FOREWORD

“I’ve come to believe there are only two things you need in any new teaching situation to succeed—humility and inquiry.” —Lisa Delpit

Irma Almager first entered my office as a graduate student determined to better understand how schools could meet the affective and academic needs of Mexican American students. As we discussed research surrounding related issues such as deficit perspectives and culturally relevant teaching, Irma’s own stories began to emerge as a powerful part of the conversation. As I listened both in those brief office talks and throughout a great deal of course work, it became abundantly clear that her own life experiences promised insights much needed in education. Having grown up within a migrant family, Irma later became a classroom teacher, an elementary school principal, and a district bilingual director; all of which contributed to the multiple and uniquely insightful stand points woven throughout her life narratives.

Well known Deweyan scholar, Jim Garrison (1997), once wrote that “[narratives] are potent because narratives of all kinds do structure our very existence. By assigning meaning and value, narratives allow us to interpret and organize what we do and suffer” (p. 144). Perhaps this is why in the midst of our current cultural penchant for decontextualized, quantifiable data, an interest in narrative research formats has also continued to gain momentum among large groups of social scientists.¹ The affective and identity-related factors woven throughout life narratives, are not only integral to knowledge construction, but they are also crucial for problem-solving within wider social and school contexts. At every level, educational stakeholders want thoughtful, potentially transferable insights in order to better meet the practical and felt needs of students. If those of us in the education field are to more wholly grasp and effectively communicate crucial ideas and research regarding what must be done to create positive changes in

¹. Evidence exists through the popularity of narrative and qualitative research conferences. AERA continues to have growing in SIGs in narrative and other forms of qualitative research, while yearly conferences such as the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) continue to expand as they draw research across the globe.
students’ lives, it is crucial that we answer Norm Denzin’s 2010 call to write and engage with research in ways that better meet the goals of social scientists. Due to the reality that it is a primary goal of research to encapsulate and to communicate findings as fully and clearly as possible, it follows, then, that it is also crucial to find ways to depict multiple levels of participants’ experiences connected to topics studied. Irma Almager’s autoethnographic research achieves this, and by so doing, it brings to life both affective and conceptual truths connected to her own and to her participants’ experiences.

Although not always categorized as autoethnographic studies, the systematic autobiographical work of scholar activists such as Rachel Lloyd’s (2011) *Girls Like Us: Fighting for a World Where Girls Will No Longer Be Slaves*, which draws insights from her own life and work with commercially sexually exploited girls, has changed state and national policies. Moving far beyond the realm of proverbial “navel gazing” or even the self-study genre, a central purpose of autoethnographic research is to narrate personal experiences in order to shed light on larger cultural or social issues and questions (Ellis, 2004). While some autoethnographic work relies solely on outside documents, artifacts and memory-work to generate a researcher’s story, other designs involve outside participants and field observations as Irma’s did. Having spent a semester observing and interviewing five white high school teachers’ interactions with and perspectives of their Mexican American students, she generated additional data through journaling her responses to collected data and through systematic memory work. What emerged from her work in addition to thematic findings were narratives surrounding her life as a Mexican American public school student, classroom teacher and school administrator. Skillfully written and replete with checks for trustworthiness and dependability, Irma’s narratives provide a deeply informative “sense” of what she experienced at an emotional level; and in so doing, offer a fuller and more *accurate* understanding of the issues and experiences explored within her study than more conventional research genres would have allowed. Irma Almager’s goal of scaffolding educators towards an ability to let go of deficit thinking and to grow into culturally relevant instruction is
complex and contextually rooted; for her, and activist scholars like her, narrative paradigms and methods act as powerful tools.

Defining culturally relevant teaching “as the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures” (NASW, 2001 as seen in Almager, 2015), her work highlights the reality that culturally relevant instruction requires educators, both individually and collectively, to develop a greater awareness of self and others. Parker Palmer (2010) is well known within educational literature for his powerful assertion that “we teach who we are.” Connecting our own life scripts with the narratives of others, then, is crucial for individual growth and educational transformation. It is one of the ways in which we construct our identities and belief systems—an avenue through which we grow in compassion and knowledge of the students and teachers we serve. As Lisa Delpit (1988) once noted, “we do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy . . . but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue” (p. 280). Narratives such as Irma Almager’s are key to educational transformation, in that they help us to feel as someone else might and equip us to dialogue from multiple stand points. In her work we are provided with the gift of her stories—narratives based on the truth of her life as it would be translated to today’s classrooms.
CONTEXT OF NARRATIVE

Maribel’s First Day was created during the author’s dissertation study titled *Teachers’ Perceptions of Mexican American Students: An Autoethnographic Journey with Five Secondary School Teachers* (2012) as a way to paint a visual of the encounters the author experienced during the data collection process in a suburban high school. The purpose of the autoethnographic study was to glean insights into some of the ways in which teachers’ stated perceptions and practices hinder or ameliorate the academic success of adolescent Mexican American (MA) students. In particular, this project examined the ways the author’s own story as a MA high school student contributed to the exploration on the impact teachers’ perceptions have in constructing classroom environments that are conducive (or not) to meeting the academic needs of MA students. Conducting informal interviews and classroom observations allowed the author to adopt the role of an abstract co-participant in the study. In addition, school building observations and front office observations were utilized to create Maribel’s First Day.

THE SCHOOL SETTING

West High School is located in the northwest part of a suburban city located in western Texas. The district’s approximate population is 28,900 students. The district is composed of four high schools, ten middle schools, and thirty-five elementary schools. West HS has approximately 2,100 students. Three middle schools and 10 elementary schools feed into West HS. The school’s and district’s names are de-identified in order to protect the participants. The teachers’ names have also been changed to protect their identity.
THE TEACHERS

Lucy García is an Anglo teacher who has taught for 43 years. Six of those years have been at West HS. She teaches English Language Arts and English as a Second Language classes. Mrs. García does not speak Spanish and is married to a Mexican-American. She is originally from Kansas and taught in other states before coming to Texas. She taught 9th grade when it was in the middle school setting, and followed the grade when it was moved to high school. She prefers 9th grade regular track kids because she is able to relate better to them. For the current six weeks assessments she has a class average of 53.45% with 60% as the passing standard. This particular class has 37 students with 22 Hispanic and only 3 African Americans. The Hispanic average is 52.9%.

Tom Peterson is an Anglo teacher with 3 years teaching experience. All three years have been at West HS. He teaches computer science and Principals of Information Technology. He has an alternative certification. Mr. Peterson was in the military and then worked in the business sector before beginning his teaching career. The class grade average is 83.68% and has 19 students. The Hispanic student grade average is 91.1%. Mr. Peterson believes that students behave badly because they learn the behavior from their parents. He also believes parents on welfare teach their children laziness. He provides plenty of time in class for work and does not assign homework because many of these poor kids do not have computers at home. Mr. Peterson does not believe in differentiation and emphasizes the need to treat all students the same.

Linda Adamson is also an Anglo teacher with 3 years of experience. She has taught all three years at West HS and teaches biology and chemistry. She has an alternative certification and has a degree in chemistry. She worked in a lab before beginning her teaching career. In her biology class of 31 students the grade average is 68.7% and for Hispanics, 69.24%. The class is predominantly Hispanic. Total number of absences for all students this six weeks is twenty one. Nineteen students are economically disadvantaged and she has six special education students.

Peter Thomason is also an Anglo teacher who teaches Algebra I, Algebra II, and math models. Mr. Thomason has 6 years of teaching experience and has been at West HS for 2 years. He has an alternative
Maribel’s First Day

certification and a degree in civil engineering where he worked before
beginning his teaching career. The school’s Algebra I scores are at 60%.
African Americans are at 41% and Hispanics at 49%. Mr. Thomason
teaches math models, which involves 10th and 11th grade students who
have not been able to pass Algebra I and Geometry. The class provides
instruction that is supposed to help close the gaps.

Leslie Henderson moved to high school from middle school and has
taught elementary. She is well rounded and loves to teach. She has nine
years experience but has taught 3 years at WHS. Mrs. Henderson has
taught regular track students in the past. This is her first year to teach
the Pre-Advanced Program class. She really enjoys teaching geography
to Pre-AP. There are 34 students in the class.
La Estudiante