(Re)Imagining Multilingual Learners: Using Photo Stories to Honor Students' Strengths, Interests, and Experiences

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Abstract
The labeling of students has the potential to result in deficit thinking, which can cause classrooms to become sites of limitation instead of places of limitless opportunity for students. This article discusses the literacy strategy of creating photo stories and shares the steps involved in inviting students to create personal photo stories that honor students' lived experiences. The author shares how these photo stories have the potential to promote critical and productive dialogue among educators and students to help them celebrate the diverse languages, cultures, interests, and life experiences that are present in their classrooms.

Keywords
labels, deficit thinking, multilingual learners, photo story

Background

Schools typically use labels to identify or categorize students. While labeling enables collective understanding and can be positive and productive, some labels imply beliefs that can impose limitations on students (Castellano & Diaz, 2002; Lee & Anderson, 2009; Umansky, 2016). These labels often carry with them assumptions that influence the way educators perceive students and thus inform how they teach. For instance, the label "English language learner" (ELL), commonly used in public school settings to represent multilingual learners, can bring about associations of deficiency because it highlights students' academic abilities in relation to speaking or not speaking English (Lee & Anderson, 2009; Martínez, 2018). When educators overlook the varied strengths, interests, capabilities, and experiences that multilingual learners bring to the classroom, teachers may find themselves inadvertently focusing on and remediating students' perceived weaknesses rather than exploring and cultivating strengths (Baldwin, 2003; Ford & Grantham, 2003). Thus, schools can become sites of struggle for multilingual learners instead of sites of boundless opportunities (Lee & Anderson, 2009).

Teacher perceptions are critical to developing students' potential (Szymanski & Lynch, 2020). Photo stories are one strategy Paynter and Arnett (2018) briefly mentioned in an article previously published in *GATESOL in Action Journal* that teachers can use to counteract deficit thinking. Photo stories provide multilingual learners with a means for sharing their (counter)stories (Delgado, 2011; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling involves sharing the stories of marginalized people whose experiences are often untold and therefore unheard (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Using these stories in the classroom can help teachers—and students—expand their views of students in order to see that students' diverse home languages, cultures, interests, and

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strengths are assets that promote learning as opposed to obstacles that may impede it (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Nieto, 2002).

Photographs and images can be useful tools for promoting acceptance of diversity in schools by prompting educators and students to view situations from different perspectives, to bridge connections, and to develop an understanding of differences (Cook & Quigley, 2013; Lintner, 2005; Lykes, 2011; Serriere, 2010). Additionally, stories provide avenues for understanding ourselves and others. Therefore, the use of storytelling can encourage curiosity about the lived experiences of others and interrupt complacency by helping listeners and speakers construct new understandings and sort through false and constraining perceptions of individuals and cultures (Clarke, 2020; Delgado, 2011; Espinoza & Harris, 1998). Thus, if teachers can incorporate meaningful classroom community dialogue around students' personal photo stories, the result can be an experience that can engage, educate, and inspire students and educators in a powerful way (Allen, 2016; Cook & Quigley, 2013; Griffin et al., 2020). The stories students tell through their visual images and narratives have the potential to yield productive conversations that help educators shift from deficit thinking to capitalizing on the strengths and interests of multilingual learners that often lie hidden behind the labels and language competencies.

Steps for Implementing Digital Photo Stories

The remainder of this article will share the steps for inviting students to use personal photographs and storytelling. Such an activity provides potential to open doors to critical and productive dialogue among educators and students to help them celebrate the diverse languages, cultures, interests, and life experiences that are present in their classrooms. The author implemented this strategy with fidelity with elementary students but accentuates its possible use with middle grades and secondary students as well.

Step 1: Study Mentor Texts & Model

While students are often familiar with narrative writing, many have little experience writing photo stories. Mentor texts work beautifully to familiarize students with this writing format, and they build excitement about the upcoming writing project (Shubitz, 2016). Mentor texts serve as a guide for helping students make discoveries about the structures and writing crafts often used in this type of writing. The mentor texts that follow work well with elementary learners, but they may be useful with middle and secondary students as well:

- *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken, and Me*, by Maya Angelou and Margaret Courtney-Clarke
- *Daddy and Me: A Photostory of Arthur Ashe and His Daughter Camera*, by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe
- *Mom Can't See Me*, by Sally Hobart Alexander and George Ancona
- *Can we Help?: Kids Volunteering to Help their Communities,* by George Ancona
- *Big Sister, Little Sister,* by Marci Curtis

After students have read and studied photo stories as a format and have developed sufficient background knowledge about the genre, they are ready to begin exploring the process of writing their own. Instructionally, teachers should model this exploration process by writing about their own personal photos. When teachers model this process with authentic photos and think aloud as photos are organized and the text is developed, students learn the photo sequencing process as well as how the images work together with the writing to tell the story.

Step 2: Take Photos

The key to creating a meaningful photo story involves photography. For this step to be most productive, educators should inform students and parents or caregivers of the purpose of the project as well as the need for meaningful photos. For this aspect of the project, it is helpful to send an informational letter to parents suggesting that they help their student think of things they would like to share with their teachers and classmates, such as specific hobbies, interests, strengths, ways they help out at home or in their community, and the like. Then, give students and parents a few weeks to take 3–5 photos of their student engaged in an activity or experience of interest or one that requires skill, concentration, commitment, motivation, and/or hard work. Parents can use smart phones or other devices to take pictures. In the informational letter, it is helpful to invite parents to initiate discussions with their students about the photographs taken so that the students will have ideas for what to write about when they begin drafting their stories. Families can submit printed copies of the photographs to teachers or send them in digital form via text or email, so teachers can save them, print them, and upload them into a digital media platform such as VoiceThread for digital storytelling purposes.

Step 3: Facilitate Paired Discussions

Using students' printed photos, invite students to work in pairs to share their photos with peers. Encourage students to describe what each photo depicts. This discussion gives students a chance to articulate their thinking, which provides a scaffolded opportunity for storytelling, helping students organize their thoughts and elaborate on their writing (Calkins, 1994; Ray & Laminack, 2001; Winn & Johnson, 2011). In addition to developing students' writing skills, these paired discussions also provide safe spaces for students to develop their listening and speaking skills. It is helpful to suggest possible questions that students can use to prompt their discussion, such as the following:

- *Who is pictured in the photo? Who isn't pictured but is an important part of the image?*
- *Where/when did the photo take place?*
- *What activities are occurring in the photos?*
- *What story is being told in this photo?*
- *What does this picture say about you?*
- *Why is this photo important?*

Step 4: Use a Storyboard to Scaffold the Writing Process

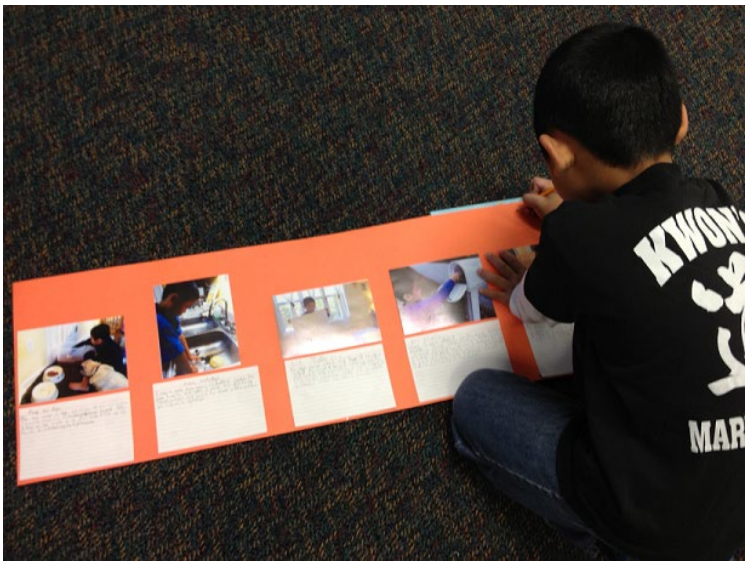
Provide students with a storyboard graphic organizer to use to organize their photos and compose the text. Facilitate conferences with students while they draft and revise, and encourage students to confer with their peers as they continue to engage recursively in the writing process by (re)considering the sequencing of their photos, drafting, revising, and editing their photo stories. Design mini-lessons and small group instruction, using mentor texts and modeling, to lift the level of writing as students work to compose their photo stories. If students are literate in their native language, encourage them to write bilingual photo stories using a fusion of both English and their native language to describe the photos. Students' authentic and scaffolded use of the writing process not only serves to meet curricular language and writing standards, but it also supports their growth as language learners and as writers.

Step 5: Publish Photo Story

Provide students with lined index cards to publish the text of their photo stories. Students can glue their photos and text onto large pieces of construction paper so that each photo is aligned with its accompanying text to create a traditional photo story (see Figures 1 and 2). Some teachers and students, such as those at the middle and secondary levels, may prefer to forego the printed version of the photo story and move directly to step 6, the creation of a digital photo story.

Figure 1

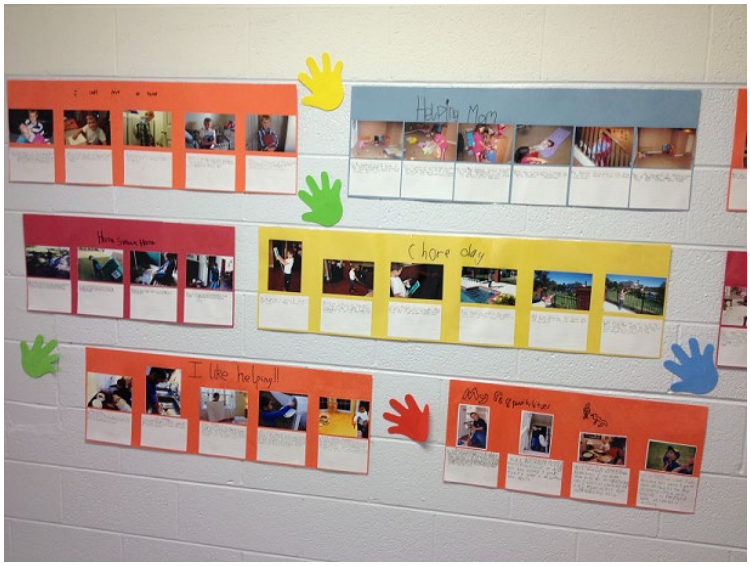
A Traditional Photo Story



Note. A second-grade writer publishes his traditional photo story with printed images and index cards.

Figure 2

Student-Created Photo Stories



Note. A hallway display showcases the photo stories written by second-grade writers.

Step 6: Create Digital Version

Invite students to rehearse their photo story to prepare to record it into a digital platform. While students rehearse, upload their images into the digital platform of choice, such as VoiceThread. When students are ready, meet with them one-on-one in a quiet location to record the narration of their photo story. It may be helpful to invite a volunteer or two to help with this step.

Step 7: Share Digital Photo Stories

Invite students to share their photo stories. As students share their photo stories with the class, teachers can facilitate critical discussions to dive deeper into the experiences brought to light through the students' photo stories. Teachers can ask students to share what they learned from listening to the photo stories as well as how their perceptions about students may have changed. While the storytellers gain a deeper understanding of themselves, the listeners develop empathy for their peers, resulting in collective affirmations of diversity. It is important for students to understand that misperceptions are common. However, students—and teachers—can learn more about one another and exchange our misperceptions for more holistic, dynamic, and accurate perceptions that capture students as whole learners, not simply language learners, and position them as people with unique and valuable life experiences.

Closing Thoughts

Through photography, storytelling, and critical discussions, teachers and students can hear individual and collective stories and become more adept at noticing the gifts, talents, and interests of multilingual learners that might otherwise remain overshadowed by language, ethnic, or cultural barriers. This increased mindfulness helps teachers and students shift their deficit thinking to at promise thinking (Swadener & Niles, 1991) or dynamic thinking (Ford & Grantham, 2003), which helps them engage with students in a way that capitalizes on their backgrounds, strengths, and interests and unlocks their true potential.

While the photo story approach is particularly useful for disrupting assumptions teachers and students may have about multilingual learners, using photo stories and collaborative discussions can also be useful for helping teachers and students truly see the strengths, interests, and experiences *all* students bring to the classroom. This is true for students of low socio-economic status, students with exceptionalities, as well as students of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Creating photo stories is a successful and culturally relevant practice to use with elementary writers, but its use can also extend beyond the elementary level and into middle and secondary classrooms. Thoughtfully engaging students of all levels and backgrounds in storytelling and respectful dialogue about differences creates more equitable learning spaces that position diversity as a resource for learning instead of a barrier that impedes it (Lee & Anderson, 2009). This, in turn, privileges students' unique lived experiences, affirms their identities, and ultimately results in improved educational opportunities for them.

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