

The work kids do: Mexican and Central American immigrant children's contributions to households and schools in California

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In this article, Marjorie Faulstich Orellana highlights the work immigrant children do as active agents in supporting and sustaining their families, households, and schools. Building on the work of sociologists who examine children's engagement in social processes, Orellana maintains that we should not lose sight of children's present lives and daily contributions in our concern for their futures. Similarly, we should not see immigrant children only as a problem or a challenge for education and for society while overlooking their contributions to family and school. Integrated into her discussion are the voices of Mexican and Central American immigrant children living in California as they describe their everyday work as helpers at home and school. These examples illustrate how immigrant children's work can be understood in many ways - as volunteerism, as opportunities for learning, and as acts of cultural and linguistic brokering between their homes and the outside world.

Immigrant children and the children of immigrants comprise the new majority in many urban school districts in the United States. This fact is publicized dramatically in news articles and educational reports: for example, children in California come from homes where over eighty-eight languages are spoken (Cornelius, 1995); one in five children in the United States lives in an immigrant-headed household (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2000); and the Hispanic population of the United States grew 38.8 percent in the last decade, mostly due to immigration (James, 2000). In these forums, immigrant children are largely considered as a problem, or at best a challenge, for the educational system and for society. The focus is also on their futures, rather than their present realities. How will they be educated, acculturated, and assimilated into U.S. society? What do we (teachers,

service providers, and other adults) need to do to help them? How will we ensure that they learn English? How will we measure their educational achievement? What futures are in store for them? What kinds of adults can we expect them to be some day?

However, immigrant children, like all children, are much more than adults in the making (Thorne, 1993). Their daily experiences are not simply preparation for the future, when they can begin "productive" lives, and they are not problems to be diagnosed and fixed. By looking at children as actors and agents in their households, schools, and communities, we may see aspects of the immigrant experience that are invisible when we focus on adults as key players and look mostly toward the future. In the process, we may also gather answers to the kinds of questions that are sketched above, as well as new ways to think about the questions that we ask.

In this article, I focus on children as members of families, households, classrooms, and schools, and I explore their contributions to those spaces as forms of work - even as I acknowledge that children's activities can be framed in other ways as well, such as "play," "learning," "development," or "helping." Just as feminist scholars have made visible the work women do in the everyday functioning of households and other social spheres (Bryson, 1996; Daniels, 1987; Fishman, 1983), my aim is to shed light on how the children of immigrants support, sustain, and sometimes change institutions. I operate in the tradition of sociologists of childhood who examine children's active engagement in social processes (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; James & Prout, 1997; Schildkraut, 1975; Solberg, 1997; Thorne, 1993) and the ways in which that engagement helps to construct particular kinds of childhoods and institutional forms. In the process of exploring children's daily life activities, deliberately framed as "work," I will discuss possible futures. My concern, however, is less with where children are going than with how they are getting there and with how they are living and learning during their childhood years.

California Childhoods

This exploration of immigrant children's work emerges from a three-year ethnographic study of children's daily life experiences in several communities in California called the California Childhoods project.' My colleagues and I selected these communities for the variation in their ethnic and socialclass composition in order to illuminate the socially constructed nature of childhoods. We have been examining the sociocultural and

sociohistorical forces that shape children's activities in each locale; the resources available to these children; how those resources are taken up; and how these children see and experience their own lives. We are interested in the children's activities both in and out of school and their processes of learning and development.

An important guiding framework for our work on the California Childhoods project is to view children as actors, agents, and "experiencers" who participate in the social relations and practices of their daily lives, in turn helping to shape their identities and futures, rather than as the passive recipients of adults' socialization or teaching practices. This view resonates with educational research in child-centered, constructivist, and critical traditions (e.g., Davies, 1989; Dyson, 1993, 1997; Edelsky, 1993; Kamler, 1999; Lensmire, 1994; Walkerdine, 1990). Most educational research, however, has looked at children only in classroom settings, and much of it still assumes that children unproblematically adopt the social and cultural norms of their communities. We draw on sociological and anthropological research that challenges the adult ideological frameworks of much research with children (Speier, 1976) and that looks at how cultures and communities are shaped by children's actions (Briggs, 1998; Haavind, 2001; James & Prout, 1997; Solberg, 1997; Stephens, 1996; Thorne, 1993).

The Community

The community I focus on in this article is the neighborhood surrounding an elementary school in the Pico Union area of central Los Angeles. This area, where many immigrants make their "first stop" in the United States before moving out to other places, has been the site of dramatic changes over the last quarter of the twentieth century. The rapidity and complexity of these changes underscore the inadequacy of a "socialization" perspective on children's development; it would be hard to say exactly what it is the children are being socialized into, or where their cultural context is located.

My involvement with the Pico Union area - first as a resident, teacher, and community activist, later as a graduate and postgraduate student, and now as a long-distance researcher in Chicago - has been very much bound up with the social and historical processes that have shaped the community. I was lured to California after learning Spanish in college because I wanted to work with Central American refugees around human rights concerns; I secured an emergency credential to work as a bilingual teacher

in response to the teacher shortage in Los Angeles schools; and I married into a family of immigrants whose pathways from Guatemala had passed through this community much like the residents that I later began to study.

Madison² is a large urban elementary school - one of the largest in the nation, with 2,400 children in grades K-5. In the ten years that I taught in this community, all classrooms had over thirty students, and the total enrollment at Madison reached above 2,700. In 1997, primary grade class sizes were reduced, trimming the school's population and forcing several hundred children onto buses to attend schools that had spaces for them. The school runs on a multitrack, year-round schedule, with two-thirds of the school in attendance at any given time. More than 99 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced lunches according to federal income guidelines.

Between 1983, the time I moved to California, and 1998, the time I left, I watched as the composition of immigrants around Madison changed. In the early 1980s, the number of Salvadorans and Guatemalans in the area grew in proportion to the Mexican immigrants already in the area; at the end of the decade, Nicaraguans appeared in the mix; and in the mid-1990s Mexicans from the state of Oaxaca began migrating north (see Chinchilla, Hamilton, & Loucky, 1993, for further discussion of Pico Union demographics). Each of these migrations was spurred largely by political and economic crises back home. The small number of Koreans residing in this area, which borders on the city section known as "Koreatown," waxed in the mid-1980s and then largely waned; the number of Korean students at Madison went from a high of 10 percent to the current figure of just under 2 percent of the school population. My focus here, as in my work in general, is on the Mexican and Central American immigrant population at Madison who constitute the overwhelming majority.³ However, a colleague, Anna Chee, has explored Korean children's experiences in the area (Orellana, Thorne, Chee, & Lam, in press).

At the time of this writing, the community continues to be one in transition, a fact that strikes me on each of my return visits to the area. Central Americans have gained a foothold in the local political and business world. Central American organizations that worked to raise U.S. consciousness about human rights violations in the wars back home have now turned their focus toward actively building community here, offering a variety of supports for children and families. Many families have moved to other places. Some have

returned home, either to take advantage of Central America's newfound peace (an uncertain process), or because the political and economic context in California has become increasingly inhospitable for immigrants. Madison's school records suggest the magnitude of movement in and out of the area: in a three-year period, approximately 1,500 children left the school, and an equal number of students took their places. The families that left moved to twenty-nine different states and seven foreign countries. Others, on the other hand, live in the same apartments I met them in years ago, and a few have purchased homes in the area.

Processes of transmigration and settlement are thus elusive, making generalizations about "these children" or "this community" difficult (see Moje, 2000, for an insightful critique of the use of the term community in educational research). But a common thread in families' decisions to move, stay, or return is the welfare of their children, and children's actions figure largely in how people live while they are in the United States.

Methods

In my efforts to understand children as participants in community processes and as agents of change, I have worked at two levels simultaneously: close-up observations of particular contexts and of individual children as they move through those contexts, and a more macro view of many children in many different settings, with attention to the institutional and structural forces that delimit children's daily life experiences. I find the metaphor of a camera helpful here. By moving back and forth between a wide-angle lens and a zoom lens, we may see things that we might not see with a more fixed gaze. (The camera metaphor, while appropriate, is also discomfiting, because it highlights the essentially voyeuristic nature of the ethnographic process.⁴)

As a participant observer, I spent time moving around in the community among various spaces available for children, including the school, the schoolyard, classrooms, several after-school and vacation programs, the public library, local parks (a place few parents saw as a good place for children to play), and the play area of a nearby fast-food restaurant. I also selected one classroom for a year of more concentrated observations and, from within it, four children to observe as they moved across home and school contexts over three years.⁵ Three research assistants (Anna Chee, Lucila Ek, and Arcelia Hernandez) joined me in conducting selected observations for part of that time; together we logged thousands

of pages of field notes. We also interviewed children, parents, teachers, and community program personnel; conducted fourteen focus groups with children and three with parents; administered a written survey of fourth and fifth graders about their daily lives; and audiotaped children's language use in a range of settings. We went on community walks with children, talking with them about things we saw along the way (Orellana & Hernandez, 1998). We also engaged children in a series of activities: drawing pictures, writing stories, making maps of places they go, and sketching timelines that project their lives into the future. These activities were designed to tap into children's views of their lives, futures, and present social worlds.

To analyze this large amount of qualitative data, I used a noncommercial software program (Fieldnote Searcher) ⁶ that allowed me to code passages using an open-ended list of codes, and then call up the passages around a given code and use these for analytical induction (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The computer coding ensured that I could readily locate particular incidents recorded in the field notes, and it helped me to disentangle - or braid together - the various threads of analysis that ran through the research. Through an iterative process of data-gathering, analysis, and writing, I struggled continuously with the very concept of transforming the social life of a community into "data" to be dissected. What I offer here has been mulled over, processed, analyzed, shared, and now presented as a research product - but I caution that social processes cannot really be captured in easily summarizable "findings" and "conclusions."

Children as Participants in Households

The Zoom Lens

Eva Morales was seven years old and in the first grade at Madison when I first met her during this research.⁷ Eva lived with her mother (an immigrant from Guatemala), father (an immigrant from El Salvador), uncle, and two brothers in a one-bedroom apartment a few blocks away from the school. Eva's father worked as a day laborer in construction. Her mother worked for a time in a garment factory, but struggled with juggling employment and the care of her three young children. When Eva was in the second grade, her family sublet the bedroom of their apartment to three people in order to afford the rent. The boarders rang up a huge phone bill, however, so this strategy backfired; Eva's parents eventually asked them to leave. After this they shared the small apartment with another family of

three. They put up a wall to divide the small living room into two spaces (one for the uncle, one for the second family), and Eva's family slept in the bedroom. In the spring of 1999, when Eva was in the third grade, the second family returned to Mexico, and Eva's mother had a new baby in July of that year.

Two years after I moved from Los Angeles to Chicago, Eva's family also moved, following a lead for employment in a small town in Kansas. Just as the community was continuously changing its contours, so too were the households within it, like Eva's. But in all of these changes, one constant was Eva's active involvement with the demands of her family's daily life. In a timeline that she created when she was in first grade (see Figure 1), Eva displayed herself helping her family with many tasks.⁸

My observations of Eva over a three-year period expanded my understanding of the ways she participated in the functioning of her household and the nurturing of people within it. Eva answered the door on almost every one of my visits, always asking appropriately before doing so, "(?)Quien es?" ("Who is it?"). Like a good hostess, she usually offered me juice or soda, carrying the full glass carefully, and returning the emptied glass to the sink. She selected age-appropriate toys for my son Andres to play with when I brought him along. After my second home visit (with 5-month-old in tow), I recorded the following field note:

The apartment door was closed; after I knocked I heard Eva's voice asking "¿d Quien es?" I responded, and she unlocked the door and opened it. Inside, the TV was on; Eva's brother was seated in front of it watching a cartoon, in English. Nina [a neighbor Eva's mom cares for when her parents work] was also seated on the couch, watching TV. Eva's mom was in the kitchen. The place was freshly vacuumed; everything seemed in its place. Eva called to her mom, telling her that I was here. Eva's mom came out to the living room and told Eva to get a toy for Andres. Eva went into the closet (a curtain served as a door) to a metal shopping cart filled with toys. She dug into it and found a baby's rattle. Then she found a plastic imitation Barbie doll and said, "Yo quiero jugar con este" ("I want to play with this one").

On other visits, I saw Eva unpack the grocery bags her mother brought home and put the food away without being instructed to do so; answer the phone and take a message for her father; get her youngest brother out of a bath, towel dry, and dress him; read to her two

brothers; and teach them English rhymes that she had learned at school. When I asked her about how she helped at home, Eva spoke animatedly: "A lavar los trastes, a vacuuar, a componerle mi ropa; cada vez que vamos a lavar, dice mi mama, me dice, `Eva, (?)por que no me ayudas a doblar?" ("I wash dishes, vacuum, arrange my clothes; every time we go to do the laundry my mom tells me, `Eva, why don't you help me to fold?"). Later she elaborated:

Hay veces que mi mama dice, "Eva, ayudume a acomodar los muebles, todo, Para que quede bonito, "y tiendo la cama, vacuamos, todo lo de la casa, todo el oficio.... 0 si no, hay veces que mi hermano, todo se bote, todo se bote, se bote todo. Mi mama me dice, "Eva, e1junior, i tfi le diste de comer a junior?" Y le digo, "El Junior comi6 bien. " Me dice, "Eva, mira, mira, que e1junior, si estd sucio, si estd sucio, me lo cambias por favor. " Digo, "OK. "Ensucia todo con comida, le cambio entonces la camisa. Yo le digo, "Mami, mami, nomas se ensucio poquito. " "Entonces alli dejalo. Si se mancha todo, cambialo. " (Sometimes my mom says, "Eva, help me arrange the furniture, everything, so that it looks pretty," and I make the beds, we vacuum, [we do] everything in the house, all the housework. Or if not, sometimes my brother, he drops everything, he drops everything, everything gets dropped. My mom says, "Eva, and junior, did you feed junior?" And I tell her, 'Junior ate well.'" She says to me, "Eva, look, look, junior is all dirty, he's all dirty, please change him." And I say, "OK." He gets everything messy with food, so I change his shirt. And I say, "Mami, mami, he just got a little messy." "Then let it be. If he stains everything, change him.")

When I asked what she had done on any given weekend, Eva invariably told me about how she had helped her mother at home. When Eva's firstgrade teacher - a bilingual, bicultural woman who immigrated to the United States from Mexico when she was five years old, and who understood the importance of household work in her students' daily lives - asked children how they helped at home, Eva, along with many of the other children, always had much to say.

The Wide-Angle Lens

In my movements in and around the community, I recorded many other examples of children's active participation in the work of daily life: running errands; caring for siblings; cleaning; doing the laundry; taking siblings to school, the library, and other appointments;

helping siblings with homework; mediating with public institutions; answering and making phone calls; ordering food in restaurants; and translating between English and Spanish for monolingual speakers. Translating involved many kinds of tasks, as summarized in Table 1.9 Twelve-year-old Adalia (the daughter of immigrants from Guatemala) described how she offers her translating services at home, at school, and in the community:

I translate for whoever wants, for teachers, for my father, my mother, sometimes for the police. It's that if they go over there in the house, because some gangsters, they always are in the house, and they were looking for them one day, and they enter the house and the manager didn't know how to talk with them, so I said to him that if he wanted to say something, and I translate to the police.

I also saw and heard about children's participation in the waged labor force: selling food, clothes, or other merchandise alongside adult street vendors; helping their parents to clean houses, care for children, or mow lawns; cleaning tables in a pupuseria (a Salvadoran restaurant); sweeping the floors of a beauty salon. One first-grade girl described the work she does in a local market on weekends (I recorded these words as she looked at a photograph of the market that we had taken during a community walk with her classmates and her teacher):

Hago pupusas y tamales. Tambien hago dulces. Mi mama y mi papa trabajan conmigo. Yo solita pongo unas cosas alli adelante donde estan los pescados. Yo pongo los frijoles. Pongo alla arriba las carnes. Solo eso. Me pagan cinco dolares. Y me dejan entrar solita a mi y a mi mama cuando la tienda esta cerrada. Hago mucho.

(I make pupusas and tamales. I also make candies. My mom and dad work with me. I put all by myself some things over there where the fish are. I put the beans there. I put the meat up there. Only that. They pay me five dollars. And they let me and my mom go in the store when it's closed. I do a lot.)

Two of the four families I selected for home observations from Eva's firstgrade classroom also worked in a different kind of waged labor - doing piecework at home. In one family, the five children (ranging in age from four to twelve) spent several hours each evening putting price stickers on "Barbie" sunglasses that were sold, they told me, in Toys 'R Us. In another family the children put tiny plastic flowers into vials that were strung on necklaces and sold in a local market. Eleven-year-old Yasmin (who immigrated from El Salvador as a

young child) talked about how her back and neck ached from bending over the work ("porque se tiene que sentaaaaaar, moverte pa' arriba, pa' abajo, pa' arriba, pa' abajo") ("because you have to siiiiiiiiit, and move up 'n down, up 'n down"). Her sister echoed, "Si la cabeza. No la cabeza, pues, el cuello de la cabeza. Y la espalda . . . [y cuando] abrimos las cajas, me lastimo yo" ("Yes, your head. Not your head, well, your neck. And your back ... [and when] we open the boxes, I get hurt"). The children told me they got paid between \$1 and \$5 for preparing a box of over one hundred vials. Their payment depended in part on where they fell in the chain of work: whether they received payment directly from the neighbor who secured the work from the store owner, or from their mother.

The implications of this phenomena - hidden forms of child labor in the late twentieth century United States - are beyond the scope of this article. The purpose here is to highlight how these children actively contribute to their household economies, as well as to their functioning in other ways; they are sources of deployable labor, not simply burdens for their families or the objects of adult care.

Understanding the Work Kids Do

The fact that children participate as needed and valued members of their households may come as no surprise to those who know working-class or immigrant communities. As others have shown, beliefs about what children of different ages and genders are capable of and should be expected to do vary considerably across sociocultural contexts (Berrol, 1995; Rogoff, Sellers, Pirrotta, Fox, & White, 1976; Schildkraut, 1975; Song, 1999). It has only been in the twentieth century, in the Western world, that children have been measured by their sentimental value rather than by their physical and economic contributions to households (Zelizer, 1985). Even in middle-class homes, children contribute more to households than is generally acknowledged because their contributions are obscured by a socially constructed tendency to view children's activities as "play" (Blair, 1992; Gill, 1998; Morrow, 1996). The question becomes not whether children work, but how visible that work is and how it is perceived. Is it valued as work, or viewed as play, learning, or character development?

Children's involvement in the activities I sketched above seems partly influenced by their parents' beliefs about childrearing and cultural constructions of the child that families have brought with them from their countries of origin. These constructions - shaped by families'

cultural, global, and social-class positioning - contrast with bourgeois ideological notions of children as relatively helpless dependents in need of adult labor and care, living within protected spaces (families, schools), engaged in activities defined as play or learning (not work), and seen as individuals needing to be developed through adult intervention. These conceptions of childhood have their roots in the ideological struggles of the Progressive Era and the shift from the "economically useful" to the "economically useless" but "emotionally priceless child" (Zelizer, 1985).¹⁰

Many parents in Pico Union take it for granted that children should participate in household work. As one mother explained:

Les digo ahora no vamos a salir, porque salimos ayer. Ayudenme a hacer esto; digamos, que me ayuden a limpiar; yo hago esto y ustedes hacen eso, y asi siempre los tengo ocupados. Dicen, "Mami, to no nos dejas descansar. " Yo digo, "Los hijos tienen que trabajar; todos vivimos en esta casa, todos tenemos la option de vivir limpio; debemos porque somos una familia. Yo no soy sola, ustedes no son solos tampoco. Ustedes tienen una familia, asi que si somos una familia, trabajamos juntos. "

(I tell them that we're not going out today, because we went out yesterday. Help me to do this; let's say, help me to clean; I'll do this and you'll do that, and this way I keep them busy. They say, "Mami, you don't let us rest." I say, "Children have to work; we all live in this house, and we all have the option of living in a clean house; we should because we are a family. I'm not alone, and you're not alone either. You have a family, and if we're a family, we work together.")

But seemingly "cultural" beliefs and practices are also shaped by demands that daily life places on families. In poor, working-class communities - here, in their countries of origin, or elsewhere - children's labor is often needed for household survival (Berrol, 1995; Song, 1999). In rural areas of Mexico and Central America, children routinely help with tasks like feeding chickens, cutting and carrying firewood, planting and harvesting crops. My husband Nery remembers receiving a machete as a gift when he was three years old. The machete was not a toy, but a tool that furthered his participation in the work of daily life. As a young boy, he climbed up coconut trees to cut down coconuts; hunted in the mountains with his father; went fishing for supper in the nearby ocean; scraped pans in a local bakery in exchange for bread; rowed a canoe three miles across the ocean to go to

work; lugged buckets of water to the house each day; and cut and sold firewood, among many other things that might be considered inappropriate activities for children in the United States today.

For families who move from rural areas or small towns like my husband's home town of Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, to the sprawling urban metropolis of Los Angeles, children's participation in household work may actually diminish. Instead of hunting in the mountains, fishing in the ocean, raising chickens, or planting rice and corn, children may be sent to the corner market to buy groceries. The conveniences of modern urban living, even in low-income communities, eliminate or transform many tasks of household sustenance. But other needs for children's participation may increase. Parents in Pico Union, when they are able to find jobs, typically work long hours. Since formal child care is not widely available in this area, and would not be affordable even if it were, parents often rely on children to help care for their younger siblings. This would be true in their home countries as well, but generally with more support from the extended family and the larger community.

As in their countries of origin, children in Pico Union also have skills that their parents do not. Just as my husband was expected to deploy his literacy skills to read and write for his parents, parents in Pico Union take it for granted that children should use their English abilities (as well as, perhaps, their literacy skills) to translate for them. Furthermore, there are complex English literacy demands for daily life in Los Angeles, as evidenced in the list of translating activities in Table 1, and parents may need children's help to carry out daily tasks.

Translating work makes particularly evident the fact that the work children do is not trivial. Children are not minor players or "peripheral participants" (Wenger, 1998) gradually being integrated into cultural practices that adults in their community have mastered. In many ways they are the experts, and their ability to engage successfully with the complex demands of modern life matters for their families' well-being and integration into U.S. society. Children's work facilitates families' access to information and resources; it builds bridges between home and school; and it enhances opportunities for their own and their siblings' learning and development.

These experiences may well have implications for children's educational attainment and long-term outcomes. Children's labor helps to change the developmental possibilities of their childhood spaces by ensuring their access to resources (e.g., when siblings facilitate children's interactions with computers or books) and by enhancing the availability of those resources for others (e.g., through language and cultural brokering). It may also help children forge particular kinds of identities for themselves that facilitate their movement into the education and work worlds. This type of work may carry children much further than teachers and researchers realize, especially if we assume that the only home-based activities that have educational value are those school-like practices that are typically found in middle-class homes. Gandara (1995), for example, notes that at least two-thirds of her sample of fifty high-achieving Chicano professionals talked about the responsibilities they had in their homes as children. They saw these experiences as connected to their achievement orientation.

Extensions to the Community

Children's work in the Pico Union community, however, benefits more than their households. Each month, dozens of Madison students volunteer their year-round vacation time at the school and other places, such as the public library and the few after-school/vacation programs in the area. Vacation time totals more than four months because the school operates for only 163 days each year.

Informal school records kept by an administrator, whom I call Mr. Andrews, suggest the degree to which children's labor now adds up at the school. During a recent ten-month period (covering five cycles of vacation), 319 students served as school helpers. The majority worked as classroom aides (224 in regular classrooms; 8 in special education rooms; and 11 in the school's pre-K program). Ten served as assistants to school specialists (the librarian, and the reading, art, and music teachers); twenty-one assisted the physical education coaches on the playground; thirty-two helped in the computer lab and two in the media lab; three were designated "campus aide assistants"; five worked with the school nurse; and three assisted the principal.

What children do in these settings is shaped by the directives that adults give them and the constraints or opportunities of the context itself, as well as by the children's interests or aptitudes. In general, children do whatever is needed or asked of them. In classrooms,

they distribute papers and lunch tickets, help other children with assignments, sweep the floors, clean the sinks, organize supplies, run errands, staple papers, file materials, read stories, and take young children to the bathroom, among many other things.

In the years I taught in this community, teachers were discouraged, and at times disallowed, from having students in our classrooms during vacation time, presumably because of legal risks. But children kept offering - even pleading - to help ("Maestra, maestra, (?)le puedo ayudar, por favor?" "Teacher, teacher, can I help you, please?"). Children's insistence to help facilitated a change in institutional practices. In 1999, the Madison administration established a formal policy that acknowledged and regulated children's involvement as helpers at school. The policy stated that only fifth graders could be helpers; they were not to leave the school site during the day; they needed a teacher's recommendation and parental permission; and they had to wear a badge at all times. How the phenomenon of helping gets named, framed, and regulated reveals something about adults' views of children in general, and of those in this community in particular. As Thorne (personal communication, February 2001) notes, various players (teachers, parents, children) may have vested interests in making labor contributions either more or less visible, or in framing them in various ways - as "civic contributions," "character development," "learning opportunities," or "work." The image of children as workers can provoke anxiety in adults and raises questions about exploitation, law violations, injustice, and children's rights. By calling children "helpers," teachers avoid this danger zone. The term distinguishes children from paid workers at the school and from adult volunteers. "Helping" also suggests an apprenticeship model of learning - one that Mr. Andrews highlights when he notes that what children get from the experience varies greatly, depending on what they are asked to do: "If it's `here, staple 900 papers,' they're not gonna get much out of it. If it's `here, go help these kids, do an art project,' and you give them some direction, [then that's different.]" The "helping" makes clear that adults are still in charge, and presumably those adults are vigilant to children's best interests.

Teachers often argue that "letting children help" is better than the alternative that most students have for their vacations - staying home alone or in crowded apartments with few material resources. Indeed, there are few public spaces in this community where children can spend their vacation time. The available vacation programs cannot accommodate the

thousands of children who are out of school at any one time in the central Los Angeles area, and most parents cannot afford to pay for child care or enrichment classes even when available. Some teachers suggest that they are doing a favor to parents, commenting that it is "kind of like a babysitting thing" and "it gives parents peace of mind" to know that their children are in school.

The fact that children need a teacher's recommendation and that some jobs are given important-sounding labels like "campus aide assistant" also frames the work as an honor or a privilege. One teacher explained, "It's kind of a reward thing - it's supposed to be because you're a good citizen during the year." The badges highlight this honor and seem to give children more freedom of movement on the school grounds than they would otherwise have.

Most teachers with whom I talked seemed to take the availability of child helpers for granted; in fact, Mr. Andrews was concerned that the phenomenon was growing out of control, making him worried about issues of child safety. Mr. Andrews also told me quite frankly that the helpers fill a need at the school. He said that this year, for example, there was a shortage of paid teaching assistants in the kindergarten classrooms, adding that "if you have a couple of fifth-grade girls, it can really help you." One of the teachers talked about the particular advantages of child helpers: "I can ask them to do things that I wouldn't dare ask my teaching assistant to do; I can say 'go here,' 'do this,' 'can you clean up that mess,' and they don't mind." Children may be ideal workers for this very reason - they are easy to control and they do not usually protest. And when helping is framed as a privilege, children can be sent home if they are not contributing, and other children can fill their places.

This is not to say that children are exploited and given nothing in return for their efforts. Teachers often buy gifts for their helpers, take them on outings, and give them special privileges, including their own affection. As a teacher, I relied on volunteers to survive, as well as to enrich what I could offer to my students. When I knew I could count on classroom helpers to set up and clean up, I was willing to implement more ambitious classroom projects than I would have otherwise.¹²

Certainly, children are not coerced into helping, and they seem to offer their ability to help partly as a way to secure resources for themselves. As one girl puts it, she likes to help

because "it's not boring." Ten-year-old Jose was excited to get access to the school's computer lab because he could use the computers briefly between class sessions. Eleven-year-old Jorge noted that by helping on the playground he was able to eat lunch every day at the school. But bound up in getting was an act of giving - a form of civic participation that benefits others as much as it does themselves.

It is important to note that in this community, it is largely the children themselves who seek out opportunities, offering payment with the only means they have: their labor capacities. For example, I watched one day as 11-year-old Yasmin announced to her mother that she was going to go help her cousin's teacher: "Voy a ir donde Camilo para ayudar a la maestra porque me aburro" ("I'm going to go to Camilo's [classroom] to help the teacher because I'm bored"). "Vaya, pues" ("Go ahead then"), was her mother's response. Yasmin, not her mother, sought out the opportunity to help. Parents rarely set this up for their children, perhaps because they do not know the opportunities exist, they do not know whom to ask or how to ask for them, or they do not feel entitled to do so.

Gendered Dynamics

To speak about children as a unified category, however, is problematic. In Pico Union, as elsewhere, children can be differentiated by many factors, including age, gender, position in family, and abilities or perceived abilities. These factors influence the kinds of things children are asked to do, or offer to do, in homes and classrooms.

Gender, not surprisingly, seemed salient in the allocation of many of the helping activities I have described. More girls than boys talked about helping at home, and my observations in several homes over a three-year period suggest that girls do vastly more domestic tasks than do boys; moreover, they seem to operate with the "running wheel" of a caregiver's mind (Haavind & Andenaes, 1997), attending to what needs to be done and simply doing it without being asked.

Like Valenzuela (1999), I found that more girls than boys claimed to serve as the "designated translators" for their families. But like Song (1999), who studied the participation of Chinese immigrant youth in family take-away restaurants in England, I found that the nature of the children's participation (as translators or in other household tasks) was also influenced by age, position in the family and in families' immigration

processes, ethnic identification, and the particular needs and circumstances of each family.

The gendered nature of children's participation at the school site is more visible for examination, however - at least at a surface level¹³ - based on recent records documenting their work activities. About two-thirds of the students who volunteered their vacation time at the school were girls. This gendered pattern becomes more marked when we look at where girls and boys volunteered their services. The majority of the helpers (224 children) were placed in classrooms, but more than twice as many were girls. In contrast, twice as many boys as girls (14 versus 7) served as playground aides/assistants to the physical education coaches, and slightly more boys than girls helped out in the computer lab and media center (21 versus 13); see Table 2.

The fact that the computer center numbers were not more skewed toward boys surprised me because, in my experience as a teacher at the school, I only saw boys helping in the lab. Talking with Mr. Andrews, however, helped to illuminate this dynamic. Mr. Andrews told me that he helps pick children for the computer lab; he looks for those that "show an interest," but specifically tries to encourage girls. He does this, he said, because "girls are more diligent, they're more careful; they're more mature. A lot of girls are just a little more astute." (It is interesting to note that, despite this teacher-directed push for girls - one that is itself shaped by some assumptions about gender differences - the numbers are still well tipped toward boys for this position.)

Ultimately, what may matter most are the meanings that children attach to their participation in these practices. These meanings may be influenced by adults' understandings; certainly the fact that some teachers talk about the particular skills that girls and boys bring to helping situations may reinforce a sense of the gendered "naturalness" of particular jobs. At the same time, participating in these spaces may open up new possibilities for identity construction. Mr. Andrews' efforts to get girls into the computer lab may be partly shaped by his beliefs about gendered attributes (though undoubtedly also by his concern with countering traditional gender stereotypes); once they are there, however, girls may learn that they like computers and may come to see themselves (and be seen by others) in new ways.

Returning to our zoom-lens look at Eva, it would be easy to argue that she is learning how to do "women's work" of cleaning and nurturing through her activities at home, perhaps not unlike the girls who are asked by their teachers to clean their classrooms. Certainly, there is considerable evidence suggesting that girls and women worldwide do more housework than do boys and men (Bloch, 1987; Burns & Homel, 1989). It would be easy to argue, too, that Eva's timeline shows her projecting her life into the future as a caregiver whose life unfolds within the domestic sphere. But this simple analysis of gender roles obscures the complexities of Eva's life, the interactions between gendered behaviors and opportunity structures, and Eva's own visions of future pathways. During visits to her home over a three-year period, I asked Eva to make new timelines (see Figures 2 and 3).

In each timeline, Eva continued to portray herself as a helper and a nurturer. But many of her more recent projections were oriented to other things, like schoolwork; she noted that she wanted to learn English and math and to teach her brothers about the things she learns. When I asked her to imagine what she would be doing at age twenty, Eva told me, "Mi hermano dice que a los veinte me tengo que casar" (My brother tells me that when I'm twenty I have to get married"). I then asked her if she thought she would do that. Eva responded, "Yo quiero ir a la universidad" ("I want to go to college"). And when I asked, "- Que trees que vas a estudiar?" ("What do you think you'll study?"), Eva told me, "Quiero cuidar a los ninos" ("I want to take care of children"). Eva seems to have resolved the tension between these competing worlds (the world of home and nurturing work, and that of school and academic work - a world of which Eva is more aware after having been in school for several years) in the same way that many other women, including myself, have done - by planning to go to school in order to learn how to take care of children. But who can say what worlds may open up to her once she is there?

Discussion

My aim in this article is to help reframe discussions about immigrant children in educational research. Although the educational needs of this population are a valid concern, we need to make sure we do not only study immigrant children as "problems" (or even as "challenges"), or only as people with needs for adults to fill. In our concern for their future, we should not lose sight of their present lives and opportunities. In more ways than not, immigrant children are assets to their families, schools, and communities. We need to

recognize the work they do: supporting and sustaining households, bridging homes and schools, helping their families to negotiate the cultural and institutional terrain in the United States, and volunteering their services in classrooms and communities.

Children's participation in these settings can be understood in various ways. We can applaud children's volunteerism as a form of civic spirit. We can highlight the opportunities that their participation provides for their own learning and development. We can talk about character formation, skills acquisition, and the pathways that are opened or closed through particular experiences. If we view children's participation in these ways, we advance the creation of more public spaces for children to engage in the same active, valued, and fully participatory ways that immigrant children operate in many households. In this way, we hold working class ways as a valued and positive model, disrupting the prevailing tendency to view middle-class practices as the only acceptable norm.

By calling children's participation work, we bring attention to other issues. We make children's activities more visible and more valuable (Daniels, 1987), even as we also slip into taboo discursive terrain. By naming the economic value of children's contributions, we are forced to face the fact that we - teachers, parents, and society as a whole - benefit from children's efforts. We can literally calculate the value of children's contributions in terms of what it would cost to pay for tutors, translators, office assistants, and other school volunteers - or even to pay these children at subminimum wage.¹⁴

By acknowledging the value of immigrant children's contributions to households and communities, we also contribute a new perspective to national policy debates. There has been considerable discussion in the public arena about the costs and contributions of immigrants to U.S. society (McDonnell, 1997). The research that partly informs these discussions examines various costs and benefits, but the general assumption is that while adults may make contributions (based on taxes they pay and their labor power), children are only a drain; they "take" from the educational and health systems without giving anything back. This is an assumption that bears reconsideration. The work immigrant children do is only as invisible as we allow it to be.

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