Nicaragua's National Palace, sparking the uprising that led to the downfall of the Somoza regime, from a camp in Costa Rica. In 2006, the border skirmishes had increased, with, according to Costa Rican spokespersons, Nicaraguans ". . . charging Ticos (Costa Ricans) illegal taxes to navigate on the San Juan and prohibiting armed Costa Rican policemen (to police the border against drug running from Nicaragua) from traveling on the river, " (Arguedes, 2006).

It was within this historical context that increasing numbers of Nicaraguans had immigrated to Costa Rica as economic refugees, with the Nicaraguan economy failing, social services falling apart, and high levels of unemployment in their own country. Various university interview participants and local officials offered that U.S. foreign and economic policy was widely seen as largely responsible for this situation. The U.S. Contra war, according to

this narrative, led to the dismantling of the educational and health programs in Nicaragua that had been put in place by the Sandinistas and had drained the Nicaraguan economy fighting the war. Structural adjustment requirements of the World Bank for loans to pay off large international debts, as well as the U.S. backed change of government following the Contra offensive, dictated the dismantling of many social services (Oettler, 2007). Thus, families were coming over the border into Costa Rica from a much inferior educational system and inherent social problems.

To Marginalize: Positioning of Nicaraguans

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary (2008) defines marginalize as a transitive verb that means ". . . to relegate to an unimportant and powerless condition within a society or group." I will use this definition along with Young's (2000) definition of the noun *marginalization* as "exclusion from meaningful participation in society" for this discussion. Transitive verbs require actors and "objects," and we will explore *who* are the actors in this relegation to an excluded space and the ways in which the excluded are, in fact, transformed into objects in the process .

As the preceding definitions reveal, *marginalization* is a social process. In Costa Rica, the society that is the *marginalizer*, or the actor, is the Costa Rican society. During my first weeks in the country, I was given a great deal of information from Costa Rican informants as to *who* the Nicaraguans were. A sample of these comments appears in Table 1. Overall, from taxi drivers to government officials, the picture that emerges is one of difference, deficit, pestilence, and criminality. The social tension was high and my positioning as a researcher interested in the Nicaraguan community clearly unsettled many people (e.g., my landlord, the real estate person who tried to discourage me from living in the community, teachers and principals who I interviewed, my assistant and her sister, and so

on), who found the situation disturbing and dangerous. I was urged by many of these people to avoid walking alone, especially in the downtown (*el centro*), since, according to them, gangs of Nicaraguans, teamed up with Colombians, were apt to snatch me off of the sidewalk – kidnap me. My landlord, for example, was appalled that my husband would "allow" me to walk about unaccompanied, as I was wont to do.

My colleagues from the Ministry of Education reflected attitudes that were widely held by progressives and the intelligentsia in the country. They abhorred the xenophobia in their country where they held such high regard for human rights. However, they all agreed that Costa Rica could not continue to support or begin to encourage the assimilation (and thus the continuing immigration) of Nicaraguans. They felt that it was unfair to the educational and health sectors of Costa Rica and that the differences between the two cultures were too numerous to successfully bridge.

Within the schools, principals and teachers varied in their public stances toward the situation. Some took a personal interest in improving the lives and academic successes of the Nicaraguan children. Others reflected a more Costa Rican-centered attitude, seeming to ignore the issues and, at the same time, reflecting and perpetuating the stereotyping and discrimination that so successfully rendered Nicaraguan children and their families as "other." All of the teachers and administrators that I spoke with and observed, however, accepted as fact the assumptions of difference and deficit that held sway in the general Costa Rican population (exemplified in Table 1). According to my informants, the Nicaraguan children suffered real discrimination in schools from both other children and from teachers. They did very poorly in school and they were considered a social and educational problem. This was one of the reasons that certain Ministry of Education people and intellectuals at the Universities were interested in this project.

Table 1

Sample Comments that "Other" Nicaraguan Adults and Children From Costa Rican Community Members

Focus	Comments
Adults/ Community	"They are thieves, rapists, killers, criminals, offenders."
	"They are *indios*, dark-skinned."
	"They have violent natures."
	"They don't speak good Spanish. You can't understand them!"
	"They (may) hold a proper ID as Costa Ricans but (people say) 'Well, this one is *not* Costa Rican' just by the way they speak."
	"No one trusts them."
	"They live in appalling conditions in completely overcrowded homes... in burrows in the ground."
	"There are cases of sexual deviations, incest cases."
	"They bring drugs and violence to the Costa Ricans."
	"The public schools? The problem is the d.... Nicaraguans! Get rid of them and we'd be fine."
	"They are taking precious resources from Costa Ricans. They get 80% of the *bonos* (low-interest government loans for housing and schooling)."
Parents of Schoolchildren	"Mothers we cannot count on because they are usually working. No, generally parents work, the mother works ironing a couple of hours here, a couple of hours there, cleaning houses."
	"We need to give everything to these children. Nicaraguan parents never buy the school materials for their children; it is actually the schools that provide everything."
	"The mothers do not really pay attention; if the child goes to school or not is something they are not worried about."
Children	"These children's only meal is the one we give them at school."
	"The children have a lot of social and economic problems and such background affects their achievement at school."
	"They are much shyer (than Costa Rican children)."
	"One of the most important problems for the Nicaraguan children is their general knowledge level. They do not arrive in Costa Rica with the same level as the Costa Rican children in our schools."
	"Very low educational levels."
	"They are usually children with bad appearance and with absenteeism problems."
	"Vocabulary! Nicaraguan children have a very poor vocabulary."
	"They always feel different to the other children; they even look different, their personal appearance is different"

Constructing Identity Through the "Other"

The Nicaraguan immigrant population in Costa Rica had been constructed in such negative ways against a national identity narrative that positions Costa Ricans in contrast. Costa Ricans see themselves as people of peace. They brokered peace within other Central American countries during the bloody internal wars in the 1980s. Their president at the time, Oscar Arias, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this effort. Within this context Nicaraguans are positioned as people of violence – *paz vs. violencia* (Bishop, 2008).

Another national identity is that of whiteness. Up until recently, most Costa Ricans claimed a white identity. Many informants told me that Costa Ricans are different from the rest of Central America in terms of their race. This is due, according to popular opinion, to the fact that when their European ancestors came into what is now Costa Rica they were professional -- lawyers, teachers, etc. They did not mix with the Indians as in the other countries. This however is not supported by the data. Costa Ricans are the descendants of Spanish soldiers and sailors who did intermarry in the "'New World." It was only recently that there has been an official recognition that Indians, Blacks, and Chinese exist at all in Costa Rica, although all three groups have a real presence with different histories (e.g. the Chinese were brought in the 1800s to build the railroad). Just before I arrived in the country, a major genetic study from the University of Costa Rica was released that documented that up to 80% of Costa Ricans have "mixed blood" and that the illusion of whiteness was just that. This identity of whiteness is contra-positioned against the heightened awareness of "dark skin" identified with Nicaraguans (Sandoval-Garcia, 2004).

Costa Ricans also hold a national identity of superiority over other Central American countries regarding levels of education, attention to health care, and overall devotion to democratic and civil ideals. This is played out in the negative stereotyping of the Nicaraguans as "warlike," "low and inferior levels of education," deficient language, and overall filthy living conditions. Several people told me that they were coming to fear that Nicaragua would invade Costa Rica (that has no army) to "get the water." This refers to the pride of Costa Rica that almost 90% of their water is potable due to their investment of monies in public health and infrastructure.

What are the processes through which these contrasting narratives and resulting stereotypes are constructed? Recent analyses cited the popular press operating within a context of crisis that exaggerates the impact of Nicaraguan immigrants on social services and on crime rates (Sandoval, 1997). Bishop reports that a study of reporting by the Costa Rican newspapers *La Nación* and *La República*, concluded that the press contributed to the negative stereotypes of Nicaraguans through sensationalist reporting. "The medias of mass communication frequently issue commentaries which foment xenophobia and implicate Nicaraguans in criminal occurrences which, together with the national population's general intolerance, heightens social rejection and discrimination against Nicaraguans" (2008, p. 1).

An infamous (within Costa Rica) example of both the depth of the xenophobia and the degree to which the Nicaraguans had been positioned as marginalized objects--and the ways that the popular press aided and abetted this process--occurred one day when the public woke up to the front page headlines that screamed that a Nicaraguan had been set upon and eaten by dogs while the police watched. As this event was analysed over the next six months, the police countered that they had called for help but had to wait for it to arrive. Nicaraguan activists pointed out that letting a

Nicaraguan die while waiting for help was more possible in the present atmosphere of hostility than it would have been had the man been Costa Rican. Apparently the murdered man had been misidentified, based on his appearance, as a potential burglar by the owner of the dogs.

Construction and Perception of Difference and Deficit

It was within this context of xenophobia, discrimination, and stereotyping that I observed and documented the educational situation of Costa Rican and Nicaraguan children in the public schools, focusing on one particular school in a middle-class community that served primarily poor Costa Rican and Nicaraguan immigrants (see Methods section, above). As I collected and analyzed my data *in situ*, the reality of construction of difference and deficit began to make itself clear.

La Escuela

La Escuela Britanica[1] is typical of Costa Rican public schools. It consists, actually, of two schools: A pre-school and a Grade 1-6 school. In Costa Rica, the *Pre-escolar* program is completely separate from the Grades 1-12 system. Each pre-school is administrated independently, with teachers trained and hired through this separate system. At Escuela Britanica, the 4 and 5 year-old children entered through a separate gate into a separate building and played on their own playground. Access to the elementary school was gained through another locked gate, but the children could see the older children and activity through the metal bars that constituted the gate as well as the perimeter of the entire school property. Maestra Carmen's kindergarten class sometimes sat out in the garden that lay between the cement-floored playground and the K-6 school.

The elementary school consisted of classrooms spread along a one-story rambling building, two wings of which faced into a garden with brightly painted concrete tables and benches, surrounded by lush flowering bushes and plants. The first grade classroom of Maestra Paola was located in one of these wings. Maestra Terecita's second grade classroom, on the other hand, faced onto the larger main playground, with its bare earth and broken pieces of playground equipment scattered about.

Who ARE the Nicaraguans in This Class?

Given the extraordinary amount of focus placed on the physical appearance of Nicaraguans by my Costa Rican informants, I was prepared to tentatively identify the children when I began my classroom observations one month after settling in to my new home and neighbourhood. Entering Maestra Carmen's kindergarten classroom with my clipboard and accompanied by my Costa Rican research assistant, Claudia, I began to look around for children who were dark-skinned and who looked as if their school uniforms were unkempt, whose hair was perhaps unwashed, and who seemed to feel "out of place" (see Table 1). I did the same in the first and second grade classrooms. I had decided that I didn't want to ask for a list of Nicaraguan children for a while, preferring to look at all of the children first without preconceived notions of who they were and what they were "capable of."

My field notes taken during those first few weeks consisted of tentative "sightings" with such comments as

- "... Nica?[2] Miguel - he was called by the teacher in the clapping song. No one knew his name. He couldn't respond/ very shy/ tried to disappear."
- "There's a little 'scruffy boy' in the corner, tiny, messy appearance, doesn't seem to know what's going on...Nica?"

This continued for about a month, and after the first two weeks, I felt so sure of which children were Nicaraguan that I had begun focusing on them for my field notes. I had confirmed my judgments with Claudia, my Costa Rican assistant, who was one of the informants who had assured me that it was possible to spot Nicaraguans immediately based on skin color, general appearance, and language ("not proper Spanish"). By this time, I had written extensive field notes on a number of children in kindergarten, first and second grade, documenting their responses to instruction, their literacy knowledge – emergent and beginning—and their gaps in understandings and abilities as related to reading and writing.

Too bad! I had spent a great deal of time and thought focusing, for the most part, on the *wrong* children. Even worse, I had missed documenting literacy learning for the Nicaraguan children who *were* in the classrooms – children who to my eyes blended in seamlessly with the other children, both in terms of appearance and apparent ability. In terms of the tell-tale language differences, I could not judge. While I spoke and understood Spanish at a *working* level, I was not proficient enough to pick up reported dialect differences. That was what Claudia was for. To me, they all sounded the same!

My error in perception became apparent during the second month of my observations when I began the process of soliciting participants for the literacy practice interviews. I wanted to interview the parents of the Nicaraguan children in the classes in which I was observing in order to document, not what the parents do *not do* in their lives – in their homes and in their communities – regarding reading and writing but rather what they *do* – what types of texts do they read and write as part of their lives and what life purposes are served by these literacy events?

I approached this task of obtaining participants for the interviews by working through the teachers. Thus, I asked Maestras Carmen, Paola, and Terecita for the names of the Nicaraguan parents of the children in their classrooms. They each referred to a list of all of the children in the class with notations of which were Costa Rican, which were Nicaraguan, and which were Costa Rican with Nicaraguan parents[3]. This was my first indication that all was not as it seemed. In the kindergarten class, not one of the children I had tagged as Nicaraguan was listed. They were all Costa Rican. Further, all of the Nicaraguan children (there were six listed) had, according to my observations, appeared Costa Rican, according to the defining characteristics of Costa Rican children reported previously by numerous informants: (a) socially adept and comfortable, (b) well-fed and dressed, (c) early literacy knowledge and abilities, with (d) skin color lighter than the Nicaraguans. This last, I admit, was impossible to determine. There was a range of skin tones among the children in all three classes, from blond and blue eyed to quite dark. It turned out that the blond child was Nicaraguan as was the brown-haired one with the freckles.

All of my informants from the educational field and several surveys that I had read indicated that one of the problems in Costa Rican schools was the negative stereotyping and prejudice toward Nicaraguan children by the teachers. However, this did not appear to affect the actual instruction provided by the three teachers with whom I worked. I never saw an indication of unfair or unequal treatment of the Nicaraguan children. Nor did any of the parents indicate to me during private interviews that they felt that this was happening. These teachers were each caring, warm, and responsive to all of the children in their classrooms.

However, this does not mean that they did not share in the nationally constructed view of

Nicaraguan children as linguistically, cognitively, and culturally deficient and of Nicaraguan parents as generally unavailable and not as concerned (as compared to Costa Rican parents) with the education of their children. This conclusion is based on casual conversation over the period of the study as well as more formal interviews conducted at the end of my time with them.

One unforgettable defining instance of the constructed nature of difference and deficit in this study occurred during the process of conducting the literacy practice interviews. Working with the teachers' lists of Nicaraguan children (I included in this sample the children who were Costa Rican by birth but not by parentage), I and my assistant visited a family of one of the first grade children. The mother, as was always true for these interviews, greeted us with warmth and offers of refreshment and made us comfortable at the kitchen table. This family, as was true for some of the Nicaraguan families from the Escuela Britanica, lived in a modest *rancho* and not in the precarios where houses are precariously constructed of scraps of lumber and tin. Thus, nothing about the low-SES barrio or the house tipped us off that we were not in a Nicaraguan home. However, an extremely awkward moment occurred as we were asking about whether or not the mother had a visa or "green card" and thus could be said to read such types of texts. Señora Espinoza reared back and exclaimed, "We're not Nica! We're Costa Rican! I was born in Guanacaste (an area in the northwestern corner of the country, next to the Nicaraguan border)." Given the xenophobic atmosphere in the country, it was clear that our assuming that she was Nicaraguan was very unsettling to her and an insult. We apologized but informed her that her name, and her son's name, were on a list at the school, identifying them as Nicaraguan. She vowed to attend to that immediately. We continued the interview, anyway.

This instance of misidentification could possibly be explained by skin color since Guanacaste was originally part of Nicaragua (and the loss of it to Costa Rica is still one of the issues that rankle in the ongoing tensions between the two countries). However, while Señora Espinoza was somewhat dark-skinned, her son was not. Tellingly, his teacher was surprised and a little shocked when we informed her later that the family was not Nicaraguan.

So, who were the Nicaraguans? It was not patently apparent, using all of the criteria (even the supposedly obvious language difference that I could not perceive as an English speaker did not work in the case of the Espinosas) that are called upon to construct difference in this case of Costa Rica. What about the generally accepted notion that Nicaraguan children enter school with low levels of general knowledge and, in particular, vocabulary knowledge, as compared to Costa Rican children?

Oscar and Luís

A little boy named Oscar and an even smaller one named Luís provide a telling "case within a case" to illustrate the reality of the Costa Rican/Nicaraguan comparative positioning within the classrooms. Oscar and Luís were both in Maestra Paola's first grade class. In first grade in Costa Rican public schools, children learned to read and write for the first time (any explicit attention to literacy is excluded from the pre-school curriculum on the theory that pre-school is a time for play and social development only)[4]. The instruction began on two levels. Officially (i.e., described and ascribed in the curriculum), children begin to read and write by engaging in activities referred to as *apresto*, which roughly translates as 'readiness' work. They practiced drawing circles, connecting dots, tracing, and coloring. This goes on for about two months before they launch into learning the names of the alphabet and the sounds of the vowels and syllables.

The unofficial point of beginning to read and write, however, was the omnipresent copying from the board. From Day One, the children were required to copy the date sentence from the board into their notebooks: *Hoy es martes, febrero 7, 2006* (Today is Tuesday, February 7, 2006). They did this four to five times a day; repeating it when the subject matter changed and thus different notebooks were used. By the end of the fourth month, they were copying the date sentence plus four others: My name is ....; The name of my school is Britannica School; The name of my teacher is Maestra Paola. The name of my country is Costa Rica. This practice is repeated across the grades. When I asked a child who taught him how to make the letters in order to copy the sentences, he just shrugged and said no one; he just copied. When I asked Maestra Paola during the final interview if the copying was considered part of learning to write, she said, "No, how could it be?" The children didn't know how to write until much later. How did they know how to copy? She didn't know; they just copied. She had never thought about it before.

Luís was the "little scruffy boy" I had noticed during my first observations. He always appeared sad, never speaking with other children, never looking up from his desk, and never smiling – at least when I was observing him. His clothes were too big for him, and he often didn't have socks on; one could see the soles of his feet through holes in the bottoms of his shoes. He was very tiny, dark-skinned, and always appeared sleepy, with red and sometimes swollen eyes. He never knew what to do. During copying time, he would begin to copy but then slowly stop as if he wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing and couldn't tell if he was finished or not. His notebooks were filled with red exclamations from his teacher, exhorting him to finish his work at home and to practice the letters more! During one exam, I watched him sit in utter bewilderment as the other children followed the oral directions and went to work. The sticking point seemed to be his understanding of the word when Maestra Paola instructed them to "circle the word...." He was just totally lost! Over the course of the five months of my observations, Luís was absent an average of two times a week which didn't help the situation. When he did attend, he always sat at the back of the room and basically tried to disappear. I felt very sorry and concerned about him and tried to help him when I could.

Oscar was a study in contrast. He began school about two weeks late, and so when he entered we were informed as to his background. His mother was blind and so his father had taught him to read and write (at least to 'make the letters') at home so that he could help her and be more independent when his father went to work as a carpenter. Upon entering first grade, Oscar could already read at (I'm approximating) about the second-grade level. He fit into the class routines anyway; always sitting in the first seat in the middle row and attending bright-eyed to the teacher and his classmates as he joined them in copying from the blackboard, and coloring, tracing, and circling on the handouts that had to be trimmed and pasted into their notebooks. He liked finishing his work and then jumping up to help others, engaging in conversations and generally enjoying himself. It is a common practice in Costa Rican classrooms for the children to move about, talking, borrowing materials, helping and commenting on others work during their work time. It is only when the teacher is directly instructing the class that they are expected to be in their seats and quiet.

While he was already a reader when he began first grade, Oscar's deep store of written language knowledge made itself obvious during one, somewhat anomalous lesson. It was highly unusual for Grade One teachers to engage students in creative composing activities in Costa Rica. Writing in the classrooms always

meant copying or completing worksheets. However, one day, Maestra Paola surprised us all by announcing to the children that they were going to 'make a story.' They were to break into groups (a totally unfamiliar activity in this all-class instructional context) and then to work together to create a story about a duck or ducks (Maestra Paola told me later that she had gotten the idea for this activity from a workshop she had attended voluntarily and paid for herself.

The choice of ducks for the main character seemed to come out of nowhere but the children quickly took it up. The ensuing pandemonium was truly amazing to behold. While none of the groups had any understanding of how to work as a group to create a story, it was clear that Oscar's group was making the most progress. Upon closer focus, it became clear that this was so because Oscar basically dictated a story to the group. This was a completely oral activity and most of the stories that came from the groups were oral renditions such as, "This duck was swimming in a lake, see, then.... it had babies.....let's see...it had white feathers....it had a beak... and ....that's all." After cutting out and coloring duck masks that they each put on, each group was called up to tell their story, with one member chosen as the spokesperson/teller. One group was sent back to their seats as they couldn't tell anything. Most of the groups rendered "stories" like the above. But Oscar's group shone! Oscar, as the leader, told a story that could have been written and read: "Once upon a time, a baby duck was swimming with her mother when suddenly a big, black cloud appeared."Oh no!" cried the baby duck. "It's going to rain and I'll get all wet." The mother duck said, "Don't be so foolish, Baby Duck." Your feathers will keep you dry! And so on....." Oscar beamed and sat down with his group, happy that he had gotten to do such a fun activity.

Children Indistinguishable by Country of Origin

This study of contrasts highlights a theme that arose in all three classrooms. Looking only at the observable evidence of classroom behaviour and performance, it was not possible to differentiate between the Nicaraguan children and Costa Rican ones. Oscar was a Nicaraguan child. Luís was Costa Rican. The 'defining characteristics' of Nicaraguans that all Costa Ricans cited failed when held under this spotlight. Oscar was brown-haired and freckled. He looked 'white.' Luís was very dark-skinned. Oscar's uniform was always clean and neatly pressed. Luís clearly wore hand-me-downs and appeared to have dressed himself each day. His shoes were worn and he was often missing his socks. Oscar's father had taught him to read when he was four years old. Although he had never attended kindergarten, he was ahead academically of all of his classmates in first grade. "We tell him that his only responsibility is to study, study, study," reported his father. Luís was a student who was lost, evidencing very low levels of emergent literacy knowledge. He was failing first grade when I left.

While such extreme contrasts did not appear in the kindergarten and the second grade classes, the theme held. The narrative of deficit and difference was not supported by the facts. In each class, the Nicaraguan children were represented in the very top levels of performance as well as in the average levels. None of the Nicaraguan children in the three classrooms were among the lowest performing, although I am sure that they could be found in other classrooms around the country.

Early Literacy Assessments
This analysis of the classroom observational data is confirmed by the results from the application of the Spanish reconstruction of Clay's *Concepts of Print Test*: *Conceptos del Texto Impreso* (Concepts About Print) and *Escritura de Vocabulario* (Writing Vocabulary) (Escamilla, Andrade, Basurto, & Ruiz (1996)*, Spanish*

Version, given to all of the children in the kindergarten and first grade classrooms in the fifth month of the school year.   The Concepts of Print assessment, Spanish reconstruction, is only normed for first graders. The scores of the first graders (*N* = 28) in this study revealed a low-average achievement level with the average stanine of 4.57. The scores of the Nicaraguan children in this class (*N* = 7) were higher, with the average stanine of 5.85. However, the average age (7.8) of the Nicaraguans was one year higher than for the Costa Ricans (6.9), reflecting, perhaps, the higher age of school entrance due to migration activity. The age difference was not due to higher rates of grade repetition, confirmed at the beginning of the year when the teacher documented that more than ½ of the class was repeating first grade. While I did not capture how many of the grade repeaters were Nicaraguan, the ratio of Nicaraguan to Costa Rican children in this classroom (7:21) supports this conclusion that grade repetition did not account for age differences. Working only with raw scores for the results of the assessment of the kindergarten children, the finding of higher Concepts of Print scores for the Nicaraguan children also held: Average class score was 7.89 (out of 26 items) with the Nicaraguan children scoring an average of 8.25 (range 4-11) and the Costa Rican scoring an average of 7.77 (range 3-15).

Discussion

Many explanations have been offered, and then studied, for the entrenched fact that children from marginalized populations the world over consistently underperform academically as compared to their peers from communities of power and status. Among these are (a) unequal opportunities to learn, (b) limited access to educationally relevant resources, (c) ethnic and racial stereotyping, and (d) cultural incompatibility between the home and school culture. While all of these are undoubtedly interrelated, this analysis highlights ethnic and racial stereotyping. The results contribute to previous analyses of the relationships between ethnic and racial stereotyping and school achievement.

Jackson (2006) explains the influence of ethnic and racial stereotyping on academic achievement by focusing on the motivation and self-concept of the marginalized student:

> In the education sphere, some individuals from these ascribed caste-like (African-Americans; Native-Americans; Mexican-Americans) minority groups have rejected this form of stereotyping by developing coping mechanisms to protect their identity. In so doing, these identity-protection strategies serve to dampen their achievement motivation, which, in turn, results in low academic achievement (p. 2).

I, however, point to the nature of the negative stereotype, itself, highlighting the critical distance between the reality of the characteristics attributed to the marginalized and resulting stereotype of deficit and difference from which teachers and other dominant ones in the society develop policy and deliver instruction.

Clearly, the negative characteristics of difference ascribed to Nicaraguan parents and children are more constructed that not. They are not based on data but more on broader issues of fear, xenophobia, perceived (and partially constructed also) national crises, historical enmities, and scapegoating. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully develop this argument with analysis of the data from Costa Rica and elsewhere, but I have shared enough of it to call into question the accepted beliefs that (a) Nicaraguan parents don't care about education like Costa Rican parents; (b)

Nicaraguan children have extremely low levels of general knowledge, in particular vocabulary knowledge, as compared to Costa Rican children; (c) Nicaraguans look different from Costa Ricans in ways that signal inferiority (e.g. dark-skinned, dirty/unkempt); and (d) You can't trust any of them as you can Costa Ricans. In other words, this data challenges the 'difference/deficit' stereotypes. The Nicaraguan children were not so different after all from the Costa Rican children and they certainly did not evidence deficient abilities or knowledge, as least in the area of literacy development and learning.

As is apparent, many of these types of stereotypes of deficit and difference apply to marginalized peoples across the globe. Perhaps we need to engage in some rigorous observation of young children in classrooms with outside eyes (like mine in the Costa Rica context) to begin to address these damaging perceptions, or at least replace them with empirical data.

In the Costa Rica case, one might ask what happens to the children from Nicaragua who start out so nicely in the early grades. It is accepted wisdom, in the North American context, anyway, that children who start out behind in reading stay behind and the gap only grows (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). But how to explain children who start out ahead or on par with their more privileged peers but who do less well as they progress through the grades, eventually dropping out at ever increasing rates? The fact that the conclusion that Nicaraguan children were doing just fine held across all 3 grades and was supported by the results of the early literacy assessment lends greater credence to the hypothesis that the 'problem' of underachievement of children from marginalized communities lies not in the community marginalized but in the marginalizing community – in their socially constructed perceptions of deficit and difference and in the ways that those constructions impact the instruction provided these children.

Note

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms
2. *Nica* is the term used most frequently as a short hand for *Nicaraguan*. While it has symmetry with the term *Tico* that is interchangeable with *Costa Rican* and that carries an affectionate connotation for Costa Ricans, *Nica* carries an underlying negative connotation in Costa Rica. For this reason, I use only the name *Nicaraguan* to refer to
3. As in most countries, children born in Costa Rica are automatically Costa Rican citizens.
4. Sources now inform me that this pedagogical principle is beginning to change and that the Department of Public Education is beginning to include more early literacy activities into the pre-schools.

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