

Chapter 20

Picturing English Language Learning Youths' and Pre-Service Teachers' Perspectives on School: How "Photovoice" Projects Might Inform Writing Curricula and Pedagogies for Diverse Youth

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ABSTRACT

The authors used photovoice and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methods to explore youths' perspectives on school, literacy, teaching, curricula, and learning for nearly a decade. While in their previous photo elicitation studies they paid attention to the literacy and general school experiences of diverse middle and high school students, they have never simultaneously explored the points of view of the Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) who will one day serve these young people in the classrooms where they will meet. Because of the dual roles of teachers and the fact that middle and high school classrooms continue to grow more diverse, and because so many of these young people struggle to achieve in the classroom and recognize writing activities and school in general as relevant to their present and future lives, the authors have begun to explore—and compare—the results of visual sociological explorations conducted with both adolescents and these PSTs. In this chapter, they describe the findings of a photography and literacy intervention that viewed youth as valid authorities on their school and writing experiences. They also called on a population of pre-service teachers to both address questions of the purposes of, supports for, and impediments to school, and then to facilitate this inquiry with approximately

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100 diverse middle and high school students. The authors' analyses of students' and future teachers' visual and written responses suggest important insights regarding multimodal composition and general teaching and writing pedagogies. With examples of youths' and pre-service teachers' image/reflection combinations, the authors introduce three findings themes and detail writing instruction curricula and pedagogies that address each theme.

INTRODUCTION

Anuruddha was an extraordinarily bright young man and a dedicated student. He was generally proficient in his British version of English, but he struggled with writing tasks in the middle school language arts class where we worked with him. We are all full- or part-time teachers working with diverse—most often English Language Learning (ELL)—youth, and we have encountered an increasing number of our ELL students facing similar difficulties. Like so many of his peers, Anuruddha was challenged by the structure and vocabulary of the English language on which we relied. As his image and reflection indicate, he had already come to understand that his success with school-related activities—in particular his writing assignments—was dependent on his ability to navigate expectations that were more foreign to him than the language he thought he had learned in his native Sri Lanka (see Figure 1).

Over several months of working with Anuruddha in this “English Speakers of Other Languages” (ESOL) class, utilizing photo elicitation and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methods, we discovered that he engaged best with writing efforts when we considered more about him than the fact that he represented the changing demographics of our ex-urban community—a commuter region beyond first ring suburbs filled with workers who serve our urban locale. Like almost all of our increasingly diverse and mostly recent immigrant students, Anuruddha was best able to accomplish his writing tasks when we oriented our pedagogies around multimodal methods and ongoing inquiries into his relationships to school and literacy.

While all but this chapter's first author—Kristien—primarily serve as classroom- and district-level teachers and reading specialists, we also simultaneously work as university- and school-based literacy teacher educators, teaching courses and serving as mentors for elementary and secondary school pre-service teacher candidates. We have most recently conducted our “photovoice”- and YPAR-based studies with diverse youth *and* pre-service teachers, wondering about the tensions and intersections between these adolescents' points of view and those of the teachers who they will one day meet in schools. In our comparisons of young adults' and pre-service teachers' visual and written responses—and in the very process of these inquiries—we discovered a range of insights about how we might shift our writing curricula and pedagogies to better serve these young people.

CONTEXTS AND QUESTIONS

Many of the communities where we teach and conduct our research represent a different present and the certain future of US schools. For example, one of our shared professional homes—an ex-urban community outside Washington, DC—has experienced considerable demographic shifts in the past decade, at what seems like lightning speed, from 5% to almost 35% ESOL students and a general increase in percentages of Latina/o, Black, and immigrant youth. Further complicating these changes is the fact that this city borders another that has been deporting citizens perceived to be illegal immigrants, making ESOL youth difficult to track, since many families do not send

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