

PhotoVoices: Amplifying the Perspectives of Latinx Students Identified as Academically At-Risk in a Rural Iowa High School

Leslie Ann Locke, Gerta Bardoshi, Jeremy Swanston

Background



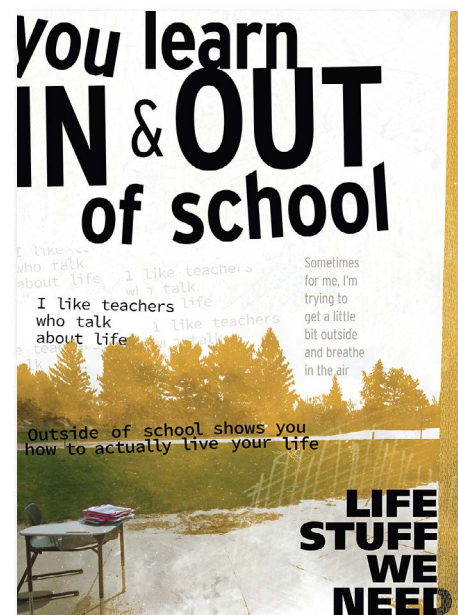
Studies point out that students' subjective experiences in school are critical in predicting academic outcomes (Irvin et al., 2011). While there is certainly a chorus of available research that addresses the experiences of Latinx students in K12 public schools (e.g., Benner & Graham, 2011; González et al., 2006; Moll & Ruiz, 2002; Romo & Falbo, 2010; Telles & Ortiz, 2008; Valdés, 2001; Valenzuela, 2010), there is little known research focused on the perceptions and experiences of Latinx students in K12 schools in the Midwest, or those within a small rural context that has undergone significant demographic change over the past few decades. The available research suggests that Latinx high school students experience

marginalization within their schools, with school climate and belonging being central to those experiences. Moreover, literature points out that the institutionalization of a culturally irrelevant and unresponsive curriculum, and a lack of cultural and linguistic representation as it pertains to teachers and leaders, negatively impact how students experience school (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2014). All these factors impact Latinx students' K12 educational outcomes and access to higher education.

Public schools in Iowa are categorized into one of six performance categories (Exceptional, High Performing, Commendable, Acceptable, Needs Improvement, and Priority). State educational data indicate that the Eastland Community School District (pseudonym), located in a rural region of Iowa, is only deemed "acceptable" in educating all its students. Achievement for Latinx students is lower than the majority student population in the district's schools—sometimes by as much as 10-15% (Eastland Principal, personal communication, May 16, 2017). This achievement gap, defined as "the disparity in academic performance between groups of students" (State Department of Education, 2017, n.p.) is common throughout the state, with data pointing to significant disparities for Latinx students.

Eastland High School's Risk Academy is a program housed within the larger

high school that purports to address weaknesses in "at risk" students' academic records, such that they will be successful later in high school. The Risk Academy is in a dedicated hallway of the high school, where students experience smaller classes directed at addressing gaps in their preparation. Students in the Risk Academy do not have classes with students outside of the Academy.



- 1 The state defines an "at risk" student as one who needs additional support and who is not meeting or not expected to meet the established goals of the educational program (academic, personal/social, career/vocational). At-risk students include but are not limited to students in the following groups: homeless children and youth, dropouts, returning dropouts, and potential dropouts.

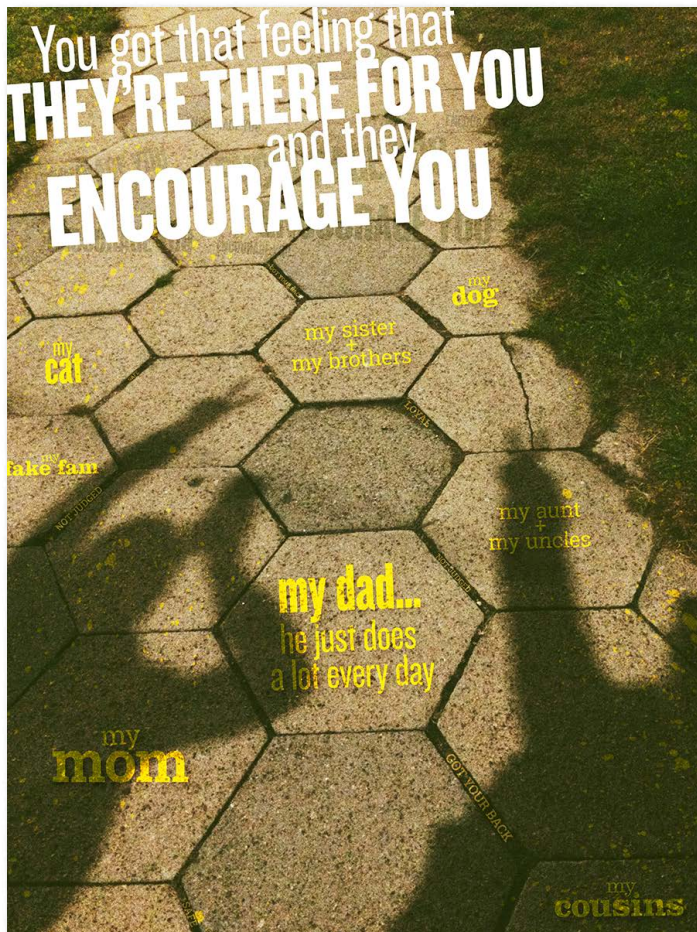
Methods

Photovoice has been highlighted as a particularly useful methodology for K12 scholars conducting social justice research (Hays & Wood, 2011). Grounded on the underlying principles of critical education and a community-based approach to photography, photovoice seeks to empower individuals whose voices are not typically heard, to crucially examine their world through photography and reflective discussion, and engage in dialogue within a larger community context (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). A principle of photovoice is utilizing the power of the visual image in communicating salient concerns, effectively activating participant photographs to shape policy and practice (Hergernather et al., 2009).

We applied photovoice as a qualitative methodology with 20 Latinx students enrolled in Eastland High School's Risk Academy to elicit photographs and narratives meaningful to their sense of belonging and connectedness to school. We conducted two separate groups. The first group included three girls and seven boys. The second group consisted of nine girls and one boy. All of the participants across both groups self-identified as Latinx.

Abbreviated Findings

Several prominent themes emerged from the analyses. We highlight three themes from our first group below. Given names have been replaced with pseudonyms.



The participants in each group completed a training on photovoice methodology (including the ethics of photography) prior to attending six weekly photovoice sessions. After completing the training, participants were provided with cameras and their first photography assignment – take pictures that hold personal meaning related to your experiences in high school. Weekly sessions were audio recorded and consisted of: a) participant discussion of salient themes related to their personal experiences in the school, b) sharing of photographs the participants had taken, and c) large group discussion led by the researchers. Further, we employed the SHOWeD technique to reflect on the images the students produced each week, with the photographs serving as a creative vehicle to discuss potentially difficult or deeply-felt issues about their school experiences as Latinx students (Wang & Burris, 1997). Specifically, participants responded to the following questions during each session: a) What do you See in this photograph?, b) What is Happening in this photograph?, c) How does this relate to Our lives or to other members in our school community?, d) Why do these issues exist currently in our school?, and e) What can we Do about these issues?

Disconnection from School

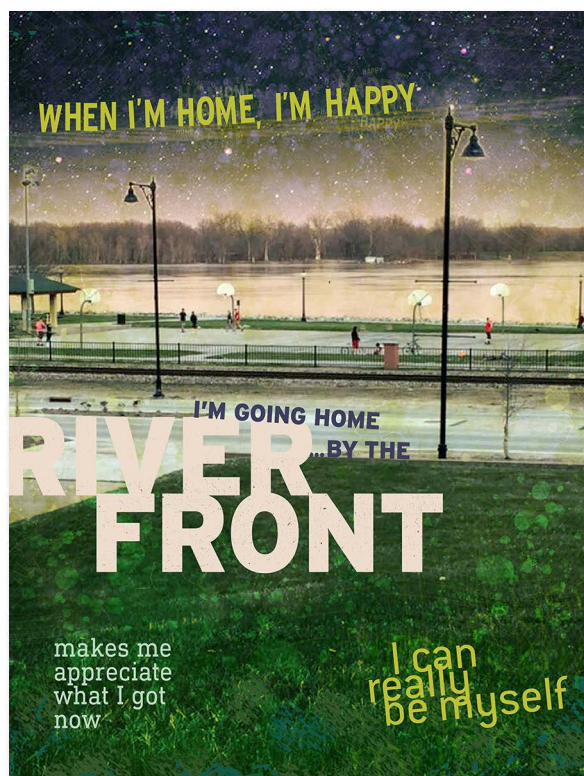
The participants frequently discussed that they felt only a handful of teachers in the Risk Academy authentically cared about them. Relatedly, they discussed that they do not “trust anyone at this school” and that the educators they interact with don’t respect them. For example, Noella said, “a lot of them [the teachers] complain about how we don’t respect them, but they don’t respect us.” Likewise, Beto recalled a time when he was experiencing conflict with a teacher, he said,

I was hella mad. I was like damn because like you’re just yelling at me, yelling at me for something I didn’t even know, like this is my first year here and like they’re like ‘oh you can’t be doing it.’ I’m like well this is my first time doing this, like this ain’t like something continuous like this is my first time. I’m like why are you yelling at me, you’re the one disrespecting me.

Arti agreed with this perspective, and perhaps offered an explanation for feeling disconnected from school noting, “[The teachers] don’t know the outside part of my life... and so I don’t depend on anyone in the school.”

Separation from the Main Body

As students placed in the Risk Academy, the participants were physically separated from the other students, who they referred to as the “main body.” The participants talked frequently about how the Risk Academy is perceived negatively by the “main body.” For example, Juan said, “A lot of people say that the Academy is for people, you know, bad kids, or whatever, we are not even that bad.” Adrian agreed noting, “They don’t respect us outside of the [Risk] Academy... Anything, ‘oh you are in the [Risk] Academy?’ like bad.” Martin said that although he requested being placed in the “main body,” the school had a different idea about his placement. He said, “they are like, forcing me being here because I wanted to experience like the actual high school, and they say no you need to be in the [Risk] Academy. I said I don’t want to be in the [Risk] Academy. I don’t want to be stereotyped.”



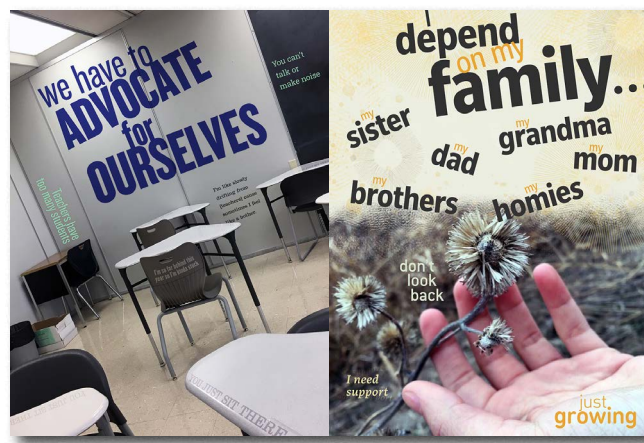
Support Comes from the Outside

The majority of the boys in the participant group played basketball outside of school. They discussed how they found community and a sense of belonging on the court. Further, on the court, unlike in school, is where they found respect. As Leo noted, “like if you are a good player, yeah, they will respect you.” With his fellow players, or his “homies” and with his family is where Leo, and many other participants reported finding the necessary forms of support. Similarly, Kelsey did not note that she found support in the Academy, rather found support and community through competitive swimming and with her friends.

Conclusions & Solutions

Eastland High School educators may have envisioned that the Risk Academy would be a place for students new to high school and perhaps for those who they deemed to need a bit of extra academic or social support could build close academic relationships with teachers, and have the benefit of small class sizes and one-on-one attention from educators—that is, a place that would facilitate connectedness and belonging. However, as a program that is physically separated from the remainder of the school, or the “main body,” this divide has had the opposite effect. The student participants in our study noted how as a segregated program and one where Latinx students are overrepresented, they and the Risk Academy, are seen through deficit lenses by the teachers and by other students. That is, they felt both the physical and psychological effects of within-school segregation. The participants reported not having any real connection to their educators, even though they are in close proximity in the Risk Academy. Instead, the participants’ found their support systems outside of school through sports, friends, and family. Their photos reflected their overall lack of connection to school.

The lessons for educators are clear and well supported in the literature (i.e., working from an asset framework, integrating Risk Academy students with the “main body,” removing negative labels such as “Risk Academy” and “at risk,” and creating authentic connections with families and communities). Further, we recommend the following: consistent and quality professional development for teachers and staff that challenges deficit perspectives and uninformed ideologies about students and communities as these subvert equitable education; providing access to counseling and emotional support services in the school setting; creating authentic alliances with students, families, educators, and communities where there is shared expertise, decision making, and ownership for sustainable change; incorporation of curricula and pedagogies that are relevant and center the students’ and families histories and cultures; and instituting hiring and retention practices that encourage more teachers, leaders, and other educators from marginalized groups in the schools.



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