

**“Mexicans are like thieves and bad people, and we’re not really like that”:
Immigrant Youth Use Photovoice to Counter Racism and Discrimination**

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Abstract

One of the fastest growing segments of the student population in the U.S. includes students from immigrant backgrounds. However, there is a lack of research about how school counselors can access and listen to the voices of these youth. This article seeks to add to the existing research on multicultural school counseling for immigrant youth with a focus on students in middle school and proposes photovoice as a culturally responsive method of working with students. Photovoice is a participatory action research method used with marginalized youth that serves to empower participants to represent their point of view and everyday lived realities. The findings from the study include three themes which school counselors can learn from and act upon in their daily work with immigrant youth: middle school immigrant students' feelings of discrimination, the strengths and assets of their immigrant families, and the need for more support from school counselors.

Keywords: immigrant youth, multicultural counseling, photovoice

**“Mexicans are like thieves and bad people, and we’re not really like that”:
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Student demographics in the U.S. continue to show an increase in the enrollment of immigrant children in public school systems. “About 10.2 million of all students enrolled in public schools, or slightly more than 20%, speak a language other than English at home” (Fry & Gonzales, 2008, p. 11). While immigrant students provide new energy and ideas to a new school community, they also might face potential obstacles in their transition to their new schools and home communities that school counselors need to be mindful of and attentive to in their outreach and advocacy. Some obstacles students might face include adjustment issues such as transgenerational trauma (Phipps & Degges-White, 2014), conflict during racial and ethnic identity formation (Iwamoto, Negi, Partiali, & Creswell, 2013), racial microaggressions (Gabriel, 2015a, 2015b; Nadal, Escobar, Prado, David, & Haynes, 2012), and depression (Yeh, Borrero, & Tito, 2013). The authors of this article have worked with immigrant youth in different capacities such as a counselor, as teachers, as a Hispanic youth advocate, as a school principal, and as the chair of a department of counselor education in a university setting. We have supported immigrant students in dealing with difficult adjustment issues they have faced and have felt compelled to undertake participatory action research with immigrant youth in our own work as multicultural educators.

In the past, educational researchers have reviewed guidelines and structures in place to determine gaps in their practice in order to create competencies to address the needs of their increasingly diversified student clientele (Sue, Arredondo, & Davis, 1992). More recently, within the field of multicultural counseling, counselors have tried to

address these student needs through creating opportunities for additional research on how to reach out to families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds (Clauss-Ehlers, 2012; Nadal et al., 2012; Nilsson, Barazanji, Heintzelman, Siddiqi, & Shilla, 2012). This work has been informed by the larger field of educational research that highlights the role schools can play in improving academic engagement and achievement for immigrant youth, ways to improve school-family-community partnerships, and a better understanding of the process of identity formation for immigrant youth (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010; Guerra & Nelson, 2013; Holdaway & Alba, 2009; Suarez-Orozco, Onaga, & Lardemelle, 2010, Suarez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009).

One specific area within the field counseling that needs to be addressed further when working with immigrant youth is the development of what Sue et al.(1992) call “a culturally skilled counselor” who can actively “understand the worldview of his or her culturally different client without negative judgments” (p. 481). There are multiple ways for school counselors to heighten their development and capacity as multicultural counselors as they work to create a more complete understanding of immigrant students’ experiences in schools, especially concerning obstacles they face in terms of discrimination, racism, and deficit-driven discourse (Cammarota & Aguilera, 2012; Fergus, 2009; Gabriel, 2015a, 2015b; Yosso, 2002). Gabriel (2015b), for example, describes the racialized experiences of middle and high school Latina youth in which these immigrant students encountered negative racial comments and slurs and were discriminated against within their schools and communities. She highlights the deficit discourses that are used when school personnel define students based on their

weaknesses instead of their strengths and the importance of counter-narratives and counter-stories to these deficit discourses.

Although the fastest growing segment of the student population in the U.S. is the population of students from immigrant backgrounds (Fry & Gonzales, 2008; Passel, 2011; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014), there is a lack of research on how school counselors can better engage and listen to the voices of these youth. This article seeks to add to the existing research on multicultural counseling for immigrant youth with a focus on students in middle school (Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Patterson, 2005; Smith-Adock, Daniels, Lee, & Villalba, 2006; Thorn & Contreras, 2005) by proposing photovoice as a culturally responsive method of engaging and learning about students' needs related to their immigrant experience.

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

Immigrant Youth and Multicultural Counseling

Students in middle school face a host of issues and obstacles in their social-emotional growth including bullying, insecurity in their identity formation, and a lack of perceived support and connection to their schools and communities. For immigrant youth, these struggles are exacerbated by racism, discrimination, and even hostility they might face in their daily lives both in and out of school. Efforts to support immigrant youth in middle school then are particularly important in that they can possibly re-center the stories of these youth through active listening and attention to their voices (Doda & Knowles, 2008), encouragement of their re-engagement within their local and school communities (Bland & Carrington, 2009; Pritzker, LaChapelle, & Tatum, 2012), and the prevention of truancy and dropout through community-based action (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009).

One important focus of the work of counselors working with immigrant youth is the explicit challenge of deficit discourse frequently faced in schools and communities. Deficit discourse includes negative stereotypes relating to race, language, and education (Cammarota & Aguilera, 2012) which often collide for these youth particularly in their communities and school settings (Gabriel, 2015a) and also within popular media (Yosso, 2002). By engaging in outreach and advocacy that seeks to disrupt these common, yet problematic narratives about immigrant youth, multicultural counselors can begin to develop within middle school youth a language and a process for creating their own counter-stories or counter-texts that empower these youth, decolonizes their frames of thinking and critically engages these youth who all too frequently feel

alienated by schools and local communities (Freire, 1970; McInerney, 2009; Sanchez, 2010; Smith, 1999).

As school counselors strive to serve a multicultural school community, it is important that they be culturally responsive to the youth, parents, and communities that they work with as well as position themselves to be advocates for social change (Sue et al., 1992). Additionally, counselors should consider ways they can better connect with and build emerging understandings of immigrant youth in ways that are authentic, racially and culturally competent, and ultimately humanizing for all participants in the counseling process (Gay, 2010; Nadal et al., 2012; Paris, 2011; Seidl, 2007; Teel & Obidah, 2008). Relationships with students can be built and strengthened by counselors if they create opportunities for students to develop strategies for new and positive pathways for themselves as well as seeing their own agency for initiating change for social justice (Green, McCollum, & Hays, 2008; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010).

Participatory Action Research and Photovoice

Participatory action research can be a powerful vehicle for helping students to combat social injustice in their lives (Torre, Fine, Alexander, & Genao, 2007) and helping students to “image themselves” otherwise (Bell & Desai, 2011). Counselors can use participatory action research to empower students to seek out answers to questions that vex them, to implement action-based research grounded within local schools and communities, and to share the findings of their research with fellow students, their parents, teachers, and members of the local community (Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010; Stovall & Delgado, 2009). Participatory action research can be potentially

transformative for all participants in that it asks for active engagement and for participants to take action and to create change within existing systems (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010; Smith, Davis, & Bhowmik, 2010; Streng, Rhodes, Ayala, Eng, Arceo, & Phipps, 2004; Torre, 2005).

Photovoice is a participatory action research process that allows its participants to tell their own stories through photography, through exhibitions, and through public presentations at schools or in local community settings. Originally used within the field of public health to provide opportunities for marginalized populations to express themselves (Wang, 1999), photovoice has also been used to help empower members of the homeless community, youth in after-school organizations, and pregnant and parenting teens (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Wang, Cash, & Power, 2000) and has increasingly been used within schools, both within classrooms (Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001; Ho, Rochelle, & Yuen, 2011; Kaplan & Howes, 2004; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009) and as part of school counseling and outreach programs (Gubrium & Torres, 2013; Hannay, Dudley, Milan, & Leibovitz, 2013; Smith, Bratini, & Appio, 2012).

Photovoice empowers participants by giving them opportunities to represent, state, and claim their unique point of view and everyday lived realities through photographic images they themselves take (Delgado, 2012; Kaplan & Howes, 2004). As they do so individually and as a group it allows participants to begin to name, describe, and analyze what is happening in their own lives at home, at school, and in their local communities (Luttrell, 2010). A stronger sense of community support is formed when participants find commonality within their own experiences, learn to better understand one another as they share their stories, and collectively begin to consider possible

solutions and strategies to address obstacles they have faced in their lives (Bates, 2010; Gosessling & Doyle, 2009; Gold, 2007). As part of photovoice, participants are also asked to create public posters, presentations, and slideshows with text that they write that explains the images and themes of their work with their school and community members.

Through these photovoice projects, participants utilize a creative process to share and discuss what is most important in their lives with people around them (Greene, Burke, & McKenna, 2013), and the projects creates a space where “everybody’s teaching and everybody’s learning” (Smith, Bratini, & Appio, 2012, p. 11). Photovoice provides catalytic effects for social action by all stakeholders involved in each project including counselors, teachers, students, and members of the school and local community (Becker, Lambert, Reiser, & Covello, 2014; Griebing, Vaughn, Howell, Ramstetter, & Dole, 2013). Based in this literature review, our research question became: As we employ the photovoice method with middle school immigrant youth, what more can we learn to better serve these students based in their sociopolitical histories as immigrant students in a school district in the mountain west region of the United States?

Method

The year-long photovoice project described in this article was created to provide teachers, counselors, administrators, and support staff in the Mountain Valley School District (MVSD) schools with information about immigrant students and their families enrolled within the district (all names of places and people have been made anonymous). The research project was a collaborative effort between MVSD and a

neighboring university. The university was invited in to conduct the research at the request of district administrators as they sought insight to better understand and support immigrant students. The data collection process sought to both empower and engage immigrant students and families in the MVSD to share their own stories and backgrounds of their move to the MVSD through photographs, narratives, interviews, and community engagement.

This article reports findings from work with recent immigrant students enrolled at Lewis Middle School (LMS), one of the sites of a larger photovoice project conducted with immigrant students and parents within the MVSD. All LMS participants were enrolled in sheltered English classes based on their English as a Second Language (ESL) identification. The research team created and conducted workshop sessions where students were asked to express themselves through photographs they took of themselves and their home communities. Student participants were also asked about the challenges and opportunities they faced as recent arrivals within the school district.

Researchers

The project research team consisted of two faculty members from a university setting, a coordinator of diversity for the MVSD, a doctoral student in counselor education, and three cultural mediators who came from the cultural communities of the student participants. *Cultural mediator* is the name of a school-based position held by members of the cultural group who work to bridge home and school communication. The cultural mediators worked on a weekly basis with the student participants both in school as part of their academic support team and outside of school as part of the community support team provided by the school district. The two faculty members were

male while the coordinator of diversity, doctoral student, and three cultural mediators were female.

Prior to the collection of data, research team members met repeatedly to discuss potential ways in which their potential biases might impact the research they conducted and the eventual data analysis (Creswell, 2013). Throughout these phases of the project, members of the research team discussed the importance of keeping in mind the ethical nature of their work with students (Banks, 2010; Bantsleer, 2010; Leadbetter, Barrister, Benoit, Jansson, Marshall, & Riecken, 2006) and the ways in which their position as researchers were complicated by issues of power, ethics, and politics (Harley, 2012) especially with students from marginalized populations within the school and local community (McAreavey & Das, 2013). For example, teachers, at times, made negative comments about the abilities of the immigrant students in the study. As members of the research team we deliberated possible solutions to these negative remarks, considered elements of power and politics as we were researchers external to the school, and wanted to support the students' access to learning. We felt students would have more opportunity, and we would be more effective, if we stayed at the school site and modeled supportive strategies for high expectations and inclusive educational practices instead of talking directly to the teachers about the negative comments. During the data analysis phases of the project, members of the research team consciously sought to "come clean" and identify the ways in which their personal views and perspectives might have affected their coding and thematic analysis of the data (Yeh & Inman, 2007).

Participants

Ten middle school students (6 male students and 4 female students) participated in this study. All students were enrolled as ESL students at Lewis Middle School and had arrived in the U.S. within the last two years at the time of the study. Seven of the ten students had emigrated from Mexico with their families or by themselves to live with aunts and uncles in Mountain Valley and the other three came from Korea, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia with their immediate family. All students were between 12 and 14 years of age and were enrolled in the school's free and reduced lunch program. Students qualified for free and reduced lunch based upon parent and/or caregiver total income and also the number of members within a family living in the household.

Procedure

All LMS student participants attended six 3-hour sessions in which they analyzed visual images, discussed and practiced using principles of photography and design, took their own photographs of important images and moments within their own lives, and began to write their own text to accompany their photographs. During these weekly meetings, project facilitators sought to create a welcoming environment that allowed these middle school students the opportunity to share about their experiences openly, to talk with one another about their experiences in school, and to create a supportive and positive space in which they could identify the ways in which the school, its teachers, its counselors and fellow class members were creating a positive and welcoming environment for them in which to learn.

In between classes, middle school participants were asked to take photographs at home and at their school with the cameras they were provided to document their lives

in and out of school, and their hopes for their educational futures. Students took these photographs during the week and then brought their memory cards and cameras to weekly meetings where the photographs were digitally displayed. Participants then took turns discussing the visual imagery and personal meaning behind each shared image. Once student participants felt comfortable taking photographs and writing about their personal experiences and stories, workshop facilitators asked them to create and design their own photovoice posters.

The project culminated with a month-long exhibition of the work created and presented by project participants, including poster presentations by immigrant students and their parents. A special reception was held half-way through the exhibition with about 250 audience members and project participants in attendance in order to celebrate the overall project, to share the posters they had created, and to have a community discussion about the contexts of reception for immigrant students in the district and larger community.

The present study was part of a larger qualitative research project that included work with immigrant parents and immigrant students from the elementary, middle school, and high school levels. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board located at the university of the two faculty project members. Student participants and their parents signed informed consent forms that were translated into every language spoken by participants in the study. Participants were not paid any money for their participation in the project, but were given a laminated copy of their final photovoice poster. The poster was mounted on foam board so that they could have a permanent copy of their work during the overall project.

Data Analysis

Participant narratives embedded within the photovoice project posters and shared during individual interviews were analyzed using constant comparison analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Constant comparison analysis is a method used to engage two sets of data to find similar themes. Individual incidents within the data were compared and contrasted with other incidents and related themes were grouped to aid in the understanding of processes involved in the experience of participants across multiple photos, written narratives, and individual interviews (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). Three levels of coding were used in the data analysis process including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. These codes were used to write frequent memos that identified evidence-based themes represented by participants within this research project (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

We implemented several validation procedures to ensure the validity of themes analyzed in this study. For example, we made sure to conduct member checks throughout the process as we repeatedly met with student participants over the extended period of the study to continually review posters and discuss emerging themes. We also conducted a final interview with each student and parent participant to ensure that they felt their text matched the photographs they took to represent their personal stories.

Results

In response to our earlier posed research question, (As we employ the photovoice method with middle school immigrant youth, what more can we learn to better serve these students based in their sociopolitical histories as immigrant students

in a school district in the mountain west region of the United States?), we found three main themes connected to the learning unveiled through the photovoice process.

Theme 1: Feelings of Discrimination

Student participants in the photovoice project repeatedly referred to feelings of discrimination, acts of racism, and loneliness as part of their experiences as immigrants and English language learners at LMS. In many different ways, they spoke powerfully about being disconnected from their fellow students, their teachers, and local communities because of their status as newcomers to the U.S.

Students described experiences of acts of racism by other students at their school and people in the community as they portrayed immigrant students as being “delinquents,” “thieves,” and “bad people”. Angelito, a 7th grader who emigrated with his family from Mexico to the U.S, shared his thoughts on how he was received when he stated, “It is that here there is a lot of, how do I say it? Racism towards immigrants, the thinking that we are like this, like delinquents.” Angelito was particularly troubled by the idea that he and his family came to the U.S. to improve their own lives and contribute positively to the communities in which they lived, but they were not always treated in this way. He went on to state, “And also, well that is what I wanted to clarify, that also Latinos, as you could call them, Latinos as a whole, we help in, how can I say, to make the United States a better place and they think that we came here to do bad.” What was important to note in Angelito’s response was his statement that people want to describe Latinos as “here to do bad,” but that he sees the inverse of this statement. Within his own family and the larger Latino group with which he self-identifies, he states that Latinos are “here to make the United States a better place.”

Adelita, an 8th grader from Mexico, added that she too wanted to speak out by creating a photovoice poster that belied the negative image people had created in their mind about Mexican immigrants. She explained, “I felt like most of the people in the community have the idea that Mexicans are like thieves and bad people, and we’re not really like that, so I wanted to show that in my poster.” In school too, Adelita experienced feelings of disconnectedness and shared that “When I’m walking and stuff they [other people in school] turn around and say go away and stuff.” In her photovoice poster, Adelita shares both text and photos that illustrate the strengths of her family and her culture through music, food, and cultural events in spite of the negative stereotypes she often faces at school and in the local community. She also wrote the following statement in her poster, “I wish that they [people in the community and at school] would stop thinking that the Mexicans are some sort of bad persons, but that we are very friendly especially my family.” Similar to Angelito’s responses, Adelita points out the negative stereotypes that abound about Mexicans, but rebuts those deficit beliefs by pointing out how Mexican people can actually be “very friendly” especially within her own family.

Khurami, a 7th grader from Yemen, explains how he experiences discrimination through his experiences of being an Arabic speaker. He states, “I want them [his peers in school] to know about us when they talk about us in English, because we are not talking English, and they laugh about us. I want them to not laugh because we are new here, because we just came into the country. Because if they go to my country, they’re gonna be the same.” Khurami here shares how he feels excluded from conversations at school because of his beginning level of English and how other students talk about and

laugh about him and some of his peers in the ESL classes because their use of English is not as strong as that of the native English speakers. He feels quite deeply the laughter and scorn of other students in school and wishes that it would stop. Khurami thoughtfully points out if these same native English language speakers came to his country of Yemen to learn Arabic, they would be in the exact same situation he is currently in of learning a new language and they would face similar difficulties in learning a new language.

Leilah, a 7th grader from Saudi Arabia, captures well the feelings of students who were part of this group when she states, “As a newcomer to the U.S., I sometimes feel nervous, strange, and scared. Every time I try not to be strange. I love when my family and I spend time together.” Here she points out the wide range of emotions she faces as an immigrant student. By virtue of being enrolled in an ESL class, she is already viewed as different from the rest of the student body at Lewis Middle School and tries not to stick out at all when at school. She goes on to share during her interview and within her final photovoice poster that one way in which she finds solace and comfort from the disconnectedness she faces is through her connections to her family and the time that they spend together.

Theme 2: The Strengths and Assets of Immigrant Families

As middle school student participants shared their feelings of facing discrimination, racism, and prejudice, they simultaneously shared stories and ideas about how strong their families were; the strengths, courage, and inspiration they found in being closely connected to their parents and families; and the ways in which members of their family possessed strategies and advice that helped them navigate

their own feelings of loneliness and alienation. In response to the deficit beliefs or disparaging remarks they heard about themselves or their families, they responded with stories based in their family's strengths and assets such as the support and encouragement their families gave them to learn English and be successful in school.

As Angelito began to think more about the use of the term "delinquents" describing Mexican immigrant students and their families, he contradicted those ways of thinking in his final project as he emphasized his own "amazing family" and the ways in which they motivate him to learn English and do well in school. In the photovoice poster he created for the project, Angelito wrote:

I have an amazing family, very funny, very loving, and much more; but what I like most about my family is that we always have a good time...We motivate each other to learn English. What I love most about my immigrant family is that my parents are very special to me, because they are very protective. My mother is very cool, because she is the best!

Angelito shared that Mexican immigrant families like his were not in the U.S. to cause trouble, but to improve their own chances at education, future work, and happiness. When asked what members of the school and local community can do to better support him and his family, he responded in Spanish, "Aceptar que, que somos Mexicanos, que somos latinos, somos como somos (risas)." In English, his statement is translated as "Accept that, that we are Mexicans, that we are Latinos, we are the way we are (laughs)." In the end, Angelito asks quite simply for students at his school and members of the community to accept Mexicans for who they are and not to hold and foster harmful and negative stereotypes.

In response to some of the deficit-oriented comments he heard at school about Mexican immigrant families, Clavo, a 7th grade student from Mexico, emphasized the closeness of his family, the fun things they do together on weekends, and the ways in which they try and stay connected to both their lives in the U.S. and also in Mexico.

Clavo wrote in his poster that:

For my whole family, culture means to stay close together. In the United States I have family and in México there are 15 people in my family. I like my family because sometimes we play together or sometimes we go to the mountains for a walk with my whole family. Every couple of months my family will go back to Mexico and then in a couple more months they come back to the United States. I love my family because they stay with me and my sister; for this reason and many more I love my family.

Throughout his poster and interview, Clavo highlights the simple things he and members of his family do to stay closely connected. He loves his family for all the things they have given to them and because they visit and support him and his sister.

Poignantly he ends his poster with the phrase, “for this reason and many more I love my family.”

Khurami, a 7th grade student from Yemen, writes that being from an immigrant family makes him “nervous because it is the first time I go to an American school.” Being in a new school and being in a new country has been difficult for him in learning a new language, understanding a new school system, and finding new friends. What makes his situation more complex are the ways in which he hears racist and discriminatory comments and how these comments are also nested within larger aspersions about his family being “terrorists” or wanting to do harm in some way. In his poster for the project he writes, “Here is something you wouldn’t know about my

immigrant family - we are civilized and a good family.” In response to discriminatory comments he hears about his family, Khurami reports that he feels compelled to signal to others how “civilized” his family is and their status as a “good family” worthy of respect by others in his school and local community.

Theme 3: The Need for More Support from School Counselors

Middle school participants in the project also wanted to share what they hoped teachers, counselors, school support staff, fellow students, and community members could do to be more accepting and welcoming in schools and within the local community. Students shared different kinds of suggestions including being patient with them as they learn English, providing encouragement and support, and empathizing with the difficulties that accompany learning a new language and moving to a new school and country.

Adelita wrote that her fellow classmates and school staff could support immigrant students by, “Being patient with the way we speak. Be comfortable with us. Not being racist.” Adelita continues that being from an immigrant family makes her “proud of being different from everybody else,” but that she needs people from her school and community to support her in being different and to appreciate the strengths and contributions her family makes to the schools and town in which they now live. Clavo, for example, wrote in his poster that people could support him by:

Helping me learn English, and by listening to me. I like my friends because sometimes we speak English and sometimes Spanish. I like my teacher because she is good to me. She helps me learn English and sometimes helps me with my homework because sometimes I don’t understand the homework.

Elisabeta shared similar ideas on how teachers and fellow students could support her when she wrote:

People can support newcomer students by helping me learn English. They can help me read a book. I appreciate it when my friends help me at school. Do something funny when we play together at lunch time. I appreciate it when my teachers help me at school. Do fun lessons. I love when people tell me I am a good person.

In their responses, both Clavo and Elisabeta underscored their keen desire to learn English and be successful in school but their need for additional support and encouragement from staff in the school building. The need for clear explanation of homework and classwork was a common theme across all participants in the study as well as for teachers who were personally supportive and understanding of the difficulties students faced in their transition to a new language and type of school system. Elisabeta powerfully ends her poster with the idea that “I love when people tell me I am a good person.” Here she is not referring specifically to schools or the classroom, but just the general need for affirming acknowledgement that she is a “good person;” a welcome and valued addition to the school community.

Hyun Jun, a 7th grader from Korea, adds to this idea of the need for a more welcoming and supportive school community. He wrote:

People can support newcomer students by being kind and friendly. I appreciate my friends at school helping me understand hard words. Coming to the U.S. has made me nervous because I can't speak English yet. My teachers sometimes speak words I don't know.

As someone who had just arrived in the U.S. a few days before his involvement in the photovoice project, Hyun Jun shared his concerns about being nervous and

worried about learning English and being included at his new school. He ends his poster circling back to the concerns he has, but also the ways in which friends at school, his teachers, counselors, and others within his school can be an important source of support and encouragement for him.

I like Lewis [LMS] because my friends and teachers are very kind and friendly.

I love my friends and classroom because they are very funny and good.

I want to learn English and fit in at school, but it is very hard.

The three themes that emerged from this study including feelings of discrimination, the strengths and assets of immigrant families, and the need for more support from school counselors are timely, relevant, and useful for schools to hear and respond.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand, through culturally responsive methods, the lived experiences and backgrounds of immigrant students in the site of study. Through the photovoice project, students provided clear examples of racism, discrimination, and alienation they experienced in how their fellow students, teachers, and members of the community treated and spoke to them. They also reported instances of people treating them as if they were ignorant, because they had not yet mastered English and were only beginning to show proficiency in the language. These findings are consistent with existing research that examines the prevalence of deficit-driven discourse for immigrant students and its concomitant impacts upon their emergent identity formation (Fergus, 2009; Cammarota & Aguilera, 2012; Yosso, 2002).

To counter these negative viewpoints and stereotypes, student participants responded with stories and examples of the strengths of their families and the different ways their families tried to be supportive of their education and further schooling.

Participants also underscored that they needed teachers, counselors, and fellow students to be more supportive of them as they continued to learn English as they began their path to academic success within new schools. In engaging in this project, students began to develop their own counter-stories that served to highlight the original deficit-driven discourse they faced and also directly dispute that problematic discourse. Through their participation in the project, students began what Bell and Desai (2011) call being able to “image themselves” otherwise and began to use the photovoice pictures and text to counter the negative stereotypes that abound about them in schools and society.

The photovoice project became a powerful vehicle for students to document, photograph, and write about their lives within their homes, their schools, and their local communities. They were then able to share what they learned with each other, with teachers, counselors, and school staff who worked with them on the project, and with the general public through a month-long exhibition of their posters in the local community. Students were given the opportunity to reflect back on the context of their reception in the U.S., such as when Khurami stated, “I want them to not laugh because we are new here, because we just came into the country.” Additionally, the students were able to express themselves from their own unique point of view through both the photographs they took as well as through the words they chose to write for their posters (Delgado, 2012; Kaplan & Howes, 2004, Luttrell, 2010).

Findings from the study underscored the importance of the photovoice project as a process for building community and mutual understanding specifically within the group of students and more generally within the larger building for teachers, counselors,

administrators, and local community members. Hosting the research project inside the school opened up conversations for educators about their beliefs and understandings of their immigrant students that could be addressed or responded to by the research team. Hosting the Photovoice poster exhibit for a month in the local community and the evening exhibit invited educators within school contexts and members of the local community to re-consider and re-examine the ways in which the students and their families were being welcomed and received. When teachers, principals, school counselors read the students' negative stories of being made fun of for not speaking English well, or their clear and succinct requests for support, they were highly impacted and motivated to create positive changes. Counselors at the middle school where the study was conducted believed these insights could help them as they considered their ongoing work with students, small support groups, and their ability to remind teachers to consider small interventions they can put in place with immigrant students such as those suggested by students in their photovoice posters. As a result of the exhibit and feedback from various stakeholders, assistant superintendents, directors, principals, and teachers were motivated and inspired to learn a more full and representative story of their immigrant student's stories. The participating high school English Language Acquisition team committed to continuing the project at their school on their own.

This project also highlighted the need for the provision of dedicated time and space to do this work and to allow students to share their stories with each other and the larger school and local communities. Through their work together, project participants continually referred to the importance of the project as a vital way of them connecting to one another, supporting one another, and finding possible ways to

address problems and discrimination they continued to face in school and society (Gubrium & Torres, 2013; Gosessling & Doyle, 2009).

Limitations and Thoughts on Future Research

The main limitations to the use of photovoice in schools included the many necessary pieces it took to make it happen in this particular project that may not be possible in all schools. First, our project was made possible by district administration interest in the project and a formal invitation to collaborate. The district internal review board (IRB) process was expedited because of the invitation extended by the school district. Having district approval to complete the research also supported the quick turnaround time of acceptance of the university's IRB process to work with minors. Secondly, having access to grant monies to pay the research team and print the photovoice posters made the financial side of the project possible. Thirdly, we were able to gain access to participants based on the collaborative nature of the study and the roles of those involved. It felt as though many pieces had to align to make this project happen. However, we believe that with an intentional focus on strong partnerships between universities and school districts, schools and school counseling offices can develop these kinds of participatory research projects. Another limitation of the study is that the voices presented in this article are not a full or complete representation of all immigrant students in the U.S. Further research could include another study adding more schools to the project to include immigrant students from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds and from other geographical locations.

Implications

This study has many different implications for the field of multicultural counseling. One implication is the need for counselors who work with middle school students to consider multiple and varied opportunities for these students to share their personal stories either in session or as part of larger groups. The photovoice project used in this study provided middle school students multiple ways to engage in discussions about their lives at home, at school, and in their local communities. By providing these multiple and varied opportunities for engagement through a participatory action research based program, the project and the method employed in the work created a new, alternative space for students where they could freely share concerns, questions, and struggles in their lives and exist within what Smith, Bratini, and Appio (2012) call a space where “everybody’s teaching and everybody’s learning” (p. 11).

This creation of a *third space* (Bhabha, 2004) or a place where students could bridge their seemingly different and separate lives at home, at school, and as immigrants seemed to have a generative effect on students both individually and as a collective. Whereas before the project, it appeared that students did not seem to have a place and time to reflect upon and share their experiences as middle school students at LMS, as recent immigrants to the town in which they lived, and as the objects of racial and xenophobic discrimination, this project provided students both the physical and cognitive space to allow all of these different worlds they inhabited to collide together. By spending time in this space, students were able to put into words in both their first and second languages the problematic experiences they were having.

Another implication of this project is the focus on the importance of students' stories about their lives and for counselors to listen with great intent with what they have to share with us. The use of photovoice within this project allowed immigrant students at the middle school level opportunities to share ideas and concerns that they saw as pressing in their own lives and families. When presented with this opportunity to share about their lives, these students opened up and discussed parts of their lives and stories about oppression that many of their classroom teachers and counselors had never heard before. How then do we with deliberate intention allow students the time and space to tell us what is happening in their lives and the problems that they face? How then, with heightened focus, do we enter into these created spaces as active, engaged listeners and respond proactively to what these students have to share?

One final implication of this project is for school counselors who strive to support their multicultural students in the most effective and culturally responsive ways is to understand that the photovoice project did not "give students voice." We know as educators that all students have a "voice" from birth. Unfortunately, however, the contexts, practices, and structures of schools and society can diminish or dampen the voices students start their lives with. The deficit-driven discourse they encounter that attempts to define them based upon their "weaknesses" can create obstacles to hearing their important messages to us. Hence, the power and call of our work as multicultural counselors is to amplify the existing voices of students, to take away the noise and other obstacles that impede the environment in which students are trying to use their voices, and to create intentional spaces where we can turn up the volume of student voices so that it is very easy and almost impossible not to hear what they are trying to

say to all of us. Photovoice in middle schools is one way this can be done. What we found in this study is that when we create spaces that are safe, students will counter the racism and discrimination that impedes their opportunities to learn and tell us what we really need to hear.

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