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Ensemble Research: A Means for Immigrant Children to Explore Peer Relationships Through Fotonovela

This work began with a question about the challenges of nonverbal communication across cultures for both immigrant children in Canadian schools and a community of researchers. The question led to the gathering of an ensemble of researchers that included both adults and children. This article represents that collaborative group's approach to a research innovation focusing on the fotonovela as both a research tool and a product of the research process. Antecedent narratives tell of the research team's diverse skills, which became resources for the visual inquiry of immigrant children into their first Canadian school experiences. Combining digital-documentary, tableau, and digital-image manipulation, the children created, reflected on, and responded to fotonovelas about their peer relationships. Their stories combine elements of the personal with social symbolic representations that result in multiple layers of identification for the students and other readers of their research. This layered narrative is discussed as a unique result of combining digitized photographic processes with the fotonovela format. It also provides insights into how the fotonovela format can be used as a research tool.

Ce projet découle d'une question portant sur les défis que pose, tant pour les enfants immigrants dans les écoles du Canada que pour la communauté de chercheurs, la communication non verbale entre personnes de différentes cultures. Une séance réunissant des chercheurs (des adultes aussi bien que des enfants) en a résulté. Cet article reflète l'approche de ce groupe collaboratif devant une innovation en recherche reposant sur la

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fotonovela, qui a été à la fois outil de recherche et produit de la recherche. Des exposés de faits préalables relatent les habiletés diverses de l'équipe de recherche, lesquelles sont devenues des ressources servant l'enquête visuelle réalisée par des enfants immigrants sur leurs premières expériences dans une école au Canada. S'appuyant sur le documentaire numérique, le logiciel Tableau et la manipulation d'images numériques, les enfants ont créé des fotonovelas portant sur leurs rapports avec leurs pairs et y ont réfléchi et réagi. Leurs récits révèlent à la fois des éléments du personnel et des représentations symboliques du social, mariage qui produit plusieurs niveaux d'identification pour les élèves et les lecteurs. Nous présentons ces récits à plusieurs niveaux comme étant le résultat unique né de la combinaison de processus impliquant les photographies numériques d'une part et le format de la fotonovela d'autre part. Nous évoquons également des façons dont la fotonovela peut servir d'outil de recherche.

Cross-disciplinary studies, which have become more common in recent years, have brought about a complex and rewarding fertilization of ideas that are becoming characteristic of contemporary research (Lather, 1992). Although collaboration among researchers is now often encouraged by institutions of higher education and funding agencies, the actual process of negotiation among the various cultures, expertise, interests, and personalities embodied by collaborative research teams is rarely explored. Similarly, the specific roles and contributions of research assistants in the collaborative process are seldom fully described and acknowledged. In this article, we use the analogy of a performance ensemble to underscore the dynamic movement of the research process and the development of researcher-child relationships as a consequence of the range of expertise provided by the members of a research team. Through the in-depth description of one particular episode of a longer research story, we present the many layers of negotiation between children and researchers involved in a process that took place over one school year. The process resulted in the children's creation of a fotonovela intended to help children understand their own and their peers' nonverbal behavior. The negotiations involved the principal investigators (Anna and Mike) and the research assistants (Oliver and Susan)—each of whom come from different academic fields and cultures—and the participating children (Veronica, Margaret, and Shannon), who also come from different cultures. These dialogues, really a multidimensional constellation of conversations, were a central feature of a research method that not only resulted in a mutually enriching co-mixture of ideas, but also allowed for changing roles and shifting leadership positions. All these dynamics influenced the sense of purpose and practical approaches of the participating children and the adult members of the research team in this collaborative undertaking.

Anna's Research Antecedents

My interest in investigating immigrant children's nonverbal experiences of Canadian schools arose from a deep personal crisis of my own. In the 10 years after I immigrated to Canada, I learned English, wrote a doctoral dissertation in that new language for a second doctoral degree, held an academic position at a university in the United States for four years, and then came back to Canada as a faculty member in the department where I had obtained my second doctoral degree. I had the right to feel successful and good about myself. I was relatively comfortable in the English language, I was comfortable in my professional self as I had gained informal and formal recognition from my students in the US,

and was well accepted and positioned among my peers. This image of my "successful" self was shattered by the first evaluations of my teaching in an undergraduate course in my new institution. The written comments of a number of students made me aware of the profound ineffectiveness of my ability to communicate my true intentions to some of my students in my interactions with them in class. It became clear to me that it was not what I said that offended the students, but how I said it. The *what* of the English language had to do with the clarity of the meaning of the words, which in spite of my accent was not perceived as problematic by the students. The *how* of *my English* language, that is, tone of voice, speech rhythm, accompanying gestures, proximity to the students, movement around the room, pauses after a statement, or facial expression while listening and responding to questions, however, was not consistent with the conventions of *the English* language that the students expected. Paradoxically, the more fluent my spoken English became, the less accurately some native speakers understood me. I was faced with a contradiction that seemed irresolvable: my increased facility with the spoken language increased my difficulty in conveying the intended meaning. In other words, I was speaking a language fluently that I did not embody fluently. I realized that in the *how* of my spoken English I remained Bulgarian.

The notion of embodiment of meaning became the focal point of my research interest. I began to wonder about children for whom English was not their mother tongue. As an adult learner of the English language who will never be completely accent-free and thus will remain audibly recognizable as a "foreigner," if I experience difficulties in communicating meaning through the how of the language, what is this like for children? It is commonly accepted that young children learn a new language not only faster than adults, but that they also learn to speak it like native speakers. But do immigrant children embody their non-native language? Do they learn the *what* and the *how* of the new language at the same time, or is there a time when the *how* of their new spoken language does not yet correspond to the *what*? Does this create a sense of confusion in them and misunderstanding between them and their native-speaking peers?

In contemplating these questions, I remembered how shortly after our immigration and only after a month in his new school, my 6-year-old son was already "in trouble" for being "too physical." Speaking through a French interpreter, I initially thought that I did not understand what the principal was saying to me and asked for clarification. She looked at me seriously and said that my son was "running around the school kissing and hugging everyone including the boys." It took me some time to realize that this was not considered appropriate behavior in Canadian culture. The question for me then became, How do immigrant children initiate and maintain peer relationships during the initial phase of learning the new oral language when they use only their body language to communicate their needs to their peers and teachers? Do their peers understand their intended meanings, and do they understand their peers' intended meanings when no common oral language is used and body language has been developed in different cultural contexts? These questions became the driving force behind my interest in studying the role of

nonverbal behaviors in establishing peer relationships in a multilingual, multi-cultural school context.

In addition to a personal and embodied experience of cultural crisis as an immigrant working in Canada, as a professional early childhood researcher, I was committed to involving children in the process of negotiation of meanings, roles, and power inherent in all research situations, especially those involving young children (Kirova, 2003; Kirova-Petrova, 1996, 2000). Beginning this study on immigrant children's nonverbal strategies in initiating and maintaining peer relationships presented me with a set of challenges. How would I capture and study the experiences of cross-cultural nonverbal misunderstandings among immigrant and mainstream-culture children without making them self-conscious about every gesture, glance, and movement? Earlier research (Hall, 1976; Hall, 1984) suggests that cultural differences at a nonverbal level are implicit and exist at a deeper, more subtle level (Archer, 1997) that people have difficulty describing. If it is unlikely that a child or anyone else can describe cultural differences in nonverbal communication, then how else can we study the embodied life worlds of immigrant children as they live and interact with their peers in a multicultural school context? Examining children's drawings was one possibility that I initially explored. After lengthy discussions with Mike about the pros and cons of using children's drawings as research data, we decided that photography was much more effective in representing children's nonverbal ways of being with their peers.

Mike's Research Antecedents

If communication can be metaphorically understood as a borderland where messages sent and received are under continual construction by both sender and recipient, I feel that my education and career have led me to a special role as observer and reporter of the visual dimensions of these meaningful exchanges. I grew up in a lens culture (Coleman, 1986). As in many middle-class North American families, taking photographs was the ritualized method of endorsing the significance of family events. My grandfather, as the family photographer, recorded family events and trips, but also made art, creating photographic still-life images of flowers. He made sure that each of us grandchildren received a first camera (mine was a Kodak Instamatic 100 with pop-up flash) when we were 8 years old. Less typical was the fact that my father's career as an accountant in the television industry meant that my childhood was also full of visual memories of playing on sound stages designed to look like 19th-century Dodge City. I remember playing with scrap strips of 35mm film I found blowing down the studio alleyways after spilling out of the overflowing dumpster outside the editing building. From an early age, I was aware of the mechanisms behind the construction of the fantasies of television narrative, but I was also comfortable with suspending my well-informed disbelief to enjoy TV stories. Visuality clothed and fed me as a child, so it may not be surprising that I make my living as a photographer, an art educator, and an image-based researcher.

As implied in comments by my colleague Anna (above), border crossings involve both discomfort and insight. Through both my own graduate degrees, I focused on the philosophical and critical literature about meaning and photography. Although my own studio practice was not as evolved as that of my

Fine Arts faculty colleagues, the fact that I had worked hard to be able to talk art language was received as a pleasant surprise. I spent 10 years in fine-arts departments "passing" because I was enthusiastic, well informed, and, as a lone art educator among studio faculty, powerless.

When I came to my current post in a faculty of education, I quickly realized that I knew little about that academic world and the specialized language, writing grant applications, and research culture at the center of its foundational values. For my first year, a feature of most staff meetings was when I declared an "acronym alert" and asked a colleague to decipher his or her code so that I could follow a discussion. Performed and received as a joke (my coping body language), this strategy was motivated by real anxiety.

While still in fine arts departments, I had begun writing about image-based research methods, but my concept of research was colored more by artists' work than by the work of educational researchers (Emme, 1999). By exploring social issues with my students through studio process, I was beginning to build a bridge between my two professional worlds, but I could not complete this bridge working exclusively from the fine-arts side. My most intense sense of the borders (and barriers) has been the transition of the past few years as I have worked, at first alone and now with research collaborators in education, to develop a language and practice that make sense for me as an artist and an educational researcher. I still identify myself as an art person in a faculty of education, but now I am linking my skills and purposes with the various skills and purposes of the adults and children who are my collaborators. My continued exploration of the lens media (Emme, 1989, 1999, 2001; Emme & Kirova, 2005) as tools for communicating meaning is not without contradictions. However, the experience of the research described here, along with a growing literature that acknowledges image-based methods (Banks, 1998; Pink, 2001; Prosser, 1998; Rose, 2001; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001) and arts-based methods (Bagley & Cancienne, 2002; Irwin & de Casson, 2005), as well as a research community more open to notions of visualized criticality and theoretical complexity (Brockelmen, 2001; Madigan, 1986) is personally encouraging to me.

The initial conversations with Anna led to grant-application-writing efforts that helped each of us clarify purposes and methods that we could implement collaboratively. For me part of this process involved recalling a conversation from 15 years ago with a Latina photographer and social activist Kay Torres, who had introduced me to the photo-based comic book, the fotonovela (Reed, 1998). Faced with the challenge of engaging children in a rich, visual storytelling process that could be shared, I believed that the fotonovela was a powerful way of focusing a diverse array of purposes.

Oliver's Research Antecedents

Since immigrating to Canada seven years ago, I have become more attuned to the slippery and contradictory nature of cultural identity. Although I perceive myself as an educated male and doctoral student of African background, I now recognize that these identities do not totally define me. I have other multi-layered identities as an educator, an (arts-based) researcher, and a social justice activist. All these forms of multi-identity influence and dictate how I interpret and perceive the world.

I credit this insight to postmodernism and postcolonial theories. Lyotard's (1984) definition of postmodernism as incredulity toward meta-narratives has made me conscious of the contested nature of identity and experience. Postcolonial scholars like Minh-Ha (1989) have reminded me that identities cannot be fully categorized because these will always leak. In my academic life, I try to pursue opportunities that will enhance my understanding of the cultural Other's identity and experience.

When I was invited to join this project, I learned that the research team wished to explore interactions between new immigrant and mainstream students in an inner-city Canadian school. The principal researchers explained that they needed someone with a background in educational drama to help the students enact the emergent stories of their school lives. Immediately I recognized that the research project would address a personal-political area in which I had a vested interest: the experience of a newly immigrated student. As an immigrant from Kenya, I have vivid memories of finding an unfamiliar and confusing social order on arrival in Canada.

I have always loved working with children because as I interact with them, I learn more about myself. My belief that children are quintessentially performers guides my drama philosophy. When working with children, I assume that they already know something about dramatization. I remind myself that every child is annoyed, excited, or bored at some time and that if they are well guided, they can recall and recreate these emotions. My input was to help them portray emotions experienced in situations in their daily lives in school as part of the storytelling process.

Susan's Research Antecedents

As a classroom teacher with 20 years of experience teaching grades 1 and 2 in upper-middle-class suburban neighborhoods, I have seen increased diversity among my students. The demands of curriculum change and growing class sizes have also made me seek innovative ways to serve students' needs. I am increasingly aware of the necessity of teaching to a variety of learning styles. Each child brings his or her own experiences, strengths, interests, and cultural background. Because of my concern with students who are challenged by reading and writing and my growing awareness of using visual literacy as a tool to help them, art education and language arts are the focus of my graduate studies.

Thus I became involved with Anna, Mike, and Oliver in this arts-based research project in an inner-city school. I was intrigued by the idea of using photography to help immigrant children to understand and communicate in their school environment and peer culture. Having taught several children new to the country, I recall being frustrated by my inability to connect with them meaningfully. Also the introductory resources with which we begin instruction for ESL students do little justice to their intellectual abilities. The limitations of our shared language made communication difficult. I thought photography might provide a readable, friendly, and more sophisticated method of accessing these children's school experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Overview of the Project

Although we members of the research team each came from different cultures, experiences, and research traditions, the experiences of nonverbal miscom-

munication provided the common ground for our collaboration. Examining both the reasons for an embodied sense of discomfort in a particular culture and how a child might explore it brought our research interests together. The primary concern of the study was assisting new-immigrant children to examine the nonverbal strategies they use to gain access to majority-culture peers. For the purpose of this article, we explore one of the three main research questions of the study: Can visual experiences such as producing visual narratives in the form of fotonovelas help children understand their own and their peers' nonverbal behaviors?

Background of the Study

Findings from earlier research (Kirova, 2001; Kirova-Petrova, 2000) have shown that social isolation and loneliness are commonly experienced by immigrant children regardless of their racial, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds. Children report that because they are unable to be accepted as members of their peer group, they experience the loneliness of being excluded, unwanted, and disliked. Other studies (Osterman, 2001) also show that being excluded or ignored engenders intense feelings of anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, and loneliness. A study of recent Chinese immigrants in elementary school (Kirova & Wu, 2002) suggests that the miscommunication during their integration into the school culture may be largely due to misinterpreting the nonverbal cues of their classmates. Peer conflicts were about misunderstandings on the part of both the newcomers and their peers from the majority (non-Chinese) culture. In most reported cases, these misunderstandings occurred on a nonverbal level. In all instances of miscommunication, the non-Chinese peers' behaviors were perceived by the newcomers as overt rejection and evoked either an aggressive response or hurt feelings, sadness, isolation, and loneliness.

Research on nonverbal behavior has demonstrated its central role in the process of establishing interpersonal relationships (Feldman, Philippot, & Custrini, 1991). The importance of studying cross-cultural nonverbal communication among schoolchildren is accentuated by the fact that nonverbal expressions are likely to remain unchanged even when a new language is acquired (Schneller, 1988). It is, therefore, the presence of unchanged nonverbal communication accompanying a newly acquired verbal language that complicates communication. When a discrepancy occurs between verbally and implicitly (nonverbally) expressed meaning, the implicit portion will dominate the total message (Mehrabian, 1971).

Because nonverbal behavior is the product of a continuing socialization process in a given culture (Archer, 1997; Kendon, 1997; Pearce & Cronen, 1980), an immigrant or any newcomer to the culture as a recipient decodes a nonverbal message according to his or her cultural heritage, which often contradicts the encoder's intentions (Archer; Schneller, 1985). The difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that most gestures that appear similar differ greatly in their emblematic meaning (Efron, 1972; Ekman, 1980; Heslin & Patterson, 1982; Leach, 1972; von Raffler-Engel, 1980). This leads to false decoding (Poyatos, 1984) that produces miscommunication and misunderstanding (Mehrabian, 1971; Mehrabian & Weiner, 1967).

Although nonverbal behavior plays a central role in the process of establishing interpersonal relationships (Feldman et al., 1991), its importance has

been overlooked in the study of young children of immigrants, especially in the context of everyday interactions in a school context. The findings of an ethnographic study (Hanna, 1997) of black-white nonverbal communication in a US school setting also suggest that nonverbal translation is a recognized remedy for potential intercultural misunderstanding.

The Setting and the Participants

The participants in this study-in-progress are elementary schoolchildren in an inner-city school in a large city in Western Canada with a high percentage of children who are recent immigrants. More than seven languages are spoken among the 204 students in the school. Over the course of the study, which began in February 2004, we have worked with 45 children from grades 4, 5, and 6. A small group of six children were participants in the study from the beginning and expressed interest in continuing to work with us during the 2005 school year as part of the photo club. One child from this experienced group (Margaret, grade 5) along with two newcomers to the photo club, Veronica, grade 4, and Shannon, grade 5, participated in the development of the fotonovela described and presented in this article. Margaret and Shannon were recent immigrants from China and Vietnam respectively, and Veronica was a Canadian-born Caucasian. All three children live near the school, an area of the city where most families are from a low socioeconomic background. The school has a free-lunch program and all three children qualified for this program.

The Place of Fotonovela in Participatory Research with Children
Researchers' awareness of children's participation rights and citizenship (United Nations, 1989) has resulted in increased emphasis on children's participation in research (Alderson, 2000; Veale, 2005). As Heeks (1999) pointed out, participation has the status of a new orthodoxy in many areas of social research. The critical examination of traditional research methods and the search for new methods that can serve as tools for children's participation in research has put photography at the forefront; it is an increasingly popular child-centered research method (Barker & Weller, 2003; Orellana, 1999). For example, photography in general has been defined as a valuable participatory technique for eliciting children's opinions (Ells, 2001). The use of inexpensive disposable or digital cameras made photography an accessible method in which researchers could engage children in exploring and recording their own experiences, feelings, and observations (Hart, 1992). Using cameras while working with children with poor written or oral skills has been found beneficial (Young & Barrett, 2001). In addition, giving children the responsibility for handling and using the cameras developed trust between the children and the researchers (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001).

In this study, we used an arts-based methodology with still photography as the primary visual data-collection method. The visual methodology used was unique because the still photographs were not only used as a basis for discussion, but were also manipulated and arranged in a narrative format as a fotonovela. As a storytelling form, the fotonovela can combine the familiar framing devices, sequencing, and text balloons of the comic book with posed or candid photographs of participants in place of pen-and-ink drawings. As a form of popular literature, the fotonovela was to be found in Mexico, Italy,

France, Portugal, and Quebec in the 1960s and 1970s. This blending of a highly entertaining and approachable narrative structure with the naturalness or realism of photography (Emme, 1989) suited the melodramatic content of its popular form (Reed, 1998). Sometimes with the anglicized spelling Photo Novella, the form has also proved a useful and important communication device in communities where literacy is an issue. UNICEF, as one example among many organizations dealing with public health issues, has produced fotonovelas for use in Nepal to tell about AIDS and health-care options.

The current literature on the fotonovela as a research tool is found in the fields of health and nursing. For example, Berman, Ford-Gilboe, Moutrey, and Cekic (2001) used the fotonovela as a research method to encourage Bosnian refugee children to represent their memories as well as their first experiences in Canada. Wang and Burris (1994) used the fotonovela to understand the experiences of Chinese women. In both cases and typical of the literature, the fotonovela is seen as a leveling and even liberatory medium in a context where diverse literacies create inequities and representational disparity. However, to our knowledge, in our study, fotonovela as a collaborative research tool is used for the first time by educational researchers with both immigrant and non-immigrant children.

In addition to using still photography, we also used elements of performative research in developing the fotonovelas. Reenacting remembered school experiences as a means of visualizing important moments identified by the children and photographing the acted scenes as tableaux was one such element. As another form of arts-based research, performative research provided deeper insights into participants' lives. Originating from anthropology and communication and performance studies, "performance is regarded as both a legitimate and ethical way of representing ethnographic understanding" (Conrad, 2004, p. 9). According to Conrad, performance allows participants to depict and examine their real-life "performances," thus "providing insight into their lived experiences and their cultural world" (p. 10).

In terms of its potential to address issues of power in research, the fotonovela as a research method allows for alternative ways for children to communicate their experiences. The value of using methods such as charts about myself, role-play, drawing, game-playing, and photography (Aitken & Wingate, 1993; Backett & Alexander, 1991; Goodwin, 1982; Hill, Laybourn, & Borland, 1996; Kirova-Petrova, 1996; Pridmore & Bendelow, 1995) has been noted by researchers as affording the possibility of restoring the balance between adults and children in terms of biological age; body size; knowledge; experience; and social, political, and economic status (Valentine, 1999). We suggest that the fotonovela used as a form of collaborative inquiry empowers immigrant children by providing them with the means to research, narrate, and share their experiences without reliance on highly developed written or oral English skills.

For the purposes of this article, we use the process of creating one such fotonovela "Getting Into Basketball" to illustrate both the fotonovela and performance research methodologies, as well as the ensemble approach to inquiry that grew out of the various cultural perspectives, professional skills, and

understandings brought by each member of the team that made this creative process possible.

Developing the Research Methods

Using the fotonovela as a means of inquiry and representation was a process introduced to the children through two stages of activity. First, all the children in the grade 5 class were invited to join a noon-hour photography club. Starting with the fun of learning a new (for some) technology, initial experiences allowed the children to play with the camera while exploring their school through documentary picture-taking. The children produced hundreds of small thumbnail prints that their teacher incorporated into various class projects and journals. As researchers, we understood these images to be the children's. They were not data that we could take with us from the school. As taking photographs became familiar (and even boring), we invited the children to start photographing around themes such as life on the playground, the cafeteria, and me pretending (Miller, 1997). Through interaction and observation, the researchers identified students who seemed particularly committed to continuing with the visual storytelling aspect of the photo club. This smaller group opened the second stage by engaging in conversations with the researchers about their documentary images and some of the ideas these evoked. The children were then introduced to the fotonovela and asked if they would like to create a similar photo-comic-style story for the next students who were new to the school and from another country. From this discussion, the research team members and children identified a story that they wished to tell. Combining tableaux, digital photography, digital filtering (both for privacy and to move the images from a realistic to an iconic storytelling form, Emme & Kirova, 2005), and desktop publishing software with much collective negotiating, several stories were created that span being new, as well as the grown-ups' rules and kids' rules in the school.

As an important ethical sidebar, it must be noted that the images in this article have been manipulated several times. The playground events depicted in the fotonovela are documented reenactments that were performed by the children as inquiry into nonverbal communication. Those images have been digitally filtered and organized by the children in collaboration with the adult research team in the layout presented here in an effort to represent the embodied experiences of the children. Although these and similar images have been reproduced with consent and permission in other academic contexts, the images have been further filtered for this journal because of the editors' concerns about privacy. Discussions with the provincial privacy commission, the school district, and experts in image-based research such as Prosser (2005) suggest that no single formula for the use of images in research is possible. Instead the researcher, participants, and academic community have to commit to situational conversations that can create a shared commitment to the particular images and their use. This ensemble of researchers is thus expanded to include two editors and to account for their criteria concerning ethics.

Photo Club Activities: A Case

Children Exploring Life on the Playground Though Candid Photographs

Anna and Mike

Over the duration of the study, four groups of students were identified. In each case, student-led research into school culture and nonverbal communication challenges became the organizing structure behind the identification of important stories that were performed in tableaux, photographed, and represented in fotonovela form. The example examined here is the third of those four cases. Based on our previous year's success with the participants of the photo club, we decided to explore with the new participants the topic of *Life on the Playground.* After their initial open-ended visual documentation of the playground, the grade 4-5 children generated ideas about all the activities in the playground, which we then put in the form of a checklist. These were games, playing with equipment, listening, talking, being alone, leading, following, being together, kids' rules, and grown-ups' rules. To explore these ideas, the children went in pairs to the playground to take photographs in each of the listed categories. The members of the research team went with the children to supervise the activity, but did not suggest what shots to take or what to focus on. Having the children choose what to photograph empowered them and ensured their active participation in the research process.

Susan

The photographers were remarkably focused, and sharing cameras made partners stay together and on task. The students wore self-made name tags as photo club members with great pride.

The playground experience was different from anything I had experienced in my career. The school is in a high-traffic area in the core of the city. It was clear from observing and participating with groups on the playground that this was where the social hierarchy was established and negotiated. It was hard to find my bearings not only as a non-teacher in this context, but as an observer. What were the rules? How are questionable behaviors handled? Where are the children allowed to play? In trying to figure out the dynamics of this different playground community, I thought of the confusions that a child from another country would experience. I recalled that on many occasions I had found newly immigrated students at their desks in the classroom at recess. I wondered if the confusions of the recess world were too much to handle: the desk and classroom a safer place.

Developing the Fotonovela: Changing Roles, Negotiating Power in the Process

Anna and Mike

The next step in the process was to print each pair's photographs and ask the photographers to examine them and color-code how each photograph represented one or more of the categories on the checklist. Our earlier success in engaging the children in conversations about the meaning of the photographs in relation to the categories as a way of a beginning to see photography as a means of storytelling was not repeated with this group of children. After making a number of unsuccessful attempts both individually and as a team to bring the children's attention to the possibilities of using images to tell their

own stories, we had recourse to Susan's teacher's skills to pull the children together and begin developing a playground story with them.

Susan

When I next joined the research, the pictures of the playground had been printed and discussed, and some attempts had been made to see their stories. Our intention was to have the immigrant children create a visual narrative of the playground experience from their perspective. The process was more challenging than we had thought. The children had lost their initial enthusiasm and thoughtfulness. In a final attempt to build a playground story, I worked with grade 5 students Margaret, a recent immigrant from China, and Veronica, a Caucasian student born in Canada. To engage and entice them, I drew them into the world of make-believe. I told them my imaginary niece was coming to their school from a foreign country, with no knowledge of school, city life, or the language. I enlisted their help in preparing her for what she would find without having to use words. Margaret viewed the idea with suspicion, asking repeatedly, "But really, do you have a niece?" As she was a leader in the photo club, she could sabotage the activity for both girls if she thought it foolish or not worthwhile. Veronica, on the other hand, was spirited and vocal; getting her to attend to the task at hand was usually a challenge. I described my imaginary niece and answered their questions about her. Once they were convinced that it was a feasible activity, their eagerness to help the new girl (Amy) impressed me. We decided to clarify the outside world of school life, the playground. In my best animated-teacher manner, I urged them to offer some advice. To motivate them, I had photographed several deserted areas of the playground. Their innate empathy was immediately evident when I asked them what they thought Amy might be feeling as she walked to the playground for the first time. Margaret responded, "Oh no, what if the kids bully me because I'm new?"

Their first response to the playground pictures was with adult-generated rules such as "Don't climb on the fence" and "Stay out of the mud." In response to the photograph of the school façade, the girls told me, "That's where the junior highs hang out in the morning. You can go there if you want to." When I showed interest, they elaborated on the different rules for the elementary and junior high students. They shared some of the unspoken rules of the playground, the etiquette between children in play and behavior outside.

The most animated discussion was about images of the basketball area. The strict code of conduct between children would need to be explained to a new student. The girls offered this advice to Amy: "If someone's shooting, don't go by." "If the ball rolls to you, don't take it." "Ask if you want to play."

Both girls wished to be heard, which I took as an indication that I had established some rapport with them. The girls also wished to ensure confidentiality for what they were divulging. Once, while they were enthusiastically generating ideas, Veronica paused to look under the couch and asked if they were being recorded by my colleagues, saying that this had happened before and that she did not like it.

Inspired by the girls' thoughtful engagement in the activity, I suggested that we make a fotonovela of one of the playground places and send it to Amy. Enthusiasm was high and they wished to start immediately. They chose the

basketball court as the setting and suggested that Amy and another girl should act in a scenario of what to do and not to do there. Unfortunately, we ran out of time and had to leave development of the fotonovela for the following week.

The following week, Veronica was delayed, and without her competition Margaret generated a script that would become the fotonovela. She was less patient with writing the script than she had been when generating advice for Amy, although we did piece together an interaction between Amy and others on the basketball court using a storyboard to divide the story into frames. The story of a new girl trying to join in a basketball game was told effortlessly by Margaret as if she had seen it many times. We used speech balloons and thought bubbles on sticky notes to record the dialogue, and I recorded the ideas as she generated them. First, Amy is at the basketball hoop watching another child dribble. When the child is about to shoot, he drops the ball, and Amy thinks, "Maybe I should pick it up and return it to that guy … Maybe I shouldn't pick it up; what if that guy starts yelling at me?" When she decides to pick it up, the other child responds, "Hey, you shouldn't be around here. Go to the playground, scram, scram." Margaret responds defiantly as Amy, "You're not the boss of me. I can do whatever I want to."

By the time Veronica joined us, Margaret and I had solidified our idea, and I was ready to photograph them acting the drama on the playground. It took much cajoling to persuade the girls to act this piece outside. Then the situation worsened. Suddenly neither girl wanted anything to do with the cameras, script, or to even be associated with me. Negotiation about who would play Amy was the first indication that acting the scenario in front of others would be a social disaster. Neither girl wished to play the role of the social outsider in front of her peers.
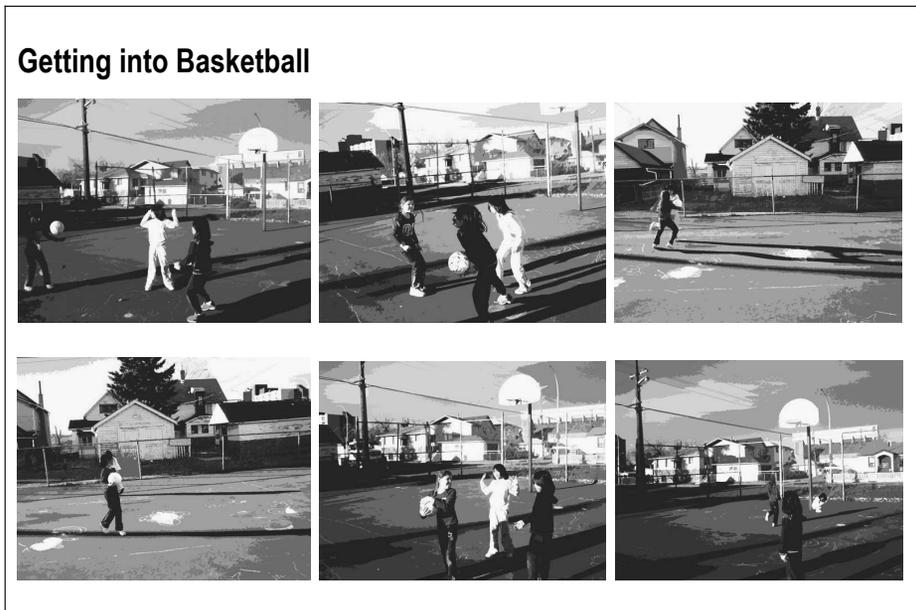

Getting into Basketball

Figure 1.

I had assumed that the transfer to acting would be without incident as it seemed a natural evolution of the process. I had not taken into account how complex a social setting the playground was for them. I was deflated by the girls' lack of ownership for their story following their earlier enthusiasm. We looked to my colleague Oliver, with his background in drama, for some coaching. He immediately recognized the girls' discomfort and reluctance to be vulnerable in front of others by pretending.

Developing the Fotonovela: Acting out the Peer Negotiations

Oliver

For me the playground is more than a recreational space. It is a pedagogical space full of "performers" who form, negotiate, and practice inclusive or exclusive interactions. So I was not surprised when the photo club group emerged with a possible story of a typical experience on the school basketball court. They wished to tell of a newcomer to the school who is rebuffed when she tries to join other children playing basketball. I realized that before venturing to help the photo club members to rehearse and perform this activity, I would first have to motivate them. Susan had already confided to the rest of our research team that she had tried to have the girls enact the story, but had encountered much resistance. I had no rapport with the girls and was not eager to dismantle an idea that others had pioneered. The best way to motivate children in creative drama is to ensure that they trust themselves and feel comfortable with the idea they are about to enact. I believed that the best way to achieve this would be to improvise this story in class before venturing outside.

Figure 2.

I asked to see the storyboard that had triggered the idea of the basketball court. Two photographs were to tell the story of a new girl who joins the school but is excluded from participating in a basketball game by two other girls. A thought balloon for the new girl read, "You are not boss of me," apparently a rebuke to the other two girls. Something about this sentence told me that a new student would hardly be this confrontational. For the story to be compelling and credible, I would have to help the girls examine the real world of a new student in the school. I led them in a creative self-exploration process that involved entering the world of the new girl. We had the following conversation.

> Oliver: Does this happen during her first day in school?
> Margaret: Yes, it is her first day.
> Oliver: What time would it be? Recess or lunchtime?
> Margaret: Recess.
> Oliver: So she has only been in school for less than three hours?
> Margaret and Veronica: Ya.
> Oliver: Do you think a new girl who has only been in our school for only three hours would say, "You are not boss of me?"
> Margaret: No.
> Oliver: So we might have to change what this girl says in this photograph. Do you agree?
> Margaret: Yes.
> Oliver: What do you think she is likely to say?
> Margaret: Can I join you?

As a result of this process, the two girls were able to imagine and articulate Amy's probable reaction during her first day at school. They recognized that

Figure 3.

Amy would be interested in playing with everyone and that she would probably not be aggressive. However, they also realized that the friendship of their characters transcended anything else in school. So they would not permit anyone, particularly a new student, to interrupt their good time together. Shannon, a girl who joined Margaret, Veronica, and me when we were already outside, was invited to play the role of Amy. She also quickly recognized that her character would be hurt by the rejection by the others. I wanted all the girls to undergo the mental process to enable them think critically about the motivation and desires of their characters.

When we asked Shannon to be Amy and join in the improvisation, she portrayed her character well. A telling moment was when she attempted to get the ball that had bounced away from Margaret and Veronica. Veronica screamed at her and snatched the ball. Without even speaking her frustration, Shannon raised her arms in frustration, a gesture that was so eloquent that anyone could fill in her unspoken words. This act of surrender portrayed a rejected child who had no alternative than to step away from the awful experience.

When the three girls went to the basketball field to enact the story, they presented it so genuinely that it would have been difficult to convince spectators that the girls' basketball play was contrived. Susan was finally able to take still photographs of the girls enacting Amy's story.

The series of six photos show Amy trying to join the play and the other children taunting her. When Amy retrieves the ball, the others respond by grabbing it. Amy surrenders and withdraws. It is a simple and common playground scenario. Because of the everydayness of the fotonovela, and because the girls credibly represented and performed their story, it could be shared with everyone in the school.

Figure 4.

Telling the Visual Story: Sharing the Fotonovela with Others

The "Getting into Basketball" fotonovela was shared with two groups of children with different purposes at different times. Because two of the girls participating in the development of the fotonovela were in grade 5, it was first shown to the other children during their regular class time. Fifteen children were present that day. The research objective was to observe how the children who had not participated would respond. The fotonovela was presented by the authors and included both the title and the text as originally written. Their classmates were immediately drawn to the content. The characters' speech and gestures were readable for the children, and it was a personal story of their own playground community. The new girl's exclusion, disappointment, and loneliness on the basketball court translated well through the fotonovela. Although the scene was short, the children revisited the images and dialogue several times. They agreed that this was "what happens the first recess when you don't know anyone in the school."

We shared the fotonovela again four months later with the grade 4 students. Based on the first presentation, the research objective was to find out how children who had not participated in developing the fotonovela would interpret the scenario based solely on their reading of the body language of the participants. To this end, black and white copies of the fotonovela given to each child carried no title or speech or thought balloons. The title was omitted, and separate pages of blank speech and thought balloons were provided to the children to cut out and place as they saw fit. This was done during regular class time with 13 children present.

Whereas the first sharing of the visual narrative gave us a general sense of its readability by the children, the second gave us a detailed understanding of the meanings assigned to each frame by the individual children. Analysis of these meanings provided some insights into how children understood and

Figure 5.

interpreted the nonverbal behaviors of their peers. Their responses ranged from empathy with the new kid, suggesting a shared experience by some readers, to an almost predatory and violent anger at the new child's apparent weakness. These new readings confirmed the richness and complexity of the nonverbal information in the story. Because the purpose of this article is to illustrate an innovative approach to research that includes collaboration between researchers and children at all stages of the research process, we do not further discuss here the insights gained from sharing the fotonovela (for more details see Kirova & Emme, in press). Rather, in the section below we recapture the main conceptual and methodological points we make through the narratives of the four researchers and the visual narrative developed by the three children who participated in this portion of the larger study.

The Value of Fotonovela in Studying Children's Experiences

This research process set out to consider immigrant children and the challenges of nonverbal communication through collaborative photographic processes and the fotonovela form. It is almost a truism of photographic imagery that we imagine the content it represents as going beyond the borders of the print. Unlike a painting that unambiguously ends at the frame, a still photograph with its intense allusions to time and place seems to have the potential to spread into the whole world. So it is not surprising that this research experience shared by Anna, Mike, Oliver, Susan, Margaret, Veronica, and Shannon, grounded as it was in photographic metaphors and processes, was less like a rigorous (Madigan, 1986) model of scientific inquiry and more like the lived and reasonable structure seen when a skilled ensemble of performers improvise together.

Figure 6.

Can the production of a fotonovela serve as a useful tool in research? As is evidenced by the work presented here, which represents only a beginning, the form offers the possibility of *poly-vocal* narrative inquiry that can embrace word, gesture, image, time, and space. Because the process can be carried out either quickly (as candid images) or slowly (as tableaux), it can support both spontaneity and reflection on the part of all participants. In an environment where gaining access to schools for research is increasingly problematic, particularly where lens images are involved, the fotonovela is a compelling storytelling form that can offer both the researcher and student participants insight while serving practical curricular ends in areas such as language arts, social studies, visual and performing arts, and health. In our experience, it was far easier to gain access to the classroom as researchers when our presence had immediate benefits for the students. As well, increasingly accessible digital technologies mean that images can be appropriately managed and manipulated so as to enhance the stories from a child reader's perspective, allow for controls in terms of privacy, and even give researchers the opportunity to focus complex visual data with specific research questions in mind (Emme & Kirova, 2005).

An initial goal for this research was to develop specific examples of nonverbal communication and miscommunication among immigrant children in Canadian schools. Although the research provided many examples of these communication events, some of which were documented photographically, the goal of a kind of typological inventory will only be achievable through image-based work involving the fotonovela over an extended period of research.

Figure 7.

A more immediate value is the role that this approach can play in giving children the tools to become self-researchers. In addition to being active participants in deciding what the fotonovela should be about and how to tell the story of a newcomer attempting to be included in an ongoing game, the children participated in the *sharing and dissemination* of their study findings with their classmates. The initial digital documentary stage allows children to casually gather photo-representations of the minutiae of their daily experience. These images can be explored and integrated into classroom experiences so that the children's sensitivity to their visual details becomes an important foundation for further work. The tableaux and digital manipulations involved in formatting images into the storyboard of a fotonovela encouraged reflection and also allowed children to see their images transformed. Although still retaining the compelling, indexical-photographic quality of being from a time and place, these images also served as symbolic characters such as the new kid in the story presented above. This capacity of the fotonovela form used in this way to invoke identifications in an individual ranging from the personal ("That's me!") to the socially symbolic ("That's the new kid!") has more than 150 years of critical consideration behind it, ranging from semiotic theory (Peirce, 1955) through feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1988) and critical theory (Benjamin, 1981). This theoretical grounding of photography and other lens media, combined with its application in human-subject research in the past 50 years (Prosser, 1998), offers a good explanation for our experience of the fotonovela form as a useful approach to illuminating the subtleties of immigrant children's experiences of nonverbal peer communication.

Ensemble research, like improvisational performance and recess play, involves a mutual commitment to invention. By being opened to the possibility for a complex convergence of the skills, interests, cultures, and insights brought by all participants, participants in a research ensemble are foregrounding flexibility and a shared development of research purpose and direction. They are discovering how to give up individual control over a research agenda and discovering when and how to reclaim that control. In this case, a shared openness in terms of method and an interest in representing the complexities of school life for immigrant children brought students and researchers together to build research stories that crossed the domains of language, embodied culture, and image.

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