Reimagining: Using Image and PhotoVoice as Curriculum with ELL Adolescent Immigrants to Reimagine Personal Trajectories

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As a practitioner-researcher and ESL Teacher, the author of this study examined the literacy practices of her adolescent ELL students as they engaged together in a curricular unit using PhotoVoice. PhotoVoice is a community and participatory research method rooted in empowerment education, critical feminist theory, and documentary photography, and aims to enable people with little money, power, or status to communicate needed changes to policymakers. Students' interests in racial discrimination and national conversations about immigration reform led them to center their PhotoVoice project around two opposing questions: 'What feels safe?' and 'What feels unsafe?' Student work samples reveal powerful insights and empowering messages of self-identification, advocacy, and pride.

Keywords: ELL, PhotoVoice, literacy development, student-led learning, youth participatory action research (YPAR), empowerment education

Language is power and...those who suffer from injustice most are the least able to articulate their suffering...[T]he silent majority, if released into language, would not be content with a perpetuation of the conditions which have betrayed them. But this notion hangs on a special conception of what it means to be released into language: not simply learning the jargon of an elite, fitting unexceptionably into the status quo, but learning that language can be used as a means for changing reality.

-Adrienne Rich

Introduction

Photovoice is a community and participatory action research method developed by Wang and Burris (1994). Rooted in grassroots empowerment education, critical feminist theory, and

documentary photography, it aims to enable people with little money, power, or status to communicate needed changes to policymakers. Several examples of Photovoice projects can be found in fields outside of education, focusing on a range of social issues including homelessness, physical ailments, mental and psychological illness, and gender discrimination. The method has been used to guide teachers through professional development of authentic literacy engagement (Adams, Brooks, & Greene, 2014) and a handful of studies in the United States have demonstrated use of Photovoice with adolescents in out-of-school educational settings (Chio & Fandt, 2007; Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Wilson et al., 2007; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009). Similarly, an organization called The Viewfinder Project ("The Viewfinder Project," 2010) uses some parallel methods to PhotoVoice, and provides its curriculum to those who are interested in initiating a group project in their community. There is a significant gap in the research that examines adolescent, immigrant, English language learners' *in-school* literacy experiences with the use of Photovoice methods. As ethnographers of their community, students can use images as powerful, visual representations that help to elevate the significance of the social issues they see and experience.

Youth Participatory Action Research

The critical feminist framework offers a firm foundation for approaching youth participatory action research (YPAR) with historically marginalized youth. In YPAR projects, the Freirean concept of praxis – critical reflection and action – is a central component for students in studying their social contexts. A feminist approach to YPAR includes elements of critical pedagogy, but also draws unique attention to the voices of formally silenced or unheard women, the social and historical construction of gender roles, and dominant notions of sexuality and sexual bias.

Several research studies have contributed to understanding how a critical feminist lens can inform YPAR.

Educator Cathie Bell's (1996) project, *Gender Bias and the Middle School Experience*, examined gender issues within her school community. Students and teachers responded to surveys which indicated that gender bias was prevalent, but not easily discussed. In particular, several girls admitted to being sexually harassed at school, but did not feel they had the power or the right to report it. The school decided to implement a 'Girl Talk' class, a forum for girls to discuss the experience of being female. The same-sex group allowed the participating girls to develop trust with one another and in themselves. Ongoing examination of gender issues and prejudice led the girls to engage discussion about sexual harassment they had experienced personally, as well as instances they had witnessed, including issues of homosexuality and homophobia. The students decided to raise awareness by posting signs throughout the school protesting sexism, together with pictures and signs to demonstrate "what makes girls angry about the way the world views them" (p. 25). The thought-provoking displays encouraged teachers to respond more diligently to sexual slurs overheard in the hallways, and to re-examine their curriculum to provide more balanced and equitable materials. The participating girls reported less resistance to reporting sexual harassment, and some of the boys at the school initiated their own survey to examine sexual harassment attitudes.

Wilson et al. (2007) applied PhotoVoice with a group of early adolescents in an after-school program called YES!, Youth Empowerment Strategies. Students were given cameras and invited to take pictures of their world as an impetus for critically analyzing the images' meanings and social representations. After organizing their photos into categories of 'assets' and 'issues' in their community, written reflections accompanied each of the students' selected photographs

to describe their significance. The culminating social action projects featured the students' images and reflections about community issues. One project, entitled "Writing on the Walls" featured photographs of derogatory bathroom graffiti, an issue that provoked numerous fights at school. One photograph revealed the message, "_____ is the uglyes gir in the school!" Students raised concerns about (dis)respecting others, wrote a skit, "Fighting and Bathroom Wall Writing" to perform at school assemblies, and initiated a petition. In response, the school district painted over the graffiti and installed a new secure door.

David Schaafsma (1998) drew from the thinking of feminist researcher Patti Lather (1991) to frame a YPAR project with students in an inner-city, middle-school summer writing program. Students conducted oral history interviews with community members as inspiration for writing *critical fiction* (Mariani, 1991), which involves "the interrogation of unitary narratives, the naming of manifold identities, the exploration of multiple subjectivities, and the incorporation of ambivalence and ambiguity as elements of resistance" (p. 12). One student, for example, used the information she had gathered from interviewing community activist, Rose Bell (a woman who started a local volunteer service for unwed mothers), and interwove the factual aspects of Ms. Bell's life into a realistic-fictional storyline about a pregnant teenager. As another form of writing, students de-constructed and re-constructed stories using critical narratology (McLaren, 1993), a composition that "encourage[s] the oppressed to contest the stories that have been fabricated for them by 'outsiders' and to construct counterstories that give shape and direction to the practice of hope and the struggle for an emancipatory politics of everyday life" (p. 218). From a critical feminist perspective, the students' stories, grounded in the oft-associated method of oral history, served as tools for community connections, personal empowerment and social activism.

Context of the Study

The focus of this study was a class of middle-school ESL students, for whom I was the teacher. The 19 students enrolled were seventh and eighth grade adolescents, all of whom were either first or second generation immigrants with intermediate-level English language proficiency, as determined by their scores on the state-required LAS-Links English language proficiency assessment and teacher recommendations. Of the 19 students in the class, 15 students claimed Mexico as their home country; four students claimed Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, Spain, and Senegal, respectively, as their home countries. Three of the students were second-generation immigrants who were born in the United States; 16 of the students were first-generation immigrants with memories of moving to the United States.

There were several transitory moves throughout the school year; two students moved to other school districts, four students joined the class mid-year due to scheduling changes, and two students were mandated by the school to enroll in Math remediation in lieu of ESL due to low test scores. Therefore, while all 19 students contributed and participated in the coursework, the study analysis will focus on the 11 students who were enrolled for the entire academic year.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the complexities of self I encountered as a teacher-researcher through this study. As James McKernan (1996, p. 3) notes, "…teaching is not one activity and inquiring into it another." My role in this work was and is explicitly multi-faceted. I described myself to students as a teacher-researcher who is interested in the ways that immigrant English language learners develop their language skills. As the classroom teacher, I was keenly aware that my role in relation to students carried significant power, and therefore, as a teacher-researcher, I attempted to balance that authority with transparency in my instruction and assessment. Having worked in the school setting as the ESL Teacher for eight years, I had

already established relationships and routines with several of the students and their families. Trusting teacher-student relationships were built through the collaborative instructional design of the course, which fostered a sense of community, collegiality and acknowledgement of the intrinsic additive value of all classroom participants.

Curricular Design and Methods

As a teacher-researcher, I invited students from my ESL Reading class to use images as an entry into critical dialogue and language development. From the start of the unit, I kept a regular practitioner-researcher journal to document my observations, reflections, and questions related to my students and the curricular unit. The initial assignment was a literacy invitation called, "A Picture Speaks?" Students were asked to select an image that held significance for them – either a photograph, magazine picture, or drawing. Each student then placed their selected image on their desktop alongside a blank piece of paper. In a gallery-walk activity, each student rotated around to examine their classmates' chosen images, and then write questions about the images. For example, a photograph of a horse incited questions such as, "Where did you see this horse?", "Did you ride the hors? [sic]", and "Why is the horse important to you?" These questions, then, served as prompts for writing the story of the image.

More concretely, students were instructed to write what happened before, during, and/or after the moment depicted in the image. Students wrote, revised, and shared the stories of their images. Though it was not a requirement of the assignment, all the students chose to write narratives about themselves and their families. As an example, the picture of the horse inspired the student to tell the story of how much he misses his mother, who lives in the Dominican Republic; they had been separated from one another for over a year, but his mother promised that he could ride this horse the next time he came back to the D.R. This initial assignment served as

an introduction to dialogue about personally-relevant issues, using student-selected images and stories, while building on their reading and writing development through use of authentic prompts generated by their peers.

Next, I showed students examples of image-based projects in which other students had participated. Examples included samples of Wendy Ewald's (2006) work, and work from The Viewfinder Project ("The Viewfinder Project," 2010) in which two groups of students - one from the state of Indiana in the United States and one from Cape Town, South Africa - took pictures around the dichotomist theme "What is beautiful? What is ugly?". It is this latter project that captured my students' attention and acted as a catalyst for brainstorming a theme for our class' focus of image-selection.

I facilitated student discussions about issues of concern to them; a frequent and recurring topic was immigration reform. Students expressed high emotionality over the images they saw in newspapers and magazines, on billboards and social media. In April 2010, then Governor of Arizona, Jan Brewer, signed a strict law which made "the failure to carry immigration documents a crime and [gave] the police broad power to detain anyone suspected of being in the country illegally" (Archibold, 2010). The headline flooded news outlets that year, inviting a sense of fear and uncertainty in my students. Critics interpreted the law to be an open invitation for discrimination against Latinos and Hispanics, regardless of their citizenship status, so many students wondered, "Could my family and I be deported?" "What if we own papers, but don't have them with us if we get asked?"

Guided by student interest, I suggested we read the personal narratives of some of my former students who authored Different Worlds: Stories of Immigrant Youth by Immigrant Youth (Greene, 2009). Concurrently, I encouraged students to look for other forms of related

literature to read and share with the class. The term "literature" was explicitly defined for students as not only traditional texts, but also books that their younger siblings have at home, pop culture magazines or websites, handwritten notes or email communications, music lyrics, advertisements, television shows, or posts found on social networking sites. The goal was to engage readings from a critical and self-reflective stance, and to question the communicative forms and their potential implications.

Students brought in newspaper articles they had read outside of school, but often didn't fully understand; they relayed anecdotes of interactions they'd witnessed in their home communities; they shared Facebook posts and messages whose racial content evoked an emotional response. Through guided discussion of these readings, the students decided upon the theme, "What feels safe? What feels unsafe?" to frame their image selections.

Each student narrowed his/her selection down to two images. Next, they wrote a title and a paragraph describing what they saw in each image, both physically and interpretatively. Finally, they uploaded their paragraphs into the Wordle applet (Feinberg, 2013) to visually represent the words that emerged most frequently in their writing. Of note, I encouraged students to first write the thoughts in their heads and hearts, without worrying about grammar or spelling. I was struck, then, by the number of students who found this allowance to be stifling to their writing process simply because they wanted their work to be read and taken seriously. Mini-lessons and editing sessions were woven into the unit to improve their writing along the way, which dually helped their language development as well as ease students' affective concerns.

A sampling of students' work from different stages throughout the unit follows. Student writing will be presented as written by the students without editing and will be distinguished by the use of italics.

"Illegal Alien" (What feels unsafe?)

This picture make me feel unsafe and angry. It shows a white man with a gun standing in front of a sign that says, ILLEGAL ALIENS HERE. The arrow that points away from the man under the words on the sign. The man has his arms cross on his estomach. I don't understand why some people think is okay to call us criminals just because we don't have papers. We are not criminals. My parents brought me and my sisters here so we could get a better life and a good education. I know is important to have papers to live here, but I cannot get papers to live here, so is not fair.

“Illegal Invaders” (What feels unsafe?)

I choose this picture because it relates whit my family and others friends. I thing that there are so not fair at all. We should have right to be here and have a job and education. We should not be have to go theough this. other people went to study and have a go job like my cuz wants to go to college but no cuz dose not have papers . if you have paper you should do good in school and get in good education. I fell when they keep on taking about this immigrant thing it is like if we was the criminal. We are not no criminal and plus the job are for everyone we do not come and steel jobs at all.

“Not Criminals” (What feels safe?)

This photo shows something that feel safe to me. I choose it because it has other Mexicans in it standing together to show support for each other. I see two signs that say Equal Rights for Everyone and We Are not Criminals. These signs show the messages that we deserve to be treat with respect and have human rights and that it is not a criminal to want a better life for your families.

My mom works very hard so that I can go to a better school than in Mexico. I know she misses mi abuela and mis tias in Mexico and so I know that it is my honor to go to school in the USA and to work hard to make her proud. I feel sad and mad when people here call us criminals when we are working hard and have our papers. I don't want for the polices to ask us for our papers like in Arizona just because we are Mexcian and because we speak Spanish. To me, that is like treating us like criminals and it is not criminal to be Mexican.

"Take Action in Justice!" (What feels safe?)

I'm part of an illegal immigrant family; it hurts my feelings to see how congress tries to get illegal immigrants out of the United States and also because I have my own doctor and my other two siblings don't they don't even have a medical card. When they feel sick my mom is the doctor at that time because we can't take my sibling to the hospital because my mom doesn't have enough money to pay a hospital bill. She don't have a lot of money because she don't get pay a lot, but she does works hard but since she don't got paper she cant get paid enough. The new law that congress are trying to pass in Indiana doesn't makes me happy at all.

Indiana SB590, how I feel about this, for me their very recess to be putting a low was polices officers asking people if there legal to be in the U.S. some will ask people just because they have a different skin color. Didn't Martin Luther King said "people from any rise color could be together," why don't just stop the recesses words that many people say. Why the congress is trying to pass the law of the SB590 if there economy is going to low down here are some reasons why. There won't be hard worker just as there is. There would also not be people that will work in carwash or doing gardens. But illegal immigrants have to protest for the bill of the SB590 to not pass. Do you think it's safe to be protesting for the rights of an illegal family?

Well, it's not safe because there are a lot of people and those people take there children and other little kids. Why does it have to be only Latinos that have to protest? Also because congress has to see that illegal people come there to have a better life but they don't come to take the jobs from legal people. They just take the jobs that legal people don't take. For

example my mom workds in a hotel (cleaning rooms) and there more illegal people working in there. As many people know, many illegal immigrants will take that job. Why illegal immigrants work harder and get pay less and legal people works less and get pay more. In my opinion that not fair cause they always what there managers says and legal people don't.

Illegal people cross the border and its unsafe, they all know its dangers but there forts to cross the border because they want a better life, for there childrens. They don't want there children are to drop out of school just like they did or work in a early age. Everybody knows the border is huge but they have to that. Other reasons why its dangers to cross the border is because there's dangers animals (snakes). May get out of water. And food they also have to sleep in the deserter. Imagine you sleeping there. Would you get seared? I would of. Since all my family had to pass through this I think they got used to it.

Don't let this happen any more. Be respectful and please stop the recess. HELP illegal immigrants buy calling the congress and tell him that it's ok to have illegal immigrants in Indianapolis. SAY NO TO THE SB590.

Each student shared their selected images and edited writing with the rest of the class. Then, the class engaged in an Affinity Mapping (Peterson-Veatch, 2006) exercise, wherein students organized the images into similar groups. While a wide array of images were selected throughout the process, when it was time to choose two images to write about – two images that,

respectively, represented each one of our research questions, “What feels safe?” and “What feels unsafe?” – most students wrote about immigration and immigration reform.

Results

Two emergent themes from the students’ collection of images and writing revealed the following categories: “representations of inducing fear” and “representations of empowerment”.

Image as Representation of Fear

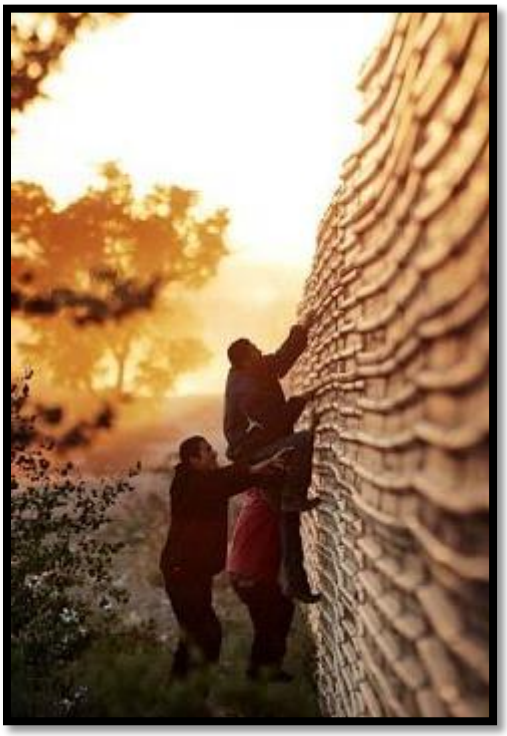

Image as Representation of Empowerment

Parallel to improvements in students' writing, I noticed, too, that that the tone of class conversations evolved throughout the unit. From entries reflected in my practitioner journal, I could see that the start-of-unit discussions revealed students' anger, frustration, sadness, and fear over the uncertainty of their futures. As students and I studied the nationwide discussions on immigration reform, we were exposed to a wider variety of intellectual perspectives than mere, media-dominated images provided. Over time, students expressed maturity in understanding the need for rules, even if they did not agree with the way they were implemented or introduced. One student reflected, "Okay, I get that there are some bad people who are coming here and they do bad things like sell drugs and stuff. I get it… but, you know, that ain't me." Students made rich connections between their personal, individual circumstances and national news and politics. They expressed thoughtfulness in seeing how words could be used to hurt and oppress, but also to advocate and empower.

Discussion

Freire and Macado (1987) offer the idea that "reading the word" involves "reading the world", critically examining the space we inhabit and using that knowledge to better understand and act in world. PhotoVoice, used as a curricular method with adolescent immigrant students, offered opportunities for language development, positive identity development, and agency building. Students who had otherwise been described as struggling readers and writers, as determined by standardized testing, demonstrated deep interest in reading and writing, a desire to think critically about current events, and a conviction to write with persuasive purpose. These outcomes are important to students' English language development, which extends far beyond grammar and conventions; it is intricately intertwined with their overall identity development as critical consumers of media, proud bicultural/biliterate contributors to society, and as an

empowered collective of citizens learning to advocate for social justice. Students' interests in the contestations of their socio-political world served as anchors and incentives for their commitments to read and write in English. In the process of validating their interests in the form of classroom-sanctioned curriculum, they came to express a sophisticated sense of self-validation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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