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## Partnering with Immigrant Communities: Action through Literacy

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## Partnering with Immigrant Communities: Action through Literacy

**Gerald Campano, María Paula Ghiso, and Bethany J. Welch**  
Teachers College Press, 2016, pp. 177

**Reviewed by Addison Koneval**  
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Much of U.S. literacy belief and policy is driven by the deficit model myth. The myth is not only ideologically problematic, but its dispersion also has very material consequences for minoritized populations, often contributing to their precarity. *Partnering with Immigrant Communities: Action through Literacy* works to challenge harmful deficit beliefs, especially those targeted at immigrants. The work by Gerald Campano, María Paula Ghiso, Bethany Welch,

and their team of graduate students examines ways immigrant communities develop necessary literacies and therefore agency for accessing and navigating the complex institutions of the United States.

Their work narrows in on the literacy practices of the diverse ethnic/racial immigrant communities of the St. Thomas Aquinas parish, school and community center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In just ten compact chapters authored by various members of the research team, Campano et al. share the first five years of their study and partnership with the parish. The ethnographic study is a look at the literacy-learning strategies that Latinx, Chinese Indonesian, African-American, Vietnamese, European-American, and Filipino communities at St. Thomas Aquinas develop to mobilize themselves and fight for educational access in a variety of contexts. Through their critical analysis, the research team explicates ways that St. Thomas Aquinas community members, often stereotyped as embodiments of the deficit myth, push back against the social pressures that reinforce the myth and develop agency through the social support of their community.

In the first chapter, Campano et al. set up their goals, concerns, and focuses for working with the immigrant communities at St. Thomas Aquinas. They center their work on the question, “how might language and literacy curricula [. . .] become a vehicle for investigating and taking action on issues that impact the lives and learning of immigrant youth?” (10). Campano et al. are highly aware of the community’s ontological precarity and note the delicate nature of conducting community-based, partic-



ipatory research. The team members continually return to this tension in their recurring accounts of building the trust necessary to observe and contribute to the literacy learning practices of each group.

In chapter two, Bethany Welch, founding director of the Aquinas Center, and researcher María Paula Ghiso describe how St. Thomas Aquinas' unique, by-design environment facilitates its parishioners' literacy learning. Functioning in a space heavily impacted by the pressures of gentrification in Philadelphia, St. Thomas Aquinas remains a marker of "radical hospitality." Few resources remain for peripheral communities, like the immigrants who find support through the parish. Ghiso and Welch identify the heart of radical hospitality as "a religious discourse community that urges empathy for those most vulnerable and attempts to transcend unjust human laws by appealing to a higher morality and a more universal ethos of human dignity" (31). This invocation of empathy is an important reflection of the Catholic social teachings and ethics that constitute the very fabric of St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas Aquinas leaders enact radical hospitality for their diverse immigrant population by making decisions about allocation of space, service-learning experiences, and art primarily through community input. The parish houses a multicultural garden, various service-learning initiatives, and racial/ethnic group-specific workshops and resources—all elements borne out of collaboration. Collaboration is an important thread through the book; it is at the heart of the ethics, the methods, and the orientation of the work.

Chapter three is the first of several chapters focused on participatory action research done at the center. The chapter focuses on the team's year and a half long work with ethnic Chinese Indonesian (Indo-Chinese) families. The families were concerned with mobilizing social capital to open up educational opportunities for their children. Researchers Mary Yee, Karim Mostafa, and Gerald Campano begin the chapter by dispelling the myth that immigrant and/or poor parents are not invested in their children's education. Yee et al. identify factors like undocumented status, work hours, lack of transportation, and literacy-specific gatekeeping measures that discourage many immigrant and English Language Learner (ELL) parents from participating in their children's education in more traditional, visible ways like chaperoning class trips and helping with homework. These families were concerned with getting their children into better schools, which they saw as the surest path to a college education. The authors argue that Indo-Chinese families' educational access was constrained by various literacy-specific obstacles, like a convoluted "school directory"—the only resource for knowing the complex transfer procedures at various schools. Yee, Mostafa, and Campano offered literacy expertise on the admissions process to help elucidate the complex transfer procedures. Yee et al. are certainly critical of such gatekeeping. They suggest that clarifying points of access in the American schooling system would enable parents to better advocate for their children as well as participate in more traditional ways. The practice would bring visibility to the parents' already existing modes of involvement.

Chapter four parallels chapter three's form in many ways. In this chapter, research lead María Paula Ghiso, and graduate researchers Alicia Rusoja, and Emily Schwab write about facilitating a Hispanic family ELL class. The course is aimed

at helping families navigate medical and academic systems through multiliteracies. During this time, the team helped co-construct ELL curricula with Hispanic families and established a space for mutual learning and teaching. The class members shared weekly “news” about their lives. They collaboratively practiced for specific scenarios, like speaking to a doctor about asthma issues, to learn the context-specific vocabulary and build confidence in self-advocacy. Using both English and Spanish, the group would support their peers’ English learning. In this chapter, Ghiso, Rusoja, and Schwab present multilingualism not as a key to solving a deficit, but rather as an additive tool to aid in identity formation for Latinx families in the U.S. They argue that multilingualism helps Hispanic Americans to carve out a counterpublic (countercultures and alternative ways of being for marginalized populations) “whereby citizenship can be defined apart from the nation-state” (69).

In chapter five, Robert LeBlanc and Bethany Welch unpack the reciprocal relationship between literacy and civic engagement in the parish. LeBlanc and Welch show that civic engagement requires its own set of literacies, including literacy related to public speaking, networking, and the fundraising process. As part of a religion class at the parish, students were asked to engage in a fundraising project. After hearing about the devastation of Typhoon Haiyan, young Francisco (a Mexican-American student at St. Thomas Aquinas) enthusiastically decided to support the Philippines relief effort. In this section, LeBlanc and Welch foreground the Catholic social teaching that Welch and Ghiso outline in the second chapter. LeBlanc and Welch write that the ethical framework of Catholic social teaching heavily informed the parish school’s goals with the civic engagement project, and set a precedent for the kind of social justice work expected of students like Francisco. The fundraiser itself was “rhetorically pitched as an example of a larger Catholic principle, in this case the ‘golden rule’” (86).

The fundraiser itself became a literacy-learning opportunity for Francisco and his peers. The context of the parish provided a platform for Francisco to practice these literacies within the framework of ethical global citizenship. The discursive resources of the St. Thomas Aquinas network (within and beyond the parish) made civic engagement and these new literacies accessible. However, while access may open up opportunities (like Francisco’s opportunity to speak at the Global Solidarity Workshop), literacy learning is not necessarily a guarantee of social mobility. The authors write that while Francisco shows incredible promise and leadership capacity, he may never get the opportunities to flourish in society. His DACA status limits many opportunities in the U.S. due to current legal configurations. For children of immigrants, and marginalized communities in general, systemic barriers often outweigh the opportunities various literacies afford. LeBlanc and Welch’s cutting analysis gets to the heart of deficit myths; the deficit is not rooted in the individual, but rather in systemic inequalities.

Chapter six takes a pivot. Lan Ngo, Katrina Barstow Jacobs, Gerald Campaño, Maria Paula Ghiso, and David Low share their work on “Inquiry into College,” a university-parish partnership focused on building literacy about college. Given that resources for learning about universities and colleges are unevenly distributed, and

“access to elite universities by adolescents who do not benefit from familial points of entry is typically more tightly regulated” (98), this partnership was an important point of entry into considering college as a viable future option. A team of graduate students arranged for a university tour with twenty children (ranging in age from five to ten years) and their families. After an arduous process of gaining university permission for the visit (the children were “categorically denied an official tour” due to their young age) and a 45-minute conversation with security, who had no knowledge of the tour despite the team’s “extensive preparation” to document the visit, the college students were able to give the children a tour of the campus (98–99). The authors reflect that elements of age, class, (lack of) familial connections, and race/ethnicity all impeded the group’s ability to access the college and its resources. Social and economic barriers like these create barriers to literacy and mobility very early on. On a lighter note, Ngo et al. write that once the tour ensued, the campus became an epicenter of inquiry through play. The authors name this concept “critical play.” They draw attention to the children’s engaged interactions with the space as well as their reimaginings of the campus, such as 8-year-old Derrick’s map of the university. Although indirect, “critical play” helps debunk the immigrant deficiency myth by extending agency to children’s intuitive literacy-learning practices.

Chapter seven presents art’s role in establishing self-agency and practicing inquiry. David Low and Gerald Campano focus on two forms of art in this section: murals and comics. In both forms, community members used collaboration to develop readily understood, accessible literacies associated with the art. An important example of this was “Randy.” Randy was the main character of a co-created comic series. What was most striking about Randy was his mutable nature. Randy constantly changed to reflect lives and needs of his various authors. In this collective imaginary, Randy could be Black for one author or Latino for another, and remain the same, singular character. The unfixed nature of Randy afforded the young writers agency; they created comics to process life events, develop political commentary, and cope with illness. The research team writes that the collaborative process helped create flexible identities for the community to mobilize for goals of representation, personal processing, and social critique.

Chapters eight and nine reflect on the ethics, norms, and collaboration that go into community-based research. The research team’s feminist and critical race orientations are particularly visible in these chapters. Campano et al. recognize the complexities of collaborative, community-based research. They outline several guidelines for conducting ethical collaborative research, which include treating equality as a starting point rather than a goal and recognizing community member’s experiences as valid, legitimate knowledge. Finally, chapter ten discusses key themes that span the work, particularly as they connect to collaboration and advocacy within counterpublics. Such themes include inquiry, radical hospitality, and interdependence in anti-oppressive work. In a call for social and educational justice, Campano et al. argue for solidarity in inquiry, advocacy, and support of community youth.

One of the major strengths of *Partnering with Immigrant Communities* is the clear thematic continuity throughout the individual chapters. Due to the transient

nature of graduate student timelines, the research team's composition was constantly in flux. Each researcher brings their own corpus of knowledge, personal investments, and orientation to the work. And yet, each chapter remains true to the research questions and contributes layers of nuance to the general themes of agency, literacy, community, and identity presented throughout the work.

Of course, *Partnering with Immigrant Communities* is by no means a comprehensive study of immigrant experience. And while individual researchers' insider status with certain groups provide additional layers of insight into particular ethnic immigrant communities, the same dynamic also left the research unbalanced. The team was limited in language, known history, and shared culture with some of the communities they explored. So, it seems that some ethnic/racial groups received more attention than others during the research process. Despite this, the team is importantly forthcoming when their positionalities as researchers of color and/or members of mixed-status families become advantageous for conducting research. The team is acutely aware of their positions of power, the requirement of the community's trust to practice community-based research, and several members of the team's insider status with various minority groups at St. Thomas Aquinas parish. Their transparency about their insider status, as well as the wonderful transparency regarding research methodologies, methods, ethics, rationales, and practices make the work a strong model for collaborative, community-based research.

In many ways, research in *Partnering with Immigrant* is the embodiment of community-based, anti-oppressive, participatory action research. The ethos of the researchers' orientation is lived out in every aspect and research was reciprocal. More than once, we see research team members offering labor, time, and/or material help through the work of literacy learning. They do so in a way that always respects, and simply furthers, the agency a group has already developed for themselves. The work was often bi-directional and centralized collaborative knowledge production, and in the same way that research was collaborative, authorship was collaborative. The two primary researchers, Campano and Ghiso, partnered with the Aquinas Center's founding director, Bethany Welch to co-write various chapters of the book. The researchers and authors' racial transparency in combination with mindful, critical research practices make *Partnering with Immigrant Communities: Action through Literacy* an ethical model for practicing collaborative literacy research with marginalized communities worth praise.

*Partnering with Immigrant Communities* is a timely and responsible book. The work handles the complexities of immigrant precarity in the U.S., barriers for accessing mainstream literacy resources and institutions, and immigrant agency forged through congregation. Campano et al. push for collaborative research with minoritized communities that recognize and contribute to community agency without reinforcing a white savior complex. *Partnering with Immigrant Communities* is a significant contribution to current conversations in the field and a fruitful read for both community members and researchers.