

The Face of Lawrence: Integrating Photography and Writing

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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. Dumbfounded 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 new-

comers 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



Mary Guerrero's students take photos of important moments, places, and faces in their lives and use the photos as writing prompts. First grader Angelié Vasquez took this photo and writes, "My sister and I sat by the Virgin Mary and said a prayer. Everyday we say a prayer. My cousin took this picture."

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. If we act like wise guys it's only because we've seen and been through too much.—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 basketball conmigo. Ese es mi hermano. El me quiere a mi y yo lo quiero a el. 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."

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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 writing from our second year in the photography/writing project follows:

This house is located on Thorndike Street. It has 21 windows and was built in 1909. It has a lot of interesting features, including geometrical shapes. It's made out of bricks, wood, pipes and glass. It has different shapes, such as triangles, rectangles, trapezoids, lattice work and squares. The triangles form the shape of the roof. The squares are on the stairs and on the windows. The lattice work is on the left going up the stairs. The quadrilateral is on top of the roof, and the trapezoids are on top of the porch.—Josue Ramirez, Henry Taveras, Maria Cruz, Arlin Hernandez, seventh graders

My favorite place is my school. I love my school. You can play with the teachers. The teachers are very, very beautiful. I feel happy when I am in school. I feel that I am at home. It is like a home because it has people and I am one of them. I call the school my house because that is where I live. My friends are like my brothers and sisters. They play with me.

My school is big like the sky. My school is huge like the World. When I am at home I cry because I want to go to school. My teacher is like a mother for me and I am like a daughter for my teacher. My school is special.—Christine Vazquez, second grader

My favorite place is my backyard because it has trees and grass. I hear a car passing by. There is my window, there is my mom too. There is my shadow. It is black. There is my grandmother's house. I smell a steak and rice cooking. There is the sun that looks like a shooting star. I feel happy. I see a leaf. I see my father's car. My friends and I play in my backyard. Everyday I go to my yard to do my homework. . . . I love my backyard.—Jonathan Camacho, second grader

The library is the best place to go during the weekdays. The library is comfortable and there are a lot of books to read. When I go to the library, I feel peaceful and smart. In this place I read books, do homework, and work on projects. I like going there on most days. . . . The library is a nice place. There are computers that you could use to search on the Internet. It has three floors. The people at the library are very nice. This is a nice place to read. When I go to the library, I feel that I am very smart and I know how to read. I feel happy.—Luis Castro, sixth grader

In our third year of the project, we chose the theme "Faces of Lawrence." 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 stunning, as is Johanny Suero's photo included here.

After almost two years of doing this project, students have developed

an acute sense of audience, knowing that people in the community will be viewing and reading their work. As a result, I have observed the subjects of their photos become more compelling and their writing become more thoughtful and articulate, sometimes 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 Ragged 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 Ragged's eyes was the diversity of the people and her appreciation for the people who make their lives here. 🍀

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