"Sometimes the Perspective Changes": Reflections on a Photography Workshop with Multicultural Students in Italy

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ABSTRACT: This article describes and evaluates an 8-week photography workshop, FotoLab, conducted in Italy at an afterschool-tutoring program for students acquiring Italian as an additional language. Seventeen students, age 8-17 and originating from 9 countries, participated. Co-facilitated by three international educator-researchers, FotoLab's purpose was to promote self-expression, collaboration, and visual literacy. Through a qualitative inquiry of the FotoLab curriculum, photographs and videos, field notes, and student questionnaires, this article reflects on themes of multiculturalism and multilingualism, collaboration, and visual literacy within a sociocultural animation framework. While expressions of cultural and linguistic identity emerged, findings emphasize the challenges and benefits of teamwork and shared learning. Participants expressed growth in their ability to create and interpret images, a perception affirmed in weekly presentations of their photographs and in a culminating, community event. Overall, outcomes highlight the flexible and dynamic nature of sociocultural animation as an effective practice for multicultural-multilingual contexts.

KEYWORDS: sociocultural animation, visual literacy, multilingual, plurilingual, immigrant

This article describes and reflects upon an eight-week photography workshop, *FotoLab*, conducted in a city of northeastern Italy with a multicultural, multiage group of youngsters attending an afterschool-tutoring program for students acquiring Italian as an additional language (IAL). FotoLab was collaboratively developed and facilitated by three international educator-researchers including the author. The workshop's purpose was to promote self-expression, collaboration, and visual literacy. Through a qualitative inquiry of the

FotoLab curriculum, field notes, student questionnaires, and photographs and videos produced during the project, this article explores themes of multiculturalism and multilingualism, collaboration, and visual literacy within a framework of sociocultural animation.

The title quote about changing perspectives is a composite, representing the shared view of many of the FotoLab students with regard to how to read a photograph, and also expresses the facilitators' overall approach toward the experience. For the students, a key outcome was understanding and appreciating that images can be interpreted in different ways depending on who is looking at them, and that the viewer may not necessarily read a photographer's message as intended. In our case, as facilitators, we learned that the goals and activities of a student workshop could be fluid and dynamic, shaped by the participants' needs, goals, and interactions. This is perhaps especially the case when running a workshop in a different country, in a second language, and with a multicultural, multiage group of students with varied experiences and expectations.

The Context

This section describes the current multicultural environment in Italy and explains sociocultural animation, the approach that guided FotoLab's development and facilitation. Additionally, the use of photography as a means to promote participation and collaboration with multicultural students is considered.

Multiculturalism in Italy

Italy, like many countries in the European Union, has been experiencing population shifts trending toward a more multicultural society. The number of immigrants residing in Italy has increased from 1.9 to 4.9 million in the past decade, and the percentage of children of foreign parents has grown from 1.5% in 1994 to now represent 14.5% of all children born in Italy (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2014). Indeed, the number of immigrant/second generation students attending Italian public schools increased from 1.7% in the 2001-2002 academic year to 8.8% in 2012-2013. Of these, 47% were born in Italy. Countries of (parent) origin most represented include Romania (19%), Albania (13%), and Morocco (12%) (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2013).

Because being born in Italy does not automatically imply citizenship, children who are immigrants, as well as those born in Italy to immigrant parents, share a non-Italian status and are generally considered *stranieri* (foreign). For the purposes of this article, I instead use the term 'multicultural' to identify first- and second-generation immigrant students in Italy.

Currently, Italian educators are beginning to realize that multicultural students, for most of whom Italian is an additional language, require language-specific instructional support to meet curricular demands. Communities with significant immigrant populations have already taken on this challenge: local organizations dedicated to *accoglienza* (welcome and integration) offer afterschool programs providing one-on-one/small group tutoring where multicultural-IAL students can receive language and general academic support. FotoLab took place at one such program.

Sociocultural Animation

FotoLab's curriculum and facilitation were framed by sociocultural animation, a widely applied pedagogical praxis (i.e., practice or way of work), in Europe, especially Spain, Portugal, and Italy. Conceptually similar to critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005; Freire & Macedo, 1987), sociocultural animation is based on the key premises of participation, community, and empowerment (Soler, Planas, & Núñez, 2013). Specifically, a community of participants – including facilitator/s (animator/s)—with a shared purpose or activity collaboratively engages in learning experiences that promote a positive group dynamic, active participation, and self-realization.

The birth of sociocultural animation has been interpreted as a response to the tremendous social change brought on by the European industrial revolution during the second half of the 19th century (Chacón Blanco, 2010; Marrengula, 2010). According to Chacón Blanco (2010), although there were instances of sociocultural animation in Spain as early as 1876, the term was not institutionalized until 1950 at a UNESCO conference, after which it became part of wider professional practice.

Indeed, Chacón Blanco (2010) suggested a variety of examples of participants and contexts for the application of sociocultural animation: with children or marginalized groups and in schools, adult education centers, recreation/cultural centers, community organizations, prisons, and health care facilities. Although for some (e.g., Mariano & Carvalho Marcellino, 2011) applications of sociocultural animation are limited to the realm of recreational activities, Marrengula (2010) argues, "SCA [sociocultural animation] is the pedagogy of discovery, of creativity, invention and innovation that goes far beyond the exclusive sector of leisure and free time, which works in emancipation and liberation…[stimulating] social change" (p. 71). Similarly, Soler, Planas, and Núñez (2013) emphasize sociocultural animation as a process of empowerment of individuals and communities.

In summary, sociocultural animation is both a pedagogical framework and practice that can be applied with diverse people in varied contexts by "creating participatory processes to help people grow into active agents both in their own and their community's development" (Marrengula, 2010, p. 67). This process

takes place through student-centered teaching and learning strategies that promote inclusion, integration, communication, participation, and empowerment.

Photography as Participation

Numerous examples illustrate the potential of photography as a tool for collaborative, community-based, and social justice research. Due to its communicative strengths, photography has been used in several projects involving work with immigrants, refugees, and other marginalized groups. While many of these projects included children and teens, there are also instances of using photography to empower adults (e.g., Armstrong, 2005; Gallo, 2002).

Various studies report on the use of photography as a means of self-expression for immigrant students in particular. In one such example, McBrien and Day (2012) used photography to discover issues and situations of importance to a group of 18 refugee students, age 11-17, in the United States. The students, originating from seven different countries (e.g., Albania, Colombia, and Liberia) took photographs and composed written comments to express their impressions of the United States and adjustment to their new life. At the conclusion of the workshop, each student selected three photos to display at a community exhibit. Themes that emerged included friends, family (including celebrations), nature, art, school, and education. For participating students, taking photos and writing about them offered an opportunity to explore the changes taking place in their lives, as well as a sense of hope for the future.

Also with refugee students, Yohani (2008) used photography, narrative, and the collaborative construction of a quilt to develop and explore "an ecology of hope" with 17 refugee youth, age 8-18, participating in an afterschool program in Canada (p. 309). The students were invited to photograph things that described hope or made them feel hopeful. The resulting images expressed hope discovered in the self, in others, and in the natural environment. Similar to McBrien and Day's (2012) work, this project demonstrated that, for refugee students, art could offer not only a means of expression but also a vehicle to find hope in challenging situations.

Finally, Zenkov et al. (2013) reported on a photography and literacy project involving 117 high school students in a diverse, urban district. Framed by culturally relevant pedagogy and using a youth participatory action approach, these educator-researchers invited the students to respond with photographs to questions related to the purpose of school and the supports and challenges they faced in the educational context. Findings demonstrated the importance of flexible and dynamic teacher-student relationships, as well as role models, to support culturally relevant literacy learning.

These studies, all of which incorporated photography as a tool for self-expression, communication, and empowerment of multicultural students, demonstrate the value of visual literacies to encourage participation, also a key principle of sociocultural animation. In line with the sociocultural animation

approach, the FotoLab project incorporated photography, not as an end, but as a flexible and dynamic means through which we could promote inclusion, participation, and collaboration among a diverse group of multicultural students.

Method

A framework of sociocultural animation in a multicultural context guided the current qualitative inquiry. This approach offered the fluid, dynamic, and reflective space necessary for continuous dialogue among the facilitators to plan, assess, and adjust the curriculum and activities of each FotoLab session. The qualitative data and analyses focus on the collective multimedia narrative produced by the participants and facilitators over the course of the project.

Participants

A defining feature of the FotoLab project was that not only the student participants, but also the facilitators, represented multiple cultures, languages, and countries of origin.

Students. A total of 17 students (6 female), age 8-17 years, participated in FotoLab. The students' participation varied from week to week, ranging from two attendances to seven (mean = 5) over the eight-session workshop. All of the students frequented local public schools (where Italian is the language of instruction) and participated in the afterschool program twice a week, for two hours each day, to work individually or in small groups with volunteer tutors on homework and studies of all subjects. The participants' grade levels ranged from 2nd grade (elementary/*scuola primaria*) to 10th grade (high school/*liceo*), with the majority (11 students) at the middle school level (grades 6-8).

The participants' cultural backgrounds included four students with families from Morocco (including one brother-sister pair), three brothers from Tunisia, two sisters from Albania, and individual students whose families had immigrated from Cameroon, Moldova, Nigeria, Peru/Ecuador, Philippines, and Sudan/Egypt. Seven students were born in Italy and one arrived as an infant. The others arrived between one and six years ago. All participants were plurilingual in that they spoke a home language/s other than Italian (e.g., Albanian, Arabic, French, Romanian, Spanish, Tagalog) and studied additional languages in school.

Facilitators. The facilitators included three diverse individuals who came together in a rather serendipitous way. I was working in Italy as a visiting researcher thanks to a Fulbright grant and began volunteering at the afterschool program. I soon met Jorge, another volunteer and educator from Portugal with experience in sociocultural animation and an interest in photography as a pedagogical medium. At the university, Anna, an undergraduate student in Educational Sciences, learned of my research in bilingualism and approached

me as a potential thesis mentor. After becoming acquainted with the afterschool program, she arranged a practicum there.

As student-educator-researchers, all three of us have special interest in multicultural, multilingual settings and a desire to work with plurilingual students. Each of us is also plurilingual, and all have had experiences living abroad. Our common languages are Italian and Spanish; however, being in Italy we opted to speak Italian in almost all communications. This being said, facilitating a workshop in IAL, with multicultural IAL students, resulted in many interesting language events, to be discussed in the Outcomes section.

Throughout the program, the three facilitators collaborated closely in all aspects of program and curriculum development. However, during the sessions, Jorge and I tended to facilitate more, while Anna often observed, clarified instructions in Italian, and supported the students in creating their projects.

The Workshops

The FotoLab took place over the course of eight weeks on Mondays after tutoring, from 5:15-6:30 p.m. Each session consisted of (a) an inclusion strategy or energizer that aimed to build community and encourage participation; (b) a brief lesson to introduce a visual literacy objective; (c) a photography activity in which the students worked in pairs/teams to compose photos; (d) presentation of photos and discussion with the whole group; and (e) a whole-group reflection on what was learned, the value of the activities, and the quality of the collaboration.

The sessions took place in a classroom of the after-school program, where we arranged chairs in a circle for the lessons, photo presentations, and discussions. The students used indoor and outdoor spaces to compose their photographs. Table 1 outlines FotoLab's weekly objectives and related activities. Note that, in line with the sociocultural animation approach, objectives and activities were designed and revised on an on-going basis, based on the students' level of participation, collaboration, and reflections each week.

Data

Various forms of qualitative data were collected during FotoLab. These included the FotoLab curriculum, developed by the three facilitators collaboratively and in an iterative fashion (i.e., through ongoing creation and revision); 34 pages of typed field notes, composed by Anna after each session; a student questionnaire completed by each participant at the conclusion of the project (see Appendix); 62 photos taken by the students as part of the FotoLab activities; and 79 photos and 9 videos taken by the facilitators during the sessions.

Table 1

Weekly Learning Objectives and Activities

Session	Participation/Collaboration Objectives and Activities	Visual Literacy/Photography Objectives and Activities
1	Introduce participants, develop inclusion, and build enthusiasm	Introduce that images can represent different viewpoints and be perceived differently; introduce basic photography constructs (perspective, light).
2	Build inclusion and express individual perspectives in the group.	By analyzing photos in a gallery, understand that the same photo can be interpreted from varying perspectives.
3	Work with partners to create photos that express emotions.	Introduce portrait photography; create portraits expressing emotions; and identify emotions in photos.
4	Work in teams to create photos of objects that convey a message.	Understand that a photographer desires to express a certain message; use printed ads to read visual messages; and compose photos of objects expressing messages.
5	Emphasize the need for a respectful community and promote whole-group inclusion	Understand the techniques of zoom-in/zoom-out through a guessing game using close-up photographs.
6	Work in teams to design a scene and take a series of photos.	Create scenes and photograph a three-photo, zoom-in/zoom-out series.
7	Work in teams to create scenes, take photographs, and design a collage illustrating a theme.	Understand photography as a way to comment on the human condition. Use photos and images to develop a collage on a major life theme (love, conflict, family).
8	Celebrate the group's efforts.	At a culminating event of the afterschool program, present a FotoLab video to all students and staff.

Analysis

A thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Grbich, 2007) was applied to the data in order to explore how certain key aspects of the FotoLab were manifested over the course of the project. Themes are considered categories applied to reduce and organize data based on phenomena relevant to the research. In this case, the themes (categories) for the qualitative analysis were identified *a priori* (i.e., before data collection) (Constas, 1992), based on the given pedagogical context and overall goals of the FotoLab. Thus, the themes explored included multiculturalism and multilingualism, collaboration, and the

development of visual literacies. These themes are interrelated, and also connected to broader concepts of self-expression, identity, participation, and community, which are also considered in the analysis.

Outcomes

This section elaborates on the qualitative themes of the FotoLab. Through examples from the data, each theme is explored: multiculturalism and multilingualism, collaboration, and the development of visual literacies.

Multicultural and Multilingual Identities

Although we initially envisioned FotoLab as an opportunity for the participants to tell their stories individually through photography, the emphasis quickly shifted, and FotoLab instead became a space for the collaboration and co-creation of images and visual meanings. This shift was stimulated by two situations: (a) the students' lack of access to technological resources and/or reluctance to take pictures outside the FotoLab; and (b) the students' requests, during reflections at the end of early sessions, to work in teams.

Thus, after attempting an initial homework assignment (photographing images from the students' homes) that produced very little participation, we decided that the best way to engage the students would be to have them take photos in pairs or small groups during the sessions. Of course, this limited the students' ability to incorporate personal images such as family, home, and neighborhood into their photos, which, in turn, became quite specific based on the visual literacy objectives of each session. Notwithstanding these limitations, some expressions of the students' multicultural identities emerged, both orally and visually through their photos, during the workshops.

Talking about "home." In Session 1, to introduce the idea of visually interpreting an image, 30 random photos (provided by the facilitators) were spread out on a table. The students were invited to choose a photo that they felt "spoke to them" and explain why. Greg (all names are pseudonyms), age 13, who had immigrated from Moldova four years previously, expressed the following:

> Greg: Me? Well, I chose this picture because it reminds me of my house, like, the house that was in my country, that was facing a lake, and….
>
> Another student: Where?
>
> Greg: Moldova (other students converse). Right, it reminds me of my mom…(A facilitator's video transcribed by Anna and translated by the author).

In this brief excerpt, inspired by a visual image, Greg expressed the sense of home (house on the lake, mom) that he still felt for his first residence in Moldova.

In a similar activity during Session 2, the students selected images from a wall of photographs (taken by the facilitators) that "represented" them. In a video, Abdel (age 11), born in Italy of Moroccan parents, stated: "I chose Andrea Pirlo [Italian soccer player]. Because soccer represents me in some way." After some prompting from the facilitators, Abdel explained that he had played soccer most of his life and it was an important activity for him.

With regard to the role of self-expression in the development of visual literacy, it is relevant that both Greg and Abdel were able to verbally express personal connections to images that went beyond, "because I like it." In fact, during Session 1, most students, in explaining why they chose a certain photo, did so by rationalizing that they liked something present in the image. As facilitators, we were challenged to scaffold the participants' discourse to a deeper level while also respecting that some students were not prepared to disclose personal information or feelings. For example, from the Session 1 field notes (translated by the author): "Being the first meeting some kids were a bit shy and closed in their explanations; others instead were open and available to narrate and express their own points of view." As FotoLab advanced, the students became more comfortable and also more adept at talking about images. For example, the Session 3 (portraits of emotions) field notes reflect: "At first some participants were embarrassed to show their own photo, but this embarrassment quickly disappeared…. The discussion was open and elicited diverse points of view about each photo."

Visions of diversity and integration. Some of the participant-created photos stand out as images of the cultural hybridity lived by multicultural students in Italy. For example, *La Madonna* (Figure 1) was the second in a three-part, zoom-in zoom-out series by Greg, Abdel, and Karim. The first of the three photos was a close-up of the statue's face, and the third was a complete scene of an outdoor shrine to the Virgin Mary, located in the garden of a nearby apartment building. As mentioned previously, Greg (age 13) was born in Moldova and had immigrated to Italy at age nine. Abdel (age 11) and Karim (age 10) were both born in Italy, of Moroccan and Tunisian parents, respectively. Although the potential religious tendencies of the boys and their families are not known, it is notable that they chose to photograph *La Madonna*, a typically Catholic symbol whose image is a normal, everyday sight for children growing up in Italy.

Figure 1. La Madonna – Greg, Abdel, & Karim

The photographs in Figure 2, *Heart*, and Figure 3, *Shoes*, were also taken as part of the zoom-in zoom-out activity. Kim and Amara, both age 12 and born

in Italy of families from the Philippines and Nigeria, respectively, composed these images with facilitator Anna's assistance. The *Heart* series begins with an even closer view of Kim and Amara's hands (photographed by Anna), then Figure 2, and lastly zooms out to a frontal image of the two girls, still connected by their hand-heart, smiling broadly. *Shoes* begins with Figure 3, depicting Kim and Anna's sneakers (photographed by Amara), then zooms out to eventually arrive at an image of them standing together, legs intertwined, and hugging each other for balance, also with big smiles on their faces. Amara and Kim intended for both of these series to represent the joy of connection and friendship across boundaries of race, ethnicity, culture, and age.

Figure 2. Heart – Kim & Amara

Figure 3. Shoes – Kim & Amara

Plurilingual practices. Although all of the participants were plurilingual, there was little use of languages other than Italian during the workshop. In fact, most of the language mixing that took place did so on the part of the IAL facilitators, Jorge and me. Anna, the only facilitator who was a native Italian speaker, often played the role of "clarifier," for example, when Jorge or I erroneously created Italian words based on Spanish (which Anna also speaks). An example of this was when I said, "Levantate* la mano se…" (*invented verb from Spanish, intending to say, "Raise your hand if…"). "Levantate" was received by a chorus of "What?!" by the students, and Anna quickly intervened, "*Alzate* la mano." Similarly, Jorge and I often mispronounced the word, "if," using the Spanish, "si" instead of the Italian, "se." After several instances of this, one of the students became impatient and yelled, "Se, NOT si!" On another occasion, when invited to read aloud the group agreements we had established the previous week, Abdel jokingly read them with a feigned Portuguese accent, imitating Jorge, and elicited laughs from the group.

Regarding the students' own plurilingual practices, they were surprisingly rare to observe, perhaps because the students were accustomed to using Italian with peers and teachers at school, as well as in the context of the afterschool program. Indeed, as the students' backgrounds comprised multiple countries and languages, it was often the case that students working together did not share a

language other than Italian. Thus, only a few instances were noted when siblings spoke to each other in their home language, for example, an older brother (age 13) speaking to his little brother (age 8) in Arabic. Outside of family groups, the use of languages other than Italian was not observed, with the exception of English, which the older boys sometimes tested out with me in a rather formulaic manner (e.g., “How are you?”).

Collaboration and Conflict

A major goal of the FotoLab was to promote collaboration among the students, who did not generally have opportunities to work together in the afterschool program. Each session opened with a whole-group inclusion activity and lesson, students then worked in pairs or teams to compose photos, and finally everyone returned to the group circle for presentation and discussion.

Challenges of collaboration. Although the students were eager to work together, we quickly discovered that the idea of collaborative learning (i.e., my concept of collaborative learning from the point of view of U.S. public education) was not part of most of these students’ broader educational experiences. To mitigate conflict, we allowed the students to work in the pairs/groups of their choice. The students generally collaborated well in the small groups; however, conflicts often emerged in the whole-group setting. For example, the girls only wanted to interact with other girls and even resisted sitting next to boys in the circle. Students of all cultural backgrounds were quick to use the term “racist” to describe any action they assumed to be unfair or the person doing that action. Although they had a vague sense that racism involved acts against someone “different,” when asked to define/explain this word, they generally could not do it and basically applied it as a way to describe disagreement among each other, notwithstanding similarities or differences of skin color.

In spite of the diversity among the participants, the students’ racial, ethnic, or cultural background did not emerge specifically as a reason for conflict. Instead, much of this stemmed from the students’ challenges in practicing respect and active listening in the whole-group setting. The field notes from Session 1 reflected: “The activity attempted to develop each student’s trust within the group, so that they could get to know each other and feel listened to, not only by the facilitators, but also by their own peers.” However, this goal was not easily achieved, as reflected in the Session 4 field notes: “The participants were often easily distracted and didn’t listen to the group members during the discussion.”

Indeed, the students themselves recognized the need for better listening during Session 5, when we invited them to brainstorm things that were working well (e.g., “teamwork” and “fun”) and things that were not (e.g., “attention” and “a lot of joking around”) in the sessions. Subsequently, the students collectively determined a set of group agreements: (a) Listen attentively when someone is speaking; (b) Be polite, courteous, and nice; (c) Respect students and facilitators; and (d) Come to an agreement to work together as a team. Although challenges

remained, after developing the agreements, it became easier to remind the students to keep to their commitment to respect and listen to one another.

Representing conflict in images. In the final activity, Greg and Joseph (age 14; immigrated from Cameroon at age 11) took on the challenge of creating a collage representing *Social Conflict* (Figure 4) with images cut from printed media as well as their own photographs created for this purpose. Although they initially had a difficult time finding images in magazines, once they had access to a current newspaper they were able to analyze headlines and locate several examples, including images of social protest, a bank bombing, vandalism, and the global health crisis produced by the excessive marketing of junk food. The boys' own photo depicts them physically fighting (photographed by Jorge).

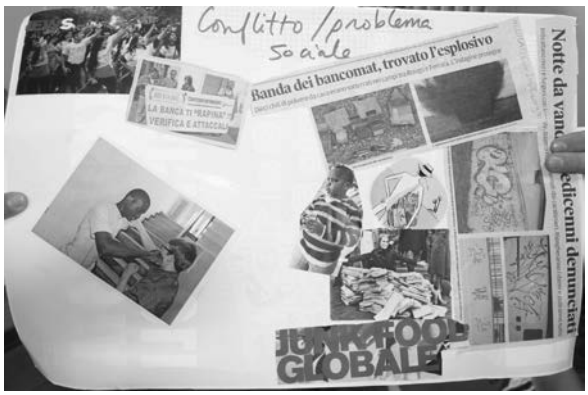

Figure 4. Social Conflict – Greg & Joseph

Reflections on the value of teamwork. The students addressed the positive and negative aspects of collaboration in their responses to a questionnaire completed at the close of the FotoLab project. Challenges of collaboration were reflected in 3 of 12 students' replies to the question, "What did you like the least about FotoLab?" These students responded, "Making chaos," "It was difficult to be of different ages," and "Impoliteness." With the exception of "gluing" (for the collage), all other responses to this question were, "nothing."

On the other hand, the majority of the students expressed that collaboration was, after actually taking photographs, the most valued practice of FotoLab. For example, 7 of the 12 students who responded to the open-ended question, "What was the most important thing you learned," made reference to collaboration, for example: "that group work is important", "trying to collaborate with boys," "to work together in a group," and "having fun in teams." Although a similar outcome may have emerged with a less diverse group of students, understanding the importance of teamwork was especially salient for this multicultural, multiage group, due to less familiarity with collaborative learning models and the students' need to overcome conflicts in working together.

Visual Literacy: Learning from Others

Learning to read photos and understand that they can be interpreted from varying perspectives was a major goal of FotoLab. Additionally, the students learned to compose their own photos to express specific emotions and

messages, as well as to surprise the viewer visually (zoom-in zoom-out). Students' questionnaires reflected these accomplishments: six students named making/viewing photos as what they liked most about the workshop; four included something about visual literacy as the most important thing they learned (e.g., "how a photo can be seen in so many ways" and "diverse points of view").

Perspective changes. The students captured the idea of diverse perspectives beginning in Session 2, when we analyzed photos (taken by the facilitators) presented in a "gallery." This activity's field notes reflected the students' application of diverse perspectives to visual images: "The students had fun exhibiting their own opinions and listening to how another person might express a completely different thought."

After visually selecting photos of interest, the students were invited to create titles for the photos, write them on sticky notes, and attach them to the images. This activity induced a high level of participation, as reflected in the field notes: "The kids had the possibility of finding an interactive space that they could personalize through writing their own titles." In the closing reflection of this session, the students articulated that they had learned that the same photograph could be interpreted in multiple ways.

Visual self-expression. In Session 3, the students worked in pairs to compose photos that expressed emotions randomly selected (e.g., excitement, joy, fear, boredom, sadness, and disappointment). The pairs took their photos in separate settings and also designed titles for the images.

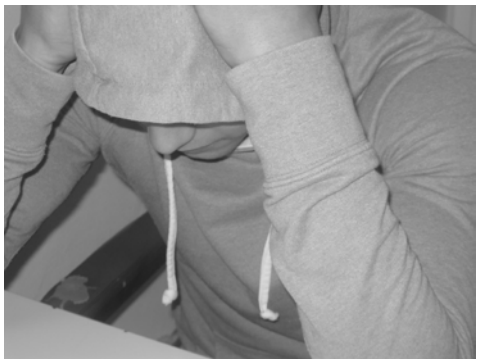

Figure 5. Voglia di cambiare: Delusione – Hamza & Abdel

Later, in the circle, each pair presented their photo while the rest of the participants guessed the emotion expressed; titles were subsequently presented. Figure 5 displays a photo taken by Abdel, depicting Hamza (age 16; immigrated from Morocco at age 8), covering his head and face to express disappointment. The boys' title for the image was *Desire to Change: Disappointment*. The field notes reflect, "The activity was stimulating for the kids… the discussion was open and elicited diverse points of view for the same portrait."

Capturing visual messages. In Session 4, we used advertisements to encourage the students' ability to detect the underlying messages present in visual images. For example, examining a Louise Vuitton ad during the lesson, the students were able to identify the target audience as people with money who want to look good and the product's message as a status symbol. In a video captured during that same lesson, Abdel explained a Nutella ad depicting happy

parents and a young child having breakfast: “In my opinion, it’s family; like, representing Nutella in the family.”

Finally, in Session 7, the students created collages, using their own photographs as well as images from printed texts, which depicted various human conditions: love, conflict, family, travel. Figure 6 depicts the photo, *Friendship*, composed by Amara and Kim (taken by Anna), which formed part of their collage on the theme of love/emotions. Showing the two girls from behind, arms entwined above their heads, and their shadow on the ground in front of them, this image represents an infinite friendship.

Figure 6. Friendship – Amara & Kim

Discussion

This article has reflected on the major themes and outcomes of FotoLab, an eight-week, photography workshop involving multiage, multicultural students and facilitators in northeastern Italy. The goals of FotoLab, which played out based on the pedagogical praxis of sociocultural animation, were to promote self-expression, collaboration, and visual literacy. Overall, it can be said that these goals were met, although they were accomplished in a way that was quite different from the facilitators’ original plan.

Student-Driven and Collaborative

One of the keys of sociocultural animation is that the needs and goals of the participants, not the facilitators, guide the educational experiences. In FotoLab, this was accomplished through weekly reflections at the end of each session during which the participants came together and expressed what they had liked and disliked and what they had learned that day. The participants also provided suggestions for ways to improve the workshop. Through these reflections, we understood that the students wanted to work together and take photographs within (and not outside) the FotoLab context.

Based on the weekly reflections and our own observations of each session, we developed the goals, curriculum, and related activities on a week-by-week basis. It was through this iterative process that we shifted from the idea of having the students produce individual, visual stories to collaboratively producing images, during workshop sessions, based on specific, visual literacy goals.

Although, at first, we felt constrained by this reality, we came to realize that what we initially perceived as limitations was simply the natural conditions of the FotoLab context and the needs of the participating students.

We also had to adjust our understandings regarding inclusion and collaborative learning. Although participants made progres during the workshop, many of the participants were reserved and hesitant to share personal information and/or experiences. There were also conflicts within the whole-group setting that had to be resolved. We attempted to do this in Session 5, when we troubleshot with the students and developed community agreements. Challenges notwithstanding, collaboration still emerged as one of the workshop's most important outcomes, especially from the students' perspective.

Indeed, FotoLab's collaborative nature differentiates this project from other research involving photography with multicultural students. For example, unlike the work of McBrien and Day (2012) and Yohani (2008), the FotoLab participants did not use photography to express personal experiences. However, thanks to the incorporation of visual literacy objectives and group discussions, the multicultural students of FotoLab learned that they could create images to communicate intended messages, whether or not they were of a personal nature. Additionally, and in contrast to previous research, the FotoLab participants also utilized photography as a means of collaboration, developing and strengthening relationships across age, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

Cultural Identities and Expressions

The students participating in FotoLab were diverse: they ranged in age from 8 to 17 years, originated from 9 countries, and spoke at least 10 languages/dialects (including Italian). This diversity provoked challenges with regard to finding activities interesting to students of all ages, as well as whole-group inclusion and collaboration.

However, an interesting outcome was that, although there were some opportunities for the students to express their identities, the participants' cultural and linguistic backgrounds did not surface as often or as deeply as expected during FotoLab. This could have been due to students' reservations in expressing their personal experiences, the collaborative (as opposed to individualized) nature of the photography activities, and the near exclusive use of Italian as the language of activities and communication.

Regarding cultural identity, individual interviews with the participants would be necessary for an in-depth understanding of it. However, it can be suggested that the students' participation in Italian cultural practices may differ from how those practices play out at home (e.g., rules of politeness/respect, communication styles, food, etc.). This might result in hybrid identities, or a sense of in-betweeness (Sarroub, 2010), in which students regularly negotiate two cultural identities and their related practices across home and school contexts. Indeed, in the PhotoLab, the students, as well as the facilitators, were managing

multiple identities and languages. For the students, these identities included student, older/younger sibling, friend, and, perhaps, representative of a certain country or culture. The facilitators also negotiated various roles, including teacher, collaborator, researcher, and mentor, as well as representative of our own respective languages and cultures/countries.

Of course, it could be argued that the goals and outcomes of self-expression, collaboration, and visual literacy could have been met similarly with a less diverse group of students. However, the fact that the PhotoLab participants (and facilitators) brought with them varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, beyond their diverse ages and individual differences, undoubtedly influenced their comfort level, social interactions, and overall group dynamic.

Participation and Empowerment

Another key to sociocultural animation is the implicit goal of promoting participation and empowerment in the communities in which it is applied. In the case of FotoLab, a challenge to this goal was the sporadic attendance of many students. Several were regular participants, but the overall composition of the group changed from week to week, as students' circumstances changed, either allowing or preventing them from staying for the FotoLab session.

This sporadic attendance was another reason for our flexibility with the weekly activities. Guided visual literacy activities, such as creating a title for a given photo, composing a portrait depicting a given emotion, and developing an image expressing a certain message about an object, encouraged participation, even when students had missed the previous session. These activities also allowed the students to interact in a way that was safe; i.e., it did not require them to reveal too much about themselves. Additionally, they promoted collaboration, as the students worked in teams to compose photographs and present their work to the entire group. It is possible that the lessons learned in these collaborative experiences, highly valued by the participants as expressed in the questionnaires, may extend into the students' schools and communities as they encounter new opportunities to participate in diverse contexts.

Finally, presenting their work in each session, as well as seeing it in the form of a video in the final session, was an empowering experience for the FotoLab participants. They were able to display the visual products that they had created, receive feedback from the group and, in the final session, culminate their participation through recognition and celebration of all the students, staff, and volunteers of the afterschool program.

Overall, in spite of challenges, FotoLab was effective in engaging multicultural students in collaborative experiences in a setting in which they were accustomed to working one-on-one with adult tutors. Through whole-group discussions about images, their messages, and interpretations, along with partner/small-group photography, the workshop also succeeded in advancing the participants' visual literacy skills. All of this took place in a fun, safe, context that

encouraged self-expression and participation, not only of the multicultural, IAL students, but also of the international facilitators who, like the students and their families, could also appreciate the Italian sense of *accoglienza* (i.e., acceptance).

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Appendix

FotoLab Student Questionnaire (Translated from Italian by the author)

We invite you to complete a questionnaire to help us evaluate the activities of the FotoLab. Please respond in a sincere and open manner. The questionnaire will not be made public, but will be used for research. Whatever you may think, Robin, Jorge, and Anna thank you for your participation. We are very happy to have worked with you.

Name: _____ Age: _____ Grade level: _____

Your family's country of origin: _____

Since when are you in Italy: _____

Language you speak at home: _____

Please indicate your response with an X on the word.

1) In general, did you like the FotoLab?

Very Much Somewhat A little bit Not at all

2) Have you learned something significant about collaborating in teams with your classmates?

Very Much Somewhat A little bit Not at all

3) Did you acquire some techniques to use with a camera?

Very Much Somewhat A little bit Not at all

4) Did you understand that a photograph can have different points of view, even different from your own?

Very Much Somewhat A little bit Not at all

5) Would you take the FotoLab again the way it was structured?

Yes No

6) In your opinion, will what you learned in this project serve you in the future?

Yes No

What did you like the most?

_____

What did you like the least?

_____

What's the most important thing you learned?

_____

Other comments?

_____

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