



# “We need their help”: Encouraging and discouraging adolescent civic engagement through Photovoice

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## ABSTRACT

Racial, ethnic, and class-based gaps in civic engagement may leave many Latino/a adolescents without a key avenue for positive development. While Photovoice, a community-based participatory research method based in photography, is typically used in research, it also offers potential as an intervention to empower and strengthen Latino/a adolescents' civic engagement. A mixed-method study design examined the impacts of Photovoice on 15 high school students. While pre- and post-test survey data suggest a limited impact on adolescents' civic attitudes and behaviors, rich focus group data indicate increased self-efficacy, empowerment, community attachment, community awareness, and intended civic engagement. Yet, results also indicate substantial student frustration at the perceived hypocrisy of adults in their community toward civic involvement.

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## 1. Introduction

Racial, ethnic, and class-based gaps in civic engagement leave some low-income and minority youth without a key avenue for positive development (O'Connor et al., 2010), and at risk of life-long civic disengagement (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). For Latino/a adolescents, this may be a particular concern. Latino youth are more disengaged civically than other U.S. youth, holding more negative attitudes towards civic involvement and engaging in fewer civic behaviors (Lopez et al., 2006; Pritzker, 2009; Torney-Purta, Barber, & Wilkenfeld, 2007). As such, there is an evident need to identify and develop empirically-based programs that can support and strengthen Latino adolescents' civic development.

Photovoice, a community-based participatory research (CBPR) method based in photography, offers one potential option. Photovoice is commonly linked with participant empowerment, strengthening community awareness, and spurring civic action. However, Photovoice studies typically focus on themes that emerge from the participants' research, rather than on systematic evaluation of how participants themselves are impacted by Photovoice (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). While anecdotal evidence of how Photovoice shapes youth participants' self-efficacy, civic attitudes, and civic behaviors is abundant, empirical support for these claims is rare (Gant et al., 2009). Building on Gant et al.'s preliminary work studying the civic impacts of

Photovoice on urban youth, we examine whether Photovoice can be an effective intervention to strengthen civic development among urban Latino high school students.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Civic engagement and identity development among urban Latino adolescents

An important stage of adolescence involves youth gaining a sense of how involved they expect to be in their community and the larger society and what this involvement may look like (Youniss & Yates, 1997). Exposure to and direct participation in community affairs help adolescents develop life-long habits of citizenship (Youniss & Yates, 1997). This burgeoning sense of civic self can have important impacts even during adolescence. Community participation can be a protective factor, as youth build community attachment (Fogel, 2004). Furthermore, it can help youth to gain the experience both to be future community leaders (Head, 2011) and to bring assets to their communities in the present as “competent citizens with a right to participate and a responsibility to serve their communities” (Checkoway et al., 2003, p. 300). Ultimately, engaged youth can contribute to the development of “more just, compassionate, healthy, and capable communities, where youth – indeed all residents – will thrive” (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 77).

Unfortunately, for some youth, community participation is rare. Low-income youth, first-generation immigrants, and some minority adolescents exhibit lower levels of civic engagement than other youth (Lee & Pritzker, 2009; Marcelo, Lopez, & Kirby, 2007; Pritzker, 2009; Torney-Purta et al., 2007), in some cases, “already feel[ing]

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that they are on the margins of democratic life” (Fridkin, Kenney, & Crittenden, 2006, p. 606). Civic engagement may be limited for those youth residing in poor urban communities for various reasons, including high ratios of adolescents to adults (Hart, Atkins, Markey, & Youniss, 2004), few social interactions (Lay, 2006), a lack of civic institutions to connect residents with the broader community (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003), and few actively engaged adult role models (Atkins & Hart, 2003). Despite these factors, Fogel (2004) found low-income and urban youth to be committed to their neighborhoods, due to the presence of family and friends. While such youth may not engage in formal political processes like voting, they may be inclined to engage in issues that directly affect their communities (Checkoway, 2011). Thus, supporting the development of youths’ sense of belonging and involvement with their communities may counter some of the negative community impacts on youth civic engagement (Fogel, 2004; Haney, 2007).

Community barriers may have particular relevance for Latino adolescents, who often demonstrate the lowest levels of civic knowledge and civic engagement in both community and political activities (Lopez et al., 2006; Pritzker, 2009; Torney-Purta et al., 2007). For Latino youth in immigrant communities, particular civic constraints may exist. Families may lack access to civic information (McDevitt & Butler, 2011), and youth may have fewer role models for civic participation (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2010; Torney-Purta et al., 2007). Despite such constraints, many Latino immigrant youth have engaged in activism, e.g., in support of state and federal DREAM Acts (Seif, 2011). Perez et al. (2010) also find substantial civic participation among undocumented Mexican youth, including social service provision, activism, tutoring, and functional volunteerism. Overall, few studies examine Latino youth civic involvement, resulting in little empirically-based knowledge about how Latino youth develop into civic actors or what factors may impact this development (Torney-Purta et al., 2007).

## 2.2. Photovoice and youth civic development

In recent years, photography has been used both to engage children and youth directly in the research process (as in CPBR) and as a means for eliciting research data from them. “Photovoice” is one such method first developed by Caroline Wang for use with rural women in China (Wang & Burris, 1997). It has been used globally with marginalized and disempowered populations, helping them gain a voice to create change in their local environments, and is now increasingly used with youth, particularly around public health issues such as teen pregnancy, substance abuse and obesity (e.g., Finholdt, Michael, & Davis, 2010; Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010; Necheles et al., 2007; Wilson et al., 2007). Latino youth have been primary participants in a handful of Photovoice studies (Gubrium & Torres, 2011; Richardson & Nuru-Jeter, 2011; Streng et al., 2004; Vaughn, Rojas-Guyler, & Howell, 2008).

Photovoice participants typically are asked to record their everyday life through photographs, either on specific themes provided by researchers or in an open-ended manner, such as using photos as a way to tell the world about themselves (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants are guided through group-based critical reflection on their photographs using the SHOWED process. In this process, participants are asked the following questions: 1. What do you see? 2. What is really happening? 3. How does this relate to our life? 4. Why does this situation, concern or strength exist? 5. What can we do to educate others about this situation, concern, or strength? 6. What can or needs to be done? (Wang & Burris, 1997). Finally, in an effort to influence policy and elicit social change, Photovoice participants exhibit their photographs to policy-makers and influential community members.

When youth have the opportunity to engage in the kinds of participatory activities that Photovoice entails – collecting information about their community, interpreting this information, and using the information to influence community change – “it can raise their consciousness and their spirit and move them to action” (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003, p. 22). Yet, despite clear theoretical reasons to believe that Photovoice participation will impact not only the community but also youths’ civic awareness and civic engagement, there is minimal empirical research on the civic impacts of the program model itself. Instead, most evidence of its success in eliciting participants’ civic engagement has been anecdotal.

Specific Photovoice elements may be particularly conducive to promoting youth civic engagement. Learning about one’s community is an important precursor to civic identity (Atkins & Hart, 2003). Engaging in meaningful activities, as when youth research and identify salient aspects of their own community, is linked with motivation for future civic involvement, especially when youth can reflect on their experiences (Balsano, 2005). Similarly, youth who have “voice” and are encouraged to state their ideas and opinions exhibit increased community attachment and stronger ties to community institutions (Mitra, 2004; Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011). Engagement in community decision-making and community action, as when youth develop and present recommendations to community leaders, can result in stronger community belonging and increased desire to volunteer (Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008). Feeling effective in eliciting change in response to the social problems they identify may increase youths’ self efficacy, an important precursor to civic involvement (Balsano, 2005; Gant et al., 2009).

Where participant outcomes have been examined, Catalani and Minkler (2010) find three primary areas of impact. First, Photovoice is commonly linked with increased empowerment. Evidence suggests youth may become empowered as they feel ownership in the project’s outcome (Finholdt et al., 2010; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010). However, a risk of Photovoice is that it may actually make youth feel disempowered, if their hopes for change are raised, but policy ultimately remains unchanged (Strack et al., 2004).

Second, Photovoice may increase how well participants understand their community and its needs (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). It is expected that participants “generate awareness not just of problems and concerns, but also of potential solutions and areas of strength with respect to their lives and communities” (Gant et al., 2009). For example, some youth participants in the Photovoice project studied by Strack et al. (2004) reported that this was the first time that they had seriously thought about their communities. However, research to date has not assessed whether general community awareness regarding topics other than the target of the Photovoice study has increased, nor whether this awareness persists after the program is complete.

Finally, studies link Photovoice with increased community engagement. Most studies report youth engagement with presentations to policymakers or action projects at the culmination of the Photovoice project (e.g., Wilson et al., 2007), as opposed to measurement of post-project action. However, Necheles et al. (2007) report that several participants continued to participate in community organizations and to engage in advocacy after Photovoice. Similarly, Foster-Fishman et al. (2010) find increased desire on the part of youth participants to identify new ways to engage in their communities. In one of the few studies to quantify civic impacts of Photovoice participation, findings are more mixed. Using a measure that incorporates both behavioral and attitudinal aspects of civic engagement, Gant et al. (2009) find some evidence of an increase in civic engagement for older youth over age 18, but not for youth under 18.

## 3. Methods

While Photovoice is often used as a *research tool*, as in CPBR, it also may have merits as an *intervention* to empower and strengthen youth

civic engagement. Though much Photovoice research focuses on the content and themes reflected through participants' photographs, we instead focus on how program participation influences the youth participants. To strengthen the evidence base regarding the possible civic and empowerment impacts of Photovoice, we implemented and evaluated a Photovoice program (EYCA: "Empowering Youth for Civic Action") with 15 high-school youth. Two primary questions guided our research: 1) How did participation in the EYCA program impact youth's social self-efficacy, empowerment, community attachment, and anticipated civic engagement? 2) What other themes emerged from youth regarding the impacts of the EYCA program on how they do, or plan to, behave civically?

### 3.1. Study design

A two-part mixed-method study design was used. Short-term impacts were measured using a quasi-experimental pre-post test design, administered to both Photovoice participants and a comparison group. The pre-test survey was administered during the first week of the program, and an identical post-test survey was administered at the completion of the Photovoice program.

In addition, two 1.5-hour focus groups were conducted solely with Photovoice participants 6 months after program completion. Focus groups served two purposes: first, to enable examination of impacts that the surveys may not have captured; and second, to triangulate the quantitative data regarding program impacts, allowing for deeper exploration of impacts and whether they were sustained after program completion. We had intended to include 6 to 8 students in each of two focus groups; however, due to school-based scheduling conflicts, four students participated in the first focus group, and five students in the second.

### 3.2. Recruitment and sample selection

The EYCA program was conducted with students enrolled at one campus of YES Prep Public Schools, a system of charter schools located in Houston, Texas. EYCA was offered as an elective during a non-academic enrichment portion of the school day. All 10th and 11th grade students who requested to participate were admitted into the class, with a maximum enrollment of 22 students set by the school. Fifteen students assented to participation in the research component and provided requisite parental consent; 14 completed both the pre- and post-test surveys. Students reside in a historic and primarily Latino and low-income neighborhood near downtown Houston. Representative of students enrolled at the campus, all but one EYCA student identified as Latino/a, primarily of Mexican descent. The remaining student was African American. Of the consenting Photovoice students, 12 were female and 3 were male. 12 students were enrolled in grade 10, and 3 were in grade 11.

The comparison group was identified at a second demographically-similar YES Prep campus. Like the study campus, students at the comparison site are almost entirely Latino and live in a low-income community. A randomly-selected 11th grade homeroom served as the comparison classroom. Fifteen comparison students provided assent and parental consent; ultimately, 12 completed both surveys.

### 3.3. Photovoice sessions

A Photovoice manual developed by Gant et al. (2009) was adapted to our specific program context. Although several changes were made to the program design, the three core elements were retained: "(a) deployment of the SHOWED process, (b) public presentation and discussion of photographs and commentary, and (c) taking of photos by community members" (Gant et al., 2009, p. 363). The manual was designed for a Photovoice program over nine consecutive days in the summer, for multiple hours at a time. EYCA, in contrast,

needed to fit a school-day schedule over the course of an academic semester. Thus, while the total number of clock hours was maintained, the content was spread out across 14 1.5-hour long sessions.

An introductory session was followed by a session on photography training and photographic ethics, and then by a practice photography session. While Gant et al. (2009) held three hours of photography followed by a six-hour reflection session on a single day, EYCA participants spent 4.5 hours in three structured group photography sessions, each followed the next week by a 1.5-hour reflection session using the SHOWED method. Participants were given a digital or disposable camera and a form for documenting their reasons for taking each photograph. Students also were encouraged to take home disposable cameras, with the instructions to capture anything they thought those inside and outside their community should see in order to better understand their community's situations, strengths, and concerns.

Due to school transportation concerns, students identified three locations for structured photography sessions that they believed best represented their community: a local Hispanic heritage park; a park close to students' residences, and the area immediately surrounding the school including a run-down playground and an oil refinery. Students were transported as a group to each location. While some students photographed independently, most took photographs in small groups of 2–3 participants, resulting in substantial similarities in photos and identification of community needs between students.

Following the photography and reflection sessions, three sessions were devoted to "story development", in which students used the photographs to document stories of their findings. Students engaged in facilitated discussion of action steps to present to representatives of local city and state politicians' offices, as well as university professors, parents, and teachers in a final exhibit held on the school campus. At the beginning of the exhibit, students presented their photos and narratives informally, interacting one-on-one with attendees about their photos. A formal presentation, designed and presented by the students who provided narratives about their photos to the community, followed. In a final session after the exhibit, students debriefed and reflected critically on their experiences throughout the whole program.

### 3.4. Measures and analysis

The pre- and post-test survey consisted solely of closed-ended questions. A more encompassing set of measures were included than in prior Photovoice studies with youth. *Social self-efficacy* was measured using a Social Self Efficacy Scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ), slightly modified from the scale originally developed by Muris (2001). To measure *youth empowerment*, we used the Youth's Empowerment subscale ( $\alpha = .78$ ) (Reininger et al., 2003). Two single items drawn from Furco, Miller, and Ammon's (1998) middle school version of the Civic Responsibility Survey measured *civic attachment*: "I feel like I am part of the community" and "I know a lot of people in the community and they know me." Finally, *civic engagement* was measured using five scales (Flanagan, Syvertsen, & Stout, 2007): Participatory Citizen ( $\alpha = .82$ ), Expectations for Engagement in Electoral Politics ( $\alpha = .74$ ), Expectations for Unconventional Political Engagement ( $\alpha = .69$ ), Alternative Ways of Expressing Political Voice, and Expectations for Engagement in Community Issues ( $\alpha = .80$ ). To identify statistical change in each of these measures, a two-step analysis was conducted using SPSS 19. Change scores were calculated for each construct in order to compare the between group differences in change from pre to post test. The control and experimental groups were then compared using an independent samples t-test.

A semi-structured protocol guided the two focus groups. Three questions focused on students' experiences: "Talk me through your experience in your Photovoice class"; "What did you learn from



your experience in Photovoice?"; and "Would you want to participate in another program like this? Why or why not?" Probes examined students' feelings about discussing their community in class and about presenting their findings to policymakers. In addition, two questions focused on students' civic engagement: "What did you learn from your experience in Photovoice?" and "Do people in power listen to youth like you when you have opinions about your community?" Probes examined whether students felt Photovoice had changed how they responded to these questions. Due to the semi-structured nature of the focus groups, new, though related, topic areas emerged as students responded and built off of other students' comments. Both focus groups were video-recorded, with audio and video data transcribed.

We had initially planned to use content analysis to analyze the transcripts based on the constructs measured in the pre- and post-test surveys. However, limited significant survey findings suggested that the constructs measured in the survey may not have effectively captured Photovoice impacts. Accordingly, we chose to analyze the qualitative focus group data using an open coding method (Berg, 2004). An open coding method allows for exploration of transcripts with a defined set of concepts while also leaving the possibility for grounded themes to emerge. During the initial open coding phase, the first two authors coded the data separately using NVivo analysis software. The two coders then compared themes, and re-examined inconsistent coding using an iterative process until consensus was reached.

#### 4. Results

Four key constructs were examined through analysis of survey and focus group data: social self-efficacy, youth empowerment, civic attachment, and civic engagement. Findings related to these constructs are discussed below. Additionally, the open coding method enabled the emergence of three additional themes related to students' experiences with Photovoice: the development of community awareness, perceived impacts of adult role models, and engagement of other children and youth.

##### 4.1. Social self efficacy

The survey measure of social self efficacy (SSE) yielded significant change scores, with participants increasing SSE ( $M = 0.93$ ;  $SD = 3.5$ ) while the control group declined ( $M = -2.1$ ;  $SD = 2.7$ ) (see change scores in Table 1). This significant increase is consistent with a similar growth in SSE reflected in the focus groups. In both focus groups, students described becoming increasingly confident holding and expressing opinions about community issues. For example, one student became more confident after an initial reluctance to share her photos and to discuss the meaning she ascribed to her photos:

*I would look at the pictures and...would have my own ideas and...I was really awkward about telling people about it because it was my idea and I didn't want people to judge it or nothing...like at the end I didn't really care what people thought about it – it's just my picture – my idea.*

Students reported that the class environment helped them to navigate classroom discussion where differences of opinion were present. Students learned to "listen to everyone and... get a broader opinion of the whole situation." One student recalled her experience realizing that others had a different perspective on a photograph she took: "that's whenever you really...notice... 'oh yeah, that is so true, I can't believe I didn't see that before.'"

##### 4.2. Empowerment

The quantitative empowerment measure finds no significant participant change in empowerment. However, focus group data suggest

that the lack of significant quantitative findings may be attributable to a complex connection between students' Photovoice experiences and youth empowerment. In the focus groups, students expressed ways that their empowerment had been affected both positively and negatively. In a comment echoed by several students, one student described positive changes in her ability to see herself as a change agent:

*I think it changed all of us as persons, the way we think. Because we used to misinterpret things, but then we went deeper into the meanings and learned things about not only other people or other things but we also learned about ourselves. A lot...about how...most times, we just we don't really do anything. We complain a lot but now it like changes us as a person that we need to actually need to do things.*

Some students described finding themselves capable of community impact despite being only in the beginning stages of making change: "[N]othing is going to happen like all of a sudden... I think we started off small. But I think it can actually get bigger like our ideas and everything." Similarly, several students reported feeling empowered to solicit the attention and help of people in power to address community issues:

*Through the changes that we make, that could make them like listen to us because then they could see that, there are problems—there are problems in our community and we are wanting to change them... but... we need their help.*

In contrast, other students described themselves as unable to influence community decision-makers, potentially reflecting both a lack of empowerment and unfavorable views of those in power. One student noted:

*My opinion about politics and everything is that certain people, they do it only to like exalt themselves and they don't do it sometimes to like help others and try and pull them up...So whenever they just hear one person saying it, they don't—they can't hear it well or something or they just pretend not to hear it.*

Furthermore, some students reported feeling limited in their abilities to change conditions in their neighborhoods due to their young age, limited adult support, and a lack of the financial resources that they felt were necessary to pursue community change. One student noted how she felt powerless in approaching the adults at her school for needed resources:

*Whenever we [students] try and do something about it... we can't. It's like out of our hands, we can't because we can't ask the school for money or something and we have to make the money ourselves.*

##### 4.3. Community attachment

Quantitative findings regarding community attachment are mixed. No significant change was found in students' feelings that they were part of the community. However, EYCA students became less likely to report that they "know a lot of people in the community" (change score  $M = -.43$ ,  $SD = .85$ ), while comparison students became more likely to report this over the course of the semester ( $M = .42$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). These mixed quantitative findings were reflected in focus group data as well, as students described the complexities of their community attachment through Photovoice. In a particularly poignant statement, one student expressed how photography enabled her to find beauty in her community:

*The first thing people think when they look at the picture is "oh, that tree is gonna die from the factories or whatever...from like the pollution" but whenever me and my friend looked at it, we thought of like – how wonderful it was for this tree like – it was like pushing through to like live. It wasn't like just dying like most of the trees around.*

**Table 1**  
Pre/post change scores on civic engagement constructs.

	EYCA (n = 14) M (SD)	Comparison (n = 12) M (SD)	t	df
Social self efficacy	0.93 (3.52)	−2.01 (2.70)	−2.35*	23
Empowerment	−0.07 (4.50)	0.25 (1.91)	0.23	24
Community attachment				
I feel like I am part of the community	.29 (.83)	.25 (.87)	−.108	24
I know a lot of people in the community	−.43 (.85)	.42 (1.08)	2.23*	24
Civic engagement				
Participatory citizen	−0.21 (3.56)	0.083 (4.64)	0.19	24
Expectations for engagement in electoral politics	.92 (3.33)	2.67 (3.14)	1.29	22
Expectations for engagement in unconventional political engagement	−0.07 (2.20)	0.78 (2.69)	0.82	23
Alternative ways of expressing political voice	0.57 (2.17)	1.70 (3.16)	1.04	22
Expectations for engagement in community issues	−.21 (2.22)	−.58 (2.54)	−.40	24

\* p < 0.05.

Yet, what emerged most commonly in the focus groups was a combination of both care for the community and negative feelings about it. In particular, students showed concern for how their community appears to outsiders. Repeatedly, in both focus groups, students described feeling “embarrassed” by some of the community scenes they captured with their photography. One described being “disgusted that people were so OK with having trash all over the place.” Another summarized the complicated attachment many of the youth described by recounting how the “graffiti with cuss words and sexual symbols” she photographed at a playground in a park near the school “represents us”. While expressing community attachment in terms of seeing the community as a reflection of them, a clear sense of frustration emerged as to what that reflection was, as well as toward a perceived lack of concern from other community members.

#### 4.4. Civic engagement

Compared to non-participating students, Photovoice participants did not show significant quantitative changes in their behavior as participatory citizens or their future expectations for engaging in electoral politics, community issues, or alternative forms of political involvement. While these quantitative results suggest that students' civic engagement was not impacted by Photovoice participation, focus group data suggest a more complex relationship between Photovoice and civic engagement. In both focus groups, some students repeatedly described an increased desire to engage in their communities. One student described realizing that:

*It starts with you because then—when people see you, and they, they adopt that, the same actions that you do, they—they see that and then they see that—they realize that it's the right thing to do.*

Students described few examples of anticipated *political* involvement, but most of the students discussed intermediate and long-term plans for *community* involvement. Clearly impacted by EYCA, one student detailed plans for implementing his own Photovoice program for “young adults” in the community. Others discussed interests in joining or starting programs to help the larger community outside of the school. As discussed further below, students also expressed interest in future civic engagement through discussions of encouraging younger youth to also give back to their community.

Yet, possible civic engagement impacts appeared short-lived for some students. While students reported excitement about making small changes in their community as a result of EYCA participation, e.g., picking up litter more regularly, encouraging friends and family to do the same, some acknowledged that “as the time passed [since EYCA], I kind of forgot about it.”

#### 4.5. Additional emergent civic themes

##### 4.5.1. Community awareness

Students in both focus groups felt that their awareness of community issues had increased. Prior to program participation, students noted they had gotten “sort of immune” and complacent regarding conditions in their community. This complacency was contrasted with the awareness the youth developed during Photovoice. As one student noted, participation “made [us] see more. I started to see a lot more of clothes and blankets and stuff under the bridge....I just see a lot... in places you would never think they would be.” Another described “some things we never really noticed that were there that have always been there.” Students clearly attributed a greater awareness of their community to EYCA participation:

*It reminded some of us, because when we started out here in eighth grade, we were—like we would come [to the school area] and it would smell so terrible and now it hardly smells to us because we already got used to it.... And it kind of opened our eyes that like why would they place like more than three schools next to that environment where the next generation is going to come out and they might already be contaminated or something and that they already might have health issues that they didn't have when they were younger because of the environment.*

##### 4.5.2. Adult role models

Throughout the course of both focus groups, students repeatedly referenced messages they received regarding civic engagement from other adults (parents, teachers, and community members). It became clear from both focus groups that the students were deeply affected by the civic actions of adults around them.

Students expressed a desire for teachers both to help facilitate youth's civic engagement and to model community involvement. Students used the EYCA facilitator's enthusiasm and commitment as an example. In one student's words: “...everybody at first were just like oh this is dumb, like we're taking pictures. But...[the teacher]... he kind of brought out that ‘oh my God, look—that feeling out of everybody.’ However, they were highly critical of teachers who did not contribute to the community as much as the students hoped. One student noted “but then when I see [teachers], I'm like, you have more resources than us. Why won't you start picking up the trash?” Another described her experience with teachers and service:

*I literally like try to pick up as much [trash in the community] as I can, but sometimes, I notice that the teacher doesn't do anything and I'm—it kind of like disappoints me because you're kind of – no offense to any teacher – you're kind of being a hypocrite. Like you're telling me to clean up after other people when you can't clean up after them yourself and*

*frankly—like, I know it's not, either one of our trashes, but if I'm willing to pick it up after other people, you should be willing to do it the same.*

A similar frustration extended to parents, as the students expressed annoyance that their parents did not encourage, and in some cases, discouraged students' civic involvement. This frustration comes through in one student's description of her attempt to paint over graffiti she had photographed in a local playground:

*Well, like at the [exhibit], I said that I was going to try and rally up some of my friends and the adults to paint over there but whenever it came to the task, a lot of people didn't want to do it and then a lot of people—a lot of the adults backed out so that cut me off at resources and that was only like—I was like by myself because even my parents, they couldn't be able to do it because they had work and they were really busy and no one that I knew could help us out so I was like if I did it by myself, I was like, that kind of, it kind of discouraged me to not do it.*

Juxtaposition of their own civic inclinations with those of adults in their community was a constant theme throughout both focus groups. As one student noted, it is “sad, how we as high school students we see that and yeah, we are going to try to do something about it but adults who have more experience in how they can – they see more – and but they don't do anything about it. It's just—it's sad.” Several students attributed these perceived differences to a generational civic gap between themselves and adults. One student noted:

*I guess like the past generation, they didn't really get to understand much about what was going on. They really like...maybe was... because of how they were taught but um they pretty much have gotten pretty care-less about some things but there are still a few people who do care.*

#### 4.5.3. Engagement of other children and youth

Finally, students also discussed the role of peers vis-à-vis their civic engagement. As with adults, students exhibited little patience with classmates who did not take helping out the community seriously. One student discussed an interest in forming a group of students to engage in service, but worried that “people would think ‘oh, it's just this—another club trying to do something’. And then you would see like five people out of the whole school come and do it.” Yet, the focus group participants were also interested in taking on the responsibility of influencing other youth, as they described supporting some of their fellow classmates who did not initially take the EYCA program seriously: “When we did talk about it in class it brought them [disengaged students] to think more about it as well. So, I think it kind of helped for us to talk about it. Or else some people...wouldn't care.”

Students were particularly expressive regarding the importance they perceived in acting as civic examples for younger youth. Just as the students perceived that the adults should be role models for them, the students saw themselves as having the responsibility to positively influence younger youth for a future impact. One student noted:

*I would try to reach out to the little kids, to show them so when they get older they know better. Because mostly adults now, they are very careless about things. And if you show them, they can make an impact.*

Similarly, another student recounted a family trip to the beach that had taken place after completion of the Photovoice program:

*My little brother and sister were ...with me ...[and they asked] ‘what are you doing? Why are you picking up trash?’ I'm like ‘well, it's gonna get in the water, you want it to get in the water where you will be swimming?’ ‘No.’ So they like actually went and they helped me*

*pick it up. So I felt like if they're very little and they already know—like this could help us, then whenever they get older, who's to say that they don't like tell other people like to do the same.*

## 5. Discussion

This mixed-method study shows that Photovoice can be used not just as a research tool, but also as a valuable civic intervention with youth. Quantitative data suggest a limited impact from Photovoice on adolescent's civic attitudes and behaviors (see also Gant et al., 2009), although data do indicate a positive impact on social self-efficacy and a negative impact on one aspect of community attachment. However, rich focus group data yield substantial indication of civic change as a result of Photovoice participation. Evident in the focus group discussions are the growing confidence youth felt in expressing their own thoughts and opinions, increasing feelings that they can and should try to make change and reach out for help in doing so, greater awareness of community needs and issues, and a desire not only to help their communities but also to bring others along in those efforts.

Quantitative findings may be limited for several reasons. First, although the sample size of 15 Photovoice participants is similar to, and in many cases larger than, prior Photovoice studies, the sample size limited our ability to capture meaningful statistical change. It should be noted that the study sample size was somewhat lower than anticipated, as some of the students enrolled in the class did not provide appropriate consent to participate in the study. Although consents were provided in both Spanish and English, some parents may have had limited familiarity with the consent process. Second, although a broader set of quantitative measures was used than in prior studies of Photovoice civic outcomes, the measures may not have comprehensively captured the impacts of the Photovoice program as experienced by youth through EYCA. It became clear from the focus groups that students *perceived* change as having taken place. While prior studies have not examined Photovoice's longitudinal impacts, participants in this study used specific and detailed language to retrospectively link the program experience to changes they saw in themselves.

Future research on the civic impacts of Photovoice should examine why the two forms of data yield such different results. One possible explanation may be the complexity of attitudes that emerged in the focus groups. Supporting youth's developing sense of community and community involvement has the potential to counter negative community impacts (Fogel, 2004; Haney, 2007), which was clearly indicated in the students' positive comments about what they gained from Photovoice. Yet data also indicate that Photovoice participation may call further attention to negative aspects of the community, with students consistent in their discussion of external limitations. For example, the study yielded mixed findings regarding the empowerment youth developed over the course of the project. While youth reported feeling more empowered, more likely to feel that they have the power to influence community change and to solicit help from community decision-makers, several felt strongly either that policy-makers are not responsive to single voices, or that their young age limited their ability to be change agents. This is consistent with Strack et al.'s (2004) finding that Photovoice may disempower youth if the changes they advocate for remain unchanged.

Students were particularly emphatic in their frustration with adults. In designing this study, we did not anticipate the substantial extent to which youth participants would be impacted by their observation of adults. Peer and adult influences can foster the development of civic engagement (Otis, 2006); however, research that examines youths' perceptions of adults in their community is rare (Fogel, 2004). This study adds insight to ways in which adults may shape youth civic engagement. Not only did participants describe few engaged role models



(e.g., Atkins & Hart, 2003; Fogel, 2004; Perez et al., 2010; Torney-Purta et al., 2007), they also expressed repeated frustration about this (see also Fogel, 2004). Youth were highly critical of teachers, parents, and community members who seemed disinterested in or unwilling to contribute to community improvement efforts. Furthermore, participants specifically discussed the impact of adult actions on their own civic engagement, such as when one described being discouraged after encountering resistance trying to follow up on change actions after Photovoice. The ways in which adults may shape youth civic engagement is a crucial area for civic engagement research. More research is needed to explore the myriad ways teachers, parents, and community members may facilitate or discourage youth's involvement with their communities.

These findings raise particular concerns for the engagement of Latino youth living in low-income and heavily immigrant communities. While we do not have data on the immigrant status of program participants and their families, both the neighborhood of residence and the multiple parental consents completed in Spanish suggest that at least some were first- or second-generation immigrants. Family involvement in discussing politics and civic responsibility with their children has an impact on the level of children's civic engagement (Fridkin et al., 2006; McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002). However, parents of some Latino youth, especially in immigrant communities, may be ill-equipped to model and discuss civic responsibilities with their children (Perez et al., 2010; Torney-Purta et al., 2007). Furthermore, youth with family members who are unable to participate fully in the American political process (Torney-Purta et al., 2007) may feel civically marginalized, further limiting their civic participation.

Spurring youth's interest in civic participation, as through Photovoice, without attention to the limiting factors in their communities, may result in exactly the mixed findings we identified. However, prior research suggests that school-based civic opportunities can serve as a catalyst to Latino youth discussion with their parents about civic participation and, ultimately, to action in a "trickle-up" manner (McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002, p. 282; Torney-Purta et al., 2007). Latino youth in immigrant families can "act as information leaders" regarding civic engagement (McDevitt & Butler, 2011, p. 1). It may be that, as McDevitt and Butler (2011) argue, "much of the impetus for family civic engagement resides with Latino youth" (p. 4), and therefore, civic interventions with Latino youth need to offer additional support to youth in how to share their new-found excitement with their families. However, student's frustrations with what they perceived as teachers "kind of being a hypocrite" suggest that school staffs' actions also play a role. Schools not only need to provide a nurturing and safe environment that encourages the participation of all youth in developing and expressing their ideas and opinions (Torney-Purta et al., 2007), but also should encourage teachers, administrators, and staff to model appropriate civic behavior. The findings in our study support this assertion as students illustrated how a supportive facilitator helped them to become more civically inclined and more comfortable with their opinions about community needs and issues.

The findings from this study also have implications for future research and practice involving intergenerational models of civic intervention with Latino youth in low-income communities. Involving youth and their parents together in a Photovoice program is one option. The youth-adult partnership literature offers other means for engaging youth in partnership with nonfamilial adults (e.g., Mitra, 2004; Serido et al., 2011; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). Retaining the "voice" youth have in Photovoice in combination with working together with adults to address community issues can have powerful civic impacts (e.g., Borden & Serido, 2009). Youth and adults can teach each other, resulting in increased community knowledge on the part of both parties, as well as an increased sense of community on the part of youth (Zeldin et al., 2005).

Although our program took place over the course of a semester, a longer program may have allowed more time for youth to critically

reflect on and process their conflicting feelings (Strack et al., 2004). A service project at the culmination of the program, where youth translate their observations to action (e.g., Wilson et al., 2007), perhaps partnering with community decision-makers, may enable youth to feel more empowered to address community issues and may increase their self-efficacy (Head, 2011).

One study limitation also may have limited positive changes in youth's feelings of empowerment and contributed to their negative perceptions of adults. Due to proximity to the winter holidays and scheduling conflicts, fewer representatives of local and state political offices attended the exhibit than anticipated. Thus, students presented their findings and recommendations to only a handful of individuals who could help bring about the kinds of changes students desired. Although invitations were targeted primarily to political leaders, inviting local business and non-profit leaders to the exhibit may have been beneficial, both as possible sources of non-political community change in response to students' findings, and as possible adult role models willing to engage in community change.

## 6. Conclusion

While findings are mixed based on the methods used, our data show the viability of Photovoice as a civic intervention with Latino youth living in low-income urban communities. The timing of the focus groups, 6 months after the completion of the Photovoice program, allowed us to see the continued impacts of Photovoice on youth participants. Students were able to vividly recount the photographs they took and their experiences in the Photovoice program, despite the passage of an additional semester. Each focus group participant described being impacted by participation, whether through increased self-efficacy, empowerment, community attachment, community awareness, or a desire to be further engaged in the community. Yet, students also reported becoming more aware of external limitations to community engagement, further supported by a quantitative decrease in one aspect of community attachment. Students felt highly discouraged by the lack of positive civic role modeling on the part of adults in their lives. The valuable civic impacts of Photovoice may be strengthened by greater attention to these youth concerns through increased integration of adults close to the participants, inclusion of a broader set of community leaders at the exhibit, and possible inclusion of a student-driven service component based on the participants' findings.

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