

# Research with Immigrant and Urban Youth

**M**iddle school students know a lot about the places in school where they feel welcomed, interested, and part of a group. Whether these are classrooms, the cafeteria, or even the rest-room, students know that the school day is made up of movement from one place to another; and they also know that talk about one another is always on the go. Sometimes the spaces they most enjoy can also become the spaces they most fear. Courtney Kelly, a graduate student in Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University, and Dr. Patricia Enciso, associate professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University, learned first hand about some of those issues through their work with a group of two

Learning  
and Social  
Languages  
in an After-  
School  
Program



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preexisting after-school programs. One program had served Spanish-speaking youth and the other was for select middle school students, some of whom were immigrant youth, in need of additional academic and social support. P-12 Scholar funding supported this study, conducted at an urban host school district, in response to the emerging needs of Mexican, Latin American, and East African immigrant youth in that city.

The after-school program met 2 days per week for 2½ hours per day. Students came together in the after-school program, but spent most of their school day separate from one another. This separation restricted the opportunity for the immigrant youth to engage in conversation and social activities with English-speaking students. The researchers knew that conversation and opportunities for working together could help all students develop academic language as they also gained new cross-cultural insights and

understanding of varied heritage language practices.

The programs led by Kelly and Enciso offered opportunities to urban low-income youth and immigrant students, two groups who have experienced isolation or difficulty in adjusting to and succeeding in conventional school settings. These programs focus on socially driven pedagogical activities that are designed to heighten student awareness of themselves, their language and learning potential, and their capacity to resist situations and labels that can limit their opportunities for social and academic success. Since the immigrant and local youth could clearly benefit from learning together but had few opportunities to do so in the school, this program was designed to facilitate their shared learning and communication. Creating an atmosphere that recognizes and is positive about diverse language and cultural knowledge can lead students to succeed at tasks that demand a higher level of academic literacy

than assignments typically given to students who might be placed in remedial language arts or content area classes. All of the students were able to become the experts, which empowered them and built on their existing strengths. This was especially true for students who had not been encouraged to recognize the value of their home languages.

### *Mapping What Students Value*

The students' first project was to create a social map of the school. The map project was based on work done by Laurie Olsen whose work with students illustrated the extent to which many immigrant youth experience school as a separate space for them, isolated from other students. This social mapping project involved the students identifying places that are important to them in the school, such as the cafeteria, restrooms, gym, and some classrooms. The



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most valued areas tended to be the ones with the least restriction, such as the gymnasium and cafeteria. While working on this project, which resulted in a big social map of the school, students were treated to a field trip to The Ohio State University Multicultural Center where they began to envision an even larger map for their future education. All the students were welcomed together with a pizza party and visits from Ohio State students who also experienced the difficulties of finding a place to belong in school.

### *Lessons Learned about Language and Communication*

The second project built upon the first and was the focal point of Kelly and Enciso's work. The students worked with The Ohio State University Film and Video Society to create a video. Through working

together to create an idea, a script, scene decisions, rehearsal, and the production, students engaged in a vast array of skills, including writing, socializing, scripting, and acting. The theme of the video was tension at school that resulted from rumors and gossip. The production costs were financed through a Storytelling Grant from the Multicultural Center. Students, their families, and Ohio State affiliates who helped with the project attended the premiere showing of the video at the Longaberger Alumni House on The Ohio State University campus. At the end of the year, the students provided a list of discussion questions for a showing of the video to their peers and facilitated a workshop on gossip for a sixth-grade class. The film was also shown to members of their city council.

One of the important lessons learned during the creation of the video was that students need to be able to talk about their language and why it is important to them. They need to work together to understand how language can be misunderstood and used against people, but also how it can be a vital, enriching source for further knowledge development. Students in the video project were very interested in each language represented in their scripts because they

wanted to determine the best way to say phrases in different languages. They knew that some phrases or sayings in one language really do not translate clearly into another. They did extensive language analyses, especially when writing the scripts, as they developed greater appreciation for their own and others' insights about language in social settings.

In addition to putting their language knowledge into action, students also had to learn about filmmaking. They had to learn how to take direction, memorize a script, and be prepared for retakes. The cafeteria, which was the main setting used, was more familiar to the students than to the adults, so they talked with the film crew about ways to make the scene more authentic. All of the students in the program participated in the film, including the three staff members. Enciso and Kelly believe that the students who participated had a much more powerful sense of self as a result of the project.

## Implications

These projects—both the social map and the video—have important implications for teachers. Teachers must recognize the capacity of young people to be interested in the diversity around them and they must use that as a resource to help students find ways to make a positive contribution to their community and school lives. Students have knowledge about language, but they also have perspectives that can be used to describe problems and construct solutions. Recognizing students' insights and their desire to be full participants in social learning enables them to perform academically with greater commitment and quality.

At The Ohio State University, these projects have also had a great impact. Several different Ohio State groups have become invested in the after-school program, especially the film

crew, which continues to work there. The involvement of the film crew provided the opportunity for the younger students to produce a high-quality product. At the Ohio State Multicultural Center, Carmen Alvarez-Breckenridge, an immigrant herself, was instrumental in facilitating students' visits to the Ohio State campus. The Ohio State University Student Alumni Association donated the use of the Longaberger Alumni House and provided treats for the premiere of the students' video. This enabled parents and students to attend the premiere together and for discussion to take place in a comfortable atmosphere.

This whole experience is a great model for research. Kelly was in-

involved and invested in the community ahead of time through her previous service with the after-school programs. In addition to being presented nationally, this work will serve as part of Kelly's doctoral research. Two other individuals who assisted with these programs were Caitlin Cummings, an Ohio State senior honors student in 2005-06, and Andre Wiley, a community member. Together with Enciso, this team's work has made a difference by providing the framework for students from the after-school program to serve as spokespersons for themselves about the value of learning together as a diverse community of students. ■

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