

## ***Que luchan por su intereses (To fight for your interests): Using Photovoice to Engage and Empower Newcomer Immigrant Students and Parents***

**Kevin Roxas (University of Wyoming, USA)**

**Kent Becker (University of Wyoming, USA)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past decade, Poudre School District (PSD), a Preschool-Twelfth grade (PK-12) school district of study in Northern Colorado, has seen consistent growth in the enrollment of immigrant and English language learner students. At the time of the study for this paper, central administrative leadership reported that schools in the district served approximately 358 immigrant students and that 71 different languages were spoken by these students. According to a recent district report, almost every school in the district has immigrant students enrolled. Despite this growing enrollment of immigrant students, very little data currently exists on the academic and cultural backgrounds of immigrant students and the families themselves, particularly regarding their resettlement into PSD and their academic, social, and linguistic needs. The authors of this paper began a research project to gather data to understand the backgrounds of these newcomer immigrant students and their families and, in so doing, began to address another gap in the field of multicultural education.

Within the field of multicultural education, many researchers have focused on the cultural discontinuity of White teachers in diverse classrooms (Howard, 2006; Landsman & Lewis, 2011). Although the demographics of students are shifting in public school classrooms in the U.S., their teachers remain largely White (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004) which creates a cultural gap between teachers and their students. The increasing enrollment of immigrant students throughout the PSD provides an illustrative case study of the important and pressing need by teachers, counselors, administrators, and support staff in all schools located throughout the United States to gain a better understanding of the backgrounds, experiences, and cultures of students and families with immigrant backgrounds.

This article reports on findings from a year-long research project using the Photovoice method (Gagne, Bowers, Russinova, Bloch, & McNamara, 2010; Guerrero, A., & Tinkler, 2010) conducted during the 2012-2013 academic school year in the Poudre School District. The findings in the article point to the important critical counter-narratives immigrant parents present to the larger school community when given the opportunity to have their voices and perspectives heard. The overall project and paper provides teachers, counselors, administrators and support staff in schools and school districts throughout the U.S. with demographics similar to PSD with important information and insight into the hopes and aspirations of immigrant parents, children, and other members of their families.

## **IMMIGRANT PARENTS AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS**

Latino parents often report feeling marginalized in schools due to race, class, and cultural differences. Teachers often do not treat them as partners in the education of their children and view parents from a deficit-oriented perspective of not caring about the educational achievement and success of their own children (Ramirez, 2003; Valencia & Black, 2002).

Despite the existence of this negative orientation, educational research indicates a very different story. Indeed, research studies have uncovered the desire for parents to be more involved in the education of their children and their hopes to be partners with teachers and other educators in the school experiences of their children (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Auerbach, 2007). Although Latino parents may sometimes not be visibly participating at school according to taken-for-granted school norms employed by their teacher, they are still participating at home in the education of their children by helping with homework, finding resources in the community, speaking with their children about the importance of education or, if they do not actually know the content of the homework, just being present with their child during homework time at home.

Indeed, Latinos place great emphasis on the academic success of their children and see the importance of education in their child's future (LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) and hence, it is imperative for educators to work to redefine parental involvement, to change the master narrative and to begin to listen to the critical counter-narratives Latino parents bring to the schools that their children attend (Gaetano, 2007; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994).

## **CRITICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES**

The exploration and application of critical counter-narratives is one way for teachers and other educators to begin to work against the negative stereotypes of Latino parents not caring about the education of their own children. Based upon the work of critical race theorists, researchers and other community-based educators actively work with people who have been marginalized in schools and other community settings to uncover their own critical counter-narratives. Within research projects and community based-action research, spaces are created within the project or within data collection that are grounded in the experiences and the indigenous and local knowledges of people of color. These stories then work to challenge taken-for-granted stereotypes that exist in society and provide frames of reference upon which educators can begin to re-think school practices and institutions that do not always provide equal access and opportunity for academic success (Stanley, 2007; Yosso, 2005).

In the case of Latino immigrant parental involvement, these counter-narratives serve to challenge dominant perspectives of deficit-based parental approaches and instead advance alternative strengths-based perspectives on parental involvement in schools. One way to examine this alternative perspective involvement would be through the concept of *educacion* in which Mexican/Mexican American families go beyond the need for students to learn academic concepts and ideas in school in order to do well on a test or to get good grades, which are of course important goals. However, besides the focus by these parents on putting forth one's best effort and achieving academic success in schools, what is also and maybe

equally important in an *educacion* is to personally develop good morals, have respect for others, and to be a “persona de bien” or a good person (Auerbach, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999; Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992; Yosso, 2006).

### **IMMIGRANT PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES**

As educators began to re-examine and re-imagine what it means for immigrant parents to be involved in public schools, the use of critical counter-narratives is one way for researchers to build a foundation upon which to move this work forward. If we seek to re-think the ways in which immigrant parents can be involved, we need to consider the ways they are already involved in the education of their children and the different ways this parental involvement manifests itself from different cultural perspectives. For example, although some parents may not be as involved in the organization of the parent-teacher association fundraiser at the school because of previous work commitments, these same parents are often staying up late with their children to help them with their homework, even though they may not know all of the academic content themselves or are learning English in a parallel process with their own children. Indeed, in this paper, we suggest that parents from immigrant backgrounds bring their own wealth of experience, funds of knowledge, and dedication to schools and other educational settings that is often not acknowledged by teachers and formal institutions such as public schools (Ceballos, 2004; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992). Through the use of the Photovoice Method, we hope to provide additional ways to uncover and unearth the different knowledges and strengths Latino immigrant parents bring to public schools and the critical and insightful counter-narratives they present to educators in public schools today (Auerbach, 2007; Villenas & Dehle, 1999).

### **PHOTOGRAPHY AND NARRATIVE AS EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS**

Photovoice is an educational project that allows its participants to tell their own stories through photo exhibitions, public presentations, and school displays. Originally used within the field of public health to provide opportunities for marginalized populations to express themselves (Wang, 1999), Photovoice has also been used to help empower members of the homeless community, youth in after-school organizations, and pregnant and parenting teens (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Wang, Cash, & Power, 2000). The method is used to allow participants to represent their point of view and everyday lived realities. Participants are asked to discuss the images they have chosen and create public presentations with text that explains the images. Photovoice allows members of marginalized communities to share their experiences with others and empowers them to become positive change agents within their communities.

### **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

The data for this research project was collected at three schools in the Poudre School District in Fort Collins, Colorado during the 2012-2013 school year. Fort Collins is located about an hour north of the Denver metropolitan area in the Mountain West region of the U.S. and is the fourth most populous city in Colorado. In the last decade, Fort Collins has experienced rapid

population growth because of its close proximity to Denver, the rapid growth of technology firms located in the city, and the continued growth of Colorado State University, the state's second largest public university.

The Poudre School District (PSD) has also seen consistent growth over the last decade in terms of demographic shifts and the enrollment of immigrant and English language learner students. Currently students are self-identified as 74% White, 18% Hispanic/Latino, 3% Asian, 1.5% Black/African-American, and 3% Other. 28% of the student population in the district participates in the Free/Reduced Lunch Program while 7.5% of the students participate in the English Language Learners Program. There are approximately 358 immigrant students enrolled in its schools who speak 71 different languages. According to a recent district report, every school in the district has immigrant students enrolled. Schools located in the central and south eastern part of Fort Collins enroll the highest numbers of immigrant students due to their close proximity to Colorado State University and to technology corporations respectively.

### **DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT AND WORK WITH SPANISH-SPEAKING IMMIGRANT PARENTS**

The year-long project was created to provide teachers, counselors, administrators and support staff in PSD schools with information about immigrant students and their families enrolled within the district. This information was gathered through photographs, narratives, interviews and community engagement with immigrant students and their families through a collaborative Photovoice project. The data collection process sought to both empower and engage immigrant students and families in the PSD through culturally responsive methods that ask students and families to share their own stories and backgrounds of their move to the PSD.

This paper provides findings from working with Spanish-speaking parents who had children enrolled in schools throughout the district, one of five groups of participants in the Photovoice project. The research team created and conducted workshop sessions with Spanish-speaking immigrant parents to better understand the experiences of newcomer immigrant families within the Poudre School District and the aspirational hopes of parents and other caregivers for their children. Parents were asked to express themselves through photographs they took of themselves and of images and places in their home communities. Parent participants were also asked about the challenges and opportunities they faced as parents in the school district.

All parents attended five two-hour sessions in which they analyzed visual images, discussed principles of photography and design, took their own photographs of important images within their own lives, and began to write personal text to accompany their photographs. During these weekly meetings, project facilitators sought to create a welcoming environment that allowed Spanish-speaking immigrant parents the opportunity to share about their experiences openly, talk with one another about their experiences in school, and create a common vision of what they hoped schools could provide for their children and what they hoped they, as parents, could provide for schools. For example, parent participants were asked to take photographs at home and at their children's school to document their lives in and out of school, and their hopes for their children's educational futures. Parents took these photographs during the week and then brought them to weekly meetings

where the photographs were displayed via projected image and parent participants took turns discussing the visual imagery and personal meaning behind each shared image.

Facilitators of the project asked parents to focus their photography and their presentations around themes related to the parents' experiences in school and their home cultures. These themes attempted:

- To understand the journey of immigrant families to Poudre School District
- To understand home cultures, both in their native country and in Fort Collins, of immigrant parents and their children
- To understand what immigrant parents think their roles are in and out of school
- To understand what immigrant students think their roles are in and out of school
- To understand what immigrant parents think the roles of children's teachers and school personnel are
- To understand what immigrant students think the roles of their teachers and school personnel are
- To understand how immigrant parents and students think school has helped them
- To understand what immigrant parents and students wish school could further assist them with
- To understand how immigrant parents and students think school prepares their child(ren) for career or post-secondary opportunities

Parents were interviewed by the facilitators about the photographs they've taken, their presentations, and their experiences with the project.

Once parent participants felt comfortable taking photographs and writing about their personal experiences and stories, workshop facilitators asked parents to create and design their own photovoice posters. Parent participants were given a template with a basic design with spaces for photographs and text. The original plan for the project was for the parent participants to create their photovoice poster directly on a computer. However, due to time constraints, facilitators asked participants to create their posters on a blank sheet of poster paper.

All parents spoke English as a second language. To allow parents to write in a language that they were most comfortable with, facilitators gave parents the choice of what language to write in for the poster. All parent participants chose their first language of Spanish. Parents wrote all text in Spanish and indicated which photographs they wanted included in their posters. Once the drafts of the posters were completed, project facilitators and staff within the district then translated all the text in Spanish into English. Text in the final posters for parent participants was written in both Spanish and English.

One major concern for project facilitators was the translations of text written by parents from Spanish to English. Project facilitators double-checked these translations by sharing posters in both Spanish and English with project participants to correct any incorrect translations. Facilitators then revised the posters one additional time to make sure to capture the spirit and intent that participants shared with them during the member-check. After all revisions were made, facilitators

interviewed the participants about their posters. Parents then had an opportunity to express their ideas in even greater detail about their projects with their facilitators and to elaborate on themes they introduced in their photos.

The project culminated with a month-long exhibition of the work created and presented by immigrant parents for their own children and other members of their family, members of the community, teachers, and other school staff. The exhibition was held at a gallery space in the downtown area of the school district. A special reception was held half-way through the month-long exhibition with about 250 audience members in attendance in order to celebrate their work, share their photovoice posters, and to engage in a community discussion about the work of all photovoice project participants.

This exhibition gave these immigrant parents and members of their families multiple opportunities to share their personal stories with school stakeholders via presentations they created and created a space where immigrant family members and school staff could dialogue and learn from one another. Parents expressed pride in their individual photovoice poster as well as the collective work completed by their fellow parents from the Spanish-speaking community within the school district.

#### **FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH WITH IMMIGRANT PARENTS**

- ✓ **Theme 1:** Immigrant parents faced many difficulties and obstacles in their journey to the U.S. and in their lives in the local community but, at the same time, they continually focused on the utmost importance of education for their children and the embedded nature of this importance within the home and family life. Despite these obstacles they faced, parents were committed to the utmost importance of success in school for their children that they firmly believed would lead to future success in life in and out of schools.
- ✓ **Theme 2:** Immigrant parents highlighted the different ways in which home culture, family goals, and school life align to help foster conditions for success for their children. These parents repeatedly mentioned the importance of a strong home life that helps their children prepare for success in school via support networks created at home.
- ✓ **Theme 3:** Immigrant parents provided funds of knowledge and at-home support that go unnoticed in everyday assignments. These parents help their children succeed in school through providing stories of motivation from their own experiences with perseverance, about how to work hard and to stay focused on their future goals. Parents also supported their children through both visible means (serving as classroom parents on field trips) and also through less visible methods (tutoring their children at homes on subjects they had strengths in).
- ✓ **Theme 4:** These immigrant parents reported that they wished to be partners with educators at school and for there to be strong communication between their homes and school. Parents wanted to be connected to the schools of their children and to try to support the schools of their children via various school fundraisers, serving as parent classroom representatives, and supporting various after-school sports and clubs of the school.

- ✓ **Theme 5:** Immigrant parents saw the importance of “strong” advice they could provide to schools if given a chance. Parents see the school as an important avenue for their children to become successful in life and readily identify the ways in which they think that schools can help their children in the present and in the future. Parents consistently reported that schools and teachers can provide tremendous opportunities for their children to be successful and continued to underscore their faith in schools and teachers to help their children be successful students and members of society

## **DISCUSSION SECTION**

The themes uncovered by this study support much of the research on the funds of knowledge of immigrant parents and how these parents support their children and schools in both visible and invisible ways. Though often hidden members of school communities, immigrant parents do have important contributions to make to the success of a school.

The study highlights the counter-narratives that these particular photovoice projects and posters bring to the existing research on school involvement of immigrant parents and how the photovoice method can be used as a vehicle to uncover these funds of knowledge and parental strengths and commitments in order to further develop and strengthen home-school connections. The photovoice method can be one way to help empower immigrant parents and other parents whose voices have been either silenced or diminished when they enter schools and other local communities.

The research in this study highlights the need for teachers, administrators, and other school stakeholders to re-think parental outreach and home-school communication and to move away from deficit-based thinking about immigrant parents, and instead to focus on and highlight the hopes and aspirations of immigrant parents for their children in public school in the U.S.

## **REFERENCES**

- Auerbach, S. (2007). From moral supporters to struggling advocates: Reconceptualizing parent roles in education through the experience of working-class families of color. *Urban Education*, 42, 250-283.
- Ceballo, R. (2004). From barrios to Yale: The role of parenting strategies in Latino families. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 26(2), 171-186.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1994). “Consejos:” The power of cultural narratives. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 25(3), pp. 298-216.
- Gaetano, Y. (2007). The role of culture in engaging Latino parents’ involvement in school. *Urban Education*, 42(2), 145-162.
- Gagne, C., Bowers, A., & Russinova, Z. (2010). *Combating prejudice and discrimination through PhotoVoice empowerment: Workbook*. Boston: Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation.

- Guerrero, A. L. and Tinkler, T. (2010). Refugee and displaced youth negotiating imagined and lived identities in a photography-based educational project in the United States and Colombia. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 41, 55–74
- Howard, G. (2006). *We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers, multiracial schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lewis, C., and Landsman, J. (2011). *White teachers/diverse classrooms: A guide to building inclusive schools, promoting high expectations and eliminating racism*, 2nd edition. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- LeFevre, A., & Shaw, T. (2012). Latino parental involvement and school success: Longitudinal effects of formal and informal support. *Education and Urban Society*, 44(6), 707-723.
- Lopez, G., Scribner, J., & Mahitivanichcha, K. (2001). Redefining parental involvement: Lessons from high-performing migrant-impacted schools, *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(1), 253-288.
- National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force. (2004). *Assessment of diversity in America's teaching force: A call to action*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Ramirez, A. (2003). Dismay and disappointment: Parental involvement of Latino immigrant parents. *The Urban Review* 35(2), 93-110.
- Solórzano, D.G., & Yosso, T.J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for educational research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), pp. 23-44.
- Solórzano, D.G., & Yosso, T.J. (2001). From racial stereotyping and deficit discourse toward a new critical race theory in teacher education. *Multicultural Education*, 9(1), pp. 2-8.
- Stanley, C.A. (2007). When counter narratives meet master narratives in the journal editorial-review process. *Educational Researcher*, 36(1), pp. 14-24.
- Strack, Magill & McDonagh. (2004). Engaging youth through Photovoice. *Health Promotion Practice*, 5(1), 49-58.
- Valencia, R.R., & Black, M.S. (2002). "Mexican Americans don't value education!"— On the basis of the myth, mythmaking, and debunking. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 1(2), pp. 81-103.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Vélez-Ibañez, C.G., & Greenberg, J. (1992). Formation and transformation of funds of knowledge among U.S.-Mexican households. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 23(4), pp. 313-335.
- Villenas, S., & Deyhle, D. (1999). Critical race theory and ethnographies challenging the stereotypes: Latino families, schooling, resilience and resistance. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 29(4), pp. 413-445.
- Wang, C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health*, 8(2), 185–192.
- Wang, C., Cash, J., & Powers, L. (2000). Who knows the streets as well as the homeless?: Promoting personal and community action through Photovoice. *Health Promotion Practice*, 1(1), 81–89.
- Yosso, T.J. (2006). *Critical race counterstories along the Chicana/Chicano educational pipeline*. New York: Routledge.
- Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A CRT discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), pp. 69-91.