A FEW YEARS ago I taught a summer school program for Latino children about the history of Lawrence, a mill town in Massachusetts where I’ve lived for sixteen years. I had big plans! We would learn about the many immigrant groups who came to work in the textile mills that were booming here in the early 1900s. We would learn about the great Bread and Roses Strike, which helped create federal laws to improve the rights of workers. We would learn about the many cultural contributions that immigrants have made to this town and this state.

I began the class with a simple question. “What is Lawrence to you?” I was shocked by the answers: “Lawrence is full of drug dealers.” “Everybody steals.” “Everyone’s on welfare.” I never expected to hear young students express such prejudice against their own community and its people, and even themselves. Dumb-founded at first, I asked the children if they were members of gangs or sold drugs.

“Of course not,” they said. “So, why do you say ‘everyone’? I live in Lawrence, and I’m not a drug dealer.” “That’s just the way it is,” they shrugged. “We can’t do anything about it.”

Lawrence, a city of only seven square miles, has always been a city of immigrants surrounded by more affluent suburbs, from the Irish and the Italians who arrived in the mid-nineteenth century to the current newcomers from the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. To me, the history of Lawrence is about the proud struggle of many people.

As a bilingual first grade teacher, therefore, I want to help my students overcome negative stereotypical views of their home town. I want to help them see that creative and hardworking immigrants have succeeded in building small businesses and have contributed to the life and the culture of the community. I want to foster students’ positive and genuine images of themselves and their new community.

One way I have successfully accomplished these goals is by integrating photography and writing. I was inspired to pursue this way of learning for my students after visiting Addison Gallery at Phillips Academy in Andover to view a photography exhibit assembled by Wendy Ewald. The exhibit included black-and-white photographs taken by students from around the world. The photos included many images from communities in third world countries where the people were living with dignity in environments far more difficult than that of Lawrence. These lovely photos, taken by children, spurred me and some of my colleagues to ask our schoolchildren to do something similar. For many of our students, English is their second language, and we discovered that the humble technology of the camera could serve as a solid stepping-stone to insightful, articulate, and wonderfully detailed writing about their communities in Lawrence.

The project could not have begun without collaboration from many sources. The local Cultural Council (with state arts money) funded the cost of cameras, film, and printing. The Essex Art Center, a local studio with dark rooms, gave our students a
chance to meet with professional photographers and to use enlargers to make prints. Julie Bernson, educational outreach director at the Addison Gallery, worked with us through each step of the project.

A student photography project can be as simple as sending a camera home with a student. In this day of Web sites, digitized audio clips, and streaming video, it’s easy to forget so basic a technology as the camera when we want to teach students to be reflective.

In the first year of our project, we sent the students from grades one through seven into the community with instructions “to take pictures of anything that represented ‘community’” and “to write a short caption to accompany the photo.” Some examples of the writing follow. Because of space limitations, I regret we cannot publish all the wonderful student photos that accompany these students’ words:

This is my family. My father goes to work at night. He brought food when he came home.—Luis Moreta, first grader

This is my mom and big brother and some friends. My mom always plays with me. We play cards with my big brother. I always win all the games.—Rafael Cepeda, first grader

My name is Ismael Campos and this a short story about me and some of the friends I’ve grown up with. We like to do things that not your everyday kid likes to do. My friends and I have been through tough times together. Our language is polluted and we all live in Lawrence. Don’t judge us by how we dress or act. To understand us you have to walk a mile in our shoes, let the truth be known, this is the most real thing I have ever written. —Ismael Campos, seventh grader

For this black and white photograph I decided to take a picture of my family. My father wasn’t home at that time because he was working. I decided to take the picture even though he wasn’t home because it was a project. My family was at the table in one part of the kitchen. My mother had just finished cooking dinner. My sister was with her favorite bird; the bird’s name is Cuca. My sister does not like the other bird which is in its cage. My brother is the only son and he is the youngest. I love to eat at the table because it is one of the places we are together.—Claudia De La Cruz, seventh grader

At the end of the project’s first year, my colleagues and I compiled our students’ photos and writing into a large handmade book, which we

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Johanny Suero’s photo of his brother Alex is an example of the sophisticated work young students can do. Spanish is Johanny’s first language, and he chose to write about Alex in Spanish and include a briefer English translation.

"Mi hermano se llama Alex. Yo y mi hermano jugamos juntos. El ve a la Usurpadora. Yo le digo que no vea a la Usurpadora. A mi me gusta ver a mi hermano. Cuando mi hermano sea grande quiere ser un astronauta. En Santo Domingo mi hermano y yo nos bañábamos en el río. Jugábamos juntos en Santo Domingo. Yo quiero a mi hermano. Me gusta como es. A el le gusta ir a la piscina. Le gusta andar por la ciudad. Le gusta jugar basket conmigo. Ese es mi hermano. El me quiere a mí y yo lo quiero a él. A el le gusta ver a mi papa trabajando. A el le gusta montar bicicleta. Le gusta Santo Domingo. Le gusta comer arroz and carne."

"Alex is my brother. I love how he is. He wants to go to the Dominican Republic. My brother and I play together. He wants to be an astronaut when he grows up. My brother is special to me."
submitted to the New England Museum Association’s Publication Design Contest in 1998. We were delighted when it won first prize.

In the second year, in an attempt to take students beyond a general overview of their community, teachers chose themes according to grade level and curriculum. For example, those studying geometry took photos of local architecture and created equations to analyze the structures. Others took photos of houses in Lawrence and wrote short histories of the people who lived in them. Yet others photographed panoramas of their favorite places in the city. Some of the accompanying words they have written to accompany the images have sometimes been stunning, as is Johanny Suero’s photo included here.

The children’s photos have improved each year, and the faces they have captured on film this year and the words they have written to accompany the images have sometimes been even insightful and wise. Having an audience in the community that visits the students’ photography exhibit, reads the short essays and captions, and responds to the book we compile is a great motivator for the students to do their best. In my view, however, the most important audience is the students themselves. They reflect on their own self-image, they reassess their place in a society that often neither sees nor values them for who they are. And the students get the chance to re-create their culture, their traditions, their people, their lives, their very selves.

When Raghed Nakkoul, who worked on the photography books in second and third grade, was asked if these projects changed her opinion of Lawrence, I believe she spoke for many of her classmates when she said, “Lawrence got bigger.” Of course, the size of our town didn’t change, nor did the population. What grew in Raghed’s eyes was the diversity of the people and her appreciation for the people who make their lives here.

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