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UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITIES OF SELF-IMAGE IN AN EFL RURAL SETTING

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Abstract

In this book, we looked at self-image from a humanistic perspective. We see it as a dynamic and complex process that compromises self-respect and self-confidence. The protagonists of this story come from a rural area. They were a group of eleventh graders from a high school in Samacá, one of the 123 towns in the state of Boyacá, Colombia. As narrators of the story, we wanted to explore, analyze, and interpret how these adolescents perceived their self-image through their life stories under a narrative inquiry method. By telling their narratives, the students could reconstruct and re-signify their reality, while showing us who they are in relation to other people and their contexts. Therefore, life stories offered us the possibility to explore students' inner and social worlds. This research study helped us increase our sensitivity to how the adolescents saw themselves as part of their rural contexts, as well as how this might affect their futures.

Keywords: self-image, rurality, narratives, life stories, self-respect, self-confidence

Resumen

En este libro comprendimos la auto-imagen desde una perspectiva humana. Es decir, como un proceso dinámico y complejo que se relaciona con el auto-respeto y la auto-confianza. Los protagonistas de esta historia provienen de una zona rural. Ellos son un grupo de estudiantes de grado once de un colegio localizado en Samacá, uno de los 123 municipios que conforman el departamento de Boyacá en Colombia. Como narradores de esta historia, quisimos explorar, analizar e interpretar como estos adolescentes percibían su auto-imagen a través de sus historias de vida, enmarcadas en un método narrativo. Al narrar sus historias, los estudiantes reconstruyeron y resignificaron su realidad mientras nos mostraban su relación con otras personas y su propio contexto. Estas historias de vida nos dieron la posibilidad de explorar su mundo interno y social. Incrementamos nuestra sensibilidad como investigadores y entendimos como los adolescentes se percibían en un contexto rural y las implicaciones que esto tiene para sus vidas futuras.

Palabras clave: autoimagen, ruralidad, narrativas, historias de vida, auto respeto, autoconfianza

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT WE CARRY IN OUR LUGGAGE

Twelve years ago, when we created the research group TONGUE (Teaching on New Grounds Unexplored English Possibilities), we were interested in exploring students' identities and self-images. We firmly believe that individuals, as human beings, are the most valuable part of society. Likewise, each student represents a whole world. One which is independent and unique. As teachers, we have strived to understand, interpret, see, and live our students' worlds. In other words, we believe that we are called not only to teach, but to also to interpret our students' contexts to better understand who they are as people. It is only after exploring our students' lives that we can proceed to teach and learn.

We see the process of teaching and learning English as a symbiosis, in which students and teachers can learn and grow with each other. Time and time again, we have noticed that teaching and learning a language come second to understanding our students. Comprehending and connecting to our students' realities have aided the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) process, in which students have become protagonists of their own learning. Because of this, we urge the need to listen to, amplify, and echo our students' voices.

In Colombia, rural areas often lack opportunities in all aspects of life, including education. Children who have the opportunity to graduate from high school are faced with the reality of a limited job market. For some graduates, working in the countryside with their father and older brothers is their only option, while women must help at home and raise families at a young age. Nevertheless, farm and housework are physically exhausting and not well paid, which is why we continue to see that 70% of the rural population is under the poverty line (Ramos & Aguirre, 2016).

Given the situation, we wanted to explore eleventh graders' self-image and understand how they build their image and how it informs about their imagined life after high school.

The Colombian high school educational system finishes at eleventh grade. Talking with eleventh graders in rural areas has revealed that they are full of energy and dreams. Some want to continue studying and go to college to move up the socio-economic ladder. Others want to pursue their dreams and shape their lives. While others are aware of the limited economic resources that will ultimately affect their decisions. Without a doubt, eleventh graders in rural areas are faced with many challenges that will determine their future, which is why understanding their self-image was crucial for us.

In this book, we looked at self-image from a humanistic approach. We see it as a dynamic and complex process that compromises self-respect and self-confidence. As a complex process, self-image is influenced by the community in which the individual interacts (school, neighborhood, home, etc.). All in all, self-image is a continuous process that begins from childhood (Rijavec, 1997; Bognar, 1999; Yahaya & Ramli, 2009; Simel, 2013). Furthermore, a positive self-image can generate many benefits. Heatherton and Wagner (2011) mentioned that having a high self-esteem helps people cope with cognitive and social challenges to live a better life.

We were also aware of the fact that the protagonists of this story were adolescents, who are in search of their selves and identities as human beings. As narrators of the story, we wanted to explore, analyze, and interpret how these adolescents perceived their self-image through their life stories. By telling their narratives, the students could reconstruct and re-signify their reality, while showing us who they are in relation to other people and their contexts. Therefore, life stories offered us the possibility to explore students' inner and social worlds.

In order to explore the adolescents' self-image, we needed to understand their life stories as a thoughtful practice as opposed to a technical one. Doing so helped us increase our sensitivity to how the adolescents saw themselves as part of their rural contexts, as well as how this might affect

their futures. In addition to understanding the students' self-image, we also wanted to make sure this book echoed their voices. Therefore, we will be sharing the stories of a group of eleventh graders from a high school in Samacá, one of the 123 towns in the state of Boyacá, Colombia. The students come from a rural area since this is largely an agricultural state.

This book is divided into five chapters that describe a journey. In this trip we made some stops. In the first chapter, *The Trip that we Planned*, we narrate where and how this trip began. We contextualize the reader with our understanding of rurality as well as with the initial concerns of the research group.

In the second chapter, *Our Fellows in this Trip*, we present the authors who theoretically support our concerns. We discuss the concepts of self-image and its connection with life-stories. All these within the framework of the rural specificities in Colombia.

In the third chapter, *Our Rest Area to Reflect upon in this Trip*, we present the protagonists and the context in which this qualitative research study was carried out. We introduce the reader with the social subjects and their life-stories. We also illustrate the rural context that shaped those stories. We describe narrative inquiry as a method to rely on to comprehend self-image construction.

In the fourth chapter, *The Experiences we Encounter in our Journey*, we describe, interpret, and comprehend what the self-stories reveal about eleventh-graders self-image. Finally, in the last chapter, *The Photo Album we End Up with in this Voyage*, we summarized the findings and we open the window for future comprehension in regards to EFL rural teaching and learning processes in Colombia.

THE TRIP THAT WE PLANNED

The research group TONGUE has had a history of working with rural areas and education communities. We have been able to witness the dire need to comprehend rural education and how it shapes people's experiences. We have also come to understand that the school is no longer a place to teach subjects. It has become an opportunity for students' voices to be amplified and echoed. Because of this, we recognize that education also encompasses a humanistic orientation to it. As such, we agree with Bognar (1999), who suggests that the humanistic perspective is still neglected and suppressed in our schools in particular with the education of a positive self-image.

We considered the previous argument and our experiences with eleventh graders at a public institution in Boyacá, Colombia, to make the choice to understand their self-images. We wanted to comprehend how the students, who are constantly constructing and co-constructing their self-image and identity, went through the process. As researchers, we used this opportunity to get to know them, and their contexts better. Since the idea of *self-image* implies taking a look at how people and the community see themselves, the students' life stories would allow us to take a deeper look at what lied beneath their words as their underwent the process of self-image construction.

In addition to the previous, one of our main objectives, as teachers-researchers, was to gain a better understanding of our teaching practices by getting to know our students' complex realities in a rural school. We did so by asking our students to write their life stories, which helped them express themselves, how they saw their world, and what they lived every day. The life stories gave us a glimpse into their world, which would have been invisible if we had focused primarily on EFL teaching and learning.

As teachers, we understand all too well assigning students multiple written pages focused on grammar, spelling, punctuation, and structures. However, we have come to realize that these assignments rarely provide the chance to contemplate meaning. Instead, it is tempting to judge students' writing based on their lack of spelling or grammatical disfunction. Similarly, we have also been guilty of giving students writing topics that restrict their freedom to express themselves. As we grow in our teaching practices and think about our students, we chose to focus on short life stories that could give students the freedom to write meaningful narratives about themselves, their lives, and how they saw themselves within their communities. Their stories went far beyond the linguistic features of the language. Moreover, they invited us to share, comprehend, and open our minds to their lives.

We wanted our students to see the language as a vehicle to express themselves and for their voices to be heard as part of their local community. Part of our point of view comes from the idea that schools play an important role in a students' self-image construction. According to Simel (2013), schools need to create a positive environment, so that individuals can create an idea of themselves in a safe place. Additionally, schools and society go hand-in-hand when it comes to change, which means that schools have to provide a space where students' characteristics are discovered, valued, and highlighted. Simel (2013) also pointed out that it is difficult to witness students' personal growth within a traditional classroom, where the teacher is the center of the class. To witness the students' perspectives; a student-centered approach needs to be the core of the learning process.

Understanding the construction of our *self-images*, not only for ourselves but also for the "other", is a deep and meaningful experience, which could lead to improving our practice, as well as creating long lasting connections for the participants: learners, teachers, and parents. We see this research as our way of putting ourselves in someone else's tiny shoes.

We expected to gain understanding about how adolescents build their image and the meaningful "spaces" (community, home, school, etc.) connected to self-image construction revealed in the eleventh graders' life

stories. Then, we aimed at describing and understanding these meaningful "spaces" (community, home, school, etc.) that were connected to self-image construction.

By understanding how self-image is constructed and the meaningful spaces for self-image construction, we could work together as a community in rural schools, so that students can develop better self-images and build their confidence and self-respect. As such, they could improve their experiences in the educational setting, and imagine their futures from positive and enriching perspectives.

OUR FELLOWS IN THIS TRIP

In this chapter, we provide a description of the main constructs, theory, and relevant studies that guided this project. The following paragraphs contain the definitions of self-image, particularly during adolescence, and we will discuss how the previous concept connects to life-stories and rurality in Colombia.

Self-Image

"Self-image is how you see yourself. This may be how you see yourself physically or your opinion of who and what you are, and it is important because it affects your self-esteem and confidence" (Nair, 2016, p. 75). When we are in the process of constructing ourselves, it is essential to understand how we and other see us. How we position ourselves in society is key in denoting our behavior and relationships with others. Here, confidence also plays a part on how we and others see us, and people will act accordingly. Of course, self-image construction also has to do with our own thoughts and beliefs, and there is no right or static way to construct one's image. In terms of self-image construction, Miljkovic and Rijavec (1996, p. 110) stated that,

> *Self-image (self-concept)* can be understood as a wider term that comprises self-respect (valuing oneself) which is made out of two parts: the feeling of one's own value – the belief that we have the right to be happy and that we deserve success, friendship, love and fulfillment; and self-confidence – the belief that we are capable of thinking, learning, choosing, making decisions, and overcoming challenges and changes (…) This is useful to explain the past, the present behaviors and predict the coming one. Without these issues, the behavior could look unpredictable for anyone.

As teachers, we understand that a students' self-image is his or her way of seeing him or her as an individual within a group of people. By positioning one's self-image, he or she is owning certain values that have been established in the past and present. At this point in their lives, students may want to achieve important aspects for the rest of their lives, and they may have a sense of belonging and the need to feel useful in society. Adolescents want to be helpful in their communities and able to make decisions and fulfill tasks on their own. It is common to see adolescent students constantly working on themselves and behaving in such ways that will reflect later on intheir lives. In a way, it is useful for us, as teachers, to be able to understand our students' behavior, thoughts, beliefs and more to get a glimpse of how they will be in the future. This is a starting point to get to know our students, as well as *why* and *how* they see their world and approach their realities.

Self-image has been defined by Coon (1994, p. 471) as the "total subjective perception of oneself, including an image of one's body and impressions of one's personality, capabilities and so on". What we see, from the perspective of the researcher and foreign language teacher, is that students often have an imaginary perception of who they are in the classroom. Who they think they are is based on their daily lives at home, school, and their community. Therefore, adolescence is a critical age for students because they are constructing their understandings of life, as well as their intellectual and corporal images.

The concept of *self-image* is also seen as the way students construct their personalities based on their insights and realities. Moreover, *self-image* construction will also depend on how people see you as a member of a community; that is to say, students build up their personalities according to people's opinions. Siachoque (2015, p. 51) asserted that,

> self-image is the individual's beliefs about him or herself including the person 's attributes and who and what the self is. Self-image includes many things that might not be part of one's identity, for example a person's self-image might include many personal attributes.

Creating a self-image is a complex issue for the rural high school students we work with. They face difficult issues inside and outside of the classroom that affect their image construction. Most of the time, we do not understand their problems, but we can observe how their self-image fluctuates. One day, they are certain about what they want in life and how to get there. The next day, they might hate how they reacted to a situation and feel that their goals and dreams were a lie. By looking at our students' written *life-stories*, we will be able to see how their connection to a community might affect their self-image construction. As some of the students have expressed, they live in difficult living conditions outside of school. In previous occasions, they have mentioned that they never asked for a hard life, they were born into it. The construction of self-image deals with all of the possible issues we face daily. It is an intricate process, and these young individuals do not really know where to go or what to do next.

Previously, we have brought up the term "adolescence", and it is necessary to define it in terms of self-image construction. Aguirre (1998) stated that adolescence is characterized by the constant search of identity. Being a *teen* has enormous implications because students are trying to construct themselves at every moment. In fact, a lot of physical and emotional changes take place in this lifetime period. Brinthaupt and Lipka (2002) asserted that "adolescence is characterized by emotional ups and downs with extremes of both immense joy and sadness" (p. 39).

Santrock (1993, p. 171) affirmed that adolescence "is the period where the 'self' is found and established for life". In adolescence, students will construct their foundations of life based on their perceptions of who they are in their community and how their community sees them. Aguirre (1998) also claimed that adolescents construct their self through factors, such as self-esteem, body image, relationships with others, and interactions in different socio-cultural contexts.

Every day, beliefs are being constructed, and self-image is one of these beliefs. For many of our students, they will dream of an imagined or better life outside of their real context, which is why they are constantly exploring who they want to be. Additionally, Erikson (1968) mentioned that identity and role confusion play important roles between the ages of 12 and 18

years of age. During this period of adolescence, individuals will deal with a deep exploration of their self, values, beliefs, and life goals. At this point, a sense of belonging within a community might strengthen, as well as their ideas for their future. Students may be asking themselves at this age "What is next for me?". Furthermore, adolescents will be defining the roles they will perform in their adulthood. Likewise, their self-image will be constructed with others, as they accept or reject their self and the others' self. However, role confusion can occur when an individual does not know the role he or she plays in their community. This is an issue that could affect adulthood, particularly decision- making. Because of role confusion, adolescents will try to experiment with different lifestyles, behaviors, etc. as a way of finding themselves, even if it is unconsciously done.

According to social identity and self-categorization theories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), identifying one's self with others is an important feature of self-definition. Consequently, self-definition has implications on a variety of phenomena (Deaux, 1996). The high school students are part of a local community, so their attributes are like their peers. For the most part, their community is homogeneous in the sense that they have a shared cultural background and similar ways of being. Nevertheless, the students also see themselves as having unique attributes that make them different than their peers. Therefore, it is essential to understand how they position themselves in interaction with others and how others interact with them.

As mentioned previously, people can also construct their self-image based on how others see them (Cole, 1991; Felson, 1989; Madon et al., 2001; McNulty & Swann, 1994; Swann et al., 2000). However, they can also self-verify, which is when they convince others to view their traits or abilities in a self-confirming manner (Madon et al., 2001; McNulty & Swann, 1994; Swann et al., 2000; Swann, 1987). Among the participants, we have seen the importance that the others' opinions have on their self-image construction. That is to say they like to behave according to what others expect of them. We believe that the students have modified their behaviors for years to obtain the others' approval, which may seem natural for them by the time they reach adolescence. At times, they may try to

convince the others of their actions, but students will most likely try to please the others.

Bailey (2003) observed that one's *self image* is composed of a mental picture of one's physical appearance along with the integration of one's experiences, desires, and feelings. Nonetheless, our mental perception of who we are also comes from the others' mental representations of how they see us. In other words, we have created an image based on what we have seen from the others because of experience. This image is a personal insight which is integrated into a *self-image*.

Moreover, Bailey (2003) mentioned that a person can also be defined by the following factors: unchanging genetic attributes, changing genetic attributes, and "work products". The latter refers to the material things (e.g. cars, houses, accessories, etc.) that can be acquired during one's lifetime.

Other factors that influence self-image construction are the nurture and attitude we receive from our parents (SOAR, 2003; Yahaya & Ramli, 2009; Lebedina-Manzoni & Lotar, 2010). Parents can provide their children with support, values, and care for their future lives. *Life values*, or the virtues taught at home, will be carried along throughout life. If subjects construct life experiences with their parents and most of those experiences are acknowledged as negative ones, this can lead to a negative perception of the self. On the contrary, positive experiences at home, foster a positive self-image.

It is also valid to say that "*self-image* is not innate and it can be changed" (Rijavec, 1997; Bognar, 1999; Yahaya & Ramli, 2009). We are humans under constant construction, and there is no final truth regarding our personalities and self-images. Perhaps this is the reason why our students seem to change every day during their teenage years. Furthermore, self-image is built upon our daily experiences and circumstances, which can make it difficult to accomplish a set self-image. According to King (1979, p. 110), the components of self that can be changed are: "physical-self, intellectual-self, philosophical-self, social-self, emotional-self and communicative-self." Thereby, the self is not static, and it will depend on the particularities of the individual and situation.

Another concept linked to self-image is "a positive *self-image*", where the teacher is one of the most important factors in the process. He/she can influence the creation of students' positive self-image at school (Yahaya & Ramli, 2009). Helping students construct a positive self-image should be a main objective for schools, and it can be achieved by creating a safe and comfortable space for self-image construction. Schools should provide students with the tools to build a positive self-image to face the challenges of the world. Not only schools are there to teach and reinforce the content knowledge of any subject, but also to value, echo and reinforce all positive characteristics of each student. For example, in the case of rural students, their roots, knowledge, traditions and cultural values should be seen as a positive asset in the school.

According to Simel (2013, p. 111), "adolescents evaluate their self-image mainly positively; the image is mostly based on the assessment of physical appearance and physical attraction." Because of this, schools need to nurture students rather than expose them to situations that could lead to negative self-image construction. As teachers, it is our goal to make sure our students remain self-confident in themselves and who they are trying to become. A static pattern or recipe to becoming someone is non-existent; nonetheless, we can motivate and encourage students throughout their construction process. Though the task is not easy, it is a first step that every teacher should take.

In this narrative study, students' written *life-stories* helped us discover adolescents' self- image constructions since they revealed their personalities, feelings, thoughts, and reflections based on their self-image.

Life–Stories

McAdams (1996) claimed that during their entire lives, people construct the past, dream the future, and internalize the reality of the present in a narrative way. In fact, when people write about their lives, they also create meaning from lived events. Students can remember particular moments that have occurred during a specific time that have impacted them somehow. These detailed situations (narratives) that were part of participants' life experiences, took the form of life stories. When participants reflected and

reconstructed their experiences, they storied them. Human beings make sense of their experiences by telling stories, and while doing so they (re) construct their own selves (Barkhuizen, 2008). Life stories were rooted in comprehensive epistemologies. As such, these life stories considered some subjective principles that view the human being as the one who actively constructs the meanings of the world, interprets from multiple perspectives the same phenomena, gives evolving meaning to phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When written, *life- stories* can provide an extensive and meaningful source of information.

A *life-story* is a specific length of a person's life, and it can be accounted for in a written or oral way. This chunk of data contains meaningful information regarding a person's life stages. *Life-stories* can be powerful when we try to discover certain information from a person. This is because people take their time to reenact those memories and the importance of their actions within the story. These written pieces are the result of a person's reflection about the situation. Because of the previous, we can analyze *life-stories* critically to understand people's beliefs and ways of thinking. As stated by Kern (2000), the importance of a *life-story* is that it is told through the author's words, the intentions he/she has in regards to the language, and the specific feelings his/her words might evoke from that term of actions in his/her life. This is invaluable in the sense of meaning because it is a unique opportunity to see language in use.

Sarabia (1985) defined life stories as autobiographies narrated by individuals, who have lived these events, or reports produced by subjects about their own lives. Bruner (1991) stated that human beings construct personal meaning and reality when they compose and express experiences or stories about their life. Based on this conception, our study described and analyzed adolescents' experiences and sense-making of their narrative over time.

Stories have always played an important role in the construction of societies. Communities are often created by building an identity and transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next through stories. *Life-stories* allow us to see the world from a special point of view. Historically, *life-stories* were developed by people who turned their daily

lives into stories that have been told for ages (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Throughout time, these stories have changed as they are retold, but the intention remains the same: to be remembered and recognized as a definite individual.

For Atkinson (2005), *life-stories* are vital pieces of authentic information that provide social and cultural information about an individual. Although some authors might say that it is impossible to obtain such data from a person, *life-stories* can provide clues about human interaction and points of view. Therefore, they can reveal human relationships between the actors of a community and their perceptions.

Life-stories can also be shorter moments in a person's life. When written or spoken, they can be real or fictional because only the narrator can recreate that moment. Nonetheless, the narrator can remember certain situations in which he or she reflects on who he or she is and why he or she acted the way they did. Spencer (2005, p. 6) said that,

> an author has a chance to make his or her mark on the world by relating a story that only he or she can tell (…) By using sensory details, the five Ws and H (who, what, where, when, why, and how), and basic story structure, any subject can be made exciting.

It is interesting to see how flexible a *life-story* could be for a student because he/she may be empowered to say anything, even if people believe it or not. These pieces of writing make the reader understand the intentions behind those words. Even though *life-stories* could have fictional elements, they reflect a person's decision to tell his/her life the way they did.

When working with *life-stories,* students can first brainstorm a specific moment in their lives. Once students decide what to write about, their written papers can yield many commonalities. *Life-stories* allow us to establish similarities between the perceptions students may have as individuals that belong to a specific community.

For our study, the students' *life-stories* were written. Each student's piece contained details that were pertinent to their true feelings at that moment. So, their life-stories were a complex series of ideas that represented their

image of reality. In this sense, we can also explore the term "realities" because it is the personal picture everyone has of the world, and they can be substantially different even when talking about the same thing. Life written stories were the perfect excuse to get closer to the realities our students face daily. It was also an opportunity to look beyond the paper and understand our students' lives.

As such, *life-stories* are a way of considering our students' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Mc Adams and Brown (2001, as cited in Peñaloza, 2016, p. 21) affirmed that,

> identity itself takes form of a story. Those life stories are based on biographical facts, and that life stories differ from each other with respect to their structural complexity, that is to say that each participant sees, feels, and tells the life story according to her/his own experience and perception of the reality.

Life stories can take place in many different locations, times, contexts, and so on, which translates into endless writing possibilities and limitless pieces of texts that will show a construction of *self-images.*

Rural Colombia

According to Rodríguez (2011), a world consensus does not exist on the definition of "rural", because of the variety and diversity that this term entails. In a way, it is impossible and undesirable to establish a standard criterion to define rural and urban areas. Furthermore, disparities in rural and urban definition will rely on population density. The *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE)* [National Administrative Department of Statistics in Colombia] (2014) defined rural territories as having less than 150 inhabitants per square kilometer, which is the same definition given by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2014).

Even though the DANE and OECD share the same definition for rurality, the Colombian government has defined four segments in relation to rural and urban areas. DANE (2014) states the following categories: 1) city and its agglomerations, 2) intermediate, 3) rural, and 4) rural disperse.

It is also important to note that Colombian regions do not always fit neatly into these homogenous concepts of urban and rural areas.

A closer look at these categories reveals that *city and its agglomerations* refers to a city and its suburbs. Being a city or one of its suburbs will affect how it is categorized in terms of economy, transportation, and utilities, among others. In general, cities will have more than 100,000 inhabitants. The second category, *intermediate*, refers to municipalities that significantly contribute to the region's economy through services and goods. The population density usually ranges from 25,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, with no more than ten inhabitant per square kilometer. The third category, *rural*, is defined by a population less than 25,000 inhabitants that ranges from one to 100 inhabitants per square kilometer. The fourth category, *rural disperse*, refers to municipalities with low population densities of less than 50 inhabitants per square kilometer. In addition, towns that are *rural disperse* will lack a city council or mayor.

Based on the aforementioned the state of Boyacá is predominantly *rural.* Only three of 123 municipalities in Boyacá are categorized as *city and its agglomerations*. The first of these municipalities is the city of Tunja, the capital of Boyacá, and its agglomerations of Cómbita, Motavita, and Oicatá. The second city is Sogamoso, with eight agglomerations (Busbanzá, Corrales, Firavitoba, Iza, Monguí, Nobsa, Tibasosa, and Tópaga). The third city is Duitama with one agglomeration called Cerinza. The other 109 municipalities of Boyacá are categorized as *rural disperse*.

The definition of rurality in Colombia should be seen from diverse angles. First, the concept of rurality does not include the whole view of its definition and essence. The contrasting socioeconomic conditions in which the rural population in Colombian lives, the limited access to education, the low levels of education and the diversity of cultural backgrounds do not allow us to determine a unique definition for rurality. Therefore, we are called to think about ruralities to provide a more integrative and balanced view of this term. A single definition would not portrait the richness of the word ruralities. The term ruralities is a concept that encompasses a set of ideas, living conditions and subjectivities that are far from any definition a group of scholars can provide.

Nonetheless, for the purpose of this research, we will describe what we understand by ruralities. We will try to build a whole definition of ruralities and its complexities, but this would imply not framing its meaning in a single definition.

We understand that there is not only a single rurality but many subgroups. In this sense, Colombia has its own ruralities which DANE classifies from a socioeconomical perspective to differentiate the rural Colombia from a more international definition from the OCDE concept of rurality. Both classifications of rurality are distant from a human perspective and tend more to fit rurality characteristics in a set of statistics and metrics. In other words, the definitions of ruralities promoted by the government see this concept from a technical and instrumentalized perspective which does not envision the humanistic view of ruralities. It seems to be that there are strong pressures to dehumanize what the core concept of ruralities implies. In fact, according to Parra *et al.* (2018), the Colombian rural political development plans are more focused on efficiency than on generating foundational principles for education in ruralities.

Soracá, Boyacá, the place in which this study took place, has its own realities that relate to its sociocultural context. Then, our view of ruralites is permeated by our understanding of the connection between ruralities and education. In this sense, Ramos *et al.* (2018a) argue that education in rural areas is linked to a set of human challenges such as lack of transportation, families´ chores at home, motivation to stay at school, lack of proper health care, inadequate employment. All in all, the concept of ruralities should be guided by a comprehensive perspective of the sociocultural dynamics of the context and the way subjects immersed in these ruralites make sense of it. Unfortunately, as stated by Cataño (2015), it seems to be that the educational context has not been able to adapt its principle to be aligned with this new ruralities.

OUR REST AREAS TO REFLECT UPON THIS FIELD TRIP

We designed our study to be a qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 2) stated that qualitative research "is an interpretative naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them". Because we worked with our students at their school and community, we considered the "natural setting" as part of this study. Additionally, we reflected on the particularities of the local community. Our role was not to be spectators, but rather participants who listened to our students' voices.

In terms of a research paradigm, we situated this study under a critical viewpoint. Griffiths (2009) stated that a critical perspective towards research uncovers the effects of political structures and their associated power relations. In our case, it allowed us to unveil the experiences that were usually taken for granted.

We also wanted to follow a narrative inquiry approach which is a qualitative research approach. Narrative inquiry allowed us to collect the participants' stories and retell them through our own experience to produce a narrative (Creswell, 2003). The narrative inquiry approach permits an analytic examination of students' insights and what their stories may illustrate. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described the narrative inquiry approach as:

> Inquiry into narrative. By this we mean that narrative is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study. To preserve this distinction, we use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon "story" and the inquiry "narrative." Thus, we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories by those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience. (p. 2)

We selected this approach because, as White (1980) stated, narrating our stories is a natural human ability. Experience and meaning go together as we communicate and settle in and with the world. Polkinghorne (1988) asserted that human beings are immersed within a narrative. To illustrate, we live in an endless story that is interconnected with others in time, space, and infinity. In narratives, the chaos of experience finds a route to order apparently isolated events in a continuity and synergy of "past, present and imagined worlds" (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 19).

We conducted our study with a group of eleventh graders at a public school in Samacá, Boyacá. We focused our study on the data given by the students, whose life stories provided an overview of the construction of the *self* in relation to their community and the people they interact with. Thus, this study took place in a natural setting that provided the members of this community with a better understanding of what needs to be done in the foreign language classroom.

Taking into account that this was a narrative study, we considered what Berger (2013) stated in regard to reflexivity as a major strategy for quality control in qualitative research. Berger (2013) pointed out that our experiences might impact the way we comprehend reality. We position ourselves as subjects who have had the opportunity to teach students from rural areas and, as such, have been part of rural communities for some time in our lives (teaching, carrying out professional development programs, designing materials, and mentoring in-service teachers). All the previous roles have sensitized us with the realities of rural communities. The students we worked with were also part of the rural community where we worked.

Being aware of our own positions helped us to comprehend participants' experiences and their dynamics. We were attentive of students' subjectivities and we wondered about what each participants' experience was like. We were eager to read their experiences and see how they portrayed themselves in those narratives.

In that sense, Guerrero (2011) mentioned that exploring and presenting narratives were like painting a portrait. We draw the impressions that

an experience left on us and how it has melted our being, and this is the organizing principle for human action. Reaching and reading a narrative also implies opening the door to the narrator's inner self, one which requires us to be in communion with the narrator. Narrator and audience become part of the same story, blending space and time in a meaningful human experience.

Strategies for Data Collection

Life story. According to Merriam-Webster (s.a.), the life story is "a record of events, transactions, or observations kept daily or at frequent intervals (…) a daily record of personal activities, reflections, or feelings". Life-stories were a good option to unveil what students had to say about their self-image and how they constructed it. Every eight days for nine weeks (school period) the students created a life story, where they stated their points of view about their realities. Since they could write freely, they could also express their true feelings and thoughts related to specific moments in their lives. The writing process allowed them to polish their writing; however, we did not demand perfection from them. Rather, we encouraged the students to put their words as they would want to see them on paper. We also gave them the change to write in Spanish in case they wanted to express themselves without the limitations of the language barrier. Drawings became part of their written pieces as well, and it allowed them to express their ideas that could not be written with words. Flexibility was a key factor that was considered when writing the life stories.

Ricoeur (2000) stated that narratives are used as a strategy to describe and analyze a person's lived experiences in order to make sense of those personal experiences through reflections. Bearing in mind this assertion, the students' narratives about their life experiences conveyed meaning about who they are and how they act in different situations and settings. For the purpose of this study, we collected nine narratives from the target population. The students wrote their narratives in response to the following questions:

- Who am I?
- How do others perceive me?

- What have been some critical moments in my life?
- What do I dream of?

Focus Group Interview. According to Anderson (1990, p. 241), a focus group is "a group comprised of individuals with certain characteristics who focus discussions on a given issue or topic." Additionally, Denscombe (2007, p. 115) stated that the "focus group consists of a small group of people, usually between six and nine in number, who are brought together by a trained moderator (the researcher) to explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a topic". A focus group interview provides a setting for the group to reflect on the questions asked by the interviewer. As this is a group of eleventh graders with similar ages, this instrument allowed us to ask them about their daily life issues. Likewise, as we asked them about what we had read in their stories, we were able to understand in depth their points of view.

Once they had written their life stories, and we had the chance to analyze them, the focus group helped us explore the most relevant findings seen in the other instruments. The goal was to expand on the issues mentioned in their life stories. In that sense, we were able to contrast the data throughout the process, which provided us with the foundation to understand what was behind the students' written words.

School Context

We carried out this study at a public rural school in Samacá, Boyacá, Colombia. This public high school is located in Samacá's urban zone. The public educational system in Samacá is made up of one pre-school, ten elementary schools, and one high school. A total of 12 facilities comprise the educational system, all of which are directed by one principal. Nine of the twelve schools are in rural areas, while the other three are in the urban zone of the town. Over 2,100 students attend these schools, which also includes students from the CEDEBOY (Education for Adults) program. More than 1,060 students are enrolled in the high school, which means that each classroom has an average of 38 students. The teaching staff is made up of 84 teachers. Forty-one teachers are assigned to perform activities at the

high school. Forty-three teachers work at the pre-school and elementary levels. At the time we conducted this study, there were five English high school teachers.

The pedagogical model of the school system is *Enseñanza para la comprensión* [Teaching for comprehension], which is based on the constructivist approach. A recent interest in teaching English as foreign language throughout the school system has increased, which has resulted in a school curriculum proposal launched by the school directors.

Social Subjects

We chose to work with the eleventh graders in Group 03 that was composed of 35 students (15 females, 20 males). Their ages ranged from 15 to 18 years of age. They attended English class for three hours a week. After speaking to our students it was clear that they were shaping their *self* and searching for their identity. Hence, we wanted to listen to their voice and understand their life stories in order to explore, analyze, and interpret their *self.*

All the students came from rural areas of Samacá except for one student, who moved from a different school district. From our observations, the student was fitting in well with the new setting and peers. Other than the new student, one of the characteristics of this group was that they had known each other at least since ninth grade. Some of them have been studying together all their lives. Needless to say, the students had strong bonds with each other, which had created a positive and affective learning environment.

During class activities, they worked well as a team, and they demonstrated friendship and camaraderie. In general, they were close and united. At times, they might disagree on certain topics, but they were always respectful of each other and their differences.

The students' parents work in several sectors and professions. For example, some parents worked at the local coal mine. Others owned their

own business, drove local transportation, worked in the agricultural sector, labored in the construction business, cooked, catered, or were stay-at-home parents. Meanwhile, some students worked after school to pay for their needs or help with the family income.

Even though this class had thirty-five students, we decided to focus on a sample of five students' writings. Three of the authors were female, while the other two authors were male. We decided to work with these five students because during the writing process, they were very open, honest, and willing to share their written work. In their written pieces, they wanted to write as close as possible to their real settings. Their words reflected honesty that could not be shared with the rest of the class. As researchers, we could see similarities between the shared stories, as well as the effort the students had undergone to write them. As mentioned before, the texts provided an honest look that represented the class, which is why we opted for the quality of the text over the quantity of papers. Through their life stories, we could picture and create a general sense of how the students were building their *self-image*. Their stories also reflected their points of view, which was meaningful for this study.

Ethical Issues

We kept confidential all the information we obtained during this study. The students' participation was voluntary, and their parents signed the consent form because the students were underage. If at any point during the study a participant wanted to leave, they had the right to do so without any repercussions. The names of the participants remained anonymous, and the data provided was not shared or published at any time during the study. The ethical management and information confidentiality were subscribed under the Colombian constitutional laws related to personal data and copyright. The results of this research were only used to present reports for academic purposes and to elaborate articles and/or books related to the study.

Table 1 summarizes the main aspects addressed in this chapter.

Table 1. *Paradigm, approach, context, participants, and data sources*

Paradigm	Approach	Context	Participants	Data Sources
Qualitative / Critical	Narrative inquiry	Public school in Samacá	Eleventh graders	- Narratives that took the form of life stories - Focus group interview

THE EXPERIENCES WE ENCOUNTERED IN OUR JOURNEY

When retelling the participants' stories, we tried to use their own words and analyzed them in meaningful ways by linking key components of their stories with different events. As soon as participants handed in each one of their narratives, their stories were transcribed. Then, we analyzed them, following a qualitative analysis, in the search for key emergent issues of any given event or particular idea (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). To build trustworthiness in this study, the participants were asked to double check the content to ensure the precision of the data presented.

Dey (1993) claimed that "qualitative analysis data is a process of resolving data into its constituent components, to reveal its characteristic elements and structure" (p. 31). In other words, we gathered the data and divided it into small chunks of information to see the commonalities between the information. Analyzing smaller chunks of data allowed us to notice patterns that would become themes for this study.

Using a qualitative data analysis approach meant that,

> the whole phenomenon under study is understood as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts, focus on complex independencies and system dynamics that cannot meaningfully be reduced to a few discrete variables and linear, cause effect relationships. (Patton, 2002, p. 41)

As the students' teachers, we had been in touch with their language learning complexities, reflections, and social backgrounds. Collecting and analyzing the data they provided was complex because they are human beings with reactions and emotions. Each participant brought his or her own set of experiences. However, the data also showed that similarities exist between the participants. As we have mentioned before, the focus of this study was to understand the student from a holistic perspective, which provided a rich set of data to analyze.

As a final thought, Patton (2002) described qualitative data research as *reflective* because the researcher has the opportunity to reflect on the realities of the participants. To avoid bias in the analysis, the *voice* and *perspective* of the researcher must be credible and authentic based on theory, which allows the readers to validate the data. From this perspective, we based our analysis on three models stated by Riessman (2000): thematic, structural, and performative analysis.

Riessman (2000) stated that a thematic analysis emphasizes the content of a text. In other words, it is said that "what" is more important than "how", or the "told" rather than the "telling". Structural analysis focuses on the telling, or the *way* a story is told. Performative analysis goes beyond the spoken word and, as the stage metaphor implies, storytelling is seen as a performance – by a "self" with a past. This means that usually stories follow a timeline which may be seen "a tool which invites participants to visually depict key events that have happened in their lives" (Bremmer, 2020, p. 4). In this sense, in a life story, participants retrieve their memories from the past and bring them into the present.

Then, our first step was to analyze the data by color-coding themes and adding meaning to them. We began by reading the different life stories written by the five students. Randomly, we underlined the information using the *coloring technique*, which uses different colors to identify the ideas that caught our attention in regard to students' self-image. We noticed that many aspects were similar among the life stories, so we used the same color and code name. We carried out the same procedure for the focus group interview where we witnessed similar patterns provided in the previous two instruments. The second step was to group the themes we found and name them. The third step was to compare the information that we had gathered from the participants with other theories and studies. After analyzing the data collected, two main themes emerged in the process.

Self-image is an ambivalent construction permeated by the context and, as such, self-image is socially constructed.

We noticed that the participants wrote about their context and the vivid situations that related to their lives. We found that their self-image construction is based on the following:

how they see themselves in a group of students
their backgrounds
who they interact with in their community
the values they have been raised with
their perception of who they are in relation to others

The school is a place where these features converge, making it a challenge to construct and understand self-image. Additionally, it is the place where students construct who they think they are in relation to their peers, teachers, and community.

Thus, self-image is not grounded in an ideal context. Instead, it is rooted in a real one. In this case, the context is situated in a rural setting, which is one that is usually permeated by societal barriers, such as structural inequality, poor health care, lack of decent housing, and limited employment. Students who belong to this context might be labeled as subjects who are likely to fail academically and have diminished opportunities in life. We found that the eleventh graders' self-image is ambivalent, socially constructed, and permeated by the other social actors within the community (parents, teachers, and peers).

Figure 1 summarizes what participants' narratives told us on self-image as an ambivalent construction permeated by the relationship between participants and parents, partners, friends and the school.

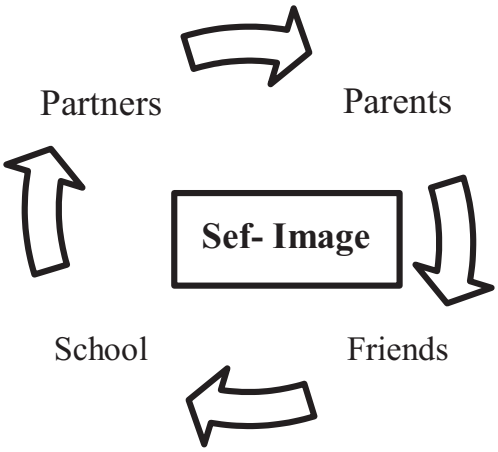


Figure 1. *Self-image as an ambivalent construction*

Self-image is an Ambivalent Construction

The construction of a *self-image* is not predictable because it is constantly changing depending on the amount of experience a person is exposed to. In this case, the specific characteristics of a rural area shape the way self-image is constructed. Although you could think of your *self-image* as completely defined at a certain point of your life, it tends to change due to exposure to social, cultural, and economic groups, as well as gaining new educational experiences. These changes will determine, to some degree, what type of person a student will become in the years to follow. The construction of a *self-image* becomes an ambivalent issue because students can fluctuate between self-images. One minute, they are someone, and the next minute, they are changing how they want to see themselves for the rest of their lives. As adolescents, these students live in a circle of ups and downs, and the definitive version of themselves is not yet established.

Adolescence is a hard time for any individual. It is a time of decision-making that could last a lifetime. During adolescence, there is a constant search for identity (Aguirre, 1998). Moreover, this is the time when the self is found and established for life. Life-changing events can appear suddenly, thereby, transforming an adolescent's mood or attitude. As the self is undefined, daily experiences can enrich their lives and lead to adjustments in their routines. Experiences are a crucial part to self-image construction, and what is good for their group is good for them too. In order to avoid rejection, the students might try something new to prove themselves to their group. They may ask themselves if what they have done will be part of who they want to be later on.

Ambivalence is not necessarily a problem; it can be useful for students to choose what they think will be useful for their lives. Additionally, they are finding out how to classify their learning experiences, knowledge, thoughts, and so on. This is a meaningful process that enriches students' decisions about their *self-images*. As mentioned before, the *self* is constantly changing, and we create ourselves in pieces based on our lived experiences. At times, these experiences can lead to positive or negative outcomes, which can reinforce our *self-image*. In the examples that follow

from our students' life stories, we could see the ambivalence that exists in the construction of the self.

For a young mind, whose initial endeavors at becoming an adult are under construction, it is difficult to define the parameters that will accompany his or her life for years to come. In this research study, we were able to see how difficult it is to be part of a group, whose ideas about their likes, dislikes, media, etc. are constantly changing. We observed how the students' opinions about their self were modified based on what the group thought about them. In this case, we noticed a duality (Erikson, 1968), in which the student does not know their *self.* This becomes confusing because the student is trying to balance who she or he wants to be with what others want him or her to be. The following story was titled "A Piece of Me 2". The student wrote about the way she felt when she talked to people, and they do not take her ideas seriously. The student (Student 1)narrated the following:

> *Sometimes I do not feel able to keep talking about anything. I know what I want to do and I do it but the… For instance in the lessons, I do not think I can give my opinion because people do not accept what I say. My partners do not respect what I think and I am just offensive and rude. Then I just regret about what happened and I accept what they tell me. But I still think I am right.* [sic] (A Piece of Me 2, April 23, 2019)

Based on the extract above, we could see how difficult it was for her to position herself without feeling guilty for what she had done. She acts according to what others expect of her. At the beginning, she stated that she was in a position of certainty because of her decisions. However, she immediately regretted her decision, and she feels guilty about her reaction. Afterward, she goes back to her initial position of defending her attitude and thoughts. Nevertheless, she finished her statement by referring to the other's ideas, positions, and thoughts. For these young people, reacting because of the other, acting according to somebody else, agreeing to the other's conceptions, and changing to please the other are daily actions made unconsciously. The idea of adjusting to fit into a group is preferred.

In the focus group interview, we asked the participants if it was better to like themselves or to like others. With hesitation, Student 1 answered:

> (...) yes, well, we are always afraid of rejection. That is, when we let, I mean, when we do something, there is always fear to be rejected, ... *and one does not express the person one is oneself, but rather one is always under a shadow or something else and one lives insecure. That is the way it is everywhere, at home with the parents or in the neighborhood or here at school.* [sic] (Focus group interview, May 23, 2019, Minute 6:31 – 6:49)

We define this situation as individuals being inhibited to be themselves. They are reliant on others for approval because their rejection is too powerful. We claim that their *self-image* remains undefined because it is not solely determined by their needs, capacities, thoughts, desires, ideas, feeling, etc. Rather, they are afraid that their "inner" self could be exposed and rejected. At times, they may feel confident in showing the possibilities and scope of their *self-image.* However, this is not done to its entirety because they want to take care of the image they portray, which might lead to a fake *self-image* constructed under the others' parameters. As we have seen from the participants, it is better to fit in simply because there are no inquires, prejudices, or awkward moments. As part of this ambivalence to try to be "someone", the students need to be aware of themselves by recognizing his/her position while bearing in mind the opinions that others have about them.

A fundamental step that a student needs to take is the idea of recognizing him/herself as a member of a community and as someone who can contribute to it. That personal recognition of the self is linked to the acknowledgement we receive from others. You position yourself based on the interactions we have with others. Even though the students' *self-image* may be undefined and ambivalent, certain roles become essential in the construction of the *self.*

Bailey (2003) mentioned the terms "work products" to refer to the measurable concrete products that create a *self-image.* He claimed that throughout our lives, we produce certain goals that materialize, and people recognize us based on these goals. It is also worth mentioning that these

achievements position us in interaction with others and prevail over time, so that the image we create of ourselves today will turn into our future *self-image.*

Examples of work products include sports records, physical appearance, material objects, abstract achievements, and others. The reason for expanding on this concept here is that this is part of becoming confident and creating a positive *self-image.* When we achieve something (abstract – material), we are co-constructing our image with the other. When these achievements are repetitive and consecutive, our *self-image* becomes associated with a certain type of person. That is to say people will categorize us into a group with determined characteristics. Consequently, we act and work according to the characteristics we believe we have and what others expect from us.

In one of the narratives, we noticed that some of the students did not want to share their stories with their peers. They thought they would be criticized for bring themselves. The following narrative is an example of the previous.

> *I remember once I wrote about my qualities in one of our classes and I noticed laughs/mockeries from my partners. I felt terribly bad because they were laughing at me and then, I promised myself I was never going to show who I am to my partners. My written pieces are private. My partners laugh if I write about my dreams because they know I am not rich and I live in this small town.* [sic] (Critical Moments N° 1, March 14, 2019)

The excerpt above is important because students want to be acknowledged by others despite being laughed at or mocked. They expressed a desire for self-recognition in their papers, even if it means changing their *self-image* from what their peers are used to. Self-recognition plays an important role on behalf of *self-image* due to the difficult moments they face when trying to be themselves. Deep down, they have constructed and co-constructed a *self-image,* which has been permeated for years. Now, it is important for them to demonstrate their main roles by recognizing themselves as people who are part of the community.

In the focus group interview, we realized that they were looking for acceptance, approval, and recognition from their peers. We asked them about authenticity in writing about themselves and in expressing their voice. Student 4 said:

> *(...) well, that depends because you can have confidence and you can be whoever you are with people, but you cannot go and tell how you feel and who you are in front of others because they, or the vast majority will, they will not understand how one feels and they are going to laugh at you instead, like they make fun of you. So, you do not want that rejection. But, well, you are going to be whoever you are, but do not tell how you feel to others. Also, many people say that because we are in Samacá, what we are going to do is to become farmers or workers in the mines and that is it*. [sic] (Focus group interview, May 23, 2019, Minute 12:38 – 13:02)

Student 4 recognized himself as part of this group, as well as a boy who is unable to express his feelings freely. We would say that he knows who he is, but he cannot show his complete self without being rejected by others. He displayed self-confidence in speaking about himself, but he also knows that it is impossible to express this *self* as his image is being co-constructed with the other. Being recognized is important, but it should be more important to be accepted for being different. This includes not just our different ways of thinking or appearance, but also who we are as humans. Being different is a human condition, and it is part of who we are.

Along the same lines of self-recognition, Student 5 narrated a critical moment in his life. He said it was a positive moment for him.

> *Once I remember my parents came to the school for my grades. It was the first time they came because they were always busy at home and I did not know what to expect. Then, I was congratulated by my parents I was very happy and surprised by my achievements. I managed to be the best among my classmates. Thanks to this, they considered me a good student and they gave me more time at home to do homework assignments. This was wonderful because I could concentrate on doing my chores at school*. [sic] (Critical Moments N^{o} 1, March 21, 2019)

Here, the student recognized that he had been a good student based on his academic performance. Because of his achievements, his parents congratulated him. This supported the construction of his *self-image* in a positive way. It is worth noting that he started his *self-image* construction process consciously by recognizing his abilities and putting them into practice to prove himself capable. Afterwards, he mentioned the importance of being recognized by someone else, especially as part of his context. Consequently, he was given more time to focus on his studies at home.

One of our roles as community members is to have confidence in ourselves and our contributions. We begin our *self-image* construction by recognizing our capabilities, achievements, successes, and even failures. However, we must also recognize the other and his capabilities, as it is what makes us human. In doing so, we co-construct each other's images and life experiences. Because of this, we can say that *self-image* is socially constructed.

At the beginning of this study, we did not know what to expect from the participants because their reactions were different. When they started writing their life stories, their *self-image* had more to do with the type of person they thought they were or wanted others to believe they were (Nair, 2016). However, we found that the educational system, home values, and attitudes are also a vital part of self-image construction (Simel, 2013).

As it is seen in the analysis, the students mentioned the importance the other has in relation to them. They tried to please each other through socialization and acceptance of the other. Because they wanted to be accepted by the other, they often held back their voice. Without a doubt, the participants sought approval from their peers in the classroom when constructing their self-image.

In the earlier stages of this study, we were unsure about our students' inner thoughts as they wrote their life stories. However, we started to understand that they were worried about what their classmates would think about them. Nair (2016, p. 75) stated that "people respond to you either positively or negatively according to how confident you are. Your confidence in relationships depends on the image you have of yourself".

That is to say if they felt that sense of approval from the other, they felt confident writing about themselves and how they wanted to portray their self- image. Certainly, they were conditioned to tell the other what they wanted to hear.

During the process of *self-image* construction, many actors will intervene. For example, we could see that the construction of *self-image* was not entirely dependent on the student's voice and point of view; rather, it was accompanied by reactions and opinions. It was clear to see the importance that community members have when students are trying to build their idea of a *self- image* for themselves and the other. The reason for this is because they want to co-construct their ideas with others and be part of the community. Then, this would be an incomplete process without the participation of members within the community.

In this study, we could identify the community as an important component for participants' self-image construction. The narrators and their stories extended way beyond the concept we had about the role community plays in adolescence. However, we present in this study the stories as they were told. This implies that we were not able to capture the experiences that other members of the community had lived with the narrators.

Each person helps the individual create his or her inner self and decide what to keep or reject for the rest of their lives. In other words, everyone contributes to shape an image that is under construction. This is an automatic process based on making quick decisions on what to internalize and use as part of the construction. Bearing in mind what has been previously mentioned, we have seen that parents, partners/friends, and the school play a role in constructing students' *self-images*.

The role of the parents. As we mentioned before in the literature review, parents provide their children with a solid basis for their lives, especially when constructing their *self-image* (SOAR, 2003; Yahaya & Ramli, 2009; Lebedina-Manzoni & Lotar, 2010). *Parental nurture, parents' attitudes*, and *life values* were main constructs present in the students' life stories. In a way, the students' life stories reflected that the students are a result of

their parents' decisions and lifestyles. We have named this finding *The role of the parents* because it summarizes the importance adolescents give to their parents' voices. Although it may seem that parents are not crucial in the construction of self-image for the participants, we could see that the values and experiences learnt at home were highlighted in their texts.

In the first life story, the students had to write a response to the question: Who am I? Student 2 wrote about the importance of her parents in the construction of who she thought she was. Through her writing, it was clear that her parents played a crucial role in her life, and they supported her through hard times, such as in her terminal medical condition. Like Student 2, the other participants reflected about who they were at home. In the case of Student 2, she was very shy, humble, and committed to her class. She chose specific words to talk about her parents, which helped us understand what her parents meant to her.

Student 2 also mentioned the values that her parents instilled in her, which have made her who she is today. She stated the things her family members have done for her and the implications these have had on her life. She wrote that she could count on her family in case anything happened. We also noticed that the construction of her *individual* self was based on the situations she faced at home. Student 2's answer to the question "Who am I?" is stated below:

> *I want to thank my parents for all that they have given to me. Last year it was very difficult for me and my whole family but they have always supported me. Now I know I need to do the same for them and I need to support them. It does not matter what it takes but I have to start working and helping them back.* [sic] (An Initial Piece of Me, March 14, 2019)

Parents play a key role because they have exposed their children to certain lifestyles and groups of people that have shaped their voice. Depending on their social circumstances, they have accumulated a variety of what we would call "knowledges", which function according to the level of exposure and contexts where they have been acquired. To answer the same question, "Who am I?", Student 4 responded the following:

> *My life is basically based on studying, working, helping in what my parents need. I would like to have more money to help them more. I think I need to start making an income to support them and have what we need.* [sic] (An Initial Piece of Me, March 14, 2019)

Along the same lines, we could see that Student 4 was grateful for what his parents have given him, and that is why he wanted to reciprocate his parents' efforts. In addition to constructing the self in the classroom with their peers, it was evident that lived experiences in diverse contexts, in this case at home, hold a special place in students' lives. What we could interpret in this study relates to the importance participants gave to the social contexts. Therefore, being with the other and share in such social spaces, is perhaps the only way to understand the power relationships and realities within their cultural structures.

The role of friends/partners. Interaction with parents have an implication on self-image construction, as well as the student's interaction with other members of his or her school community. It is fundamental to understand how students participate in each other's self-image construction processes, especially because students have a history with each other and spend most of their day together. Nair (2016) stated that *self-image* has to do with what you believe others think of you, how much you like yourself, if you think others like you, and the status you feel you may have in your environment. That is the main reason why we have decided to name this subcategory *The role of partners/friends* because we realized that classmates and friends also have implications on a person's self-image.

In his written life story, Student 1 stated the following:

> *I like to have friends, I love socializing with people I know. I know what my friends like and I write about what they want from me. I need their friendship because it gives me their confidence*. [sic] (Critical Moment, March 14, 2019)

We saw that the students tried to please their peers by writing what they thought the other would like to see or read in their papers. In this particular case, Student 1 tried to look for consent by socializing with the other. In being accepted, she felt she belonged to the group of students in

the classroom. Consequently, her written work became more important and satisfying. It is clear the enormous influence the other's opinion has on constructing *self-image*. There is a co-construction of a personal set of beliefs and behaviors that are present during their educational lives. In this group, students know each other from elementary school and have worked together over the years. The impact that their reactions, comments, and opinions have on each other became visible when we asked them to describe who they thought they were.

In the focus group interview, we asked the students about wanting to please the other while writing their life stories. We sought to understand why they needed approval from the others in terms of what they thought about themselves. Student 4 responded the following:

> *At least, sometimes you feel insecure. At least me. So that is why I need approval or something from others to see how it feels. I do not write or say many things without feeling that my partners support me. If they do not support me, I pretend it to be like a joke.* [sic] (Focus group interview, May 23, 2019. Minute 3:14 – 3:23)

As seen in this excerpt, their self-image is constructed based on the other's opinion because there is a sense of belonging to a community. Thus, the role of friends and partners will determine who they think they are. Throughout this study we were able to see that these students felt confident when they exemplified who they thought their peers wanted to see. We noticed that the students were not aiming for uniqueness or self-determination; rather, they were constructing, and processing decisions based on the interactions with their peers. These interactions could influence what students choose is best for their lives. We would like to highlight that the students' need for approval could have a positive effect. Students are internalizing their learning process in interaction with others. Thus, they are active in their decision-making processes. Apart from family and friends, the school is another crucial factor in *self-image* construction.

The role of the school. Students will spend most of their time during the day and year at school, which is why it is a pivotal place for students' self-image construction. Students will have the opportunity to obtain academic, athletic, and social achievements, as well as establish close relationships

with others in their communities. They will also meet people from different cultural backgrounds. As mentioned before, the school is a place where the main aspects of being human are defined. In that order of ideas, and according to Yahaya and Ramli (2009), the teacher is an important element in this process because he/she is in charge of promoting the creation of a positive self-image, where the student can feel capable of developing his or her humanity. At school, there should be a sense of humanistic orientation because students are learning, changing, and improving on themselves every day.

When our students wrote about critical moments in their lives, Student 5 answered the following:

> I have participated in a spelling contest. This experience was unique. It happened when I was in fifth grade. *I feel very good because I was recognized by my teachers. Teachers thought I was intelligent. I even won a dictionary.* (Critical moments 1, May 21, 2019)

In this excerpt, we could see the importance the teacher had on this student's life in his earlier years. Adolescents' interactions with their teachers will influence the way they perceive themselves as having values. Oyserman (2015) argues that

> Values are internalized cognitive structures that guide choices by evoking a sense of basic principles of right and wrong (e.g., moral values), a sense of priorities (e.g., personal achievements vs group good), and create a willingness to make meaning and see patterns (e.g., trust vs distrust). (p. 1)

Values are supposed to affect behaviors and actions. This implies that if teachers stimulate certain values, these will influence students' behaviors and actions. Giving students positive feedback, such as a congratulatory statement, is a powerful gift that can make a student feel appreciated. At the same time, the student's positive *self-image* is constructed and reinforced.

THE PHOTO ALBUM WE END UP WITH IN THIS VOYAGE

Throughout this study, we noticed the difference between teachers, who try to comply with school regulations, and teacher-researchers, who are reflecting and opening the door to new spaces. We understood the importance of being heard vis-à-vis academia, as well as our reflections about our place in society.

As teachers, we should stop for a moment and reflect on the actions that happen in our classrooms. For instance, this study revealed the importance our community members have on our students' *self-image* construction. Parents stimulate their children with certain attitudes and values, and the students reflect these ideas. At school, it is clear that new perspectives become part of *self- image* construction, and what could be a reinforcement one day can change the next.

We can suggest teachers in schools to promote students' collaboratively group work so they have more chances to interact with each other. Sometimes, we teachers are immersed in helping our student to achieve goals and school standards as individuals, but we often forget that group work could generate great opportunities for adolescents to work cooperatively. This could generate dynamics in which the students shape and reshape their self-image construction.

Also, any type of activity among students and parents can help to strengthen their bonds. Parents are a great source of positive feedback and encouragement for their children. They are those who always help their children when they attend pre-school and elementary school years. And this support must continue throughout high school, too. As teachers, we should carry out more school activities in which parents feel participants of their children education.

Decision making, problem solving, struggles, and other issues are factors in the construction and reshaping of beliefs. Friends and partners also become an essential part in the students' lives as long as they share commonalities that lead down a similar path. All these aspects of *self-image* converge in one place: the school. Indeed, schools help support and construct students' *self-image*, along with teachers and parents.

In this study, the students' life stories revealed how ambivalent the construction of a *self- image* can be because students are not alone in a community. They depend on others to widen their experiences. In addition to peers, we highlight that parents' involvement was crucial in giving their children values and daily experiences that strengthen their image. Students mixed old experiences learned at home with new ones lived inside the classroom. Likewise, partners and friends also play a fundamental role since they contribute to the adaptation, approval, or rejection of *self-image.* Being recognized is part of the process, and it means leaving behind personal preferences to please others. Therefore, *self-image* reflects socially constructed bonds. Finally, it is pertinent to mention that students need a comfortable (physical and emotional) place for positive *self-image* construction within the community. Teachers can have a huge impact on students' lives when they acknowledge their work along with treating students with respect. Recognition can lead to active leaders in our schools, while providing students with significant experiences that continue to build a solid foundation for their *self-image* and identities later on.

As *self-image* construction is constantly changing and is not innate, we cannot determine when this change will happen. Yet, it is necessary to understand the role students have in their communities. At times, students will demonstrate hesitation in expressing their roles. However, self-recognition of one's role is part of the functionality of the self. If students' lived experiences do not contribute to their *self-image*, then they will have a harder time determining who they are. Consequently, this might affect their image into adulthood.

Then, it is the teachers' and school's duty to supply meaningful environments where the self can be developed in an expressive way. We can cause a huge impact on our students' *self- image* when we decide

to open our classrooms and hearts to better teaching practices to allow students to create their own learning environments. In promoting this in our classrooms, we are considering our students as human beings instead of language machines.

The previous ideas align with a notion of pedagogy as a possibility to take care of the other (Van Manen, 1998). If teachers take care of students, they will probably understand what students are capable of learning and how they can achieve their goals. Guiding students to question, to challenge, to think and to understand their own responsibilities in terms of learning, allows students to feel safe, included, and successful. As a result, their self-esteem is positively impacted.

In pedagogical terms, the main implications for us and our colleagues were that we need to move on from a static point where the teacher is the only provider of knowledge. On the contrary, our students had ideas that enriched our classrooms and allowed us to see further than the classes we were developing. In fact, our students can help us co-construct topics and ideas in the classroom. With traditional teaching methods, the teacher is in a position of power and control over his or her students. Unfortunately, this also limits the amount of knowledge negotiation between teacher and students. In this study, we had a meaningful opportunity to co-construct new perceptions, while we unveiled what was behind our students' thoughts about their roles in life.

Another main implication arose from listening to our students. By doing so, we were co- constructing knowledge from different points of view, as opposed to one theory. By getting to know our students' *self-image*, we could approach our teaching practices from various angles and promote a student-centered teaching and learning process. In the long term, this is significant because knowledge is not a matter of vertical teaching models, but it is a constant construction of ideas that surround our lives. When teaching a foreign language, *self-image* identification plays an important role because we understand the personal perceptions of a foreign language according to the individual's needs.

In other words, and as stated by Ramos *et al.* (2018b), being aware of the role self-image plays in any classroom helps teachers move towards more student-centered approaches in which learning is constructed by pupils with experiences in their learning environment. In doing so, learning is based on students' contexts and needs. During the study, we realized the different ways our students approached the language in the class. If we fail to include and understand our students, classes may not be meaningful to them.

Freire and Macedo (1987) pointed out that an important aspect of literacy is the critical reflection of the relationship between language of an individual's reality representations and the world. In that sense, the adolescents' narratives revealed how they were able to express every inner and social aspect of their reality through the language. Likewise, the students were able to express their own voice despite the language barrier.

Narratives can be a meaningful source to promote writing as a social literacy practice. The implementation of narratives as a strategy help hear students' ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about their life experiences, while letting teachers know more about students' inner and social worlds. Using narratives in teaching and learning practices encourage students to the manifestation of their self as a unique person. At the same time, teachers can understand the worth and meaning of students' narratives, which address the construction and re-construction of reality and strengthen English language learning from a social dimension. Therefore, narratives explore, analyze, and interpret the perception and construction of an individual's self from their life experiences.

As asserted by Alcorn (2002), teaching has to change the conception of the human subject, for a distant one from the simplistic perspective adopted. Engaging in a relationship with someone's experience implies comprehending and apprehending the subjects' desires within their cultural backgrounds. We need to embark in a journey that allows students from rural areas and their voices to be echoed in the expression of who they are. This study was just a first step to provoke other scholars interested in rurality and what it really means to continue opening spaces for deep comprehensions.

In this sense, Cruz (2018) stated that stereotypes perpetuate the idea that rural students and people are academically less capable. Fraser (2000) pointed out that a change is needed so that rural inhabitants receive the recognition they deserve and, as stated by Cruz (2018), the same chances to develop their capabilities.

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Colección Investigación N.° 180

In this book, we looked at self-image from a humanistic perspective. We see it as a dynamic and complex process that compromises self-respect and self-confidence. The protagonists of this story come from a rural area. They were a group of eleventh graders from a high school in Samacá, one of the 123 towns in the state of Boyacá, Colombia. As narrators of the story, we wanted to explore, analyze, and interpret how these adolescents perceived their self-image through their life stories under a narrative inquiry method. By telling their narratives, the students could reconstruct and re-signify their reality, while showing us who they are in relation to other people and their contexts. Therefore, life stories offered us the possibility to explore students' inner and social worlds. This research study helped us increase our sensitivity to how the adolescents saw themselves as part of their rural contexts, as well as how this might affect their futures.

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