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Puerto Rican English Teachers’ Perception of Student Resilience in Extraordinary Times

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Introduction & Contextual Background

This qualitative study documents how Puerto Rican English teachers innovated and adapted their teaching of writing in the aftermath of Hurricane María, ongoing earthquakes, political unrest, and COVID-19. In 2019, The still recovering - from two hurricanes, which killed more than 3,000 people- Puerto Rican population was hit with leaked text messages that allegedly evidenced offensive jokes and corruption - about the government’s relief response- between then governor, Dr. Ricardo Roselló, members of his cabinet, and lobbyists. This resulted in mass protests that lead to the politician’s resignation during the summer of 2019. The following January, earthquakes rocked the island amassing uncountable damages to the southern part of the island and the entire electric grid. Then, in March, the interim governor Wanda Vazquez, issued an island wide lockdown via executive order as a result of COVID-19.

Through a phenomenological lens, this paper presents the results from ten, semi-structured interviews with K-12 English teachers who described the relationship between their understanding of resilience and their teaching in the aftermath of these extraordinary. Emergent themes that are discussed include: Defining Resilience and Coping. These experiences serve as a basis for a discussion about teaching writing in extraordinary times, despite of the existing gap in disaster pedagogy research, particularly in the Puerto Rican and Caribbean contexts. Reflections on these emergent themes and findings document teachers acting as first responders regardless of the type of school they work in. Additionally, this paper presents recommendations second language teachers of English can incorporate in the teaching of writing.

My Story

It took two months after Hurricane María, to finally be reunited with my seventh graders who I was working with in an afterschool program via a local non-profit institution. Working with these students made me witness first-hand the resilience of Puerto Rican youth, many of whom were still without electricity, had lost almost everything, and were living in conditions that would be deemed difficult by even the poorest citizens of our world. Throughout that first meeting we had a roundtable discussion where they were able to vent their frustrations about the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Most of my students expressed feeling powerless. We discussed ways we could help the community and after
brainstorming, decided to collect and distribute donations for 20 bedridden elderly residents neighboring the school.

Unwittingly, we began to design a Problem Based Learning (PBL) unit that integrated Spanish, English, Math and History with Disaster Relief. As a result, students focused on promoting the importance of the wellbeing of elderly members of their local community. We wrote letters in Spanish and English to several local companies and multinational corporations, as well as religious nonprofit organizations requesting support. Students recruited volunteers from other grades and homerooms to help organize and categorize donations. In three weeks, they successfully collected over $4,000 in donations, all without access to electricity, running water, and attending school for only half days as the school did not yet have electricity. I had started with less than a dozen seventh grade students but as word spread, I ended up with a larger class of 31 students from all high school. As we approached the Christmas holiday, students decided to visit each elderly person with a traditional Parranda (a very lively rendition of Puerto Rican Christmas carols). They met with community leaders, mapped out a route and scheduled each visit. They made sure the experience would bring joy to every person they would encounter. After the activity, we had a moment to reflect about the process and students felt empowered, valued and grateful for the experience. Their homeroom English teacher commented on their improved behavior and teamwork skills during class. She was surprised students were requesting help with their writing and coursework. However, it was during those initial conversations with these resilient students that I became interested in documenting and understanding the perceptions of English teachers in Puerto Rico concerning incorporating resilience in their teaching practice and the potential to incorporate the concept after experiencing the aftermath of two natural disasters.

My research goal was to explore how ESL teachers understood student resilience within their teaching contexts in these extraordinary times. Thus, the following question guided my inquiry: How do English teachers in Puerto Rico understand student resilience within the context of the post-Hurricane Maria era? My participants were selected through what Welman and Kruger (1999) call purposive sampling. Creswell & Creswell (2017) note that 10 participants is an acceptable amount for a phenomenological qualitative research design. After IRB approval, the 10 participants were recruited through word of mouth and email. Participants’ have been randomly given pseudonyms to protect their identity. In order to systematically analyze the data emerging from the semi-structured interviews, I used Moustakas’s (1994) systematic guidelines for assembling the textual and structural descriptions.

My research question cut to the core of interactivity between students and teachers Thus, I believe they are the best prepared to assess students’ resilience and ways to incorporate resilience building in the English classroom. With this research I sought to learn from English teachers in different parts of the island as to how they adapted their teaching in these extraordinary. Similar to the rest of the island, the participants of this study showed amazing and at times unbelievable resilience in the face of utter tragedy and repeated loss. This research is vital as it could potentially provide teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders with information that influence curricular considerations in the event of future
natural disasters and tragic events that can jeopardize normal school operations in Puerto Rico and abroad.

Main Takeaways

The teachers I interviewed witnessed resilience amongst their students. They defined resilience based on their lived experiences. Commentary and shared experiences illuminated emerging categories for defining this theme. Respondents shared observations of their students in school, how these students related to their peers and other members of the learning community, also commenting on the meaning derived from these observations. When participants define resilience, they begin to operationalize their understanding of the phenomenon and the meaning they derive from it. A consistent thread in the shared stories focused on defining and describing resilience. Many highlighted a deep sense of community and empathy displayed by their students. Rose captured this theme when she suggested that resilience “is a way of making the most with what you have”. Sofia shared how she believes resilience is inevitable during and after a potentially traumatizing event. “Resilience is a reaction to a problem. You’re resilient because there’s no other choice”. Similarly, Monica viewed resilience as the ability to “actually cope with [things] after a big event”. These educators’ understanding of resilience echoes current trends found among the literature (Singh, 2016). Resilience can either exhibit itself as stable mental health during and after a potentially traumatizing event, or as temporary disturbances followed by a relatively rapid, successful recovery.

ESL Writing Skills Emergent from Participants’ Interviews

Teachers are paramount in the restoration of daily life after a natural catastrophe or a government ordered shutdown. Their ability to adapt their planning, making learning more flexible and contextualizing it to their contexts, developing creative strategies and adapted to the few resources that can be counted on at times like these, were some of the pedagogical innovations that Puerto Rican teachers implemented after hurricane Maria. Although the particular actions carried out by teachers, principals, and community leaders in Puerto Rico are admirable, updated public policy related to post-disaster risk-management in the educational field is urgently needed. The well-being, support, and safety of children and adolescents must be a national priority in the face of stressful and catastrophic events.

When an event occurs that shocks society as a macro structure, its consequences impact multiple components of the microsystem, such as family, school and others. For Brofenbrenner (1994), children and youth in the development period need to create an ecological environment, made up of different structures – such as family, peers, and teachers – that interact to help overcome situations that affect them throughout the different levels of their socioecology.

Teachers Are First Responders. Penny recalled deciding to have what she called Open Time, where students could have the opportunity to talk about what had happen to them personally.
I told them it was optional to tell us their stories so, we could understand how everyone got affected by it, because I felt a lot of them where scared or angry or frustrated or confused. So, it was good for them to hear each other out and I feel like it helped.

Penny felt that reflecting on what they had experienced help most of her students, but she believes that the exercise did not help one student in particular. Without providing to many details she thinks the strategy was unsuccessful because his situation was a bit worse than that the rest of the class.

**Less Is More.** Participants found it significant that their teaching strategies were much more succinct. Rachael created less units developed more activities related to assigned readings, “It was better for me to blend grammatical skills for example and having one reading”.

**More Composition, Less Grammar.** Amy took the opportunity to encourage her students to practice their writing, “Because it was impossible just to come back after such an experience and not talk about it like nothing happened. There was no way we’re going to do that. So, we all talked about it for the first few days”. Then she had her students start journaling. The overarching theme was reconnecting with was done August versus what was going to be done next.

**Translanguaging Practices.** Monica reported helping their students cope with the aftermath of Hurricane María was to analyze and reconsider her classroom language policies. She noted that regardless of students’ English proficiency, all students felt most comfortable sharing their feelings in Spanish. García and Wei (2012), explain this translingual practice as a bilingual accessing and codemixing their linguistic repertoire in order to be able to explain themselves more effectively. Being understanding and compassionate in a language learner’s psycholinguistic process is imperative in order to let them feel comfortable in acquiring the English language.

**Challenges in Online Teaching.** Annette noted how she had multiple siblings sharing one computer, students using their cellphones to complete assignments, she even noted that there were some students who did not have internet at all. “I realized fairly early on, that the strategies I had developed after the hurricane and the earthquakes were not going to be useful during the COVID-19 lockdown”. She tried to make her classroom environment feel as comfortable as possible and use storytelling as a vehicle for teaching writing, she understood she needed to be extremely flexible, understanding, and most importantly, compassionate

**Conclusion**

Studies like this one are increasingly relevant, as they provide concrete actions that teachers can apply after a natural disaster. This type of event is becoming more recurrent: in recent years, the impact of natural phenomena has severely hit vulnerable populations in countries with feeble economies. Given this scenario, it is essential to have a public policy in the event of disasters, in order to prevent and reduce the impact of damage on society. Such a policy will require different levels of intervention, ranging from the global to the local,
community, and family. In the community sphere, it is vital to establish alliances between the school, the members of its immediate and general community, as well as public and private entities, with or without profit.

References


