Using *Photovoice* as a Teaching Tool to Explore Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Students from Impoverished Backgrounds

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Abstract

Despite the diversity of the American student population, the current teacher force and cohorts of future teachers are overwhelmingly white women from middle class backgrounds. In addition to the work around race, gender, and disability status, there is a clear need for us to help future teachers reconsider how they think about children experiencing poverty in urban schools and communities. Based on its use in an elementary education foundations course, this article provides a first-person accounting of how the pedagogical tool photovoice helped future teachers critically reflect on their perceptions of students from these backgrounds and offered their professor entry points for knowledge and skill development related to teaching students living in impoverished backgrounds.

Keywords: preservice teachers, photovoice, impoverished backgrounds, teaching tools

Introduction

I've occasionally had the opportunity to overhear my pre-service teachers discuss their future plans. During one such conversation, I heard a student mention how she wanted to teach the "poor city kids" but worried she wouldn't "survive" in a city school. I watched as the other students hesitated before replying, crafting their responses. Just as another student broke the silence to agree, she was quickly talked over by the rest of the group who made it clear they were going to pursue jobs in suburban districts because it meant fewer headaches and stress. Implied in their statement was a belief that working in the suburbs meant fewer "poor kids."

As often is the case, hearing students' uncensored comments led me to question my pedagogical decisions. I wondered how I'd neglected to help my pre-service teachers feel prepared to teach students from impoverished backgrounds. What had I said that led them to hear the phrase "city schools" and immediately conjure images of poverty and disadvantaged students? It was pretty clear that most of my group of pre-service teachers had their minds made up about where they wanted to teach. I was confident, though, that by giving them knowledge and effective strategies focused on students living in poverty, I could help them change their minds and see urban schools in a new light. I wanted them to understand that not every student who attends an urban school is from an impoverished background, not every child in the suburbs lives in middle- or upper-class homes, and strategies that benefit students who live in poverty can benefit all students.

There is research that suggests teacher preparation programs need to do more to prepare pre-service teachers to teach students from impoverished backgrounds (Bertrand, 2017; Emdin, 2016; Milner, 2015). Although I had long worked with my students to consider gender and disability status, focusing explicitly on class, like race, felt overwhelming. I am a Black woman assistant professor. The course I wanted to focus on had twenty-eight students on the roster, all white women. Entry points into conversations on race and gender had been easier to identify given our demographics but I knew from past experiences, conversations around poverty can be uncomfortable and hard to initiate. I decided to start by getting more information about their perceptions of students who live in poverty or come from impoverished backgrounds.

My long-term goal was to identify pedagogical entry points to ensure the teaching and learning in my course helped them expand their understanding of students from impoverished backgrounds and gave them the skills and knowledge to support them. To

make the conversations as meaningful as possible, I decided to use a visual methodology known as *photovoice* (Wang & Burris, 1997), a tool that enables users to express themselves through photos and written explanations without feeling the pressure to have an immediate face-to-face discussion.

Photovoice alone won't prepare all future teachers to support students from impoverished backgrounds, but as I show in this article, using it as a pedagogical tool gave my students the space and tools to reconsider their mental models around "poor city kids" and showed me entry points for teaching them how to better support those kids.

Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Students from Impoverished Backgrounds

Like my students, most pre-service teachers do not feel prepared to teach students from impoverished backgrounds (Bertrand, 2017; Cox et al., 2012; Milner, 2010). In some instances, they lack an understanding of how both poverty and their own negative influences play a role on student achievement (Bennett, 2008). In many cases they rely on stereotypes of students living in poverty (Gorski, 2012, 2016), which negatively impacts how they perceive these students.

The most common stereotypes rely on seeing the students and their families as lazy or drug addicted and, most significantly, that they do not value education (Gorski, 2012). Getting past these stereotypes requires supporting teacher candidates to effectively recognize their own biases (Smith & Farnan et al., 2017). Lower expectations and bias, particularly toward poor and minoritized students, can lead to expanding achievement/opportunity gaps (Noguera, Pierce, & Ahramrd, 2016). By neglecting to prepare future teachers to support students from impoverished backgrounds we are, in effect, failing to prepare them to teach almost half of the student population. Addy and Wight (2012) report that 44% (31.9 million) of children under the age of 18 live in low-income families.

Ullucci and Howard (2015) addressed how teacher preparation programs can prepare teacher candidates to better support students from impoverished backgrounds. They suggest teacher preparation programs include conversation and activities in their teacher preparation classroom that discuss the myths about poverty that teacher candidates bring with them. In addition, they provide anchor questions designed to undo classist frameworks and the "culture of poverty" lens used in most traditional education classrooms. In the next section, I explain *photovoice* and my decision to use it to better understand pre-service teachers' perceptions of students from impoverished backgrounds.

An Understanding of *Photovoice*

Photovoice was created by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris in 1994. It is a research process that uses photography and discussion as tools for social change (Farley et al., 2017). Wang (1999) defined *photovoice* as a "process which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique" (p. 185). Later work by Wang and Pies (2004) summarized the three overall goals of *photovoice*: (1) allow participants to photograph everyday phenomena that relate to a given question; (2) allow for group discussions of the photographs, giving special attention to issues that are of greatest concern; (3) connect the ideas and concerns shared in the discussions with decision makers. Typically, decision makers are local policy makers or community leaders. For my course, however, we focused on faculty and program administrators.

While Wang & Burris developed the concept of *photovoice* as a means to record, reflect, and critique community issues (Wang, 1999), it has been helpful for understanding issues in education. There have been several studies that have included *photovoice*, including Carnahan's (2006) use of *photovoice* to improve engagement with autistic children, Zenkov and Harmon's (2009) approach to teaching writing to urban youth, and Cook and Buck's (2010) study of middle school students. One of my goals in using *photovoice* was to create a pedagogical space that included a heightened "consciousness of self" (Wang & Burris, 1997) among my white students and to build upon the body of literature that showed how images could tap into something face-to-face communication might miss.

Context of the Education Course and Action Research

The students I overheard were members of my education foundations course, one of the first required courses in the elementary education sequence at my institution. The foundations course introduces pre-service teachers to a vast array of topics in education, and every discussion encourages students to become equity-minded and social justice oriented. In addition, pre-service teachers discuss issues in education, develop instructional strategies, learn classroom behavior guidance techniques, and advance their ability to think like professional elementary educators. The course is coupled with over 100 clinical hours in an urban elementary school setting, taught and supervised by the same instructor. The

clinical practice experience provides an opportunity for pre-service teachers to gain practical experience in an elementary classroom while they study theory and content.

I approached my course pedagogy as an action research project focused on helping my 28 pre-service teachers reflect on their perceptions of students from impoverished backgrounds. Action research is a practical research method that focuses on gaining a better understanding of a practice problem to improve the situation (Grogan et al, 2007; Kuhne & Quigley, 1997). According to Coghlan (2007), "action research is collaborative in that it aims to enhance people's involvement in the generation of knowledge about them and their work and the actions they take" (p. 295). Masters (2000) clarified basic guiding principles for action research, including that action research is empowering for participants, it supports collaboration through participation, it results in acquisition of knowledge, and the work is aimed at social change. I was able to attend to all four of these guiding principles through my use of *photovoice*.

Photovoice as a Teaching Tool with Pre-service Teachers

Pre-service teachers are typically treated as passive observers in their education (Horwitz, 2012), even when their professors adopt a constructivist approach, as I do. Using *photovoice* in this course supported my pre-service teachers to fully embrace their own learning. It gave an active "voice," via the camera, to those who are often the subjects (pre-service teachers in our case) of knowledge, rather than the agents (teachers and researchers) of knowledge. Additionally, it offered them an opportunity to use photographs as communication tools to allow greater engagement (Chio & Fandt, 2007).

This class project illustrates how *photovoice* can be used as a teaching tool to foster engagement and critical reflection (Horwitz, 2012) when teaching and learning about poverty. Before adapting *photovoice* to my course, I had to negotiate how I could teach the required content and give my students space to consider their perceptions of students in poverty, all while trying to better prepare them to teach students from impoverished backgrounds. After brainstorming ideas and considering each required topic in the course and how these topics can be relevant when teaching in high-poverty, urban elementary schools, I created a plan.

I began by introducing my students to the *photovoice* methodology. They were asked to read articles about *photovoice* and view the *photovoice* website (www.photovoice.com).

We spent a class session exploring the concept, clarifying any misunderstandings or misconceptions about the method, discussing ethics, and addressing issues of confidentiality in photography. Students were explicitly told that they could not take pictures of people and their faces but could take pictures of objects or landscapes. We spent part of the following class exploring *photovoice* examples that I had obtained from previous *photovoice* projects in other courses. For their *photovoice* project, students were encouraged to pull from their clinical experience in elementary schools (they were completing clinical hours in urban elementary schools where more than 40% of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch) and their interactions with students.

Students were given two weeks to take between 20 and 30 pictures of what they thought teaching students in poverty looked like. Then, they chose the ten images they felt that best illustrated their thinking and brought them to class for a discussion. We used half of a class session to go through the PHOTO protocol (Hussey, 2001).

- 1.   Describe your **P**icture.

- 2.   What is **H**appening in your picture?

- 3.   Why did you take a picture **O**f this?

- 4.   What does the picture of **T**his tell us about your life?

- 5.   How can this picture provide **O**pportunities?

For the purpose of my course, I added the phrase "with regard to teaching students who attend urban schools from impoverished backgrounds?" to the fifth question.

After discussing and modeling the protocol using a photo I had taken, I asked my students to revisit their photos and write captions that explained the pictures and the reasons they took the pictures. As a result of the using the PHOTO protocol, they were able to focus on their specific experiences and stories portrayed in the photographs. Students used PowerPoint to include the title, photo, and reflection on the same slide and made a hard copy of each slide to display for the class gallery walk. The gallery walk following the protocol was an engaging opportunity for students to discuss their photos and how their photos related to teaching students in poverty. There were over 250 photos and reflections exhibited on the classroom walls during the gallery walk.

After the gallery walk, I led the class in a dialogue on the commonalities and differences of their images. The students reflected on their *photovoice* submissions

individually and as a group. Their insights were a rich vein of information for me as their instructor and gave me a deeper understanding of what I needed to discuss in my future classes to support students in becoming effective teachers for *all* students, but specifically students from impoverished backgrounds. As I expected, the use of the *photovoice* provided an opportunity for pre-service teachers to be transparent with their responses and share their thoughts, even those based in stereotypes, about students from impoverished backgrounds.

Examples of the *Photovoice* Projects and Pedagogical Insights

Each pre-service teacher shared ten photos and responses/reflections that described how they perceived students from impoverished backgrounds. Sidney, a junior in the elementary education program, shared the following photo and reflection:

Figure 1
"Trying to figure it out"

I am from a suburban community and I do not have much experience with students of color, students from impoverished backgrounds, or urban schools. This is my first time really thinking about the experiences of urban youth in this course and I will say that it is eye opening and I have a lot that I need to try to figure out.

In this picture you see two of my students trying to figure out what the fish are doing on the wall. This is really how I think about the students I work with; I am trying to figure out who they are and what they need.

Like most of the students in my class, Sidney is a white, monolingual, cisgender woman with no experience working in urban schools or communities prior to my class. We talked through as a group what "it" referred to, and during a future class session, I spent time helping them recognize and dismantle the savior mentality white teachers from middle

class backgrounds might hold around students living in poverty. During the discussion, the group arrived at the importance of making sure they view students from impoverished backgrounds as coming to school with numerous assets and actively acknowledge they have a lot to offer.

Another student, Nikita, submitted the following photo and response/reflection.

Figure 2.
"Uneven Fight"

I have always felt sorry for students in poverty because I believe they have to fight for everything they need to be successful both in school and out of school. It's like they are in an uneven fight.

They do not have the training or resources to win the fight because there are so many things that they lack.

Nikita's response, in particular, highlighted the need for me to teach my students explicitly about deficit thinking (Gorski, 2012.) While the future teachers appeared to care about students from impoverished backgrounds, the way they discussed the students' experiences was negative and focused on the things they felt the students lacked or couldn't do. A close read of the pre-service teachers' projects revealed they saw students from impoverished backgrounds as hard to teach, below grade level, sometimes lazy, from "broken" homes, and hard to manage in class.

I revised upcoming lectures to explicitly address these perceptions, provide data and statistics to challenge them, and gave my students the knowledge and strategies to increase their efficiency working with students. I facilitated discussions and provided my pre-service teachers with ways to identify assets in urban schools and to consider how they to cultivate the genius (Muhammad, 2019) that each student brings into their classrooms.

A third student, Alana, provided insight into the role of empathy in supporting students living in impoverished settings. Her example was titled, "Overweight Baggage."

Figure 3
"Overweight Baggage"
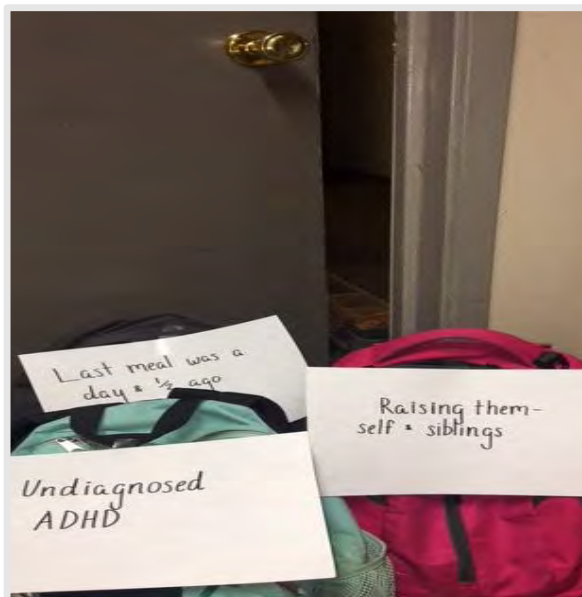
Students in poverty face a lot of social and emotional damage because of their home lives. They are carrying so much baggage it weighs them down.
They can't go to school and leave their baggage at the door because it is so much. These students have no choice, but to bring their home lives into their classroom because it is so prevalent in their lives.

Many of their parents are unsupportive and they are carrying everything alone.

Twenty of the 28 pre-service teachers in this course discussed parental involvement in their *photovoice* projects. Most of them, like Alana, assumed students in poverty do not have parents that are supportive. This led to a class discussion about the myths of students in poverty and how lack of parental involvement is not an issue for all students in urban schools and that students in housing and food secure environments don't always have supportive family structures.

Alana's example allowed me to dive into the nature of how intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) manifests in the school setting. We explored how systemic racism and systematic inequalities may prevent parents from providing their children with resources. We discussed how racism, redlining, gentrification, lack of resources within the community, and other structures cause parents who are experiencing poverty to appear unsupportive to teachers used to a middle-class model of support. During our discussion, one of the pre-service teachers, April, shared, "I am so happy that I was able to do this project and then have a conversation with the class. I do not know anything about being poor, and I often thought people were poor because they were lazy. Now I see that inequities and inequality are huge factors in why people are in certain situations. I want to make sure that as a teacher

I support my students and also help dismantle systems of inequity." This comment illustrated the benefit of doing the *photovoice* project with my class and how transformation was happening with some of the pre-service teachers.

As we continued our discussion, many of the pre-service teachers shared that their initial perception of students from impoverished backgrounds was based on things from the media or by from input from their family and friends. This was a powerful moment in our *photovoice* discussion because they expressed how this assignment allowed them to think beyond their perceptions and gain an understanding of how poverty affects students. As future teachers, they expressed the importance of this discussion and how it will benefit them in their own classrooms. After using the *photovoice* project to explore their perceptions of impoverished students and direct instruction throughout the course, students were asked to complete a critical reflection regarding their *photovoice* experience and reflect on they saw it affecting their practice and identity as teachers.

The critical reflection came two weeks after they completed their projects. I waited two weeks to ask them to write their reflections because I wanted to give them a few class sessions to learn more about teaching in elementary settings and focus some of our class discussions on specifically how to teach students in poverty. Their reflections revealed how this project allowed them to express their thoughts and opinions freely and without feeling judged. I noticed that my students were outspoken about the biases and deficit ideologies that they held prior to this project. Pre-service teacher Melanie wrote in her reflection, "I feel like I began this course with preconceived notions about students who attend urban schools and they were all negative, honestly. This semester I was pushed to be uncomfortable and realized that my way of thinking was deficit and if I became a teacher with these views it could have been harmful." All the pre-service teachers expressed that this project, coupled with class discussions around their perceptions, changed how they view students from impoverished backgrounds.

Discussion and Conclusion

When preparing pre-service teachers, our understanding of their perceptions is critical. Knowing students' mental models can provide instructors with a clearer understanding of their misconceptions and entry points for course content and lectures. The *photovoice* project, from design to debriefing, gave students an opportunity to reflect on

their perceptions of students living in poverty and gave me insight into their pedagogical needs.

This project was an opportunity for me to broach an aspect of identity that's not often discussed in teacher preparation and offered a creative and unconventional way for pre-service teachers to critically reflect on how they perceive students in poverty. While this project is not a solution to the issue of pre-service teachers not feeling prepared to teach in high-poverty schools, it is a start to an important dialogue with pre-service teachers about the impact of poverty on children.

We know that poverty impacts students in multiple ways (Bertrand, 2017; Gorski, 2016). Students in poverty tend to be more stressed and academically perform worse than their peers who are not experiencing poverty (Fiester & Smith, 2010; Williams & Crockett, 2013). Understanding the actual impact of poverty and not what the media or peers offer is critical for new teachers. This *photovoice* project was a starting point for prospective teachers to begin discussions about supporting students from impoverished backgrounds and become knowledgeable about the realities of working with this particular group of students. The use of *photovoice* provided a teaching tool that allowed the instructor to gain an understanding of the pre-service teachers' perceptions and guide future class discussions based on those perceptions. We can no longer make excuses for not directly addressing poverty in our education courses, and *photovoice* is an effective teaching tool for starting the conversation with pre-service teachers and informing our pedagogical practices.

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