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Brave Storytelling: Diasporic Indigenous Students, Vulnerability, and the Arts

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Abstract: In this article, I explore how vulnerability is imposed on diasporic Indigenous students in U.S. classrooms and how, through the arts, language and literacy educators can remove these vulnerabilities. For this, I weave elements of storytelling to first introduce Mariela and diasporic Indigenous students. Then, I share two examples of how my diasporic Indigenous students used poetry and drawing in our high school English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom to overcome vulnerabilities imposed on them by our school system. For clarification, throughout this manuscript, I use the term diasporic Indigenous students to describe Indigenous students who migrated to the United States from territories known today as Latin America.

My hope is that the experiences described in this article will urge literacy and language educators to consider vulnerability as a condition imposed on students rather than as a characteristic or deficiency that learners bring with them.

Keywords: diasporic Indigenous students, emergent multilingual learners, ESOL, storytelling, vulnerability

Introduction

Early in my career as a language teacher, I favored grammar instruction in the teaching of English as a new language. In my graduate studies, grammar was emphasized as a vital element of second language acquisition (SLA). However, I realized that grammar alone was not enough; I had to make a change in my teaching if I wanted to connect with my students. This realization shifted my pedagogy and centered the lives of the adolescents in front of me (España & Herrera, 2020). I wondered, *Who are they? What are their stories? How have their journeys affected their lives?* These questions informed my lesson planning and our community building. Another significant wonder was *What do my students need from me to succeed in our classroom and beyond?* Finding the answer to this last question required me to get to know my students individually and in community.

As an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher, I have had the privilege of learning just as much, if not more, from my students as they have learned from me. My students taught me, for example, about the rich and often unknown diversity within the Latinx community. I, as a Cuban-born and raised individual who identifies as Latinx, thought I knew what being Latinx meant, often assuming all students coming from Latin America were monolingual Spanish speakers. I was wrong, very wrong. Relationships founded on trust, respect, and appreciation for one another encouraged my students to disclose personal information with me that otherwise

would have remained hidden. One of the most profound revelations my students shared with me was that they were Indigenous. This revelation took me on a path to learning and recognizing how the practice of erasure—erasing Indigenous languages and identity—often replicated in our school systems, imposed vulnerabilities upon my Indigenous students.

For clarification, throughout this article, I use the concept of *vulnerabilities* differently from how it has been historically used in the context of education. In the education discourse, the use of the term *vulnerability* has become increasingly popular and it is often associated with poverty, personal traits and status, social issues, or other factors that reside outside of educational institutions (Jiménez Vargas et al., 2018). From this purview, when describing a student, the term *vulnerability* is often—and abstractly—used to refer to factors that students bring with them from outside and into the educational institution. This definition, in my view, is problematic for two main reasons: (1) it identifies *vulnerability* as a descriptor that exists and occur only outside of the educational institution, and (2) it expropriates educational institutions of all their responsibility to identify and eradicate inequality in their learning spaces.

In this article, I explore how vulnerability is imposed on diasporic Indigenous students in U.S. classrooms and how, through the arts, language and literacy educators can remove these vulnerabilities. For this, I weave elements of storytelling to first introduce Mariela¹ and diasporic Indigenous students. Then, I share two examples of how my diasporic Indigenous students used poetry and drawing in our high school ESOL classroom to overcome vulnerabilities imposed on them by our school system. Throughout this manuscript, I use the term *diasporic Indigenous students* to describe Indigenous students who migrated to the United States from territories known today as Latin America (see Kovats Sánchez et al., forthcoming). Also, both of my students gave me permission to share the poem and the drawing that appear in this manuscript.

Mariela's Story

I taught ESOL at a public high school in the state of Maryland from 2014 to 2019. As a novice ESOL teacher, I was nervous and excited to finally put into practice what I had learned through my teacher preparation program. Over 97 percent of the emergent multilingual learners at this high school were Spanish speakers, so I knew my bilingual knowledge and skills would be an asset to support their language development. In the first two months, I followed the best practices for teaching Spanish-speaking learners by relying on Spanish, their supposed native and first language, and to scaffold and differentiate instruction in English. Most of my students benefitted from this practice, but I noticed how a handful of the quietest, shy learners continued to become disengaged and thus fell behind in their classes.

I remember launching an early lesson as follows: “El verbo ‘to be’ se cambia igual que cambiamos el ‘ser’ y el ‘estar’ en español. A este cambio le llamamos conjugación, y la conjugación del verbo cambia para cada persona, que se llaman pronombres personales.” (The verb ‘to be’ changes the same way we change the verbs ‘ser’ and ‘estar’ in Spanish. We call this

¹ All names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

change conjugation, and verb conjugation changes for each person, which we call personal pronouns.)

I wrote this textual information on the board to serve as a visual aid. In my explanation, I made connections to the conjugations of the verb ‘to be’ in both English and Spanish. In-between sentences, I checked for understanding by scanning the room and listening to responses. My students’ gentle nodding and smiles informed me that they were understanding the information I was teaching them, which filled me with joy.

Mariela, a seventeen-year-old student who enrolled in our school in November, showed confusion on her face. When we made eye contact, I asked, “Are you ok?” followed by a thumbs up and smile. Mariela responded to my informal inquiry with a shy smile and continued to transcribe in her personal notebook the information from the whiteboard. I assigned an activity asking students to write sentences with the verb ‘to be’ using different personal pronouns. While the class worked on this activity, I walked to Mariela’s desk with enthusiasm.

“Mariela, ¿entendiste esto que expliqué?” (Mariela, did you understand what I explained?) Mariela kept her eyes fixed on her notebook while working on the activity of the verb ‘to be’ and whispered, “Más o menos, Mr. Pentón.” (A little bit, Mr. Pentón.) I reached for a chair and sat beside Mariela. I began going over the conjugation of the verb ‘to be’ one more time, but I realized that we had less than five minutes left for our class. “Mañana te lo voy a explicar mejor que ya casi se acaba la clase” (tomorrow I’ll explain this information better because we are almost out of time for our class), I assured Mariela as I rushed quickly to the front of the classroom for final announcements before the bell rung.

During our short time together, I noticed that Mariela was struggling in our ESOL classroom. “*Perhaps my teaching style is not working for Mariela?*” “*What else can I do to help her understand this information?*” were frequent, ruminative questions. As an ESOL teacher, I understand that emergent multilingual learners undergo a period of culture shock and silence when they first arrive in the U.S. and in new schools, but Mariela did not show signs of withdrawal. In our classroom and in the school hallways, she was always smiling and interacting with classmates.

Although Mariela had joined our school a little over a week ago, I did not know much about Mariela’s background. The only information I received from the guidance counselor when I welcomed Mariela was that she was a Latinx student from Guatemala who spoke Spanish. At our school district, teachers rarely received a file with information about our learners. For this reason, we (teachers) were often left unguided on how to best support the recent arrivals we were welcoming into our learning spaces.

That afternoon, I decided to call Mariela’s mother to ask about her formal education background in Guatemala. In my conversation with Mariela’s mom, I learned that Mariela’s native language was Q’anjob’al, not Spanish, and that she was learning Spanish and English simultaneously. Mariela had been wrongfully mislabeled as a Spanish-speaking student, and my teacher-colleagues and I never received information about her Indigenous culture or language. After explaining to Mariela’s mother that I was noticing some challenges in her progress, she asked me to include support in Q’anjob’al instead of Spanish to help Mariela learn English.

“Profesor, ella si puede hablar español pero escribir y leer es más fácil en Q’anjob’al para ella. Por favor, dele la ayuda en Q’anjob’al en vez de español” (teacher, she can speak Spanish, but it is easier for her to read and write in Q’anjob’al. Please give her the support in Q’anjob’al instead of Spanish)². I was surprised by this request and responded “voy a ver qué puedo hacer, pero no tenemos recursos o diccionarios en idiomas indígenas en nuestro distrito escolar” (I’ll see what I can do, but we don’t have any resources or dictionaries in Indigenous languages in our school district).

Diasporic Indigenous Students

Mariela’s story is, unfortunately, common. Although the migration of Indigenous Peoples has been recorded for decades (Castellanos, 2015; Jonas & Rodríguez, 2015), the practices of erasing Indigenous languages and cultures in the U.S. continue to affect Indigenous communities. Mariela and other students like her represent one of the most vulnerable and invisible student populations in U.S. schools today—diasporic Indigenous students (see Pentón Herrera, 2021a). In their countries of origin, Indigenous communities have historically been murdered, marginalized, and allowed fewer opportunities for success and prosperity than their non-Indigenous, Spanish-speaking counterparts. Mariela and other diasporic Indigenous children escape these dangerous, inauspicious living conditions in hopes of a better life. However, upon arrival, the U.S. education system often neglects their Indigenous language(s) and culture(s), assigning them linguistic and cultural labels of the oppressive system they are escaping from, namely, Spanish-speaker and Hispanic/Latinx (Batz, 2014).

Due to these experiences, students like Mariela are often reluctant to disclose that they are Indigenous or that they do not speak Spanish for fear of being denigrated, disrespected, or harmed (Batz, 2014; Boj Lopez, 2017; Romero & Corpeño, 2019). At the same time, staff at school districts often assume that all students from Latin America speak Spanish as a first (and only) language and rarely ask for information about the students’ native language or culture when enrolling in school. Further, even in cases where Indigenous families disclose to district and school personnel that they speak an Indigenous language, this information is erased³ from their children’s school records (Campbell-Montalvo, 2021). Diasporic Indigenous students are caught in the middle of these socio-political and bureaucratic circumstances and, as a result, their formal education and language learning is affected.

I was once unaware of the existence of diasporic Indigenous students in U.S. schools. However, learning about my Indigenous students transformed me personally and professionally, making me a fierce advocate for their rights and opportunities. During my time teaching high school, I often sent school-wide emails to our teachers and administrators with information about our Indigenous students, and I used every platform I was allowed at the district level to bring light

² I was not able to verify Mariela’s writing and reading abilities in Q’anjob’al as I am not a Q’anjob’al speaker and could not find anyone in our community who spoke the language besides her family. However, Mariela appeared to know and feel more comfortable with Q’anjob’al than with Spanish.

³ For clarity, erased from the children’s school records refers to (1) literally erasing the information from the school records and/or (2) omitting the information disclosed by the parents, which becomes a form of erasure.

to my Indigenous students, their cultures, and languages. During these acts of advocacy, the resistance and silence I experienced from district and school leaders⁴, as well as teachers, reminded me that diasporic Indigenous students are a vulnerable population in U.S. schools not because they are fragile, but because of the neglect and indifference of those in positions of power.

Rafael Writes a Poem

On a chilly December morning in 2014, a boisterous group of students walked into our newcomer ESOL classroom for their first class of the day.

“Mr. Pentón!” Rafael shouted excitedly, “¿Qué vamos a aprender hoy?” (What are we going to learn today?).

I smiled and responded, “Today, we are going to write a poem in your native languages and English.”

Rafael’s eyes opened wide with wonderment, and he and other classmates began to cheer with excitement. My students’ reaction to my response was exciting for me, their teacher, but it was also somewhat expected. After all, this would be the first time they engaged in an activity requiring such a high level of linguistic imagination and innovation in English. After writing the instructions for the poem on the board, Rafael, shouted again:

“Mr. Pentón, yo hablo mam, español, e inglés. ¿En qué idioma escribo mi poema?” (Mr. Pentón, I speak Mam, Spanish, and English. In what language do I write my poem?).

“In all three: Mam, Spanish, and English,” I responded with a grin on my face. “Rafael, you have such a wonderful ability, being able to speak three languages is truly amazing,” I asserted. Then I turned to the class and shared, “the more languages you speak, the more knowledge you have about people and the world. Always use and treasure all the languages you know; they make you special.”

Rafael, smiling, stated that he was going to write a poem titled *Nnaniya tal tb’anix wen* (My mother is very beautiful) to honor his mother and everything she has done to care for him and his brothers throughout her life. His poem, short in size, but rooted deep in emotions, provided a safe space for Rafael to use his Indigenous language to share his feelings, and also allowed him to introduce his mother to our class. Once he completed the poem, Rafael asked me if he could read it aloud in all three languages. I, of course, replied with an excited “Yes!”.

I used the projector to reflect the trilingual poem below (see Table 1) on the board, and Rafael began reciting the poem to the whole class while pointing at each line, first in Mam, then in Spanish, and finally in English. He ended the reading of his poem with an emotional “I love my mother very, very much.” His classmates responded to Rafael’s emotional presentation with thunderous applause.

⁴ The topic of resistance and silence from district and school leaders, as well as teachers, deserves more attention. However, this is a sensitive subject that goes beyond the main topic of this article.

Table 1*Rafael's Trilingual Poem*

Language	Mam	Spanish	English
	Nnaniya tal tb'anix wen	Mi mamá es muy hermosa	My mother is very beautiful
	Tzaj tq'on nchwinqila	Me dio la vida	She gave me life
	Ex ok tkayina ayin	Me dio su amor	She gave me love
	Atzin jalenxin chjon	Y yo le pago	And I repay her
	Tuke wanmiya	Con mi corazón	With all my heart
	Azin tal q'ia tal tb'anix wen	Ella es muy linda	She is very pretty
	Atzin tal q'ia bonitx wen a nnaniy	Ella es mi madre	She is my mother
	A nnaniy ntzaj tq'on tumel wey	Ella es la estrella	She is the star
	Ex a nnaniy ntzaj tjion nb'ey wen	Que mi camino abre	That my path opens

During my time teaching Rafael and other diasporic Indigenous students, I learned that poetry and free writing allowed my students to express their prior knowledge while also using literacy as a medium to engage and explore emotions. Ríos Vega (2020) also discovered the power of engaging diasporic Indigenous students in poetry writing. In his book, Ríos Vega (2020) shares that Esperanza, an Akateko (sometimes spelled *Acateco*) student, had kept a self-reflective poem many years after graduating high school. Similar to Rafael's poem, emotion is palpable in Esperanza's writing, particularly in the sections she mentions her family.

Poetry writing, especially in Mayan languages, is an emotional act of reclamation directly linked to Maya literacy (Holbrock, 2016); yet, opportunities to write poetry in Indigenous languages are rarely provided to students, especially in English language classrooms. For this reason, creating safe spaces where our diasporic Indigenous students can use their Indigenous languages, explore their emotions, and weave their Indigenous literacies becomes a matter of educational equity and justice. Further, providing a space where Indigenous students can share their stories and use their languages becomes an act of counternarrative against the persistent erasure of indigeneity, Indigenous Peoples, and Indigenous languages and cultures in our K-12 spaces.

Gaspar Draws La Aldea de Xoncá (The Village of Xoncá)

I welcomed Gaspar, an 18-year-old student, to our newcomer ESOL class a few months after our 2015-2016 school year had begun. He was timid and spoke very softly, always avoiding any unnecessary attention. In our initial conversation, I learned that Gaspar spoke Ixil, a Mayan language, as his first language and that he dropped out of school after completing fourth grade. The village where he lived in Guatemala had an elementary school that taught content in Spanish, but most of the student population was Ixil. As a result, Gaspar was not taught how to read and write in Ixil, only in Spanish; however, he primarily communicated orally (i.e., listening and speaking) in Ixil, and had difficulty speaking Spanish. In our English classroom, Gaspar would develop, for the first time in his life, proficiency in all four language domains (i.e., listening,

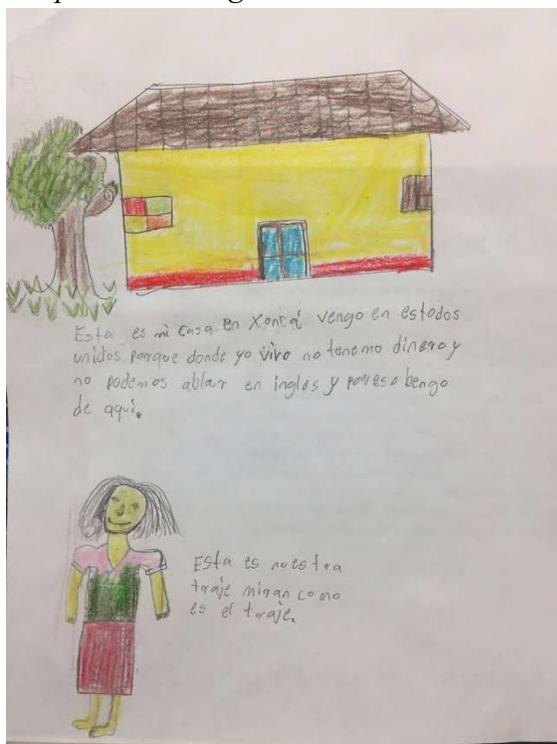
speaking, reading, and writing) in one language—English. This experience proved overwhelming at first for Gaspar, and he often sought refuge in the back of the classroom, where he sat quietly hoping to stay hidden from classmates and me, his teacher.

A few weeks after his arrival, I asked one of my students to interpret to Gaspar in Ixil the instructions for the activity we were working on. This activity asked students to share a visual representation of their choice (e.g., drawing, picture, etc.) along with a story. Gaspar became overwhelmed at the idea of presenting in front of the class, but his Ixil classmate assured Gaspar that he would stand up beside him during the presentation. The next day, Gaspar walked into our classroom with the drawing shared below in Figure 1 and proudly handed it to me, “Mr. Pentón, mi dibujo” (Mr. Pentón, my drawing). I smiled in excitement and began the class by placing Gaspar’s drawing on the overhead projector and reflecting it on the board.

“Gaspar, ¿puedes leer estas oraciones en voz alta, por favor?” (Gaspar, can you read these sentences aloud, please?), I inquired, while reflecting Figure 1 on the board for everyone to see. Gaspar began to read these sentences aloud and, after each sentence, I repeated them in English for all students. While reading, Gaspar shared with us that he was from Xoncá, a humble, rural village in Guatemala, and taught us the colors of the traditional regalia used by Ixil women in his community. His classmates, excited to learn about Gaspar and his story, clapped at the end of his presentation and congratulated him for his work and story, “good job, Gaspar!”.

Figure 1

Gaspar’s Drawing



Gaspar’s written Spanish may be considered distinct from the idealized ‘native’ or ‘standard’ norm. He wrote in his drawing: “Esta es mi casa en Xoncá vengo en estados unidos

porque donde yo vivo no tenemos dinero y no podemos hablar en inglés y por eso vengo de aquí. Esta es nuestra casa miran como es el traje” (This is my house in Xonca. I came to the United States because where I lived we did not have any money and could not speak English; that is why I came here. This is our traditional regalia. Look at the regalia).

Some of my diasporic Indigenous students arrived in our classroom with limited or interrupted formal education (see DeCapua et al., 2020; Pentón Herrera, 2022). Many of them, like Gaspar, could write and read with various degrees of proficiency in their Indigenous languages and/or Spanish, but primarily spoke and understood their Mayan language(s). Many of these learners had difficulties establishing and maintaining relationships with their classmates, and anchoring themselves in our school and classroom community because ‘doing schooling’—that is, attending a formal school environment—was a new concept for them.

Initially, I struggled to engage learners like Gaspar while simultaneously teaching print literacy and language in English. However, by incorporating activities that invited visual forms of expression, such as Gaspar’s drawing, my diasporic Indigenous students with limited or interrupted schooling began to share their worldview with our class, becoming more engaged and motivated in the process. The work produced by my diasporic Indigenous students through art-based activities expanded my definition of literacy, noticing details that would otherwise remain invisible or hidden. For example, in Gaspar’s drawing, he uses elements of Maya literacy to assign patterns, colors, and symbols in the woman’s traditional clothing (Holbrock, 2016). These Indigenous literacies and epistemologies are often ignored in traditional Western schooling, causing detrimental effects on Indigenous knowledge systems and students (Kulago et al., 2021).

Removing Vulnerability Through the Arts

In her book *Incarcerated stories: Indigenous women migrants and violence in the settler-capitalist State*, Speed (2019) discusses *vulnerability* and being *vulnerable* as pertaining to Indigenous women. Throughout her book, Speed (2019) discusses vulnerability to “reveal the multiple ways in which Indigenous women are rendered vulnerable to a range of perpetrators through structures of settler capitalist power, and act to resist by surviving” (p. 2). Simply put, for Speed (2019), vulnerability is imposed on Indigenous women in multiple, intersecting ways by those in positions of power. Similar to Speed’s (2019) discussion about Indigenous women migrants, I believe vulnerability is not a personal characteristic but an imposed condition placed on diasporic Indigenous students who arrive in U.S. schools and classrooms.

Research tells us that diasporic Indigenous students have unwelcoming and challenging experiences in U.S. formal education systems (see Barillas Chón, 2010; Casanova, 2019; Pentón Herrera, 2021b). These unsupportive experiences emanate from multiple, intersecting factors (i.e., mindsets, politics, and practices) established by people in power, placing diasporic Indigenous students in situations of constant vulnerability.

Tussey (2019) explains that the U.S. “public-school system is a subset of hegemonic culture and as such, establishes a learning environment that replicates broader ruling class ideology” (p. 109). This means that educators, often unconsciously and unknowingly, either

neglect Indigenous students' identity or approach Indigenous students' funds of knowledge and linguistic repertoires from a deficit perspective (Tussey, 2019). As a result, diasporic Indigenous students are faced with two difficult options, either (1) conform to the labels of *Spanish-speaker* and *Hispanic/Latinx* assigned by the school system and staff members; or (2) claim their Indigenous identity, which could result in becoming vulnerable by the lack of support, resources, safety/protection, and conditions available in U.S. schools for Indigenous youth. For a deeper conversation about the racialization of Indigenous students from Latin America in U.S. schools, see Barillas Chón et al. (2021).

In this article, the stories of Mariela, Rafael, and Gaspar reflect some of the challenges and opportunities diasporic Indigenous students experience in our learning environments today. Mariela arrived at her school and was racialized as a "Spanish-speaker" because she was from Guatemala. The lack of knowledge in school districts about diasporic Indigenous students like Mariela creates uncomfortable, unhelpful barriers, affecting their academic progress and placing them in a state of vulnerability. When I first learned that Mariela was Maya and spoke Q'anjob'al as a first language, I did not know what to do to support her. In all the training I received in my teacher preparation programs, as well as in professional development workshops offered by the school district, Indigenous students were never acknowledged or talked about. My lack of knowledge and awareness about Mariela's culture and language placed her and her Indigenous classmates at a disadvantageous position, erasing their Indigenous identity and language in the process, and placing them in a state of vulnerability.

Since my time meeting Mariela during the 2014-2015 school year, I have learned about the struggles diasporic Indigenous children face in their native countries and have continued to witness the challenges that are placed upon them in U.S. schools. For example, I have learned that in many Latin American countries, people in power have subjected Indigenous communities to genocide, displacement, poverty, and discrimination for generations, placing them in a constant state of vulnerability. Similarly, I continue to witness how some of my diasporic Indigenous students arrive with a wealth of life experiences and skills deemed unimportant by the U.S. school system simply because these funds of knowledge do not fit within the standardized Western curricula. Through these lessons and my own teaching practice, I have found that integrating arts in our learning environment allows my diasporic Indigenous students to thrive.

By incorporating arts in our ESOL classroom, Indigenous students like Rafael, who can read and write (at various levels) in their Indigenous language(s), Spanish, and English, are able to explore the beauty of translanguaging while learning English, using their full linguistic repertoire in the process. At the same time, students like Gaspar, who have interrupted formal education and are developing print literacy skills, can use their funds of knowledge as a bridge to share their stories and establish personal connections with other classmates. Beyond creating exciting, fair learning conditions for all, I have personally found that incorporating arts provides cathartic relief for my students, many of whom suppress their emotions and memories because they cannot find a safe place to share them.

Final Thoughts

What, then, are the next steps schools and educators can take to support diasporic Indigenous students? The answer to this question is complex and full of possibilities. I do believe, however, that building a relationship of trust and respect with our learners is the first step to learning more about their realities and what we can do to support them. Also, uplifting and honoring Indigenous cultures, languages, and identities in our learning spaces and schools is vital for empowering our diasporic Indigenous learners (Cano, 2022). This practice of empowerment, in turn, will contribute to changes in worldviews, helping us (teachers) transition from deficit to asset-based pedagogy while learning about Indigenous epistemologies and literacies that remain hidden in Western schooling systems. I recommend teachers read Kovats Sánchez et al. (forthcoming) for more information on how to create positive learning communities for diasporic Indigenous students in our classrooms and beyond.

I would like to end this article by urging literacy and language educators to consider vulnerability as a condition imposed on students rather than as a characteristic or deficiency that learners bring with them. When we see students struggling in our classrooms, we must ask ourselves, “*what vulnerabilities are being imposed on this student by school personnel and the school district?*” and “*how can I remove these imposed vulnerabilities?*” By asking these two important questions, we begin to change our mindset, focusing on the possibilities for our students’ success, and including activities such as arts to remove the imposed vulnerabilities placed upon them by those in positions of power.

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