Seeing how to ask first: Photo elicitation motivates English language learners to write

Photos prompt middle grades English language learners to reflect upon and write about their lives.

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"Mara Salvatrucha"

"Mara" means "gang." "Salvatrucha" means "really angry." Gangsters. They are bad people because sometimes they kill someone. … They ask teenagers if they want to join the gang. Teenagers join a gang so they could have more people to fight or protect them. … Gangs sometimes cause trouble in school because they bring knives … [and] bring and buy drugs in school. … I don't get involved in gangs because I don't want my parents to feel badly. … If I do something bad, then maybe I'd have to go to jail. I'd like to be a doctor.

—Miguel

Miguel was an eighth grader who had recently moved from El Salvador with his family to our exurban community. For the first few months of the school year, Miguel struggled to participate and complete assignments in our English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class, but he began to engage with writing tasks when we relied on image-based inquiries into his relationship to school as the starting point for our lessons. He was motivated to attend our class and attempt our assignments when he was able to both show and tell why he came to school and what helped or hindered his attendance and achievement.

The photo image Miguel took (see Figure 1) and the related reflection he wrote allowed us to know more about why he was distracted in school. Furthermore, they help illustrate a potential solution to the disengagement crisis we face with English language learners (ELLs)

in language arts. We have learned that using image-based methods to *ask* young adolescents about their relationships to school—instead of only *telling* them about school's importance—helps them to appreciate the writing tasks in which we ask them to engage. In this article, we discuss the positive effects these photo elicitation inquiries have had on our students' growth as proficient writers and how these activities have raised their awareness of reasons to care about school.

Language dropouts

Miguel is a part of a dramatic demographic shift in our exurban, commuter community, located beyond the first ring suburbs of a major mid-Atlantic U.S. city. In 2000, fewer than 6% of the 900 students in our middle school were classified as ELLs, compared to approximately 50% in 2012. These young adolescents are arriving from as close as other less affordable suburbs and from as far away as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Sri Lanka. All of our ELL students are non-native English speakers and youth of color. Many are also inconsistent school attendees, in part, because our city borders one that has been actively deporting "illegal" immigrants. Often, these youth are afraid to come to school, and their families are cautious about drawing the attention of truancy reports. These factors contribute to the risk that these young adolescents will disengage from our classes and eventually drop out, or be "pushed out" of our schools (Children's Defense Fund, 2008; Greene & Winters, 2005). In fact,

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This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Value Young Adolescents, Meaningful Learning, Multiple Learning Approaches

Figure 1 Miguel, an eighth grader from El Salvador, provided this photo to accompany his writing.

the national dropout rate for ELL students in 2009 was 40%–60% (NCES, 2009).

Sadly, these grim dropout realities are no longer shocking to us, given our students' struggles with school and literacy. While most of the 14 eighth graders in this ESOL class appeared to be on track for graduation, they were, on average, reading at a second grade level. Much research reveals how students' literacy development plays a primary role in their decisions to remain in school (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). More recent studies have documented how schools' curricular responses to diverse populations' low traditional literacy rates contribute to overall school disengagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Zenkov, 2009). In addition, the cross-generational nature of school detachment has resulted in increased "aliteracy" among diverse urban community members: Our students and their family members often *can* read and write, but they frequently choose *not* to do so (Ivey & Broaddus, 2007).

Image-based methods in literacy instruction

Each year it seems more likely that ELL students will become just another uptick in the low literacy achievement and dismal graduation statistics, and every year we become more concerned about their lack of success in language arts class. We reached a point at which we had to wonder what motivated our students even to come to school. We realized we had little to lose by calling on them to tell and show us what they believed

about school. However, these students already struggled to read and write, so we could not simply ask them to write or orally answer questions about the purpose of school and factors that support or impede their success.

We also knew that these students "got" images in ways that schools rarely appreciated (Chicola & Smith, 2006). In response, we looked to current concepts of multi-modal literacy for a curricular framework through which we might engage these seemingly unmotivated students (Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2009). These notions of literacy suggest that schools should rely more on types of texts with which diverse students are proficient, including visual and digital media (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Morrell, 2007). Image-based tools have proven to be highly engaging for at-risk youth and capable of providing difficult-to-access information about young adolescents' perspectives (Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003; Van Horn, 2008 [Editor's note: See also Rajni Shankar-Brown's article in the November 2011 issue of *Middle School Journal*]). Research suggests that image-based tools promote students' abilities to share insights about school that language-centered methods cannot (Kroeger et al., 2004; Raggl & Schratz, 2004). Moreover, the use of these tools supports literacy curriculum that is exploratory, integrative, and relevant to students' interests (National Middle School Association, 2010).

Photo elicitation pedagogy

These insights into diverse adolescents' literacies led to the development and implementation of the curricular and research tools we used for this project. We used photo elicitation techniques with ELL middle grades students to explore their perspectives on curricula, pedagogy, and school in general (Harper, 2005; Streng et al., 2004). We provided participants with digital "point and shoot" cameras and instructed them in the basics of camera operation. We worked with these students in our language arts block for about three months, asking them to use the photo elicitation process to address three questions with images and reflections:

1. What is the purpose of school?

2. What helps you to be successful in school?

3. What gets in the way of your school success?

Each student was asked to shoot 10 to 25 images prior to each of approximately 15 project meetings held during our language arts class. From more than

3,000 pictures, our 14 students eventually selected approximately 50 photos (3 or 4 each) as illustrations of what they believed were their best or most intriguing responses to the project questions. We discussed these pictures in one-to-one and small-group sessions as part of an elicitation process, asking questions such as "Why did you take this picture?" and "What do you like about this photograph?" (Marquez-Zenkov, 2007). In most cases, we recorded and transcribed students' oral reactions to these images; students drafted the transcriptions into paragraph-length reflections, and we eventually helped them edit their writings about these selected photos.

Photo elicitation study

Research methods

The writing project was accompanied by a research project in which we used multi-stage qualitative and visual analysis methods (Kress, 2006; Rose, 2006; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001) to identify themes that led us to the findings of this article (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). We collected data during the one-to-one and small-group discussions with students.

Rather than telling our ELL students why school and our literacy tasks should matter to them, we first asked them to document what they believed about school via photographs and writing.

Each of this article's authors studied all the photo/reflection combinations, recording the subjects of the images, the topics addressed in students' writings, and documentations of our photo elicitation conversations with youth. Based on these examinations, we began to identify themes that appeared across these data sets (Have, 2003; Pole, 2004). As a result of this content analysis—as well as the post-project session conversations among the authors—we established that writing instruction practices were among the most frequently mentioned topics in these data.

Because the students were in the classes the first and second authors were co-teaching, we were able to meet with most of them on a regular basis, even after the conclusion of our project. During these interactions we conducted informal member checks (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002), sharing the themes we had identified with the students who had created the image/reflection combinations that served as key evidence of those themes. All the topics we discuss in this article are ones these young people agreed were accurate representations of the ideas they were either explicitly or unintentionally depicting in their photographs and related writings.

Throughout the project, students described the qualities of our language class pedagogies that they perceived as supporting or impeding their achievement. In the following sections, we use students' reflections and visual data to describe and illustrate three categories of findings and implications that relate to young adolescents' motivation and literacy instruction: the notion of an "ask first" approach to writing instruction, the utility of other young adolescents' images as "ways in" to writing, and the necessity of moving beyond the classroom to engage young people in personally meaningful writing activities. Each of these themes holds instructional implications for teachers working with ELLs.

Finding 1: *Asking* ELLs to write

Our students were most motivated to write when we worked with them in one-to-one writing conferences and "asked first." That is, rather than telling our ELL students why school and our literacy tasks should matter to them, we first asked them to document what they believed about school via photographs and writing. We initially invited students to respond independently to the project's core questions through a handout we provided. But it was only when we worked with them one-to-one that these usually reticent learners engaged with this writing task and demonstrated their hidden capacities for writing.

Students frequently shared powerful and unexpected insights about motivational factors related to their school success. For example, some students revealed that their primary school and life mentors were local gang members. These family and community members were trusted experts on the importance of succeeding in school because they were living the consequences of not graduating from high school. Students also identified

difficulties with English as an obstacle to their school engagement and success but, again, not in the way we expected. Alex, who had recently arrived from Sri Lanka, illustrated with a photograph of picture books and young adult literature from his home country (see Figure 2) the motivational and language challenges he was facing. He explained in the following reflection:

Figure 2 Alex provided a photo of books from his homeland, Sri Lanka.

"My Name Is Short"

In Sri Lanka, my name is short and everyone can pronounce it. However, in America, my name is long and difficult to pronounce so nobody can say it correctly. When I do an assignment for class, I have to make sure there is a space provided for my name. Otherwise, I need to add a space so people will know it is my name and not just a word. … Sometimes I cannot understand what Americans are talking about because there are a lot of differences between American and British English. … Sometimes the teacher just says, "Read the book." I can read, but I cannot understand everything I read.

—Alex

Our students were interested in answering the questions we posed about their relationships to school. However, asking them to compose their responses independently— even after they had discussed potential answers in class— was an impediment to their engagement in these writing tasks. Alex's reflection above is a rich example of the writing that results from the instruction processes that we have found to be most successful with ELL students. Alex produced this paragraph—one of the most complex, detailed, and authentic we saw from him during our

year of working together—only after a combination of whole-class and several one-to-one interactions with the authors.

In response to the writing challenges Alex and other ELL students were facing, we began the writing process by gathering some ideas about their responses to the project questions through a whole-group discussion. This open-ended whole-class discussion provided students with a foundation from which they could each compose independently. We then worked one-to-one with a student—Alex, in this case—to draft a written response using one of their images as inspiration. We spent several classes in these individual conferences, prompting youth to examine their photos from different angles, while continuing to discuss them in whole-group, small-group, and think-pair-share formats. These activities provided many ideas that helped motivate students to begin writing and allowed them to forget their negative identities as writers.

Finding 2: Others' images as engaging "ways in"

We also learned how to use peers' work to spark student engagement and help them appreciate writing activities. We shared with our students examples of what other young adults from around the United States had described and illustrated about their own relationships to school. Using an activity we developed for this project (see Appendix A), we drew on images from previous versions of our project conducted in similarly diverse settings. This tool called upon young adolescents to identify which of the project questions they thought several images were intended to address.

These other adolescents' photographs clearly were relevant to our students. The students in our class seemed to be motivated by the fact that these images represented some of the issues that also concerned them. Analyzing these photos helped our students recognize that photos leave a great deal of room for interpretation. They also started to appreciate that one person's impression of an image is not necessarily any more "right" than another's explanation. These open-ended brainstorming and composition activities were tremendously appealing to our students and useful for them as writers.

This photograph interpretation and elicitation activity also provided our students with "ways in" to their ideas that they had not yet discovered. For example, while we knew that gangs were a concern for our students,

it was only when we shared pictures from other young people encountering similar conflicts that they wrote openly about their own gang worries. Similar to Alex, who wrote about how language impeded his ability to engage with and find success in our language arts class, other students surprised us with their uncharacteristic perspectives on what many would consider a stereotypical concern. Juan was a recent immigrant from El Salvador who brought to class an image of a gun on a computer screen (see Figure 3). He accompanied this photograph with a description of how gang-related racism got in the way of his school success and how teachers might help to address these apprehensions.

Figure 3 Juan used a photo of a gun to tell about gang violence and racism.

"Guns and Racism in the United States"

I am scared that I might get shot … because several of my friends are in gangs and have access to guns. Also, I am scared of … other kids in the school, because some of them are racist towards Hispanic students. One time my friends and I were walking in the hallway, and a group of kids approached us. They said, "Get the @#$% out of America, you stupid Hispanics!" … These students had knives on them. I think teachers need to talk about these issues with students.

—Juan

It was troubling to us that the students who most often represented such threats to our ESOL students were from the shrinking white minority in our school. Through the photo elicitation process, we learned a great deal about the everyday difficulties our students were facing. In response to the issues Juan and his ELL classmates

depicted, we held discussions with both our ESOL and non-ESOL students about the negative impacts of harassment and how to react in positive, effective ways.

After viewing and discussing relevant images and writings from other youth, Juan was willing to engage with writing activities in ways that he had not previously done. He also revealed a factor that motivated many of our students to show up for school—the ability to fit in rather than feel threatened or judged. Allowing these young adolescents to preview other students' work helped them see what was expected of them with our project, and this clarity of expectations motivated them in school—an institution that is often as foreign to them as the new language they are learning.

Finding 3: Walking—*photo* walking—beyond our classroom

Venturing beyond our classroom to provide real-world contexts for image-based writing assignments also served as a motivating activity for our ELL students. We escorted students on multiple "photo walks" throughout the school and into the community, during which they took photographs that they then reflected on in light of the project questions. Students appreciated moving beyond our ESOL classroom, especially since the school and its activities often seemed irrelevant to them and their families. This activity seemed to intrigue our students because it created an even larger space for the incorporation of their lives and voices into the language arts curriculum.

By taking the project cameras into their homes and communities, students were able to see that many things in their lives outside school had an impact on their successes and failures in our language arts setting. Lillian, a student from Guatemala who was still learning English after several years in the United States, committed a considerable amount of time to revising the reflection "No, Thank You," which accompanied an image of a local police officer's badge (see Figure 4).

"No, Thank You."

One day I was at the library, and I found my brother's friends, and they said, "Do you want to come to my girlfriend's house?" I said, "No, thank you." … And [one of the boys] got mad and said, "You better come,"… and then he pushed me down and said, "Walk." I was crying, and he said, "You better be quiet."… Then he saw an old man. … [M]y brother's friend pulled out his knife and said

to the old man, "If you move, you are going to die. … Take off your shoes." The old man said, "No." He said, "I said 'Take off your shoes.'" The old man said, "Okay." My brother's friends said, "The police are coming. Run, Lillian." And I ran fast.

—Lillian

Figure 4 A photo of a police badge accompanied Lillian's reflection titled "No, Thank You."

Because we had witnessed the power of using peers' images and writing as a "way in" to promote writing engagement, we decided to invite Lillian to share this story with her classmates. We marveled at how involved they were in the resulting discussion about making wise choices and why they might value formal education.

While they had often been unmotivated about writing tasks in our classes, our students discovered a greater confidence in their composition skills through our willingness to let the outside world be a part of our curriculum. Their increased engagement and improved writing performance helped support their success with writing activities throughout the rest of the school year. Students repeatedly demonstrated a newfound awareness that they could question and analyze the academic and life challenges they were encountering. More importantly, they displayed the ability to devise and articulate potential solutions to these difficulties orally and in writing.

Conclusion

Through this project, our ELL students provided us with many insights into instructional practices they identified as effective and into their relationships to school in general. The greatest aid to their motivation and academic success was developing an awareness of the factors that supported them in school, which was the focus of our photography and literacy project (Dutro, 2009). We came to understand that when students answer questions about their relationships to school with photographs, they are motivated to write, because visual materials are powerful and safe starting points for the composing process (Ajayi, 2009). Their images and reflections revealed that our dreams for their school engagement and success had become theirs as well.

Perhaps most important, the photo-driven writing process we employed allowed our ELL students to see beyond their negative identities as writers and students. We found ELL youth may engage more deeply with writing tasks and grow more as writers when they consider how out-of-school realities relate to their everyday lives. More specifically, they may engage and grow more when they see these realities in our classrooms through their own images. Middle grades ELLs, too often, are invisible in historically white schools and communities, appearing only as statistics in high school dropout rates. Image-based writing strategies challenge this invisibility and motivate ELL students to become aware of their own reasons to write. As a result, they appear to be more conscious of their potential as writers in our classes, as students in our schools, and as citizens in our shared nation.

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"Matching Others' Images"

Name: _____ Date: _____

Consider the photographs below as answers to the project questions. Decide which question you think each image addresses. A picture may answer more than one of the project questions. Explain why you think each photograph answers each question or questions.

Photograph #1　　　　**Photograph #2**　　　　**Photograph #3**

Photograph #1 answers the following question(s):
What is the purpose of school? What supports your success in school?
What things get in the way of your success in school?

_____

_____

_____

Photograph #2 answers the following question(s):
What is the purpose of school? What supports your success in school?
What things get in the way of your success in school?

_____

_____

_____

Photograph #3 answers the following question(s):
What is the purpose of school? What supports your success in school?
What things get in the way of your success in school?

_____

_____

_____