

# Connecting Worlds: Using Photo Narrations to Connect Immigrant Children, Preschool Teachers, and Immigrant Families

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## Abstract

Increases in immigrant children to U.S. preschools have introduced unique challenges to teachers. An awareness of disconnections between a homogeneous teaching population and the increasingly diverse student population calls for additional exploration of enhancing connections to facilitate the young immigrants' learning process in the classroom. The purpose of this study was to explore how photo narrations in which preschool teachers listened to immigrant children talk about their photos of their context outside of school would provide opportunities for enhanced connections between teachers and immigrant children. The findings revealed that by using the familiar tools of photos and stories, the immigrant children were given space for their voice to be heard, the teachers found their awareness of the cultural connections and disconnections they used during their interaction with the immigrant children heightened, and connection opportunities with immigrant parents were enhanced. In essence, the teachers were given the opportunity to enter the previously unfamiliar context of the child through the bridge the photo narrations constructed between the teachers' and immigrant children's worlds.

Key words: culturally responsive pedagogy, photos, narration, immigrants, children, early childhood education, photographs, home cultures, preschools, teachers, language learners, stories, parents, diversity, connections, English

## Introduction

Demographic trends around the world are changing schools. In both cities and suburbs the diversity within local preschools is increasing. Preschool teachers find their understanding of teaching and learning challenged as they are confronted with such discontinuities as English language limitations, low immigrant achievement, and seemingly low parent involvement in school (Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). The position statement of the National Association of Educators of Young Children (NAEYC), *On Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity* (2009), clarifies the importance of teachers developing knowledge and new skills that will support all children in their classrooms, including those with diverse cultures and languages. Existing literature suggests that teachers continue to struggle to connect with immigrant children in their classrooms (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). The current academic early childhood conversation includes strategies for teachers to enhance communication and connection with this increasingly diverse preschool population. This article describes how six preschool teachers and their immigrant students used disposable cameras as tools to enhance connections between them.

### Demographics

In the past decade the immigrant population entering the United States has been historically remarkable. In 2005, there were more than 10 million school-age children of immigrants (ages 5-17) in the United States, 1.3 million of whom were noted as foreign-born (Camarota, 2005). It is estimated that one out of every five children in school today are either children who have newly arrived in the U.S. or children with at least one parent who has recently immigrated (Camarota, 2005).

Likewise, the number of children in our schools who are Limited English Proficient (LEP) is on the rise. According to the U.S. State Education Agency Survey data, the number of LEP children in schools increased by 105% between 1990 and 2000, whereas the general school population grew by only 12% (Kindler, 2002). Of these children, it is estimated that in 2000, six out of seven enrolled in grades 1-5 lived in linguistically isolated households (Consentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005).

The teacher population, on the other hand, is generally homogeneous and tends to be reflective of the local mainstream population. In this study, the immigrant children represented 13 countries (see Table 1); in contrast, all the teachers were White females who lived most of their lives in Pennsylvania (see Table 2, p. 88).

Table 1. Demographics of Participating Immigrant Families

	Participant	Place of Birth	Age	Home Language(s)
1	Mother	India		Malayalam, English
	Father	USA		English
	Child (f)	USA	3	English
2	Mother	USA		English
	Father	USA		English
	Child (m)	Russia	3	Russian, English
3	Mother	Germany/Egypt		Arabic, German, English
	Father	Egypt		Arabic, English
	Child (f)	USA	3	Arabic, English
4	Mother	Japan		Japanese, Mandarin, English
	Father	Taiwan		Taiwanese, Mandarin, English
	Child (m)	Scotland	4	English, Mandarin
5	Mother	China		English, Mandarin
	Father	China		English, Mandarin
	Child (f)	USA	4	English, Mandarin
6	Mother	India		Hindi, Spanish, English
	Father	India		Hindi, Spanish, English, French
	Child (m)	USA	4	English
7	Mother	USA		English
	Father	India		Bengali, English
	Child (f)	USA	4	English
8	Mother	USA		English
	Father	USA		English
	Child (m)	Guatemala	4	Spanish, English
9	Mother	Mexico		Spanish, English
	Father	USA		English
	Child (f)	USA	4	English
10	Mother	Cambodia		Cambodian, Chinese, English
	Father	Cambodia		Cambodian, Chinese, English
	Child (f)	USA	4	Chinese, English
11	Mother	Turkey		Turkish, English
	Father	Turkey		Turkish, English
	Child (m)	USA	5	Turkish, English
12	Mother	Japan		Japanese, English
	Father	Japan		Japanese, English
	Child (m)	USA	5	Japanese, English
	(m)	USA	4	Japanese, English
13	Mother	India		Guajarati, English
	Father	India		Guajarati, English, Hindi
	Child (f)	USA	3	English
14	Mother	Germany		German, English
	Father	Germany		German, English
	Child (m)	Germany	4	German, English

As learning and achievement have been key goals of our schools and classroom teachers, the increasingly diverse student population in our suburban school classrooms has challenged the definition and pursuit of these goals. School dropout rates within the immigrant population are on the rise, and

teachers feel a disconnect or a “mismatch” between the immigrant student and the learning community of the school (González, 2001, p.168; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p.148). As a result, teachers are asking for more help in working with the immigrant children entering their classrooms (Trumbull et al., 2001). Framed by sociocultural learning theory, this article explores photos and stories as key tools to provide teachers with opportunities to connect with these students as the teachers seek to facilitate learning in their classrooms.

### **Learning as Connecting**

Existing literature suggests that learning takes place best where there is interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). In a classroom, interaction may be seen as occurring when the teacher and students communicate with each other for the purpose of constructing meaning, or in other words, negotiate to the point of mutually understanding something. For example, in our study, as the preschool teachers interacted with each child during circle time, they attempted to connect what the children were communicating verbally and nonverbally with the other children and their own experience to facilitate group understanding. Some have defined this necessary work of the teacher to be that of bridging or connecting individual worlds to create or construct the expected understanding (Bruner, 1996; Rogoff, 1995).

This goal of connecting is negotiated through the use of shared language, in this case English, as well as through shared cultural assumptions (Vygotsky, 1994; Wertsch, 1991). This suggests that intentional interaction between teachers and immigrant children includes not only English proficiency but also an awareness of the experiences students, their families, and teachers bring into each interaction within the classroom (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Trumbull et al., 2001). Therefore, arriving at understanding, or connecting in a classroom setting, is complex, and introducing limited English proficiency and cultural differences into the conversation increases the complexity of this endeavor.

The sense of impossibility to connect with immigrant families was expressed by the teachers in our study as they initially talked about the parents and children. Although the majority of the parents spoke English, the teachers blamed limited English language proficiency for this perceived disconnection. Without exception, each teacher in our study desired to know about the immigrant children in her classroom but expressed that the immigrant child’s and/or immigrant parents’ limited English language vocabulary did not make this feasible. This resulted in the teachers not talking to the parents but “guessing as to the origin of the children and their parents,” thus remaining unfamiliar with the child’s context outside of school. Their focus on English language

vocabulary without acknowledgement of the social and cultural construction of language (González, 2001) left the teachers disconnected from the immigrant children and their families.

### Teachers as Culturally Responsive

In early childhood education, cultural awareness in the bridging between teachers and children is considered to be appropriate practice and has been found to enhance teachers' connections and relationships with their students and families (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Wright, Stegelin, & Hartle, 2007). This connecting of contexts has been noted to be particularly important when working with ethnically diverse students (Copple, 2003; Trumbull et al., 2001). However, when the teachers in our study attempted to connect with these students' worlds, disconnections seemed to appear instead of connections. This was particularly noted during the classroom observation near Easter when a child from China arrived at the classroom with a seemingly new dress on. The teacher commented that she had a new dress and asked the child if this was her Easter dress. The child responded with a blank stare. During circle time the teacher again asked if this was the child's Easter dress. Again, the child did not reply. The teacher turned to the researchers and noted that this child probably did not understand her English then. In reality, the child probably had no cultural category for Easter, a Christian holiday. The child's later comment was, "This is just a new dress."

Recognizing the importance of interaction in learning, schools have sought to address this disconnection between teachers and immigrant children by providing training in strategies proposed to assist teachers to connect with students of cultural backgrounds different from their own. Unfortunately, what we saw in this study and what commonly appears within schools is what can be called "cultural tourism" (Drew, 1997, p. 297) or strategies which reduce a child's culture to celebrating national foods and festivals or a set of static characteristics which encourages stereotypes. It is suggested by the literature that cultural responsiveness is a better option (Gay, 2000). Therefore, a common goal found threaded throughout the current discourse is the search for culturally responsive strategies which effectively strengthen the linkages between families of all cultures, diverse communities, and school (González et al., 2005). González-Mena (2008) has found that teachers who are self-aware and able to honor the perspectives, beliefs, and values of another can be more culturally responsive teachers, thus creating an environment which encourages not a stereotyping of culture but of equity and social justice. Therefore, it has been suggested that when teachers make their own cultural perspective explicit, their ability to make connections with all students is enhanced. Such approaches as cultural

responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000), diversity pedagogy (Sheets, 2005), as well as multicultural education, have been the topics of many workshops and other professional development venues to reach this responsiveness. Even within this context, teachers continue to puzzle over how to best connect with children of cultures unfamiliar to them.

The preschool teachers in our study were eager to try something that would help them connect with the immigrant children; however, their hectic lives at school and home became obstacles to trying anything unfamiliar to them. The challenge, therefore, was to use what was familiar to the teachers to bridge the unfamiliar—the worlds of the immigrant children. This study sought to address this challenge by taking what is familiar to preschool teachers, photos and stories, to create a bridge to what is unfamiliar, the immigrant children's worlds outside of school.

### **Photos and Stories as Tools**

Photos and drawings have always played an important role in teaching and learning with young children. Early childhood settings typically include displays of picture books, photos of children, and autobiographical books of each child. These visuals are utilized to teach and create teachers' connections with children and their families. Additionally, photography has been found to be effective in enhancing a sense of community between people (Marquez-Zenkov & Harmon, 2007). Recently, effective linking between classroom and community has been done with English language learner (ELL) students using photography (Landay, Meehan, Newman, Wootton, & King, 2001). Therefore, this study proposed that photos—a familiar tool in the local preschool classroom—could be an effective tool to connect with the unfamiliar—in this case the families from cultures different from the teachers' culture.

Where there are pictures, there is a story. Stories are also familiar tools used by teachers to enhance understanding within their classrooms. Storyteller and researcher Paley (1990) identified listening to another's stories as key to listening in on the minds and hearts of young children. Historically, storytelling has been a powerful tool for passing along the meaning systems of a culture (Bruner, 1990; Miller, 1994). According to sociolinguists, personal stories are constructed using past personal experience based on culturally shared assumptions (Gee, 2005). These assumptions, during a conversation, are perceived to be shared by both the storyteller and the listeners. One's story, or storyline, reflects not just the storyteller's present thoughts but the storyteller's appeal to his or her background and previous experience reflecting culture and social class to tell his or her story as well as appeal to the listener to seek understanding (Bakhtin, 1986; Gee, 2005). Subsequently, the storyteller's thoughts and

assumptions, believed shared by the listeners, become culturally constructed storylines (Gee, 2005).

In light of this, it is possible to see how combining photos and personal stories (Cappello, 2005; Clark-Ibanez, 2004) could possibly be a powerful bridge between teachers and immigrant children. Therefore, we proposed that children's photos of their world outside of school, along with their photo narrations, or stories about their photos, could be appropriate tools for immigrant children to make meaningful connections with their teachers. The study further proposed that the children's narrations of their photos might facilitate the teachers making meaningful connections with their immigrant students. Also, the combination of photographs and narrations were proposed to provide the opportunity for the teachers to enter the child's world outside of school.

## Method

### Participants and Context

This case study took place in a longstanding private preschool nestled in an upper-middle class suburban neighborhood in Central Pennsylvania. This region had recently experienced an unprecedented increase in diversity. All the preschools in the area were surveyed, and the one with the greatest number of immigrant children and receptive teachers was chosen. The selected preschool, housed on one floor of an old brick church building, weekly served approximately 300 children, ages 2-5. Each classroom had 10-15 children. The teachers were White females, college educated, ranging from 35-55 years old (see Table 2). This preschool had a reputation of providing a non-threatening place in which children could grow in their social and language skills without focusing on academic achievement. This was a popular choice for immigrant families in the area who desired that their young children gain in their use and understanding of English without the pressure of academic responsibilities.

Six teachers who had immigrant children in their classrooms consented to participate in this study. The average preschool teaching experience of these teachers was 10 years. For the purpose of this study, immigrant parents were contacted and invited to consent to allow their children to participate and consent themselves to be a part of an interview within the study.

Fourteen families representing 13 countries and 16 languages consented to participate (see Table 1). Of these families, 9 had two foreign-born immigrant parents; 3 had one foreign-born parent and one U.S.-born parent. Two families had U.S.-born parents with adopted foreign-born children. Each family had at least one parent who was fluent in English.

Of these families, 15 immigrant children (8 males and 7 females) participated in this study: two 5-year-olds, nine 4-year-olds and four 3-year-olds. Of

these children, 11 were born in the United States of immigrant parents. Four children were foreign-born: one in Germany, one in Scotland, one in Russia, and one in Guatemala. The child from Russia and the child from Guatemala were adopted by U.S.-born citizens who had minimal connection with the home countries and languages of these children (see Table 1 for summary).

This sample is representative of the characteristics of immigrant families in the U.S. today in two respects. First, Census Bureau data reveal that 79% of the children from immigrant families living in the U.S. are native-born, and one in four has a parent who was born in the U.S. (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2007). In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 34% of immigrant children live with at least one U.S.-born parent. In this study, 25% lived with at least one U.S.-born parent. Second, the National Census Bureau data reveal that 58% of immigrant parents report that at least one of them is fluent in English (Hernandez et al., 2007). In Pennsylvania this number is closer to 80%, which is mirrored in this study with 24 of the 28 participating parents (86%) self-reporting English fluency (Hernandez et al., 2007).

The primary investigator of this study had unique qualifications which enabled her to communicate freely with immigrant families as she has worked in over 30 countries as an educational family consultant. Her extensive experience provided her with unique cross-cultural communication skills and heightened cultural awareness which became an asset during the interviews with the immigrant parents as well as during the data analysis.

Table 2. Demographics of Participating Teachers

Name	Ethnicity	Language	Preschool Teaching Experience	Overseas Experience	Academic Degree
Teacher A	Caucasian	English	7 yrs	Lived in UK (4 yrs) Bahamas (7 days)	BS ECE cert
Teacher B	Caucasian	English	6.5 yrs	Italy (10 days) Mexico (7 days)	MA ECE cert
Teacher C	Caucasian	English	2 yrs	Italy (8 days) Austria (9 days)	MA
Teacher D	Caucasian	English	9 yrs	Bermuda (7 days) Mexico (1 day) Jamaica (1 day) Canada (2 days) St Croix (7 days)	MA
Teacher E	Caucasian	English	18 yrs	Canada (2 wks) London (2 wks)	BA
Teacher F	Caucasian	English	18 yrs	Mexico (7 days)	BA



## Data Sources

To begin this study, the researchers sat in each classroom at least twice to observe a typical day. During these observations researchers noted context as well as the interactions the teacher had with students including the connections attempted by the teacher with each immigrant child. Subsequently, the researchers compared observations and noted any commonalities and/or differences in their notes. This process worked to minimize observer effect and maximize inter-rater reliability (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003).

Next, a focus group of all participating teachers was convened (Morgan, 1997). During this time they were asked to talk about their perceptions of the immigrant children in their classes. This session was digitally recorded and transcribed.

As photos taken by the preschool immigrant children were essential to this study, the teachers devoted one circle time to teach the children how to use a camera and take good photos by practicing with cardboard cameras and using storybooks. At the conclusion of the circle time, each child was issued a disposable camera. Upon return of the cameras, the photos were processed and ready for the children to participate in what is known as a photo narration (Cappello, 2005; Clark-Ibanez, 2004). In this process the children talked about their photos in the presence of their teachers while the researchers sat behind them recording observations. These teacher-child interactions were audio recorded and transcribed.

After the photo narrations, the teacher focus group was reconvened, at which time the teachers were again asked to talk about their perceptions of the immigrant children in their classes and describe their thoughts on the process they had just experienced (Morgan, 1997). Again, this session was audio recorded and transcribed.

Additionally, the primary investigator, who had extensive experience working with parents of ethnically diverse backgrounds, interviewed at least one parent of each participating immigrant child (see Table 1). The purpose of the interview was to gather information on family constellation, migration history, and home language(s) to inform the researchers of each child's home context and inform the analysis (Child Development in Context Program, n.d.).

## Analysis

The observation notes and focus group and photo narration transcripts were initially read by each researcher multiple times and coded for salient themes (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003). The resulting thematically organized data were further analyzed for recurring words or phrases, providing for the discovery of

the teachers' personal, culturally constructed storylines they brought into their interactions (Gee, 2005; Quinn, 2005). This analysis was done by each researcher and subsequently checked for compatible results (Creswell, 1994). Additionally, the photo narration transcripts were read multiple times and coded corresponding to the analysis of attempts at bridging understanding made by both the child and the teacher and the resulting connections and disconnections which emerged (Strauss, 2005). The researchers met periodically to check for agreement. Participants were not involved in any aspect of this analysis. All names used within quotations are pseudonyms.

## Findings

Three key connections between teachers, immigrant children, and their families emerged from our analysis. First, the interactions between teachers and immigrant children during the photo narrations revealed that these narrations effectively gave the children a way to communicate with their teachers, connecting the immigrant children with their teachers in a unique way. Also, the teachers expressed increased awareness of their disconnections or mismatches between their previous assumptions and children's stories. Third, the teachers noted their enhanced connection with the immigrant children's home context using this process or what they called a "virtual home visit."

### Connecting Immigrant Children With English Words

The immigrant children's photographs and opportunity to talk to their teacher about these photos seemed to connect their world with words in English. The majority of the children surprised their teacher by using more extensive vocabulary and dialogue than had been anticipated. The following is one teacher's account of what occurred during the photo narrations, which illustrates what was found throughout the teachers' focus group discussions:

For Hans, in particular, it was the first time, when I sat down with him to go over his pictures, it was the first time he initiated an English word to me ever besides just repeating a word that I had just said. Like the color green, I would say, "Can you say green?" and he would repeat it. But it was the first time when he showed his Chocolate World picture, he said, "Chocolate World," plain as day, and it was the first time I ever heard him speak English to me. So without the pictures, that would have never have occurred.

In addition to the number of words spoken by the children, the content of the children's photo narrations was also instructive. All identifiers and stories were spoken by each immigrant child in English. The children consistently

included information on family constellation, home context, and relationships. For example, the children talked about Grandma, Grandpa, Nana, Poppop. They also described relationships and roles within the home such as “Dada, that’s my grandpa” and “This is my mom’s kitchen....She is baking” and “Look at my daddy, he is crawling with my brother!”

Bedrooms, kitchen tables, and playrooms, as well as outside play areas, were also described. These included details such as favorite blankets, toys, foods, and activities. This is seen in the following indicative dialogue between an immigrant student (from Mexico) and her teacher:

S: That’s my bedroom. That is Bridgie’s bed and that’s our kids, and that’s Bridgie’s dresser and that’s my rug and the toys are inside.

T: So you and Bridgie share a room together?

S: Yes....And mom sleeps in a different room upstairs....That is where my bed is.

T: That is your bed?

S: Yes.

T: And whose bed is that?

S: That’s Bridgie’s.

T: Oh, ok and what is that on the wall?

S: My butterfly. I made it. I got it for my birthday.

The teachers, after hearing the children’s narratives, remarked at how much they learned about the children’s families and home life. This precipitated their desire to capture this information in thematic books for the class to enjoy at a future time.

### **Connecting Teachers and Their Cultural Mismatches**

The combination of the photos and narrations exposed the false assumptions or storylines the teachers had constructed through their travels and limited knowledge of the cultures each child represented. Throughout the focus group reflections, the teachers talked about the false assumptions they brought into this process, their surprise over this, and how these storylines had inhibited their ability to hear the children and effectively connect with them.

A salient example of this was how each teacher mistakenly identified the photo’s subject, only to be corrected by the child. For example, one teacher, looking at the child’s photo with the child, remarked, “Oh, there are your parents.” The child corrected the teacher by pointing to a small and seemingly insignificant truck on the floor in the foreground of the photo and talked about that as the focus of the picture. The teacher reflected on this experience in the subsequent focus group.

What they saw in the pictures versus what I saw in the pictures was another thing that was remarkable to me....I'm thinking it's a picture of your mother, but it wasn't to this child. It was this little teeny thing on the wall, and I had to like squelch the desire to say, "But who's that person?" because, you know, they tell me more is better.

Teachers' storylines or culturally constructed assumptions were also reflected upon during their focus group. For example, one teacher several times recounted the following interaction of how one girl (S), whose parents were from India, picked up a picture of her house and began telling the following story to her teacher (T):

S: Oh, I'm riding my bike. That's my dream house. Oh, that is my big, no that is my dream house.

T: Your which house?

S: Yep, it looks like, see now, this was, this was my dream home....

S: Yep, it is. Now this is my crib.

T: That's your crib?

S: Yep.

T: And it's turned into a bed, isn't it? So you can get out whenever you want?

In the subsequent focus group, the teacher remarked how throughout the year this immigrant child had talked during the class sharing times about being a baby and sleeping in a crib (in the present tense). This puzzled the teacher. She responded to this child's stories about the crib as if it was true when the child was younger but not true now. When the teacher saw the photos, she was surprised by the current pictures of this girl's high chair and crib. Subsequently, the teacher remarked that this insight into the role this child played in her family put into perspective the information the girl had shared during the class circle time and provided this teacher with a better understanding of how to communicate with the child. This type of reflection was mirrored by the rest of the teachers, as one after another recounted how they had been surprised by something the immigrant child had said and how it had changed their understanding of that child.

Also, it was noted by the researchers that in the majority of interactions during the photo narrations, each teacher had a moment in the child's story when she constructed her own connections and stated her connection. They did not check for shared understanding but moved on to a different topic, resulting in silencing the child.

For example, a common interaction during the photo narrations was the teacher (T) summarizing what she believed the child (S) was saying and then moving on to another topic. The following interaction between the teacher and

a child whose parents were from India illustrates that as the child was poised to tell a story about Beauty and the Beast, the teacher had understood the book and moved on.

S: I was reading my beastie book.

T: Your beach book?

S: Not my beach book. I don't have a beach book.

T: Okay, what kind of book?

S: My Beauty and the Beast.

T: Beast book. Gotcha. (turning to another photo) Now is this your room or your mommy's room?

S: Yep.

Additionally, the teachers' storylines exposed within their interactions with each immigrant child, although not negated by the children in these dialogues, were often disconnected from the child's storyline that he or she was attempting to introduce. This is illustrated in the following dialogue with a child whose parents are from China:

T: Is that a picture of something?

S: Um, a tree.

T: Oh, okay. Where did you get that from?

S: It's Chinese.

T: Oh, it's Chinese. Do you know someone that is from China?

S: My dad bought it.

T: Oh, your dad bought it. Was he there? Does he work there? Oh, he just went to visit. Oh, okay. What's that? (Teacher moves to another photo)

In the following dialogue, the teacher is talking with a child whose parents are from Egypt. She believes Egypt is the connection even though the child dismisses this topic.

S: Oh, those are my friends and this is me and this is my friend.

T: Are all your friends from Egypt?

S: No.

T: Where are they from?

S: I don't know... This is...

Each of these dialogues focused on a storyline the teacher brought into the dialogue, wanting the child from China to talk about something seemingly from China, and wanting the child from Egypt to talk about a connection to Egypt. Instead of enhancing the dialogue, this approach stopped the conversation and transformed the narrative into answering the teachers' questions that required one-word responses that were either right or wrong. This was observed throughout the photo narrations.

## Connecting Teachers and Immigrant Children's Home Context

After the photos were taken and the photo narrations were complete, both parents and teachers commented on their perceptions of strengthened connections between their worlds. As the immigrant parents talked during their interview, they related how when they realized that the photographs of home items valued by their children were shared and respected by the teacher, they felt more positive about the whole school experience. Each immigrant parent, without exception, stated during the interview process that he or she felt more "comfortable" in the school because of this experience and he or she felt assurance that the teachers desired to work with his or her child. They all expressed a sense of not fitting into the homogeneous environment of Central Pennsylvania. In contrast, the message of value gleaned from the camera project was a welcome, new feeling for them. Several immigrant mothers volunteered to help the researchers do this "camera study" every year to help all the immigrant families "feel welcomed" as much as they now did through doing this project. Most of those interviewed expressed a desire for continued dialogue with each other and the school at a later time. Several of the women gave the researchers their contact information, volunteering to encourage other teachers in other schools to do the photo narrations to assist other immigrant children and their families.

The teachers also expressed their sense of enhanced connections with the home context of these children. This is illustrated in the following teacher's reflection of how she thought about the photo narration process:

Well, I liked seeing his pictures. I mean, I did learn a lot about him. I learned that he loved helping his mom in the kitchen with baking like he had the apron. I mean, they had the whole set-up; he had all his miniature utensils, like they must do it often because they had all the stuff. Alright, and you know, and his playroom trains, I mean, I knew he liked to play trains here, but now that's why. He has a ton of trains, and his mom had it set up so elaborately for him. He even told me. I said, "Did you set up?" and he went "Mom," so I knew that meant mom set it up for him.

Additionally, throughout their focus group conversations, the teachers expressed their increased comfort with the immigrant parents subsequent to the photo narration event. One teacher expressed it this way, "I think that I definitely got insight.... The parents are interested, so that made it another bridge for us to even talk about something else; it definitely gave us something else to talk about."

## Discussion

Revisiting our original purpose, our findings provoke an exploration of how space for the immigrant child's voice was promoted through the photo narrations. Also, the impact of the preschool teachers' interaction with and response to the photos on their cultural awareness necessitates further exploration.

### Hearing the Immigrant Child's Voice

First, this study clearly demonstrated how immigrant children's photos of their context outside of school and their personal stories about these photos provided space for their voice to be both found and heard. As has been found in past research, providing space for a child to tell his or her stories provides the child with a sense of power as well as an opportunity to create an identity within that space (MacBeath, 2006; Rogoff, 1995). This is particularly important for those children crossing cultural borders in the classroom. In their work, *Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender in United States Schools*, Weis and Fine pointed out the necessity of listening to the voices of children and adolescents who were not "centered in our culture" (2005, p. 2) to promote social justice and equity. This present study provides a tool for soliciting and hearing the voices of the immigrant children in our preschools using a familiar venue—photos and stories.

Additionally, in personally constructed narratives such as this photo narration process, the interlocutors are given distinct roles; the teller is the narrator of personal experiences, and the listener seeks to understand what is being told. As has been noted by researchers, the verbal and nonverbal responses of the listener may either encourage the life of the narrative or silence the story (Ochs & Capps, 2001). As the teachers in this study interacted with the children, there were those teachers whose responses silenced the child and those whose responses opened the space for the child to voice words in English previously unheard in that setting.

Children's stories have been found to powerfully provide the hearer a glimpse into their world from their perspective (Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001). Researchers have found people's stories to be effective in bridging understanding between people of different roles, abilities, and cultures—promoting social equity and justice in schools (Weis & Fine, 2000). This study revealed the teachers' and parents' pleasure in seeing and hearing about the child's world, or cultural context, outside of school.

### Enhancing Teacher's Cultural Awareness

Second, the teachers' awareness of inappropriate assumptions or storylines they brought into their interactions with the immigrant children and their

parents was clearly heightened by this experience. The initial focus group data revealed that the teachers moved into this process with the culturally constructed storyline that defined immigrant children as those with limited English language skills whose key obstacle to connection in class with the teacher and students was language. This was revealed in the overwhelming number of statements referring to language and vocabulary, with the teachers' questions regarding the immigrant children centered solely on assisting the children and their parents with English. During the first focus group meeting, the teachers only called these students "English Language Learners" or "those with limited English." Their questions and concerns centered solely on the limitation of language. Their consistent insistence on increased language and vocabulary strategies was prevalent throughout all they said.

The later teacher focus group transcripts revealed a shift in the teachers' descriptions of these children. In the focus groups following the photo narrations the teachers' references to language were fewer as they talked about how they had found that there was something besides language which was inhibiting their connections with these children. Their references to language deficits were replaced by references to the insights they were gaining into the child's context, identity, and roles outside of school. For example, such phrases as "I didn't know" and "This surprised me," followed by references to the child's unique interests and cultural family relationships, were common during the follow-up focus group discussion.

This identification of the immigrant children in their classroom as children who bring a rich and meaningful context into the classroom, not just children with limited English language skills, illustrates a culturally responsive commitment to connecting with individuals who are culturally and socially embedded within learning communities (Gay, 2000). This personifies the NAEYC (2009) commitment to provide all children a welcoming environment that respects diversity. This was introduced to these teachers not in a diversity workshop training session but within the natural preschool teachers' familiar setting of photos and storytelling.

Furthermore, this renewed awareness also seemingly sensitized the teachers' recognition of how, as they appealed to their own background instead of the child's background, some of their attempts to connect with the immigrant children were more disconnections than connections. The teachers' driving need to bring understanding and teaching to the situation seemed to disconnect them from the child's storyline. Cazden (2001), in her careful study of classroom discourse, suggested that one obstacle to a child's sharing his or her story in a classroom was what was observed in this study, the teacher's agenda. She further remarked that the teacher may approach a conversation with the child:



as an opportunity to teach particular academic frames of reference, shifting children's discourse not only toward putting more of their experiences into words, but toward different aspects of that experience, thereby hoping to influence not only conventions of form but also conventions about meanings that are valued in school. (Cazden, 2001, p. 20)

During their second focus group, teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with some of their attempts to understand the immigrant children as they recounted surprise revelations within the photo narrations. In response to their reflective dialogue, they collectively vowed to listen and hear more from these children in the future. This verbalized frustration and strategic plan to listen more revealed an enhanced level of awareness of their cultural mismatches within interactions with immigrant children and the power inherent in offering the children time to talk about their lives. Villegas and Lucas (2002) labeled this necessary awareness as "sociocultural consciousness" as opposed to "sociocultural dysconsciousness" (p. 33), suggesting this to be the vital link in effective culturally responsive pedagogy.

### **Connecting With Immigrant Families**

Third, the teachers' dialogue concerning their intention to become better acquainted with the immigrant children's parents shifted noticeably from feeling fearful because of limited language to a strong desire to interact with the parents to find out more about their lives. This is illustrated by the following quote from one of the teachers as she talked during a spring focus group:

I found [at the beginning] that I felt intimidated sometimes because—there was one dad in particular, when he talks, I have to listen to every word because it's so hard. So I think that is part of the problem with the adults sometimes—we can't always understand each other...I think I definitely got insight [through the photos]. The parents are interested, so that made it another bridge for us to even talk about.

Additionally, there was a noticeable shift in the teachers' questions. In the first focus group they asked the researcher to find out about the families without initiating the pursuit of any answers themselves. In the second focus group the teachers explored ways to better communicate with the families and to find time to get together to listen to them.

The teachers' intense desire to become better acquainted with the parents was reflected in their appeal to the researchers to assist them in bridging the communication between themselves and the parents by facilitating a parents' night with these families. Whereas the efficacy of the home visit in early childhood arenas has been effectively utilized in such programs as Head Start,

recent discourse on the inconsistent results of this process suggests crafting new approaches that provide additional help for the increasingly diverse family population (Weikart, 2003). Also, it has been noted that immigrant populations introduce complexity of language and cultural nuances that limit the effectiveness of home visits by teachers (Ginsberg, 2007). The photo narrations in this study provided a glimpse into the home and family life of each child outside of school through the child's eyes. Through this process the teachers expressed an enhanced ability to connect with the parents after seeing the photos with the children. This home-school connection is an important component in facilitating the learning process of these immigrant children and therefore requires further investigation and pursuit.

## Conclusion

Many immigrant preschoolers struggle to learn and communicate in their classrooms, while preschool teachers are challenged to effectively facilitate the necessary responsiveness for learning to occur. In light of the recent focus on academic accountability and the value of early childhood education, it is important that research continue to explore ways to enhance understanding between immigrants and teachers and to strengthen connections between the immigrant child's home and school contexts (NAEYC, 2009). The present study addresses this need by introducing how six teachers in one preschool took familiar preschool tools of the classroom world—photos and stories—and effectively found connections with the unfamiliar—the world of the immigrant child.

The results suggest two key implications. First, this study introduces a novel approach that can be used as an effective tool for culturally responsive pedagogy professional development among preschool teachers. Photo narrations, with the use of the children's photos and voices, provide the opportunity for teachers to become aware of their assumptions or storylines they bring into their interactions with children from backgrounds different from their own by using two familiar tools: photos and stories. We suggest that this approach may provide a natural tool for enhancing self-awareness of cultural presupposition, a key component of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Second, using the camera in this way may provide teachers with a feasible way to get a glimpse into the child's world in such a way as to better connect with immigrant children and their families. The camera usage provided an out-of-school contextual record, as seen by the children. The photo narrations provided the teachers in this study with what they called "the virtual home visit." Thus, this process controlled for teacher observational bias by placing both the words and the perspective into the hands of the child and opened the child's world outside of school to the teacher.

As literature has suggested, schools and teachers who build relationships with each child and his or her family encourage learning (Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Therefore, as the camera and photo narrations may encourage learning, it may be suggested that the photo narration process explored in this study may facilitate at-risk learners as well as immigrant children's entrances and relationships into new schools and classrooms. This calls for further investigation.

In conclusion, one teacher, struggling to find a way to express her surprise and overall wonder at how much she had gleaned throughout this study, appealed to her experience with the Narnia story (Lewis, 1950/2002). As she looked around the room searching for the right words, she finally concluded that this study had given her, for the first time, the opportunity to "walk through the closet, feel the fur, and enter into the child's world." For that, she said she was eternally grateful.

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