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Weaving the fabric of shared experience: Immigrant and refugee students engaged in visual *Testimonio*

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Testimonio, collective narratives situated within our sociopolitical sphere, is a powerful tool that empowers students and moves them toward a space of collective agency. When multimodalities are added to this process, students can further expand their expression and agency. This article hopes to support educators who want to embed a visual *testimonio* pedagogy in their own classrooms by exploring ways a secondary teacher sought to develop a critical literacy curriculum with her immigrant students. This article explores the current social discourse on immigrant and migrant students, discusses the foundations of visual *testimonio*, and offers three tangible examples of classroom activities.

KEYWORDS

testimonio, immigrant academic success, critical pedagogy, literacy, culturally sustaining education

Introduction

Over the past few years, anti-immigration narratives have gained momentum in the United States (López and Pérez, 2018). These narratives are dangerous due to their influence on national policy. Unfortunately, states have followed the national politics, especially in Texas where the students from this study reside. In 2020 the Texas governor declared that the state would no longer accept refugees (Romo, 2020). In addition, on June 16, 2021, the governor declared that the state would make a \$250 million down payment on a new border wall between Texas and Mexico (Barragán, 2021).

Despite anti-immigration narratives influencing our sociopolitical landscape, teachers know we can provide a safe space for immigrant and refugee students to find agency and empowerment (Freire, 1985; Lash, 2021). One approach being used to empower students in confronting oppression is the process of *testimonios*. *Testimonio* is defined as “a tool for inscribing struggles and understandings, creating new knowledge, and affirming our epistemologies” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 367). While *testimonio* is most often employed as a research practice, it is also becoming a powerful pedagogical practice. Originally developed out of Chicano Feminist thought, *testimonio* pedagogy gives educators the opportunity to push back against social injustices such as negative narratives about immigration and create a sense of belonging in the classroom (Saavedra, 2011; Munoz, 2017). When teachers add multimodalities to *testimonio*, students have the opportunity to deepen their creativity, expression, and collective agency. Within the classroom, visual *testimonio* becomes a collective fabric of student languages and experiences woven together with different mediums and methods.

The purpose of this article is to support educators who want to embed a visual *testimonio* pedagogy in their own classrooms. While this specific discussion illustrates visual *testimonio* with high school refugee and immigrant students, this approach is situated to support all students, especially students facing marginalization. This article shares the foundations of visual *testimonio*, offers instructional examples, and discusses pedagogical moves observed in the classroom.

Pedagogical history and framework

Testimonio was birthed in Latin America as a form of critical autobiography that pushes back against institutional oppression, which was often sponsored by the United States. These oral and literary first-person accounts of state violence blend individual and communal voices with a clear socio-political purpose (Anzaldúa, 1990; Cruz, 2006; Gutiérrez, 2008). *Testimonio* creates a safe space where people confront injustice both as an individual and as a community (Abril-Gonzalez, 2020a). Through its interweaving of lived experience and sociopolitical contexts, *testimonio* combats the colonized views of academic writing that places learning in a sterile vacuum.

While *testimonio* originally began as a literary mode of empowerment, during the 1980s it developed into a form of qualitative methodology for scholars to include experiential knowledge that bears witness to oppression and serves as a tool for liberation (Reyes and Curry Rodríguez, 2012). Chicana feminist scholars describe it as “an approach that incorporates political, social, historical, and cultural histories that accompany one’s life experiences as a means to bring about change through consciousness-raising” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). More recently, *testimonio* is being used as a pedagogical tool in the classroom that reflects Paulo Freire’s concept of emancipatory education (Freire, 1973). Cruz (2012) emphasizes the need for *testimonio* in the classroom to ensure underserved youth are seen and heard:

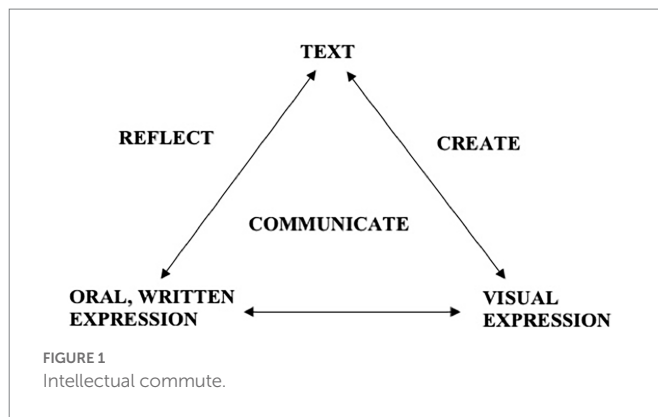
Testimonio, as a genre of the dispossessed, the migrant, and the queer, is a response to larger discourses of nation-building and has the potential to undermine the larger narratives that often erase and make invisible the expendable and often disposable labor and experiences of immigrants, the working class, African Americans, and others. (p. 460)

Educators, who recognize the power of *testimonio* are using it to center silenced voices within the classroom, honor student lived experiences, and develop self-agency. Student *testimonios* are often developed through spoken word poetry, critical reflection essays, book circle discussions, and memoirs (Cruz, 2012; Coleman, 2018; Allaman et al., 2020; Abril-Gonzalez, 2020b).

Visual *testimonio* serves the same purpose as *testimonio* but embeds multimodal elements. Additionally, visual *testimonio* pushes back against oppressive narratives that restrict ideas of what defines art and what defines genre. Munoz (2017) notes, “Visual Testimonio does not judge art on subjective ‘originality,’ a move that is in contrast to the evaluative methods of fine arts, which shun the use of established symbols” (p. 21). Rather than just create traditional art, students merge digital images with text and symbols. Through this process students are given the space to engage in critical encounters with texts, explore social topics relevant to them, exhibit their cultural wealth and embrace their role as agents of change (Saavedra, 2011; Lynch, 2018).

One example of pedagogical visual *testimonio* can be seen in The Migrant Summer Academy at San Diego State University (Rodríguez-Valls et al., 2012). Teachers engaged high school students in visual *testimonio* through the creation of a graffiti wall. The walls served as a vehicle for student voices that were supported through what researchers called the “intellectual commute” (p. 99). Figure 1 shows the student process for developing visual *testimonio* at the Migrant Summer Academy.

Through the intellectual commute students first individually developed cultural tags that symbolically reflected classroom readings. Next, they created new tags that synthesized meanings from the readings



with their own lived experiences. Then through class discussions, the students merged their individual cultural tags to create a graffiti wall that conveyed group identifications and communal voice.

Another example comes from a teacher education course (El Ashmawi et al., 2018). The professor gave students the time and space to create their own educational timeline. Students worked through three different layers: their lived experiences during early school years, events happening at national and international levels during those years, and events within their local neighborhood and family. Students were encouraged to interrogate the inter-play between their lived experiences within the educational setting and the complexities of the socio-political world around them. The students reflected these tensions through visuals and phrases throughout the timeline. Students then worked together to identify the communal connections between their various timelines and confront the complex relationships related to aspects like race, immigration status, gender, religion, and sexuality.

Learning environment

The pedagogical visual *testimonio* in this article took place at a large, public high school in Texas. The tenth-grade classroom consisted of 15 emergent bilingual students who had recently immigrated to the United States (1–9 months prior) and were placed in a sheltered, newcomer classroom by the school district. Most of the students were Spanish speakers from countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, Dominican Republic, and Mexico.

Jessica (a pseudonym) is the high school English teacher who led the classroom. Jessica self-identifies as a white woman, a background seen in the majority K-12 public teaching force. She shared an awareness of the pervasive cultural gap between teachers and students in public schools. She has worked with emergent bilingual students for over 8 years. As an experienced teacher, she wanted to continue growing in her pedagogy. Her hope was to assist her students’ literacy development through an empowering curriculum.

Results from the classroom

The results discussed in this section reflects pieces of tangible curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy that was observed in an intrinsic case study. Intrinsic case study is a qualitative methodology used to gain a naturalistic exploration of the phenomena and offer a thick description for readers (Geertz, 1973; Stake, 1995). The purpose of the study was to provide teachers, graduate students, and teacher education faculty with

concrete descriptions and examples of visual *testimonio*. Two questions framed the study:

1. What instructional activities facilitated the engagement of visual *testimonio* for students within the classroom?
2. How is pedagogical visual *testimonio* supported in the classroom?

These two questions were significant to the understanding of visual *testimonio* in the classroom because they provide the “what” and the “how” within the studied phenomena. Three specific sources of data were collected: field observations, curricular materials, and student artifacts. I conducted 12 weeks of classroom visits accumulating approximately 720 h of field notes. Initial review of the data was done through priori coding supported by a framework for visual *testimonio* (Munoz, 2017). This framework breaks visual *testimonio* into three pillars: *testimonio*, art as resistance strategy, and Critical Race Theory. Once aspects of visual *testimonio* were clearly identified through Munoz’s framework, axial coding was used to analyze patterns and themes in relationship to the research questions. Below is a detailed and descriptive exploration of the instructional activities that facilitated the engagement of visual *testimonio* and the pedagogical moves made by the teacher that were observed in the classroom that supported visual *testimonio*.

Instructional activities facilitating visual *Testimonio*

Two key instructional activities were observed in the classroom. These instructional activities reflected the visual *testimonio* framework from Munoz (2017). Sharing these activities can support educators in envisioning tangible ways to support a visual *testimonio* in their own classrooms. While many activities supported the movement towards visual *testimonio* in the classroom, two specific activities fully encompassed the concept. The Origin Poem and Battle Shield activities embraced the multilingual background of the students, confronted socio-political issues, as well as a multimodal approach to literacy. A detailed description of the instructional activities allows practitioners to see how students engaged in visual *testimonio*.

Origin poems

The Origin Poems allowed the students to practice required literacy skills like poetic elements of imagery, personification, and symbolism. More importantly, students engaged in a multimodal and multilingual storytelling experience that embraced students’ knowledge of their heritage while also confronting injustices. First, the teacher asked students to think about their place of origin and how they can share that place with their learning community. Students began this process by using the internet to search for images of their origin place. Individually, students practiced developing sensory details based upon photographs they found online. Then, students shared their sensory details in small groups and brainstormed symbolic meanings based upon the images. After working in small groups, students shared with the entire class.

To brainstorm the Origin Poem, students shared unique elements of their origin place that they missed or elements that make it special. The teacher encouraged them to focus on the five sensory elements, as in the examples below:

- El Salvador: “When you travel around the country, you can hear different sounds because each city has different cultures”

- Honduras: “Since we have the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, the air is so fresh”
- Mexico: “Pineapple with chili is one of my favorite treats.”

In addition, students considered a sixth sensory element: feelings. The teacher explained that sensory detail of feelings comes from the heart and should not be ignored.

After brainstorming, the teacher displayed her own model poem for the class, and together they annotated the eight stanzas to identify various poetic aspects. The teacher reminded them to consider the six sensory elements. She also encouraged students to consider personification in order to have a conversation with their place of origin.

After writing their poem, students used the online tool Pic Collage to embed an image from their place of origin as the poem’s visual background. This image became the foundation for the poem’s symbolism. Students’ choice of images varied based upon their symbolic focus and meaning of the poem. In Figure 2, Honduras Poem, the student chose the country’s flag as their background image. In Figure 3, Venezuela Poem, the student decided to use a photograph of recent conflict.

Rather than studying poetry elements through external authors, the origin poems were a way for student voices to be embedded within the curriculum. Additionally, the assignment allowed student to build knowledge about poetic and symbolic imagery while also creating a space for adolescents to explore their identities, share lived experiences, and develop counternarratives that push back against common socio-political narratives.

Battle shields

The Battle Shield activity symbolized how students defend their identity from false narratives and stereotypes. The Battle Shield served as a symbolic armor to protect their sense of self. This activity incorporated a picture book, a visual template of a shield, and written expression of student identities. First, the teacher read aloud *Lucía the Luchador* by Garza (2017). Next, students discussed elements of the story in small groups. Guiding questions that focused on key elements within the story framed the group discussions:

Identity:

- What makes Lucía special? What makes her powerful?
- The mask becomes a part of Lucía’s identity. What parts of your identity are important?
- How does the mask create protection for Lucía’s identity and her dreams?

Confronting Oppression:

- Lucía faces gender stereotypes when the boys on the playground do not consider Lucía powerful. They tell her, “Girls cannot be superheroes!” Why do the boys feel this way?
- What aspects of our culture or society makes others feel less powerful?
- What is oppression?

Feeling Empowered:

- Lucía is just a little girl on a playground. How can regular people can be a warrior?
- Lucía’s luchadora mask gives her courage to fight for what is right and fight to achieve our dreams. Her Abu says, “A real luchadora

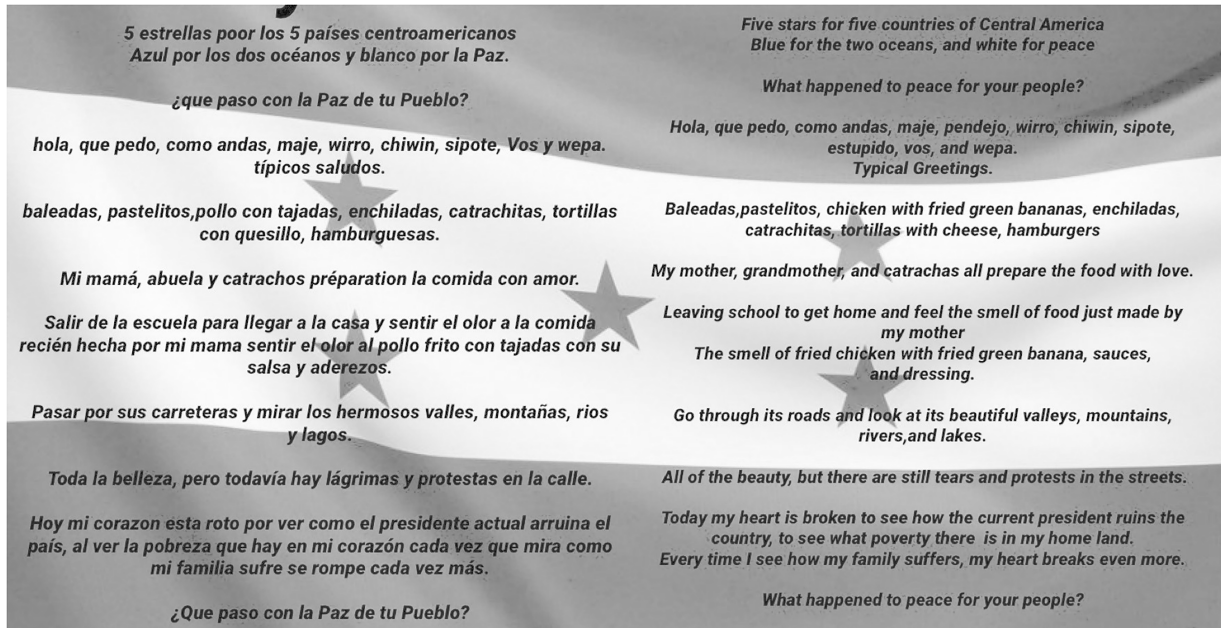


FIGURE 2
Honduras poem.



FIGURE 3
Venezuela poem.

“fights for what is right.” Who is someone who has encouraged you to fight for what is right?

- Do we all need a mask or armor to give us courage to strive for our dreams?

- How can being our true to ourselves help others?

After analyzing the elements of the story, students made personal connections to Lucía by considering characteristics they have in

common with her. Students began to see Lucía's story as her own but also as a story that might be a part of themselves. After comparing and contrasting their identity with Lucía's, students composed a list of personal identifiers break stereotypes.

Next, the teacher gave students a template of a shield divided into four sections. The upper left quarter was a place where the student could visually represent their home country. The upper right quarter was a place where they could visually represent their dreams or goals. The lower left was a space where they could share a quote that has shaped their identity. The lower right quarter was a space for them to share a symbol that represents them. Lastly, the center of the shield was a space for them to share their three identifier words. Figure 4 provides an example of how students utilized hand-drawn images and text to represent their identity.

The battle shields allowed students to consider the idea of empowering ourselves with symbolic armor that also displayed our true selves to the world. By making connections to Lucía's courage and her push back against the status quo, students were able to explore their own identities and engage in a multimodal representation of their "self" through the shield. Students shared their shields with the class; they also displayed their shields in the hallway allowing students outside of the sheltered class to witness the identity stories.

Pedagogical moves to support visual *Testimonio*

Visual *testimonio* needs particular conditions and foundations in place in order to thrive. As Geneva Gay (2013) reminds us, culturally responsive teaching is about much more than the content or curriculum. We must teach "to and through our students" (p. 49). It is important that we recognize the intentional pedagogical moves the teacher made in the

classroom to support students' visual *testimonio*: engaging in critical communal discussions, centering lived experiences in the curriculum, and creating culturally safe spaces. These themes are discussed in detail below with examples gathered from the field observations, curriculum materials, and student artifacts.

Engaging in critical communal discussions

First, the teacher consistently engaged students in critical communal discussions. Rather than focusing on academic skill development in a vacuum, the teacher did not shy away from giving students the space and support to explore sociopolitical issues. She recognized students' place within the broader sociopolitical context is a key component of visual *testimonio*. Keeping in mind that visual *testimonio* is both individual and communal, the teacher intentionally moved students in and out of individual and communal activities. She first gave student individual opportunities to critically reflect, then they were able to share in smaller, more intimate groups. Lastly, students always came back together as a class and connected through communal perspectives and identification of collective resources.

One example of this was through vocabulary practice. The teacher was willing to stray away from the traditional vocabulary worksheets to engage students in collaborative exploration of critical socio-political terms. Some of the key vocabulary terms for the students were:

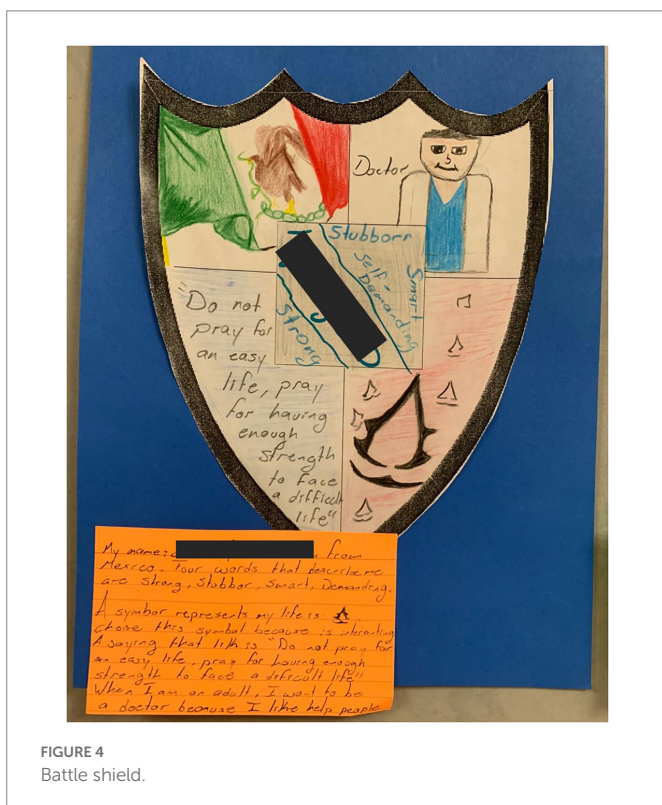
- Civil Rights
- Social Justice
- Protest
- Stereotype
- Advocate
- Activist
- Oppression

Students were first encouraged to work together in small groups to put the definitions in their own words. For example, "an advocate is a person who makes the world want to change from bad to good" and "protest means to fight for what you believe."

After building a foundation for the vocabulary, the teacher expanded the critical communal discussions by connecting the vocabulary to real-world activists. Students searched the classroom library and located books of their choice that connected to the social justice terms. The books became a starting point for class discussions about individuals who fought oppression. Most of the book choices revolved around activists such as Malala Yousafzai, Iqbal Masih, César Chavez, Rosa Parks, and Sonia Sotomayor. Students used their social justice vocabulary to make thematic connections and compare/contrast how individuals were able to be agents of change in their societies.

The teacher was also organic in critical moments. For example, while discussing agents of change who were immigrants, students shared frustration over their own personal treatment upon entering the United States. The teacher took a moment to stop the lesson and allowed students to break out into small, intimate groups and confront the following questions with their classmates: (1) Do some people think that because you are from a different country or speak a different language, you are not smart? (2) How can you address this stereotype and fight for everyone to be respected and treated the same?

During their discussion of these questions, students voluntarily shared stories of overcoming obstacles. While listening to these discussions, the teacher wrote the following terms on the boards:



Questions, Thoughts, Feelings, and Ideas. She encouraged students to brainstorm together a list of actions based on those four concepts. Below are some examples from students:

- Questions: How do we change the situation? Does racism happen everywhere?
- Thoughts: Crazy that happened. That was disrespectful.
- Feelings: That makes me sad. He deserved to have better.
- Ideas: go to protest, write kind notes, help translate for people who do not speak English, explain when someone is confused, join others who want to help, make anti-bullying posters.

The teacher guided students through a discussion focusing on how experiences may be similar to their chosen change agent. Through this process, the students made connections to historical agents of change and explored the idea of themselves as a potential change agent.

Centering lived experiences in the curriculum

Because visual *testimonio* is about much more than language scaffolding and skill building, the teacher was intent upon centering the curriculum on her students' lived experiences. Often our students can be treated like data rather than individuals. Remembering the humanity within the classroom is essential, as this teacher regularly demonstrated by intertwining her students' lived experiences into the curriculum. Most importantly, the teacher did not assume to know her students' lived experiences. While they are all newcomers, she recognized that each student had a different journey, a different level of language development, and different backgrounds. Rather than seeing her class as a homogenous group, she recognized the diversity of each culture.

In order to stay grounded in the students' experiences rather than her own assumptions, the teacher used regular bell ringer prompts. On her projector, she displayed the daily agenda along with a prompt for students to consider when they enter the classroom. For example, one of the bell ringer prompts read, "What is something you are passionate about?" Not only did she use this prompt to encourage writing centered on her students' lived experiences, but she also used it to learn about her students, so she could revise and adapt her curriculum.

The broad prompts allowed students to share ideas relevant to their current or past experiences. Some students shared that they were passionate about ending racism or police brutality, while other students shared stories about soccer or the first person in their family to graduate high school. The teacher recognized that centering the curriculum within her students' humanity required pedagogical strategies that allow a range of experiences.

The pedagogical moves the teacher made also demonstrated the development of visual *testimonio* through curriculum centered on students. With *Lucía the Luchador*, the teacher built the activity around student identity. Creating a battle shield for Lucía would have definitely supported the academic goal of analyzing character development. However, the teacher recognized the significance of centering her curriculum around the students' lived experiences. This allowed them to connect with Lucía and her character traits, while making connections to their own lives.

Creating culturally safe spaces

While personal narratives revolving around social justice and critical reflection can be powerful, the process can also be painful or complicated for students. Therefore, the teacher intentionally created a space built upon trusting relationships. The trusting relationship

between teacher and students is foundational, but the teacher also worked diligently to ensure that the trusting relationships were established among students.

The teacher also ensured students' autonomy, another essential step for a culturally safe space. She clearly communicated to students that they only had to share what they felt comfortable sharing. She supported this with her actions by creating narrative prompts broad enough that students could interpret the prompt in several ways and approach the narrative from a comfortable angle. For example, when students were preparing their Origin Poems, the teacher used the prompt—"Share with us your place of origin." The teacher informed students that the idea of an origin can have several meanings. Students did not have to write about their home country, rather they could choose to focus on their hometown or current community. The idea of origin is any space that had shaped their identity or sense of self. She also elaborated on the idea of "origin" to include a place of worship, a geographical element like the ocean, or a family member's home.

Furthermore, the teacher supported a culturally safe space through differentiation. She wanted to show students she trusted their choices for communication, so students often had the opportunity to share their narratives in several different ways, for example through several different mediums such as videos, comic book strips, posters, or digital slideshows. If they felt comfortable as artists, they could hand draw symbols and images. If they felt more comfortable harvesting digital images, they could use the internet.

Being inclusive to the students' linguistic preferences was another key component. For example, students chose the word "protest" as a key vocabulary word to fight for what you believe in. The teacher encouraged them to build a word wall that included their chosen words in English and their native languages. For example, the word wall included a note showing "protest/protesta." The teacher informed students that their linguistic backgrounds were valued, but she also wanted to learn from them as much as she could. She allowed for several "teach the teacher" moments where students taught her the concept using their linguistic backgrounds.

Lastly, the teacher provided ample scaffolding. The teacher wanted students to feel confident and supported when approaching bigger concepts, academic terms, and engaging in complex narrative activities. She recognized the risk and vulnerability it takes for students to engage in critical reflection. Therefore, scaffolding was an essential component in every visual *testimonio* activity for students. An example of this can be seen in the Origin Poem process. Since poetic elements were new to most of the students, the teacher built in several layers of scaffolding. Students first began their practice by communally exploring photography. Students worked in small groups to analyze pictures of everyday objects. These photographs were based on students' lived experiences such as a soccer field or a beach. Students practiced developing sensory words to describe their chosen photograph and also practiced considering the symbolism of the image. For example, one group discussed how the soccer field symbolizes the idea of community and people coming together. Once students had become confident in their concept of symbolism, both visual and written, the teacher moved toward the Origin Poem projects.

Discussion and limitations

This article recognizes the limitations of only looking at one teacher's classroom. Despite this constraint, through detailed description, a picture for other educators can still be painted allowing

them to envision visual *testimonio* in their own classrooms. Additionally, since the K-12 system still mostly consists of White middle-class female teachers, *testimonios* are still an unfamiliar or disregarded practice. Nevertheless, it is important for teachers to recognize and understand the socio-political elements discussed in the introduction that impact immigrant and refugee students. It is also important that teachers, especially those not from immigrant and refugee backgrounds, recognize there are classroom practices that must be present to authentically weave this practice into the classroom.

Receive student voices

First, it is important to create a space where student voices are heard rather than given. In their discussion of *testimonio* pedagogy, El Ashmawi et al. (2018) offered a crucial reminder that educators do not give voice to students. Our students already possess voices that are ripe with invaluable experiences, knowledge, and agency. Through *testimonio*, educators “create spaces where it is safe and empowering for our students to fully embody their already rich voices” (p. 81). This process of visual *testimonio* embraces students’ voices through their stories as a part of the curriculum for educative moments that guide the entire learning community.

Honor privacy and agency

Second, personal narrative writing can be problematic if students are required to write about their families or immigration journey. In her research working with immigrant families, Noguérón-Liu (2017) shared her classroom digital project and the risk immigrant students faced when sharing online. Her research emphasizes the need to consider power dynamics within our social system that can leave immigrant families vulnerable. While her research focuses heavily on virtual platforms, the concept of risk-taking includes classroom sharing. In a study by Gallo and Link (2015) that focused on politicized funds of knowledge, they explored the tension between trying to create a safe space in the classroom when working with students whose families might be at risk for deportation. Their study reveals the real-life dangers students face when they are forced to talk about their immigration experiences. This concept holds true for any student from a marginalized background who might be taking a risk based upon their gender, sexuality, religion, or culture. Divulging personal information must be handled with care, intentionality, and flexibility to meet each student’s need. Students should always be given agency over what they choose to disclose.

Acknowledge trauma

Finally, students might not be ready to explore trauma. The teacher in this study gave students choices and autonomy regarding the approach they took for their visual *testimonio*. Students were not required to create a multimodal project that was restricted to their past trauma or their specific immigration journey. They were given broad, umbrella prompts that allowed them to choose a specific focus, thus, allowing students to share any range of experience from joy to the mundane to the traumatic.

Furthermore, the teacher recognized that trauma experienced by her students did not necessarily happen in their home country. She

acknowledged that her students often experienced extensive trauma after entering the United States public-school system. Symbolic trauma can come from police presence in our buildings, low expectations for students, or autocratic teaching practices (Howard, 2016; Gast, 2018; Kolluri, 2021). Because visual *testimonio* engages students’ stories, which may include trauma, students must be able to share their experiences on their own terms and within their own chosen focus.

The fabric of shared experience

While the teacher in this classroom utilized visual *testimonio* specifically with students who recently immigrated, this pedagogical process supports students from any marginalized background because it can encourage individual and communal emancipation from the negative social and political messages. By merging multimodalities with *testimonio*, teachers can further support students in their narrative journey. Visual *testimonio* is about individual and communal stories joining together to create a fabric of experience. This multifaceted fabric is threaded with voices that are both distinct and interrelated. Collective knowledge developed through the multimodal narratives embraces both the sociopolitical lives of the students as well as their current learning community. This communal fabric allows our students to confront dominant narratives and begin to weave their own stories.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Texas Woman’s University IRB. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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