

Engaging Students in Praxis Using Photovoice Research

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Introduction

Photovoice research, developed by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris in 1994, is a research design that utilizes photography and discussion as tools for social change (Wang, 1994). As a methodology, it provides the opportunity for participant research in which they record, reflect, and critique personal or community issues that are stated as research questions (Wang, 1999).

This methodology includes using community-based photography and discussion as a way for marginalized groups to “identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (Wang, 1997). In addition to photographic representation of the participant experiences, critical reflections and group dialogue provide greater context and deeper meaning for the photos.

This approach serves as a means for a community to co-construct meaning around a common experience or circumstance. It is also a creative way to explore the human experience through the lenses of people directly impacted by the experience or circumstance rather than through researcher interpretation.

Background

Rooted in grassroots empowerment education, critical feminist theory, and documentary photography, Photovoice aims to enable people with little money, power, or status to communicate needed changes to policymakers. Several examples of Photovoice projects can be found in fields outside of education that focus on a range of social issues including homelessness, physical ailments, mental and psychologi-

cal illness, and gender discrimination. A handful of studies in the United States have demonstrated the use of Photovoice with adolescents in out-of-school educational settings (Chio & Fandt, 2007; Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Wilson, et al., 2007; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009).

Photovoice projects have the potential to lead to praxis, an important process by which people reflect on their circumstances and work to make the changes that they want to have happen (Friere, 1970). In Photovoice, students act as the ethnographers of their communities using images as powerful, visual representations to help elevate the significance of the social issues they see and experience. Photovoice can serve as an instructional approach that empowers students to analyze the issues that impact their lives, question existing structures, and advocate for the changes they believe would improve their lives (Adams & Brooks, 2014).

Furthermore, teachers can use Photovoice research projects in conjunction with writer’s workshop and other instructional approaches to provide students with motivating and authentic opportunities to develop their oral language and writing skills (Adams & Brooks, 2014; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009). Ideally, participants who are co-researchers in Photovoice projects use their newfound awareness to educate stakeholders and policymakers about issues relevant to their lives and advocate for social and political change.

Photovoice is a highly flexible methodology that can be adapted to a variety of topics (Photovoice, 2005). There are three different stages in Photovoice, so planning is critical to the success of any project. The stages include: (1) training co-researchers in Photovoice methodology and techniques; (2) small and large group discussions about photographs; and (3) participatory analysis to identify themes emerging from the discussions (Wang & Burris, 1997).

The steps in these stages may differ,

depending on the facilitators, co-researchers, and context in which the Photovoice research takes place (Adams & Brooks, 2014; Pies & Parthasarathy, 2008; Wang & Burris, 1994). However, the main goals always include teaching participants how to collect data within their own community, co-construct meaning around an issue or circumstance, and share their understandings. When using Photovoice as an instructional approach in an educational setting, additional stages may include: offering instruction in how to analyze and interpret images, developing research questions, writing photo captions, explaining and supporting research themes, and finding venues for sharing research with stakeholders and policymakers (Adams & Brooks, 2014).

Examples of Photovoice in Practice

Lisa and Katie, two of the authors of this article, have each used photovoice research with K-12 and university teacher education students. In the following sections, we describe two of these projects.

Lisa’s Story: Sixth Graders Tell Us What They Actually Need to Be Healthy

This Photovoice project was conducted with 13 children who had just completed 6th grade in urban schools within a large Midwestern city. The percentage of students who qualified for free- and reduced-lunch was approximately 80% district-wide. These children were enrolled in a summer school program designed to close the achievement gap by providing underserved children with access to high quality academics in an engaging summer program, tuition free.

In a report on health in the U.S., the National Center for Health Statistics (2015) stated, “Between 2004 and 2014, life expectancy at birth increased more for the Black than for the White population,

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thereby narrowing the gap in life expectancy between these two racial groups. In 2004, life expectancy at birth for the White population was 5.2 years longer than for the Black population; by 2014, the difference had narrowed to 3.4 years.”

In order for these statistics to further improve, it is incumbent upon educators to engage with the families of racially and ethnically diverse and low socioeconomic communities to gain a better understanding of community needs and co-construct meaning that empowers students to advocate for the changes that they want to see in their schools and communities.

This particular Photovoice project was designed to examine what it meant for these students and their families to be healthy, as well as what explicit needs these students have in order to live longer and healthier lives. The *primary research questions* were:

What does being “healthy” look like?

What barriers do we face in being “healthy?”

The primary goal of the summer health curriculum was to assist students in becoming healthier, more productive citizens by gaining an understanding about how to achieve improved health through shared opportunities. We realized during the health education planning sessions that we could not tell the students and families what they needed to live healthy lives. We instead needed to look through a different lens in order to partner with students and their families to help them learn what healthy living means in their context. We needed to understand how they viewed healthy living and what they felt their needs were.

Therefore, utilizing student Photovoice research groups in which participants were able co-create this information helped us understand what they perceived were the assets and barriers they faced in becoming healthy individuals. This proved to be the perfect opportunity to participate in mutual understanding; students learned the characteristics of healthy individuals and ways to achieve them, while we learned what the students felt was both helping and holding them back from being healthy.

The ultimate objective was to then share this information with educators, our youth, and local families in order to seek and potentially find workable solutions toward becoming healthier. Additionally, we could use this information to begin exploring how these communities could

fulfill their needs both inside and outside of school.

As with any population, gaining the trust to be able to facilitate discussion of opinions and experiences was important to establish from the beginning. Therefore, we tackled the project utilizing four distinct stages. Stage one involved gaining trust and forming a mutual understanding of the desired project. Stage two concerned setting up and providing opportunity for the photography. Stage three included writing about and discussing the photos that students selected to represent their ideas. Stage four provided the opportunity for students to make meaning from the large group experience and showcase the end products.

In stage one, we started with an exercise that introduced the project as well as provided some measure of vulnerability for the teachers. We presented photos of each teacher that were less than complimentary—one picture showed teachers with cookies in their teeth as they smiled at the camera, and one showed a teacher with no make-up and disheveled clothing. We asked the students to describe what they were seeing. The goal was for the students to see more than just the surface of what was there but also to see the meaning behind it. Additionally, it was important for us to demonstrate to the students that we were willing to share photos of ourselves that might be funny or slightly embarrassing so that when students had similar photos later, they might be more inclined to share them.

Additionally, we had a conversation with the 12- and 13-year olds regarding the photos that they were going to take using a one-time-use camera. We reminded them that although these were confidential photos, that anything illegal that might be depicted would have to be brought to the attention of authorities. We did this to assure the students would be kept both healthy and safe.

Stage two provided the opportunity for students to take meaningful photos. In the first week, we introduced different concepts to help students frame their own thinking. Those ideas included: an introduction to health; Photovoice methodology, research, and project parameters; and camera introduction. Students were given three distinct opportunities both in class and at home to take photos and have them processed and returned to them. Each time students received the photos, we had a large-group discussion. This helped reframe what students were

seeing and what they might be looking for as they set out to take more photos.

During stage three the students had an opportunity to reflect individually on the meaning and purpose of the photos, and then to co-construct group meaning based on what they had seen depicted as healthy in comparison to what they saw as a barrier to being healthy. In this stage, students participated in the co-construction of meaning in a variety of ways. Each week, students journaled individually and participated in both large and small group discussions. At the end of the project each student was interviewed as well.

For the journaling exercises, we encouraged a variety of forms for the students to choose between, including writing narratives or poems, drawings, using word walls, plus other forms that expressed what they had seen—specifically what they had photographed, what they had chosen not to photograph, and how they felt during the process. Large group discussions came in a variety of formats that included the sharing of ideas, basic brainstorming, mind mapping, and flow charts.

We adopted a technique from Wang (1999) that uses the acronym “SHOWeD” to facilitate conversation. Students wrote or discussed: What do you **See** here? What’s really **Happening**? How does this relate to **Our** lives? **Why** does the problem or strength exist? What can we **Do** about this? Small group discussions of three to four students centered specifically on photos that each student had taken with the intention of representing an important concept for that day.

A “show and tell” type conversation resulted in group chat around the similarities and differences that people had experienced. Individual interviews focused on anything that each student was particularly happy, sad, or confused about regarding their topic. These short discussions led to the creation of a flow-chart of both healthy and unhealthy topics that students mentioned.

The fourth and final stage showcased the social issues that the students saw and experienced during the project; each student chose one of their own photographs they felt best represented each of the research questions. The final outcome of this project was a gallery of photos chosen by each student, framed and displayed for parents, other students, and the community at the final celebration.

In addition to the photos, we also framed some of the quotes from the students that represented their own ideas about what

constituted a “healthy” person as well as what barriers they faced in becoming healthy. These anonymous quotes provided more meaning and personalization to the photos to demonstrate how the students engaged in the overall praxis.

Katie’s Story:

Teacher Education Students Learn about Teaching from Middle School Students

In a content literacy methods course I taught for preservice teachers, the teacher candidates engaged in their own photovoice research project and then facilitated a photovoice research project with students in the seventh and eighth grades at a local urban middle school during a required field experience for the class. During this experience, they tutored seventh and eighth grade students who scored significantly below grade level on state standardized tests. They focused on literacy development. The research questions for both the preservice teachers’ and middle school students’ photovoice projects were:

What do I wish that professors / teachers knew about me?

What motivates me to do my best learning?

What makes a great professor / teacher great?

Most of the preservice teachers were White middle class students with limited experience in interacting with racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students. Consequently, the primary goal of this project was to help these preservice teachers develop relationships with, and learn from, Black and Hispanic middle school students. The field experience school was an urban 7-to-12-grade secondary school with a student population that was about 65% Black and 20% Hispanic. Approximately 80% of the students qualified for free/reduced lunches.

During the field experience, the preservice teachers provided one-on-one tutoring in content literacy to the seventh grade students who had not passed the state standardized language assessment the previous year. Preservice teachers in previous semesters, as well as in the semesters in which we engaged in photovoice research projects, expressed concerns about teaching Black and Hispanic students. Many preservice teachers held fears and assumptions regarding students and schools that were racially, ethnically, and socio-economically different from the schools that they had at-

tended as K-12 students. As the instructor for the course, I felt that it was imperative that the preservice teachers interrogated these beliefs through learning from and with the students at the school.

Before we began our field experiences, the preservice teachers learned about and discussed Photovoice methodology and techniques. They began by engaging in their own Photovoice project using research questions with a focus on what they wished to learn. We debriefed this activity by talking about what was effective and ineffective in terms of the process plus discussions as well about why learning from our students and each other is so important in our development as teachers. We then talked about qualitative research, biases, and ethics, and the fundamentals of participatory research.

When we went to the school for our field experience, we talked to the middle school students about Photovoice and asked them if they would be willing to help us learn more about being great teachers. The students were eager to teach us about how they viewed good teachers and teaching. First in small groups and then as a whole group, we discussed their initial ideas about the research questions. We then brainstormed ways in which we could represent those answers through photographs. We practiced taking some photographs based on their initial answers, followed by a discussion to help the students better understand the process of the project. For the discussion, we adapted Pies’ and Parthasarathy’s (2008) Photovoice discussion protocol:

- P** Describe your *Picture*
- H** What is *Happening* in your picture
- O** Why did you take a picture *Of* this?
- T** What does this picture *Tell* us about life in your school?
- O** How does this picture provide *Opportunities* for us to improve life in your school?

In discussing the photos, preservice teachers worked with groups of three-to-four students to understand the questions, listen to each other’s stories, and identify commonalities and differences in their stories. The students spent the next week capturing images that represented their answers to the research questions.

When we reconvened the next week, small groups of preservice teachers and

students met together to share and discuss the photographs. The students chose photographs that best represented their answers to the research questions, told their stories related to the photographs using the adapted Pies’ and Parthasarathy’s (2008) Photovoice discussion protocol, and worked together to identify the themes that emerged from their stories. The preservice teachers took notes about what they heard the students say and sometimes prompted the students with clarifying and probing questions to help them explore/explain their ideas in greater depth.

At our next class session, with just the preservice teachers, we talked about what we heard and made connections to adolescent development and effective teaching. In the following two sessions with students, the preservice teachers worked with students to write caption statements related to their research findings for each of their photographs.

The Photovoice project provided an authentic and engaging literacy development experience for the middle school students, and supported the preservice teachers in developing a habit of mind of listening to and learning from their students. We shared the photographs with the teachers and administrators from the school as a way to advocate for the instructional practices and policies that the students believed would make the school more supportive of them developmentally and academically.

Conclusion

While Photovoice has traditionally served as a research method, it holds great promise as an instructional practice to help students engage in meaningful learning engagements. Students can explore issues related to their own lives, as Lisa’s students did, or they can collaborate with others as co-researchers to learn more about how different groups of people experience the social structures and circumstances that impact their lives, as Katie’s students did.

These projects, through the discussions and writing that occurred, provided students with authentic opportunities to make meaning through writing and speaking. The projects also modeled for students and preservice teachers a method for advocating for the changes they would like to see in their schools and communities.

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