

Writing our own *América*: Latinx middle school students imagine their American Dreams through Photovoice

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This study examines the intersection of the “bootstraps” American Dream¹ and the América envisioned by four first-generation U.S. Latinx sixth graders in an urban English Language Learners class. The students participated in a joint Photovoice writing and photography project about the American Dream with students from a liberal arts college and articulated the importance of the journey toward their dreams. Sharing their narratives and photographs in public forums, the students challenged the individualist American Dream discourse, underscoring a collective approach instead. The outcomes foreground previously-silenced voices and provide an example of culturally relevant pedagogy within a structured literacy curriculum.

*“Si el sueño de uno / es el sueño de todos / romper
la cadena / y echarnos a andar. / [T]engamos
confianza / pa’ lante mi raza / a salvar el tiempo
/ por los que vendrán”*

*[If one’s dream / is everyone’s dream / to break
free from the chains / and begin our journey. /
Let’s be confident / let’s move forward my people /
to save time / for those who are yet to come]*

*[our translation] (Blades, “Buscando
América,” 1984)*

INTRODUCTION

Legendary Panamanian *salsero* Rubén Blades' iconic "Buscando América" (1984) became the anthem for many Latinx in the United States seeking an *América* where they felt welcome to express themselves following decades of military dictatorships in their respective countries of origin (Gonzalez, 1987). Blades wrote "Buscando América" while living in exile from Panama in New York and his disillusionment with the abandoned Latin-American homelands and his adopted U.S. "land of opportunity" is a central theme in his lyrical, imagined *América*. Blades (1984) laments: "Te estoy buscando América / y temo no encontrarte / tus huellas se han perdido / entre la oscuridad" [I am searching for you, America / and I fear that I won't find you / your traces have been lost / in the darkness]. The melancholic tone echoes the lack of hope in the imagined *América* when life in the United States fails to live up to the expectations many Latinx had. "Buscando América" calls on Latinx to reflect on the strength of their common identity after centuries of oppression, "seeking out the solidarity of other *americanos*" (González, 1987, p. 254) in a *collective* way forward. This study examines the space between the "bootstraps" American Dream and the *América* sought by Blades by analyzing how four Latinx sixth-graders wrote their American Dreams in a joint project with college students that engaged the larger community in critical dialogue about issues of importance to the middle school students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Latinx and the American Dream

Historically, the American Dream has consisted of a belief that anyone can "bring themselves up from the bootstraps" and succeed by way of hard work and determination. Based on data from college students' reflections, Hauhart and Birkenstein (2014) define the American Dream in the contemporary context as "effectively, an empty basket into which any American can place his/her hopes and aspirations" (p. 369), which many times means economic and social mobility or related opportunities. However, Hauhart and Birkenstein (2014) noted that while this optimism held true at the abstract level, when the American Dream was analyzed at the individual level, students began to see potential barriers to reaching their dreams.

The individualist bootstraps American ideal is seen as early as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1793/1958), where he outlined his self-described virtues for the pursuit of moral perfection. Among these virtues were industry and resolution, which laid the foundation for subsequent Positivist economic and political beliefs related to discipline and productivity. Franklin used these virtues to solidify his legacy as a distinctly American self-made man through his technocratic pursuit of this ideal. Beach (2007) argued that Franklin's virtues also reshaped the American ideal such that "cutthroat competition only served to reinforce established forms of authority, hierarchy, and gross inequality by focusing . . . on the improvement of the individual by making him/her more marketable for the corporate workplace" (p. 157). Thus, in the late eighteenth century, the American ideal vis-à-vis Franklin became about wealth and upward mobility (Beach, 2007), which subsequently became the common interpretation of the concept.

James Truslow Adams first coined the term American Dream in *The Epic of America* (1931/2012), writing, "The very foundation of the American dream of a better and richer life for all is that all, in varying degrees, shall be capable of wanting to share in it" (p. 411). Although many interpret Adams' dream as individualistic à la Franklin, he actually treats the subject with a collectivist approach: "If we are entering on a period in which, not only in industry but in other departments of life, the mass is going to count for more and the individual less, and if each and all are to enjoy a richer and fuller life, the level of the mass has got to rise appreciably above what it is at present" (p. 410). Adams underscores the need for everyone to work together so that *all* may share in the prosperity promised by the American Dream, contrasting sharply with the competitive meritocracy espoused by Franklin (1793/1958), the American exceptionalism of Winthrop's famous "City on a Hill" imagery (1630) or the self-creation inherent in Manifest Destiny ideology vis-à-vis young Americans' beliefs (Hauhart & Birkenstein, 2013).

In "Public Schools and the American Dream," Hochschild (2001) examines access to the American Dream for Latinx. She writes that, for many, "[e]qual opportunity to become unequal, to succeed (or fail) because of what one does, not who one is, is a central part of

the American dream” (p. 35). On the other hand, Slater (1970) and Ehrenreich (2006) challenge the viability of this competitive culture, which either causes loneliness (Slater, 1970) or keeps the middle class from thriving because white collar opportunities inherent in the American Dream ideology are difficult to access (Ehrenreich, 2006). Hochschild (2001) echoes this realist interpretation, calling the American Dream “a brilliant ideological invention, although its realization is considerably less impressive” (p. 35).

While a largely idealistic American Dream persists for U.S. Latinx today (Berman, 2015; Cohen-Marks & Stout, 2011), how realistic is it? Perhaps paradoxically, research shows that Latinx are far more optimistic about achieving the American Dream than other major U.S. ethnic groups, despite being denied inclusion in the American identity in many contexts due to their ethnicity (Devos & Mohamed, 2014). To illustrate, Cohen-Marks and Stout (2011) surveyed residents in the Los Angeles area to gauge the optimism of various ethnic groups about their chances of achieving the American Dream. They found that “Latinos are almost six times more likely [than other groups] to believe they will achieve the American Dream if they have not already” (Cohen-Marks & Stout, 2011, p. 833). Likewise, a 2015 poll by the Aspen Institute and *The Atlantic* demonstrated that African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians were measurably more optimistic than Whites that the American Dream is alive and well (Berman, 2015).

Although Latinx may be more optimistic about the American Dream than other ethnic groups, Latinx identify themselves less strongly with an American national identity than Caucasian Americans, as shown by Devos, Gavin, and Quintana (2010). They found that Caucasian Americans and Latinx Americans perceived Latinx as less American than Caucasian Americans, although Caucasian Americans believed this more strongly than Latinx Americans (Devos, Gavin, & Quintana, 2010). In addition to unequal access to national identity, there are other barriers for Latinx to achieve their American Dreams, in particular the opportunity gap in American public schools (Cross, 2009; Irizarry, 2011; Jenkins, 2009; Menken & Kleyn, 2010). Moreover, Valenzuela (1999) called the U.S.-Mexican educational experience subtractive schooling, which “encompasses subtractively

assimilationist policies and practices that are designed to divest Mexican students of their culture and language” (p. 20).

Research has shown that first generation immigrant Latinx graduate at higher rates than second and third generation immigrants (Irizarry, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999), which may explain the fact that Latinx continue to be optimistic, particularly immigrants from Latin America. Yet when U.S.-born Latinx enter the U.S. public education system, their high hopes are quickly dashed by a lack of cultural understanding by authority figures in schools, such as teachers and administrators (Blanchard & Muller, 2015; Irizarry, 2011). Despite these challenges, the number of Latinx students to enroll in college immediately following high school has been slowly increasing (Fry & Taylor, 2013). Although these figures appear positive, Fry and Taylor (2013) are cautious in deeming them so. Their report demonstrates that although Latinx are enrolling in colleges at higher rates than white students (69% versus 67%), their higher education selections are not equal to those of white students: “Hispanic college students are less likely . . . to enroll in a four-year college (56% versus 72%), . . . less likely to attend a selective college, less likely to be enrolled in college full time, and less likely to complete a bachelor’s degree” (p. 5). Thus, even though Latinx students who have recently graduated are going to college at higher rates than in 2000 (49% in 2000, 69% in 2012) (Fry & Taylor, 2013), a stark distinction exists between the educational levels attained in higher education between Latinx and Caucasians (Blanchard & Muller, 2015; Irizarry, 2011).

Despite the fact that the opportunity gap has been identified as one of the main issues in the American education system today, it has proven difficult to close for several reasons. Cross (2009) writes, “[i]nstead of creating policies to alleviate racial, linguistic, and class subordination/discrimination [to lessen the opportunity gap], attention is instead diverted to the threat of a *new* deviant group that is a drain on society and that should be feared.” She also explores the cultural tension that Latinx experience while in the U.S. public education system. As is widely acknowledged, the U.S. public education system subscribes largely to middle class Anglo-centric culture and leaves little room for Latinx to have their cultural heritage explicitly included, and thus *valued* (Ayala, 2012; Cross, 2009; Hill & Torres, 2010).

The exclusion of Latinx culture from American classrooms (Ayala, 2012; Cross, 2009; Hill & Torres, 2010) also impacts whether or not Latinx students feel that their teachers value them and their educational experience (Blanchard & Muller, 2015; Irizarry, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999). As reported by national K-12 education writer Motoko Rich (2012), Latinx and other non-white students do not read or have access to many stories that feature a protagonist of their own ethnicity in schools as they do of stories with white protagonists (Rich, 2012). He concludes that not seeing their own culture in children's books discourages young Latinx readers and foments an early disinterest in reading (Rich, 2012). Similarly, Rubin (2014) wrote that "ELA [English/Language Arts] teachers must be willing to connect with Latinx and choose literature that reflects the students' own lives, families, and personal histories" in order to break the school-to-prison pipeline by engaging students in their own educational experience (p. 225).

Another potential barrier is a lack of communication between Latinx parents, many who come from another cultural context, and American public schools, which subscribe largely to a White, middle-class culture. Mena (2011) underscored cultural issues many parents face when they immigrate for economic reasons, including working multiple jobs, learning English, and adapting to the American education system, all of which can contribute to communication breakdowns between parents and public schools. Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls, and Nero (2010) found that engagement efforts that take into account cultural orientations more positively affected outcomes than did those that focused on getting students and parents to extrinsically value education. Similarly, Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba, and Henderson (2013) researched effective ways for the schools to engage Latina/a parents in students' educations, concluding that personal invitations to the family, parent-driven support roles, and flexible scheduling to account for limited time led to further parent engagement and thus better outcomes for students.

As a result of the aforementioned barriers, Latinxs continue to be the lowest academic achieving ethnic group based on their selection of colleges and performance on standardized tests (Fry, 2010). Despite the high school dropout rate of Latinx students dropping from 28%

in 2000 to 14% in 2011, Latinxs still have the highest dropout rate when compared with African-Americans and whites (Fry & Taylor, 2013). Likewise, Hill and Torres (2010) have argued that access to the American Dream for Latinx is more complicated for later generations of immigrants, who “arrive in the United States with a strong belief in the American Dream, a strong work ethic, and high aspirations for their children. However, after a generation or more in the United States, the possibility of achieving the Dream and the sure pathway of education become elusive” (Hill & Torres, 2010, p. 106). Hill and Torres (2010) also argued that Latinx students are less likely to be in a college-preparatory track in schools than other groups.

Irizarry (2011) attributes this phenomenon at least in part to the silencing of Latinx students’ voices in the American education system. After two years operating an after-school program in one American high school with a high Latinx population and developing relationships with Latinx students, Irizarry (2011) writes, “[T] hose with the most to gain from meaningful changes in policy and practice, namely youths themselves—are typically rendered silent in discussions and policy debates regarding the achievement gap” (p. 1). Latinx students also frequently reported incidences of racism in disciplinary actions (Irizarry, 2011). In response to the silencing of young Latinx voices with regard to their education (Irizarry, 2011), it is useful for American educators to implement models of education where critical thinking is valued over a “banking model” (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970/1990). Latinx students would, instead, be supported by educators who shape their teaching around critically thinking about students’ role in the current society in a culturally relevant way that engaged not only students, but the greater public, in substantive ways (Giroux, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1992).

Photovoice and Service-Learning as Public Pedagogy

Two ways to navigate linguistic, cultural and academic barriers is through Photovoice and reciprocal service-learning partnerships based in principles of public pedagogy (Giroux, 2003; Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011). Photovoice is a creativity-based, participatory writing and photography approach for students’ voices to be heard by students photographing, analyzing, and writing about personal representations of a chosen topic to share in a public

forum. First developed by Wang (1999), Photovoice has three goals: “to enable people (1) to record and reflect their personal and community strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through group discussions of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers” (p. 185). This technology has been subsequently applied with youths to express how they wanted to change their communities (Wang, 2006).

In addition to its public health roots (Wang, 2006), Photovoice has recently been employed to engage urban youth in explorations of academic motivation and literacy practices (Marquez-Zenkow & Harmon, 2007; Marquez-Zenkow & Harmon, 2009). Through writing and analysis of their own multiple literacies, the high school students’ work in their study revealed that real-world applications of writing not only motivated them in their literacy class, but in other aspects of life, and the collaborative work with other students also provided rich learning experiences (Marquez-Zenkow & Harmon, 2007). Moreover, Marquez-Zenkow and Harmon (2009) determined that “teachers [must] allow youth to share stories,” as the results of their research led the teacher-researchers to “more often integrate issues of schooling and social justice—including analyses of our communities’ tenuous relationships to school—into our curricula” (p. 583). Consequently, students engaged their larger communities and even their own teachers in a new public discourse (Giroux, 2003) as a result of an open-ended Photovoice project similar to the American Dream partnership analyzed in the present study.

Like Photovoice, service-learning seeks to stimulate a yearning for its participants to create social change (Wade, 2007). In service-learning pedagogy, classroom learning is connected to service experiences in deliberate ways, the most important being structured reflection that allows for a deeper understanding of social issues in context (Boyle-Baise, 2002). For example, the American Dream is often described as individualist, one person working their way up the socioeconomic ladder. Yet Seider, Gillmor, and Robinowicz (2010) challenged their students’ concept of the American Dream through service-learning. After participating in a service-learning project, several students realized that to make the American Dream accessible to all, they must work together as a collective (Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz, 2010).

Likewise, Boyle-Baise (2002) touts the impact of service-learning, arguing that a co-taught service-learning program in an existing curriculum allows participants to break down cultural barriers.

Both Photovoice and service-learning pedagogies support an idealized curriculum, or educational experience (Pinar, 2004), which should promote “self-reflexive, interdisciplinary erudition and intellectuality” (pp. 2-3) rather than standardized practices, which “demote teachers from scholars and intellectuals to technicians in service to the state” (p. 2). Likewise, as Giroux (2003) wrote, “Schools should provide students with possibilities for linking knowledge and social responsibility to the imperatives of a substantive democracy. Education is not training, and learning at its best is connected with the imperatives of social responsibility and political agency” (p. 9). The project analyzed here offers an example of how one teacher engaged in interdisciplinary erudition (Pinar, 2004) by using service-learning and Photovoice as public pedagogies (Giroux, 2003) that pushed a standardized curriculum beyond itself so that “knowledge, subjectivity, and society [were] inextricably linked” (Pinar, 2004).

METHODS

Context of the Study

The project chronicled in our study utilized Photovoice as a means of communication and critical analysis for first-generation American Latinx students in a school where Spanish as a home language was not openly valued. To attempt to mitigate this issue, the Photovoice project was embedded in a service-learning partnership with a 300-level undergraduate college Spanish course about U.S. Latinx, with Photovoice as a vehicle through which both groups of students wrote their own American Dreams. Through this co-construction of knowledge (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970/1990), participants shared their hopes and concerns about reaching their American Dreams with external stakeholders from school administration and the local community, engaging in public pedagogy (Giroux, 2003) about issues that mattered to them.

The middle school class at the heart of this project was made up of 22 sixth graders, 18 who consented to participate in the study. Five consenting participants were classified by the school as English

Language Learners (ELL): four of Mexican heritage (who are the focus of the present study) who had been in long-term ELL (more than five years) and one Pacific Islander; of the non-ELL participants, six were Caucasian and seven were African-American. The partner school is located in an urban area of 150,000 people in the state's third largest school district. In the past two decades, the city attracted thousands of newcomers due to the demand for meat processing and manufacturing work, particularly Hispanic (im)migrants of Mexican and Guatemalan descent, as well as Bosnian (late 1990s) and Burmese (2010-present) refugees. The city has a sizeable historical African-American population that dates to the Great Migration. Both the African-American and recent migrant groups settled mostly in the East side, while Caucasians historically lived in the West. One of four middle schools, the partner school is the district's second most diverse. According to publicly available data, 76.9% of the district's students are ethnic minorities, including 56% African-American, 16.8% Hispanic, and 3% Asian. 91.2% of students received free and reduced lunch in the 2011-12 academic year, an increase from 78% in 2004. The school has been consistently low achieving; the local newspaper labeled the district's high school a "dropout factory" in 2011, with 40% of students failing to graduate. Graduation rates, however, improved greatly in the last ten years, reaching 77% in 2011.

The service-learning course from the partner college consisted of nine Spanish majors and thirteen minors, all from the Midwest, studying areas such as English/Writing, Education, International Relations, Psychology, and Pre-Med. Three had spent a semester in a Spanish-speaking country, and all had studied abroad for a month (Costa Rica or Mexico) in the previous four years. Twenty students were Caucasian, one was biracial, and one was Asian-American, and all students consented to participate in the study. For the college student outcomes from this project, please see Montgomery et al. (2014). The liberal arts college of fewer than 1800 students is located in a small town less than 40 minutes by car from the middle school.

The Community Partnership

The ELL teacher was herself a refugee from another country who had come to the United States in the late 1990s in search of safer and better opportunities. The co-constructed, multidisciplinary literacy

project in her classroom centered on a community partnership during a middle school language arts block. The writing process was of primary focus in the literacy curriculum, including exposure to diverse genres, development and application of academic vocabulary, and visual literacy. Middle school students studied literature related to the American Dream, including Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and Langston Hughes' poetry, as well as photography by Dorothea Lange. Both groups used a modified Photovoice methodology (Wang, 1999) by taking and sharing photos about their American Dream. As part of their regular literacy curriculum, students learned photography techniques and analyzed photos using multiple perspectives during several drafting sessions. All students wrote culminating narratives to contextualize their photographs for three public events, one at the middle school, one at a local college of education, and one at the liberal arts college. The school's parent committee co-funded the events. Throughout the semester, a celebratory pizza party and trip to the Ballet Folklórico de México served as community-building activities.

The ELL teacher and college professor developed their partnership over several years; this was their second semester-long collaboration. The 300-level undergraduate course *Latinos in the United States* was taught in a Spanish program with the following objectives: "to foment critical dialogues about the Latinx presence and influence in the U.S. from various perspectives . . . [and to] attempt to challenge and analyze the stereotypes and beliefs presented both in the media and in the dominant discourse" (Course syllabus, 2012). The Photovoice partnership took place for 100 minutes each Thursday in the public school. Tuesday's traditional college class meeting (also 100 minutes) consisted of: structured reflection linking the field to academic content; student-led discussions about the day's texts; and preparations for the next partnership meeting.

The research team consisted of the ELL teacher and college Spanish professor, two university Education professors (literacy and social studies methods), a university supervisor, and an undergraduate student. As white researchers working with predominantly multicultural students from various ethnic and national backgrounds, the research team acknowledged its positionality in relation to

inherent authority and biases throughout the project (Worthman, 2016). The team attempted to moderate this positionality by co-creating the project with the ESL teacher, a former refugee and fellow research team member, deferring to her classroom goals and experiences with this particular group of students before proceeding.

The research team, including the teacher, chose the American Dream as the project's focus because they believed it would provide a flexible framework through which to do interdisciplinary literacy work with both groups and allow for student input to guide the project's progress. They created an open-ended cross-curricular project that worked within the established program, and like Worthman (2016), "facilitated quietly the writing and discussions of the [participants], and only when requested provided [our] perspective as outsider[s] whose legitimacy was left to the [participants] to decide" (p. 50). An adapted Photovoice (Wang, 1999) pedagogy was chosen for the co-constructed collaboration, meeting both the college course goals and the highly structured public school literacy curriculum. To co-design, co-teach and co-organize the Photovoice project, the team met before the partnership and communicated often by email.

Research Questions

This study explored two main questions: (1) How would sixth-grade Latinx ELL students conceptualize the American Dream in an open-ended Photovoice collaboration with college students? (2) What are the implications for educators and policymakers of interpreting the American Dream through the lens of these first-generation American Latinx students?

Data Sources

The focal data comes from student Photovoice narratives and photos, draft materials created during the fourteen-week partnership, audio recordings of each one-on-one partnership work session, field notes and memoranda from the research team, and a follow-up interview with each sixth grader. The study received IRB approval from both institutions on the research team.

Methods of Data Analysis

The first participant, Hernando, was chosen at random from all consenting participants, independently coded, and analyzed by research team members. The research team met to identify emerging themes about the American Dream from Hernando’s data. Themes were cross-checked and verified by research team members and refined before analyzing five randomly-selected students using content analysis of qualitative research methods (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). Finally, analysis of data for the remaining sixth-grade participants was conducted. After completing analysis of data from all sixth-grade participants, four themes emerged: 1) freedom/opportunity to pursue an American Dream; 2) the process to its pursuit; 3) access to achievement of that dream; and 4) the importance of the collective in individual dreams. Data from the four consenting Latinx students demonstrated common themes related to the American Dream in the U.S. context, and the content analysis yielded compelling results that we believe add to the discourse in the field. The four Latinx participants and their college partners are described in Table 1 in alphabetical order by pseudonym.

Table 1: Latinx Sixth-Grade Student Participants

Name (pseud.)	Demographic Information	Brief Photovoice Photo Description	College Partner, Background
Ana	Female of Mexican descent born in the United States, long-term ELL*, urban	Atlas page from the school library. The slightly blurry image presents a small map of North America and an enlarged map of Mexico in the center. To the side are pictures of a pyramid and a beach resort, respectively.	Biracial female, urban

Hernando	Male of Mexican descent born in the United States, long-term ELL, urban	Close-up view of the engine of his mother’s car. The photo is slightly blurry. The engine shows the dirt and grease of an older vehicle.	Caucasian female, rural
Liliana	Female of Mexican descent born in the United States, long-term ELL, urban	Wide view of a neighborhood street near her home with potholes in the pavement. There is a car in the distance, a stop sign mid horizon on the right, and the yard in the foreground has chain link fencing.	Caucasian female, suburban
Néstor	Male of Mexican descent born in the United States, long-term ELL, urban	Marker board with a large, hand-written, red “A+” in the center. Around the letter grade are four written words/phrases: 1) Literacy; 2) Math; 3) Reading; 4) $2 + 2 = 4$.	Caucasian female, suburban

** Long-term ELL is defined by the district as a student in the ELL program for longer than 5 years.*

RESULTS

The American Dream as a Journey, or Camino

The following explores the most salient emerging theme from the four Latinx sixth-grade students' data—the journey, or *camino*, to their self-defined American Dreams, as a lens to analyze these students' positions in a larger socio-cultural and educational context. Of the four Latinx students, the two females explicitly developed their Photovoice narratives and photographs around a physical journey to Mexico to visit and reunite with family, while the two males focused on the academic or professional journey that would allow them to achieve their dreams of becoming a teacher and engineer, respectively. Notably, all students focused on either those who would help or accompany them on their journeys, those whom they would help after achieving their dreams, or both. Each student's Photovoice data will be presented, followed by a discussion of how writing and sharing their American Dreams informs the public and educational community about the barriers facing Latinx in the United States.

Ana

Ana's photo is of an atlas page from the school library. The slightly blurry image presents a small inset of North America and an enlarged map of Mexico. The image represents her desire to travel to Mexico to reunite with what she calls her "other family" and introduce her brothers to the "home" culture they have never known (Audio session, 10/23/2012).

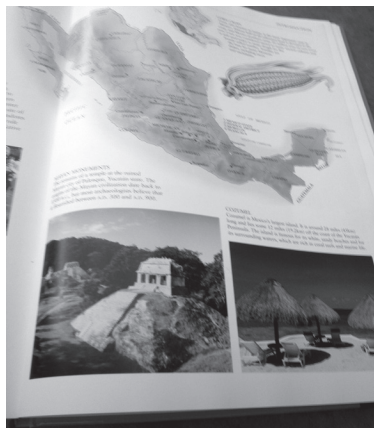


Figure 1: Ana's Photovoice Image

Ana initially focused on her academic goals in relation to her American Dream, photographing the school greenhouse to express her desire to be a botanist because of her favorite science course. However, after analyzing her photos, Ana was dissatisfied, and she asked to photograph something else. She explained in her post-project interview: "I chose that one because it's not like the other ones. . . . This . . . picture [referring to the photo she eventually chose] [is] the only one that talks about my family" (Interview, 12/13/2012).

Ana, who was born in the United States but lived seven years of her childhood in Mexico, introduced her Photovoice image with the following: "this represents . . . where I came from. My American dream is to travel to Mexico with all of my family if I have the opportunity. Also, I want to spend time with my family that lives in Mexico" (PV narrative, 11/28/2012). She shaped her American Dream narrative specifically around her brothers' inability to access Mexico due to her family's mixed documentation status. As she wrote, her favorite places, including a waterfall, could be useful means to transmit her knowledge of her family heritage to her brothers who do not have the same access that she has. Moreover, by choosing the atlas, Ana framed her American Dream in a collectivist perspective rather than the dominant individualist perspective, focusing on her family as the impetus. She wrote: "When my family is able to go to Mexico, my brothers will experience where they came from. They will be able to see all of the different styles of clothing and the different types of foods Mexico has to offer," adding "I think it would be really fun to share these places with my brothers" (PV narrative, 11/28/2012). When asked in the interview about her last trip to Mexico and why her brothers did not go, Ana replied, "They didn't want to go because like my brother came here to the United States when he was like 1 or 2 years old. My other brother was born here like three years ago." She added, "So they didn't [go] because my mom wasn't sure like my baby brother was going to like be comfortable in the car and so my mom was like maybe next year he might go with you" (Interview, 12/13/2012).

Throughout the semester, Ana never explicitly stated whether her brother was undocumented or not, and it was not clear from any data source whether she knew. Yet the real barriers she faced defined

her American Dream. The findings presented here suggest that Ana shaped her American Dream Photovoice project around her entire family's difficult or impossible *camino* (journey) to their Mexican homeland. She wanted to share her cultural capital with her siblings to try to break down the barriers that exist for them, namely that they had been unable to travel with her to Mexico, so that her family in the United States can be reunited with what she calls her "other family" in Mexico. Ana echoed this sentiment in conversations with her college partner: "I wish, like, one day, all my family here in the United States can go visit our other family in Mexico" (Audio session, 10/23/2012). A week later, Ana repeated: "I wish once my whole family and I could go to Mexico and like celebrate with our other family there, that is there, and so like, I could see like my aunties, grandparents, cousins, and my uncles" (Audio session, 11/01/2012). By creating a dichotomy between her U.S. family and her "other" Mexican family over the border, Ana problematized the fracturing of the *gran familia* discourse central to a traditional Mexican family, and her American Dream Photovoice project offers a potential solution—a journey to Mexico that unites *all* members of her family.

Ana concluded: "In order to achieve my American Dream, I have to work hard and stay dedicated to my dream. I know that it's not going to be easy but it is still important" (PV narrative, 11/28/2012). At the same time, she doubted if her dream would be possible: "I wonder if that dream will come true and if it will be hard" (Audio session, 11/01/2012). For Ana, the map she photographed and analyzed in her narrative acts as both a physical and metaphorical delineation of the difficult and unpredictable *camino* that awaits her as she works toward her collective American Dream of crossing borders more freely and reuniting her fractured family.

Hernando

Hernando's American Dream was to become an engineer and work for NASA. His Photovoice project centered on his academic success through hard work, professional aspirations in engineering, and the resulting empowerment to assist others in reaching their dreams. He photographed his mother's car engine to express his interest in building and designing things.

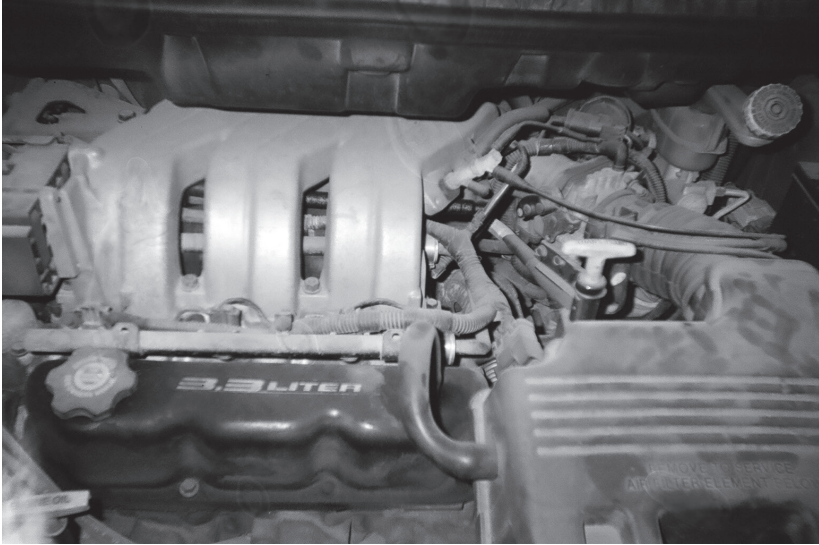


Figure 2: Hernando's Photovoice Image

Despite his ambitious goals, Hernando's Photovoice photo foregrounded the process, or building blocks—learning how an engine works—, rather than the final product, such as photographing a space shuttle or the moon. His focus on the process, along with his (seemingly) disengaged demeanor and resistance to participation early in the project, surprised and led one researcher to draw incorrect conclusions about Hernando's initial Photovoice image: "When I approached the group . . . Hernando was quick to show me his photo. It was an engine of a car (close up)." The researcher noted, "I asked him if his dream was to be a mechanic, to which he reacted in a huge, confident smile. 'No, an engineer'. I had assumed that his dream was more humble than it was" (Field notes, 10/23/2012). This demonstrates deficit thinking on the part of the researcher, despite prior experience working with Latinx in these types of partnerships.

Hernando's framing of his American Dream project around its building blocks not only mirrors the steps of a complex engineering system, but also demonstrates his awareness of the collective group who will help or be helped along the way and the difficult process ahead. When asked in the follow-up interview why parts of his dream were like an engine, he responded: "[F]irst comes school and stuff . . .

then you have to learn how to do anything and then you can . . . tell other people how to do it and they can probably do it, their American Dream” (12/13/2012). In his narrative, Hernando examined this process: “By learning how to work with many parts, I could figure out how rockets work and how they are made. By learning this, I can work for NASA someday.” He also wrote, “I want to help people, and by doing this I can help discover water on other planets so that people can live there” (PV narrative, 11/28/2012).

The difficult journey to fulfill his dream also emerges as a dominant theme in Hernando’s Photovoice narrative: “I will accomplish this dream by working hard, writing, and pay[ing] attention in school.... This is important to me because I think it is fun and I could help someone someday” (11/28/2012). The effects of achieving his dream, particularly being capable of helping and teaching others, became a motivation for Hernando’s individual American Dream. Significantly, he also underscored the American Dream project and his partner’s role in helping him as an example of how he’d like to help others someday (Interview, 12/13/12). He wrote: “It is important for me to be able to help someone someday so that I can help other people accomplish their dreams to become engineers, so they can do the same. I want to make history” (PV narrative, 11/28/2012). Despite his understanding of the difficult path ahead, Hernando was cautiously optimistic, writing: “My American dream seems like a fairy tale, but it is real life, and it will become a success someday” (PV narrative, 11/28/2012).

Liliana

Liliana’s American Dream was to travel to Mexico and visit her grandparents, as well as travel in general around the world to experience new places. Her image is of a modest urban street intersection. Trees line the street and the yard in the foreground has chain link fencing. There are potholes in the pavement. One street leads away and another veers to the left. The image of a road is both a literal and figurative expression of Liliana’s American Dream: it is this road that she will have to traverse to travel Mexico and the world, but the stop sign is symbolic of all of the barriers that she recognizes to achieving her American Dream.



Figure 3: Liliana's Photovoice Image

To describe her American Dream, Liliana wrote, “The road represents travel because no matter where you are going or how you are getting there, first you have to start on the road” (PV narrative, 11/28/2012). For Liliana, embarking on a journey meant that she could see her family in Mexico for the first time in six years (Audio session, 11/15/2012). She realized that she needed to start somewhere to achieve her American Dream and she also knew that there would be many obstacles to overcome. She wrote, “The obstacles that the stop sign represents can vary from person to person, and are unique to every adventure” (PV narrative, 11/28/2012). Some of the specific barriers that Liliana mentions are economic; she considered transportation, lodging, food, and clothing expenses as important whenever one makes a journey (PV narrative, 11/28/2012). Liliana also cited the language barriers to travel (Audio session, 11/8/2012). While Liliana’s understanding of the resources necessary to travel to Mexico is fundamental to her framing of the roadblocks along the way, she also expressed the complexity of her American Dream. In her narrative, Liliana wrote: “Even though my American Dream is challenging, I will study and also work hard to make my American Dream true” (PV narrative, 11/28/2012).

In the project, however, Liliana also underscored how she would need help from others to reach her dream. She wrote: “Sometimes you might not have enough money to get a plane ticket and you need to find a place where you can sleep for the night. You might not know anyone there and you won’t have anybody to talk to except for yourself” (PV narrative, 11/28/12). Although Liliana knew that studying would help her journey and she thought her American Dream would be possible, she also noted that her dream may not come true. She pondered the stop sign with her college partner and said, “The challenges that the stop sign may represent is that you may not be able to go to the places you want to go” (Audio session, 11/8/2012). This demonstrates a depth of understanding uncharacteristic of the “pull yourself up” rhetoric typical of the American Dream, in which individual and collective efforts may not be enough.

Liliana also hinted at further barriers to her American Dream like family legal status and financial hardship and it was difficult for her to discuss her photograph:

Liliana became noticeably upset while working with [her college partner] and did not appear to understand or want to complete the activity about choosing photos . . . Liliana began to cry about the photos when she spoke about seeing her grandparents in Mexico and then seemed to calm down. [The researcher] spoke with [the teacher] about getting Liliana to see a counselor if she was still upset about the project. (Field notes, 10/23/2012)

In the end, Liliana participated, writing a powerful narrative that received the most praiseful tweets at the public gallery events. Despite the seemingly optimistic narrative, Liliana’s class demeanor and response to a pre-writing prompt tell a more complex story that underscores the somber tone of her Photovoice photo: “I wonder if I will make it” (Pre-writing, 11/01/2012).

Néstor

Néstor’s American Dream was to study mathematics in college and become a math teacher, or soccer player, but his true passion was for education, the focus of the majority of his narrative and interviews. He staged his image with his college partner, with a marker board

with a red A+ written in the center. Surrounding the A+ were the words and phrases: 1) literacy; 2) math; 3) reading; and 4) $2 + 2 = 4$. Néstor believed that earning high grades was key to achieving his American Dream of teaching others in the future.

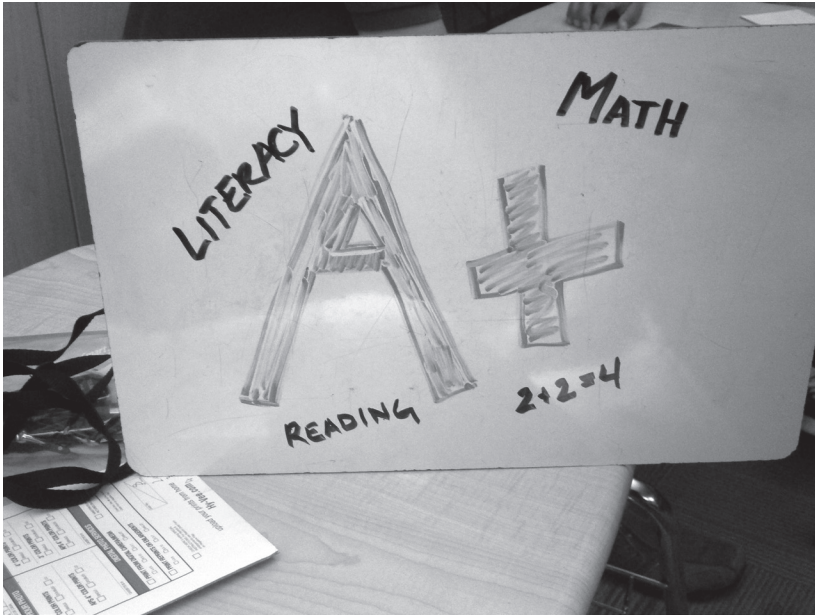


Figure 4: Néstor's Photovoice Image

At the start of the project, Néstor was unenthused about the partnership, one could even say resistant. By the end, he became significantly more excited and more involved. When it seemed like he would not be able to come to the middle school gallery event and share his narrative due to his catechism class, he was noticeably sad (Field notes, 11/01/2012). Moreover, Néstor seemed as though he would cry when he realized that his college partner was not able to attend the class following the gallery night due to illness (Field notes, 11/29/2012). Throughout the project, Néstor developed a bond with his college partner and was thrilled to be on the college's campus for the visit. He had even made a card, which he forgot, for his college partner.

Throughout his narrative, Néstor emphasized the steps toward achieving his American Dream of being a math teacher. He wrote, “For me the American Dream is to go to college and to be a good student. It also means to get an A+ in all of my classes.” Néstor continued, “This chance to go to college will help me get a successful job. . . . I want to be a math teacher in my American Dream because I like math and because I can teach other kids to become better at math” (PV narrative, 11/28/2012). This passage demonstrates that Néstor reflected on the path to enter the field of teaching, emphasizing good grades, dedicated hard work, and attending college as integral, which certainly resonates with the traditional, individualist bootstraps narrative.

However, one of the most enlightening and nuanced parts of Néstor’s American Dream is that it did not end with him landing a teaching job; the main achievement of his American Dream is educating others, contingent on the following: “I want to do well in reading class. Doing well in reading class will help other people understand what I say. It will help me read clear[ly] to the students in my class when I’m a teacher, too.” He added, “I want to make sure they [the students] understand what I’m saying. The students can then do well on pre- and post- tests and pass with good grades” (PV narrative, 11/28/2012). Although Néstor already thought about how he wants to impact the lives of children once he becomes a math teacher, the foundation of his American Dream is based on the path he will need to take to make it; Néstor realized that working hard to develop his own literacy would let him effectively communicate with future students to ensure their own success. Thus, Néstor views his own success as both individual and collective, recognizing both his hard work and that of his teachers in their own educations.

Néstor further defined his American Dream in his final interview, distinguishing between communicating in English and in Spanish, ultimately privileging English over Spanish. In response to a question about why communication is important, Néstor responded, “Because I speak two languages and I need to talk with more clear English than Spanish because people will not understand me talking Spanish, so I have to talk in English more often” (Interview, 12/13/2012). Later, Néstor affirmed that English was important, but he viewed Spanish

as “not that . . . important. . . [b]ecause we don’t need that language like in school because we need to talk to the teachers in English” (Interview, 12/13/2012). Due to the continual encouragement to speak English and the discouragement to speak Spanish in the school, Néstor believed that distancing himself from Spanish, and perhaps even Latinx culture, was crucial for him to have the opportunity to teach and impact others in the American education system.

DISCUSSION

The data of the four Latinx middle school students analyzed here underscore two themes related to their journey, or *camino*. First, their presentation of the difficult path and potential barriers to achieving their dreams offer insight into the students’ beliefs about their challenging educational and economic futures. In their American Dream projects, all four students foreground education as the difference maker: the resulting economic empowerment would allow Ana and Liliana to overcome (some of) the barriers to reunite their families separated by the border; Hernando’s education as an engineer would allow him not only to solve social problems, but also to pave the way for his family to achieve their dreams; Néstor’s effort to overcome what he perceives as a linguistic barrier in education by communicating in English would empower him to educate future generations. Despite being born in the United States and being in ELL since kindergarten, all four sixth graders were unable to score proficient on the district’s English test to move into the regular curriculum for sixth grade, which raises questions about the various ways the education system and society had failed them.

Second, the students’ dreams involve individual attainment, but only as a necessary component of a larger, collective American Dream. In fact, the Photovoice data of all four students suggests that their American Dream is not “mine,” but rather, “ours,” and involves their families, teachers, classmates, and even future students. The students’ concepts of “our” American Dream are situated within a context that transcends the student and their unique cultural and geographical locations: for Ana and Liliana, the *camino* crosses borders and generations, uniting separated families and sharing vital cultural heritage would give their community strength; for Hernando and Néstor, succeeding on the challenging path would forge the way

for the next generation. Ostensibly, the four Latinx students' data interrogate key questions found in Blades' imagined *América* three decades earlier: the collective strength to search for optimism in difficult times and, as Blades (1984) proposed, "Let's be confident / let's move forward my people / to save time / for those who are yet to come" [our translation].

Finally, like the "disappeared" or gagged *América* depicted in Blades' "Buscando América," the aspirational *América* described by the sixth graders is borderless in theory. However, data analyzed here demonstrates the students' critique of barriers (both physical and abstract) imposed by a marginalized position in American society, whether linguistic, racial or socioeconomic. Their Photovoice projects demonstrate that they are indeed cognizant that their voices are silenced and of the challenges they will face along their *camino* toward their respective American Dreams, with all questioning whether their dreams can be made reality.

CONCLUSION

This joint Photovoice project in a reciprocal service-learning partnership between middle school and college students challenged both youth and young adults to interrogate the seemingly ordinary American Dream concept in a novel way. In the end, it was due to one courageous ELL teacher's creation of a space within a standardized curriculum that co-constructed learning flourished and less recognized voices were heard by the public. The project's approach resonates with the Latinx Critical Theory (LatCrit) approach of Solórzano and Yosso (2002), which "suggest[s] that we must recognize and address the lives of students of color who are often the objects of our educational research and yet are often absent from or silenced within this discourse" (p. 46). With these goals in mind, the Latinx students chronicled here wrote their *own* American Dreams, which challenged the individualist "bootstraps" discourse by demonstrating that Franklin's meritocracy (1793/1958) did not necessarily apply to their current situations. Their marginalized voices engaged over 600 community leaders, politicians, and school officials in public pedagogy (Giroux, 2003)—with the students as teachers—through public gallery events and, moving forward, the public at large through scholarly outlets.

After a debriefing with the teacher at the end of the school year, it became clear that the Photovoice collaboration had concrete implications for two sixth-grade students in particular: Ana and Hernando. The teacher shared that after spending seven years in the ELL track, Ana was the only one in her ELL cohort to pass the English proficiency exam and be able to join a regular curriculum in seventh grade. With regard to Hernando, on the first day of the partnership, the teacher told one researcher that he “hates writing”; in contrast, when asked in the follow-up interview about what he liked about working with his college partners, he said: “I really didn’t like to write a lot but now I like to write stuff” (Interview, 12/13/2012). Another concrete outcome became evident at year’s end, when Hernando was slated to repeat sixth grade. However, when the teacher presented his Photovoice writing and unsolicited praise from an email to the principal about Hernando’s photo and narrative by a community member, particularly how well he fielded questions at the middle school gallery night, the school decided to promote him to seventh grade. According to the ELL teacher, both students’ confidence and classroom engagement had also increased greatly during and following the American Dream project, which she attributed directly to our collaboration. Unfortunately, the teacher moved to another state that year and the partnership was discontinued after several years of ongoing collaboration. The field coordinator worked with the middle-school students for two years beyond the Photovoice project with other teachers, including on projects parallel to ours.

The data analyzed above demonstrates both the concrete and catalytic (Lather, 2003) values of the partnership and study. The reciprocal structure of this collaborative literacy project between higher education and public schools and its outcomes provide an example of how to not only teach literacy creatively in a structured curriculum (Pinar, 2004), but also how to engage and privilege silenced voices in a public discourse (Giroux, 2003) in a culturally relevant way (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Fernández (2002) posed an important question about researching Latinx students: “What gets left out, then, if we do not hear students’ voices?” (p. 45). In this case, the Latinx students’ Photovoice narratives and photos answer that question for us.

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NOTES

The term America(n) is often used in Latin America and by Latinx in the United States to refer to the Americas, with many rejecting its use to refer solely to the United States. With this in mind, we use the terms America(n) to explore the American Dream concept only in this specific context.

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