

“Would You Like to Hear a Story?": Collaborating With Families Using Photo-Elicitation

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Abstract

Research related to family empowerment and capacity-building suggests that families facing multiple risk factors (e.g., presence of a disability, poverty, single parents, low levels of maternal education, etc.) may experience feelings of powerlessness when asked by professionals to make decisions on behalf of their families. The purpose of this study was to explore a particular strategy for engaging families experiencing multiple risk factors, including caring for young children with disabilities, to work collaboratively with Head Start professionals when planning and implementing family-centered interventions. Specifically, we examined how photo-elicitation may empower families to share their personal stories as a pathway to building meaningful relationships with their Head Start family service workers. A qualitative approach via thematic analysis was used. Findings begin to address the need for identifying innovative strategies for building family capacity with Head Start families, specifically those caring for young children with disabilities.

Keywords

collaboration, families, Head Start, disabilities, photo-elicitation

Head Start was established in 1965 to address disparities in outcomes for young children living in poverty and is based on a comprehensive approach of addressing educational, health, nutritional, and social-emotional-related needs. As a two-generation program, Head Start's services and supports focus on children as well as the families caring for them (Dropkin & Jauregui, 2015); thus from the beginning, Head Start recognizes the importance of families in promoting positive outcomes for young children facing multiple risk factors (Keys, 2015).

Research related to family empowerment and capacity-building suggests that families facing multiple risk factors (e.g., presence of a disability, poverty, single parents, low levels of maternal education, etc.) may experience feelings of powerlessness when invited by professionals to participate in the decision-making process on behalf of their families (Nachshen, 2004). To counteract such feelings, professionals must possess tools that build families' confidence and competence. The formation of effective collaborations may serve to mitigate feelings of powerlessness by

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replacing prior negative experiences with opportunities for families to have their voices heard by invested, caring professionals (Korfmacher et al., 2007).

Importance of Collaboration for Children With Disabilities

Given their commitment to promoting inclusion in early childhood, Head Start requires that individual programs enroll a minimum of 10% of children with identified disabilities and their families across both Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Section 1302.52 of the Head Start Program Performance Standards (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2016) underscores the importance of family partnerships within the services provided by Head Start. Specifically, the standard related to the family partnership process, 1302.52(a), highlights the need for Head Start programs to work collaboratively with families “to support child learning and development, to provide, if applicable, services and supports for children, with and without disabilities, and to foster parental confidence and skills that promote the early learning and development of their children” (p. 44).

Within Head Start, family service workers are charged with forming effective collaborations with families to assist them in identifying individual goals, strengths, needed services, and support systems as well as developing strategies and timetables for achieving self-determined goals. Collaboration between families caring for children with and without disabilities and Head Start professionals, particularly family service workers, positively impacts both child outcomes (e.g., improved academic performance and social-emotional development) (Mendez, 2010) and family outcomes (e.g., increased sense of empowerment and general improvement in parent-child relationship) (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Trivette et al., 2010). As such, this article describes facilitators and barriers to supporting effective collaborations between families caring for young children with disabilities and Head Start professionals while examining an innovative strategy, photo-elicitation, for engaging families to “tell their story.”

The Promise of Photo-Elicitation as a Strategy

The inclusion of young children with disabilities in Head Start highlights the need for Head Start professionals to possess the necessary skills to support families caring for these children on a day-to-day basis. Head Start professionals use the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, 2018) to guide their practice. Based on Section 1302.52(b) of the Head Start Program Performance Standards (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2016), “A program must implement intake and family assessment procedures to identify family strengths and needs related to the family engagement outcomes . . .” (p. 44). Photo-elicitation may be an effective strategy that supports this endeavor.

Photo-elicitation is a qualitative interviewing strategy in which visual images, such as photographs, video clips, children’s drawings, billboards, or graffiti are used to enhance interviews (Harper, 2002; Richard & Lahman, 2015). Patton (2002) states that using photo-elicitation “captures participants’ feelings, thoughts, intentions, previous behaviors or the ways in which people organize their mental understandings and then connect these understandings to their world” (p. 341). Photo-elicitation falls under the larger umbrella of “visual sociology,” encompassing video ethnography, documentaries, and photo-essays (Harper, 1998).

A primary benefit of photo-elicitation is that photos have been found to facilitate more in-depth responses from study participants (Shaw, 2013). Miller (2014) found that photo-elicitation can help shift the family-professional relationship from a deficit-based approach to a

strength-based approach. The use of photos often extends conversations, supports personal reflection, and enables participants to share their values, beliefs, and experiences. It is important to note that it is not the photograph itself that is of interest, rather it is the story behind the photograph that provides meaning (Smith et al., 2012). Mandleco (2013) contends that photo-elicitation is beneficial in shifting power from the researcher to the participant, as it is the participant who ultimately decides on the photos he or she feels comfortable sharing. Furthermore, using personal photos during interviews may assist with rapport building as focusing on photos may alleviate some of the anxiety that comes from engaging in dialogue with an unfamiliar professional (Hurworth, 2003).

Finally, photo-elicitation can assist with “breaking the frame” to any preconceived notions or biases the researcher may hold (Shaw, 2013). Photo-elicitation provides participants with the power to make meaning of their reality using their own voice. Literature highlights feelings of powerlessness on the part of many families facing multiple risk factors toward the early childhood professionals tasked with supporting them (Nachshen, 2004); therefore, photo-elicitation could be an effective strategy for balancing this power differential.

Potential Limitations of Photo-Elicitation

Although there are numerous benefits to photo-elicitation, this particular interviewing strategy is not without its challenges. Researchers must keep in mind that some photographs may illicit strong memories and emotions, both positive and negative, for participants (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Another consideration when using photo-elicitation is the fact that even when participants volunteer for the study, at times, they may be unable or unwilling to share the true meaning behind their photographs with researchers (Mandleco, 2013). As photo-elicitation interviews are used to examine experiences that are not readily observable such as feelings, thoughts, or intentions, again, these interviews may tap into emotions the participant was not prepared to explore in depth (Richard & Lahman, 2015).

Researchers must be cognizant of ethical considerations when using photo-elicitation. They must take into account how they can protect the identities of participants when using the photos for professional presentations and publications. Furthermore, it can be difficult for researchers to feel confident that all individuals shown in a particular photo provided consent for their image to be included (Smith et al., 2012).

There are also logistical issues to consider. While participants have the freedom to choose the photos they wish to take, they may not always have a camera on hand to capture the moment. In addition, some participants might require more assistance with the technical aspects of working a camera. This is an issue that must be considered if participants are minors, have limited experience using various types of cameras, or have a disability (Mandleco, 2013).

To extend the research base on effective collaboration between families and early childhood professionals, the following questions related to the utility of photo-elicitation were addressed:

1. What do families perceive are the benefits and barriers to using photo-elicitation as a way to “tell their story” to Head Start family service workers?
2. What do Head Start family service workers perceive are the benefits and barriers to using photo-elicitation as a strategy for learning families’ stories?

Data collection including photo-elicitation interviews with Head Start families and focus groups with Head Start professionals allowed all voices to be heard with equal weight and significance. Relationships are transactional; therefore, to garner a more comprehensive perspective of the experiences of families and Head Start professionals alike, it was necessary to include both groups (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Method

Participants

The target states for this study included a large Midwestern state and a smaller Southern state with populations of approximately 13 million and 5 million, respectively. Participants of the photo-elicitation interviews included 18 Head Start families caring for young children with an identified developmental delay or disability (12 from the Midwest and six from the South). Participants in the focus groups included 16 Head Start family service workers tasked with forming effective collaborations with families to assist them in identifying individual goals, strengths, needed services and support systems as well as developing strategies and timetables for achieving self-determined goals (4 from the Midwest and 12 from the South).

Family participants. Families of children with identified developmental delays or disabilities were recruited using purposeful sampling. Tracy (2013) contends that purposeful sampling supports cohesion between the purpose of the study, research questions, data collection strategies, and participants so that they “complement each other” (p. 135). The criteria for participation included families whose children were (a) enrolled in Head Start or Early Head Start and (b) had an identified developmental delay or disability.

Eighteen photo-elicitation interviews were conducted with a total of 19 participants. Seventeen interviews were conducted with one caregiver and one interview was conducted with a married couple. Of the 19 participants, 18 were female (95%) and one was male (5%). Twelve cohabited with their child(ren)’s father (67%) and six were single mothers (33%). Fifteen caregivers were biological mothers (79%). The remaining participants included an adoptive mother (5%), grandmothers, both who had legally adopted their grandsons (11%) and a father (5%). Of the 24 children, 12 were male (50%) and 12 were female (50%). Based on their ages, 12 were enrolled in Early Head Start (50%) and 12 were enrolled in Head Start (50%). Demographic information for the families who participated in photo-elicitation interviews and their children, respectively, are described in Table 1.

Head Start family service workers. Head Start family service workers from both states were invited to participate in focus groups. Convenience sampling was used to recruit Head Start family service workers. Specifically, the various Head Start grantees in both states who assisted with recruiting Head Start families were contacted and asked if their family service workers would be willing to share their experiences related to building effective collaborations with families. Convenience sampling provided the opportunity to work with participants who were readily available (Etikan et al., 2016), meaning that contact had already been made with their program directors who had expressed an interest in the topic being explored.

Of the 16 focus group participants, 13 completed the demographic survey in its entirety, while two completed the front side only, missing the items related to race and ethnicity. One participant did not turn her survey in. Participants included 15 females (94%) and one male (6%). Of the 13 family service workers who completed the question related to race, nine identified as Caucasian (69%) and four self-identified as black or African American (31%). Fifteen family service workers shared the number of years they had worked in the field with seven participants having been in the field for 4 or less years (47%), while the other eight had worked in the field 5 to 15+ years (53%). See Table 2 for additional demographic information.

Procedures

Data collection and analysis were a team endeavor led by the first author with the support of two research assistants. The first author conducted all photo-elicitation interviews as well as the two

Table 1. Study Participant Demographics.

Photo-elicitation interview participants (N = 19)	Children depicted in photo-elicitation interviews (N = 24)		
	N (%)	N (%)	
Gender		Gender	
• Female	18 (95)	• Female	12 (50)
• Male	1 (5)	• Male	12 (50)
Role		Age	
• Biological mother	15 (79)	• <12 months	3 (12)
• Adoptive mother	1 (5)	• 12–24 months	1 (4)
• Father	1 (5)	• 2–3 years	12 (50)
• Adoptive grandmother	2 (11)	• 4–5 years	8 (33)
Family composition ^a		Location of services	
• Mother/father (legal guardians) cohabitating	12 (67)	• Home-based	4 (17)
• Mother only	6 (33)	• Center-based	20 (83)
Number of children in home		Developmental delay or disability	
• 1	5 (28)	• Speech/language	9 (38)
• 2	8 (44)	• Autism	2 (8)
• 3 or more	5 (28)	• Down syndrome	1 (4)
		• Prematurity	2 (8)
		• Global delays	5 (21)
		• Other medical conditions ^b	5 (21)

^aBased on the 18 family units represented. ^bMedical conditions included: Pompe disease, seizure disorder, prenatal drug/alcohol exposure/cancer, cleft lip/palate, and Axenfeld–Rieger Syndrome.

focus groups conducted in the Southern state. A research assistant facilitated the focus group in the Midwestern state, while the second research assistant provided support.

Photo-elicitation process. Families were provided with a brief overview of the study as well as general instructions regarding the types of photographs they might consider sharing. It was critical to not guide or direct them in a particular direction. As their story of caring for a young child with a developmental delay or disability is unique to their family, they were not provided with suggestions that might affect the types of photographs they would share. They were told that there were no “right” or “wrong” photographs to include. The initial thought was that families would take photographs for the purpose of this study. However, after conducting the first two interviews where families shared photographs that had been taken prior to their participation in the study (e.g., picture of a child in the hospital), the instructions were revised to allow families to also identify prior photographs they had taken to share as they also assisted in “telling their story.” For the purpose of this exploratory study, each family was asked to take or identify five to 10 photographs depicting a “day in the life” specific to caring for a young child with a developmental delay or disability. Each family was offered a disposable camera; however, all families elected to use their personal camera phones. Families requested 3 to 7 days to collect their photographs after which photo-elicitation interviews were scheduled.

Prior to beginning the interview, families were reminded of the overall purpose of the study. For each family, regardless of whether the interview was conducted face-to-face ($n = 11$) or by phone ($n = 7$), each photograph was discussed one-by-one. For each photograph, families were asked: (a) “Can you please describe what is going on in this photograph?” (b) “How does this photograph help tell your family’s story?” and (c) “How might this photograph help your Head Start Family Service Worker understand your family to best support you?”

Table 2. Demographics of Focus Group Participants ($N = 16$).

Demographics	N (%)
Gender	
Female	15 (94)
Male	1 (6)
Age ^a	
<24 years	1 (6)
25–34 years	3 (19)
35–44 years	7 (44)
45–54 years	1 (6)
>55 years	3 (19)
Unknown	1 (6)
Race ^b	
White	9 (56)
Black or African American	4 (25)
Unknown	3 (19)
Hispanic or Latino origin ^b	
Yes	0 (0)
No	13 (81)
Unknown	3 (19)
Level of education ^a	
Bachelor's degree	11 (69)
Associate's degree	4 (25)
Unknown	1 (6)
Years working in the field ^a	
<1 year	1 (6)
1–4 years	6 (38)
5–9 years	3 (19)
10+ years	5 (31)
Unknown	1 (6)
Number of families currently serving ^a	
0–29 families	2 (13)
30–59 families	10 (63)
60+ families	3 (19)
Unknown	1 (6)
Number of families caring for a child with a disability ^a	
0–2 families	5 (31.25)
3–5 families	9 (56.25)
6+ families	1 (6.25)
Unknown	1 (6.25)

^a $n = 15$. ^b $n = 13$.

Each family was asked to provide copies of the photographs they had shared during the interview. The seven families interviewed over the phone sent their photographs via text message or electronic mail prior to the scheduled phone interview. The number of photographs families shared ranged from three to 18 and included photographs that were taken prior to their participation in the study as well as photographs taken specifically for the purpose of this study. Upon completion of the photo-elicitation portion of the interview, each family was asked follow-up questions specific to their relationship with their identified Head Start family service worker.

These questions revolved around identifying strategies their family service workers used to build collaborative relationships with them and the effectiveness of such strategies. Families were specifically asked “Do you feel like taking photographs of your life to share with your Head Start Family Service Worker would be an effective strategy for helping him or her better understand your family? Why or why not?” Findings from these questions are forthcoming.

Focus group process. Following photo-elicitation interviews with families, focus groups with family service workers were conducted to determine if they felt photo-elicitation could be an effective strategy for getting to know the families they serve on a more personal level, to identify benefits and challenges of photo-elicitation, and to identify supports they would need to be successful using photo-elicitation. To that end, the concept of photo-elicitation including the process, potential benefits, and potential limitations was described prior to the start of each focus group. The first author presented examples of photographs and stories shared by families to provide a context for the discussions that occurred during the photo-elicitation interviews.

Three focus groups were held, one in the Midwestern state and two in the Southern state. The focus group held in the Midwestern state consisted of four family service workers and lasted 82 minutes. The two focus groups held in the Southern state were comprised of six family service workers each and lasted 102 minutes and 84 minutes, respectively. Each focus group was comprised of family service workers who came from the same Head Start program. Organizing focus groups in this manner allowed the focus to be on that particular program’s policies and procedures with an emphasis on how the family service workers supported effective collaboration with families caring for young children with developmental delays or disabilities. Focus groups were held at their respective Head Start centers during working hours.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected through photo-elicitation interviews and focus groups were audio recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed by an independent, professional transcriber. Transcriptions were used to create a “working” code book (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The first iteration of the photo-elicitation interview code book included a priori codes based on the research questions (i.e., perceptions of photo-elicitation, potential benefits, and challenges of photo-elicitation). The coding process was an ongoing endeavor as data were collected and new themes emerged. Procedures outlined by Saldaña (2013) were followed when coding. First, descriptive coding techniques were used to provide a description of the general topics being discussed without delving into meaning or substance. Second, axial coding reduced the initial codes that emerged from the descriptive coding process and organized them into conceptual categories or codes (Saldaña, 2013). Analytic memos were also developed to highlight initial thoughts, reflections on the meaning of the data, questions that warranted further exploration, and direct quotes that spoke to a larger theme.

The data analysis process was a team effort lead by the first author who benefited from a team capable of supporting efforts to establish trustworthiness and credibility. All 18 photo-elicitation interviews were coded in NVivo®, a coding software used for data management. During this process, the first author and one research assistant independently coded each transcript using the refined code book as guidance. Once coding was completed, a query was run within NVivo® to determine the level of agreement for each theme, code, and subcode with a goal of meeting, at a minimum, 95% agreement. Coding for agreement was selected as the method to determine inter-coder reliability because the “variety of viewpoints and experiences among the team members may help unravel the complexities and ambiguities of the data” (Hill et al., 2005, p. 197).

After reviewing the NVivo® query reports, the first author and research assistant engaged in further dialogue for each theme, code, and subcode that did not meet the minimum requirement

of 95%. The highlighted passages within the transcript were reviewed in context followed by a discussion of why passages had been coded in that manner. Next, the definitions, examples, and nonexamples outlined in the code book were reviewed to determine if that particular passage should be re-coded. These subsequent conversations resulted in final intercoder agreement falling between 95.19% and 100%. In the final step, the second research assistant randomly selected six transcripts to code for agreement. After completing her coding, the first research assistant ran another NVivo® query leading to further team discussion of coding discrepancies. Ultimately, the research team's agreement fell between 95.41% and 100%.

Assessing data quality. To ensure that data were accurately captured, strategies to aid in the establishment of trustworthiness of study findings were used (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). One method of establishing trustworthiness was through member checks. Member checks were conducted routinely throughout photo-elicitation interviews as well as during focus groups. For example, the facilitators stopped periodically to provide a brief summary of the conversation and asked if they heard the participant(s) correctly or if they were misinterpreting the intended message. In addition, the primary contact person for each focus group (i.e., the individual who assisted with confirming date, time, and location) was provided with a brief written summary via email. These three individuals reviewed the summary and shared that the overall messages were captured accurately.

Other methods used to establish trustworthiness included: (a) multiple sources and (b) multiple methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The use of multiple sources across the two target states allowed for variation in experiences and perspectives. It also allowed for a comparison of responses and identification of codes (i.e., themes) that emerged from photo-elicitation and focus group participants. Furthermore, data were collected using multiple methods, specifically interviews and focus groups. According to Carter et al. (2014), individual interviews support the procurement of “rich information about personal experiences and perspectives” (p. 545) while allowing for flexibility and responsivity to each participant's specific needs. Conversely, focus groups are beneficial when the goal is to elicit data that might not be obtained outside of a group context. Within the focus groups conducted in this study, participant interaction was key. Participants shared their perceptions of shared experiences and elaborated on what others shared (Carter et al., 2014). Findings from all data collection sources were compared and contrasted to identify themes, therefore increasing confidence that the data were trustworthy. Guba and Lincoln (1985) stated, “Once a proposition has been confirmed by two or more measurement processes, the uncertainty of its interpretation is greatly reduced” (p. 306).

Researcher reflexivity. Another way of establishing trustworthiness within qualitative research is for researchers to acknowledge their positionality within the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), as there is the potential to carry previous experiences and biases into the work. As such, it is important to acknowledge that the lead author has 20 years of experience working in the fields of early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) as a teacher, Part-C EI service coordinator, and developmental therapist. Furthermore, she participated in EI with her own child due to developmental delays resulting from his premature birth. As a result of these collective experiences, she has a vested interest in ensuring that EI/ECSE professionals work collaboratively with families, and that families' voices are heard.

Results

Head Start families and family service workers described similar beliefs related to the potential *benefits* and *barriers* of using photo-elicitation to encourage families to “tell their story.” Specific themes identified under *benefits* included authenticity, building rapport, and focusing on the

positives. Themes identified under *barriers* included lack of authentic experiences and logistics. The themes that emerged from both the photo-elicitation interviews and focus groups are presented next.

Benefits

Of the 18 families who participated in photo-elicitation interviews, 15 identified at least one benefit of using photographs to “tell their story” of what it is like to care for a young child with a disability. Several used the phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” when they discussed how photographs could provide insights that a verbal account of an experience could not. One mother shared, “I feel like it can be an effective way ‘cause then you actually . . . you see the picture that goes along with the story that you’re telling about them.” Likewise, the majority of family service workers described the potential benefits of using photo-elicitation to learn families’ stories. They cited how photographs could open up a line of communication when first meeting a family. One family service worker shared, “If there’s one thing that all of my Head Start families have in common, it’s that they love their kids, and they love to talk about their kids, and they love to show off their kids.” Many family service workers also felt they could gather pertinent information about potential needs or supports simply by asking families to describe the photographs they had chosen to share.

Authenticity. Both participant groups discussed the idea of authenticity of what is depicted in photographs as one of the potential benefits of photo-elicitation. Authenticity in photographs can assist family service workers with understanding what the family “truly looks like,” providing an accurate portrayal of a “day in the life.” One mother shared a story about her family’s “day in the life” by describing how difficult it is to get her daughter to school in the morning. Her 2-year-old daughter has a chromosomal deletion that causes global developmental delays. Since their Head Start program did not provide transportation, they were required to use public transportation. To get to the bus stop, she carried her daughter down the steps of their apartment building and across a busy street. The photograph she shared while relaying this story showed her daughter sitting on the bus (Figure 1A). When asked how this particular photograph would help her family service worker understand what it is like caring for a young child with a disability, she stated, “It allows her to see in that picture the struggle we were having that particular day or over those amount of days. Like each day is a different struggle for her.” This story highlights how capturing key moments in photographs can paint an authentic picture of families’ day-to-day lives, thereby enhancing family service workers’ understanding of families’ stories in a meaningful way.

A mother of multiples shared another story highlighting the importance of family service workers having an authentic “picture” of families’ day-to-day lives. The mother shared that their family has been involved with Child Protective Services and as such, were sometimes hesitant to share information about their family with strangers or to ask for help, even from familiar individuals. During the interview with this mother and her husband, they shared a picture of their 2-year-old triplets buckled into their car seats (Figure 1B). The mother shared that she was responsible for getting the triplets, along with their 6-month-old sister, to school in the morning. Understandably, drop-off was hectic and potentially an unsafe time of the day when only one parent was available to unbuckle and escort four young children into a building “that’s locked down, that you have to have a passcode and a key to get into.” The mother, at times, called her family service worker and asked for assistance to get the children safely into the center, especially when running late for work. She shared, “The fact that they’re willing to help me means more than anything really.” This couple expressed concern that they might get “hot lined” again if others perceived they were unable to appropriately care for their children. This story highlights the level of trust that was necessary for a family who had experienced traumatic events to not



Figure 1. Photographs families shared during photo-elicitation interviews.

only be willing to share what mornings are actually like for their family but to also feel connected and secure enough in their relationship with their family service worker that they willingly sought out support.

Family service workers in this study echoed the idea of authenticity as a benefit when they described how pairing a photograph with a verbal story could support their understanding of concerns families conveyed to them. For example, several family service workers described supporting families in addressing their child's challenging behavior. Some expressed a belief that families often under- or over-exaggerated their child's behavior. In general, these family service workers believed that viewing a photograph while families told a story could in fact, limit misinterpretations. One family service worker shared, "It's more insight to the situation where you can see it firsthand. Do they really pitch a fit that bad? In a picture, you can tell how a kid is standing there doing stuff." The photographs could provide additional insight, via visual cues, into what led up to the behavior. This, in turn, would provide opportunities for family service workers to follow-up with additional questions based on what they saw in the photographs. Therefore, the photographs paired with a story could serve as a tool for supporting families in meeting their children's needs.

Building rapport. A second benefit of photo-elicitation that families reported was how sharing the story behind a photograph could support the formation of positive rapport with their family service workers. For example, a grandmother, who was her grandson's legal guardian, shared a photograph of him lying in a hospital bed (Figure 1C). She shared that he had been diagnosed with cancer and routinely had to undergo tests and procedures since going into remission. These experiences sometimes caused him to demonstrate challenging behavior in the days following.

The grandmother told a story of a time when she informed his teacher that he would be absent the next day due to a medical appointment. The teacher declared, "Great, he's going to have a terrible day when he gets back." This negative declaration led to the Grandmother holding negative feelings toward the teacher. When asked how this photograph and story could assist a family service worker with supporting their family, she indicated that the photograph depicted what her grandson routinely experiences. He is often expected to lie still while undergoing painful procedures. She would like his teachers to understand that his behavior stems from trauma and that they should be patient and loving toward him upon his return. She felt that if her family service worker understood their circumstances better, she could serve as an advocate between them and his teachers to build a more positive rapport.

Some family service workers felt that photographs could make the initial meetings with families more personable in that, "You actually have a face to go with the information instead of just reading more information." Other family service workers described how using photographs could support those families who are less comfortable engaging in a one-on-one interview. They felt that focusing on a visual could serve as a buffer and help families feel more comfortable sharing personal information. They acknowledged that people have different communication styles, so incorporating photo-elicitation could serve as an effective strategy for building rapport.

An interesting aspect of using photo-elicitation to build rapport with families was the idea of discovering the families' perspective of what was happening in the photographs. Several family service workers described how photographs could provide them with insights on how families perceived challenges related to their child's disability or challenging behaviors. For example, if a family showed a photograph depicting their child having a tantrum, some family service workers described wanting to know how the family perceived the child in that specific moment.

Did they see it [the tantrum] as just 2 minutes? Did they view it as going on for an hour? How did they feel during it? Why did they pick this photo? Was it because it's such a strain, or is it because they still feel the joy of having their child, regardless of their disability.

Several family service workers felt that by understanding the families' perspective, they would have the tools to effectively support their needs. In general, they believed that photo-elicitation could build a foundation that would lead to greater rapport with families.

Focusing on the positives. The ability to focus on the positives was cited as a third benefit of using photographs to learn families' stories. It is important to point out that not all families focused on negative or challenging aspects of caring for a young child with a disability. Some families chose photographs that depicted happy times or activities that highlighted their child's strengths. A young, single mother of a 4-year-old child with a communication delay shared various photographs that depicted her son smiling while engaged in activities such as riding his bike, playing at the park, learning how to write his name, and dressing up in a vest and bow tie for an Easter service at church. She explained, "All those pictures were happy moments for him. This is his outlook of what makes him happy. These are his moments." (Figure 1D).

When another mother described the benefits of using photographs, she explained:

It also gives a chance to brag about your kid. When you are in a program and they do have deficiencies, it's nice sometimes just to be able to brag for a second and say, "Look how good they are at these puzzles or this," or whatever it is.

This mother went on to share how parents really enjoy taking pictures of their children and sharing them with others. Another mother shared, "I think it would be very helpful. Even if it was five photos. Something simple. What's the best and what's the worst? To say, 'This is what we're good at.' To have a positive spin on it."

Based on the premise of this study (i.e., using photographs to tell a story of what it is like caring for a young child with developmental delays or disabilities), it would have been very easy for families to share photographs depicting nothing but challenges. However, some families chose to highlight photographs that focused on their child's strengths. They believed that photographs could help their family service workers recognize that despite their delays or disability, their child still has much to offer.

Barriers

Head Start families and family service workers also identified barriers to using photo-elicitation to build meaningful relationships with families while learning their stories. In contrast to how photographs can provide an authentic view of families' day-to-day lives, both families and family service workers described how inauthentic or "staged" photographs could be a barrier. In addition, several family service workers described logistical issues such as lack of financial means to share photographs and safety concerns as barriers.

Inauthentic photographs. The primary barrier described by families and family service workers alike revolved around families choosing to share inauthentic or "staged" photographs. Their main concern was that inauthentic photographs could alter the family service workers' opinion of what was actually going on in the families' lives. For example, one mother shared, "pictures can kind of be misleading, so you have to watch it. You have to make sure that you're not taking . . . that you're taking the right kind of pictures for it." When asked to explain what she meant by "the right kind of pictures," she shared that it would be important to not "pose" the children. Another mother explained, "Of course, the parents can always take what they want to show and maybe not what is actually going on."

Similarly, some family service workers believed that families would only want to share photographs that showed them smiling and happy. One family service worker explained, "I'm wondering if it's gonna be like Facebook™ and they're only gonna show you the good." Another family service worker shared the same concern, ". . . sometimes they hesitate to tell you how bad it is because they think you're gonna report them. So, are they really gonna take true pictures?"

Another potential barrier related to a lack of authenticity was how a picture provides "one snap shot" of the events taking place. A concern for some family service workers was that they would only see what was going on when the picture was taken and they would not get the "big picture," or as one family service worker shared, "so not maybe what led up to it or what resulted when the tantrum was done. It's just in the moment." Even if families showed a challenging situation, some family service workers feared that the event in the photograph might not be described accurately or authentically when families were asked to tell the story behind the photograph. To address these challenges, some of the families felt it would be more beneficial to "shadow" families for a day to capture an authentic or accurate account of their experiences. One mother suggested:

Come spend a day. I take photographs, but I don't take photographs where . . . I'm rarely crying or anything like that. We take pictures of happier things, but spend a day in my house shadowing us, and you're gonna figure out real fast where we're coming from.

Logistics. The second barrier described by some family service workers related to logistical issues including access to the internet to share photographs electronically, financial resources to print photographs, and safety concerns for children and families depicted in the photographs. Family service workers from one focus group shared that many of the low-income families they served would not have the financial resources to print photographs from their cameras. Furthermore,

they expressed concerns that even if digital photographs could be used during the interview, many families lacked consistent access to the internet to retrieve photographs. Although Family Service Workers acknowledged that this barrier could be overcome if Head Start programs possessed the appropriate resources, it was still a concern for those interested in using photo-elicitation with families with limited financial means.

In sum, Head Start families and family service workers described similar benefits and barriers to using photo-elicitation as a strategy to build meaningful relationships with families while learning their stories. Participants felt that while photo-elicitation could assist professionals in gaining an accurate understanding of families' stories through authentic depictions of their "day in the life," they also expressed concerns related to families choosing to share staged photographs that could limit their understanding of the families' needs, thus limiting their ability to provide appropriate services and supports. Finally, Head Start programs interested in conducting photo-elicitation interviews would need to make sure that families had the means to share their photographs with family service workers.

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the potential utility of photo-elicitation as a strategy to enhance parent–professional collaborations by empowering families to share their personal stories through photographs. Numerous researchers have found that children and families benefited when the professionals supporting them engaged in practices that led to greater collaboration. Specifically, researchers noted positive gains in children's academic and social-emotional development (Mendez, 2010) and overall physical health (Palfrey et al., 2005) when parents and professionals collaborate. Benefits for the family unit included increased support for their children's education (Brooks et al., 2004) and improvement with the family's overall well-being, specifically as it related to the parent–child relationship (Trivette et al., 2010). The Division for Early Childhood's (DEC, 2014) Recommended Practices state that families and early childhood professionals should enter into equal partnerships. Thus, it is important to understand how effective collaborations are formed.

It is equally important to understand how the presence of multiple risk factors (e.g., presence of a disability, poverty, single parents, low levels of maternal education, etc.), as often found among families participating in Head Start, affect the formation of effective collaborations. Nachshen (2004) contends that some family members who care for children with developmental delays or disabilities are "unable to communicate his or her own needs to those in power" (p. 67). To mitigate such feelings, professionals must know how to implement strategies for building meaningful relationships with families experiencing multiple risk factors. These relationships can, in turn, serve to empower families to actively engage in making decisions that support their child and family as a whole. When families are empowered, and when professionals value and use the strengths and perspectives families bring to the table, feelings of powerlessness may be diminished (Korfmacher et al., 2007; Nachshen, 2004).

Photo-Elicitation as a Tool for Building Effective Collaborations

Study participants were asked to consider the utility of photo-elicitation as a tool to build effective collaborations. Photo-elicitation is based on the premise that professionals value experiences where individuals take the lead and "teach" them (Shaw, 2013). A benefit to using photo-elicitation is that it allows professionals to gain insight into family dynamics that would not otherwise be brought up without a visual reminder. Furthermore, photo-elicitation "breaks the frame" of the professional's perception of the family dynamic (Shaw, 2013). For example, professionals might enter into a relationship with a family caring for a young child with a disability assuming that

they “struggle” with their child’s diagnosis or that the diagnosis consumes their daily lives (i.e., their “frame”). If they conducted a photo-elicitation interview with this family and found that most of the photographs depicted “typical” or positive family interactions (e.g., playing at the park, reading books at bedtime, etc.), the professionals’ “frame” might be broken; meaning that they may begin to recognize that not all families experience adverse effects related to their child’s disability. Finally, photo-elicitation presents participants with the opportunity to share and interpret their own stories while fostering an atmosphere of engaging dialogue between the two parties (Hurworth, 2003).

Overall, families and family service workers in this study found photo-elicitation intriguing and identified several potential benefits for its use. First, they noted that photo-elicitation can help shift the family–professional relationship from a deficit-based approach to a strength-based approach. Family service workers shared that families sometimes find it difficult to identify their own strengths and believed that exploring photographs together could provide talking points related to strengths. This belief aligns with Amatea (2009) who suggested that professionals should encourage families to regularly share anecdotes about their child and family as a way of honoring the expertise they possess; believing that sharing anecdotes will ultimately strengthen parent–professional relationship.

Second, families and family service workers shared similar views on how photographs could highlight the positives or provide greater insight to families’ strengths, interests, routines, and preferences. Both groups of participants shared how the use of photographs could provide a visual representation of families’ daily routines. For example, if a family shared photographs depicting safety concerns related to bathing a child with severe physical disabilities, their family service worker could assist by identifying resources that could help them acquire the necessary positioning equipment to make bath time safe and enjoyable. Another family might share a photograph of a parent and child reading books together. If the family service worker knew that book reading was a preferred activity, she could support the family with acquiring a library card or participating in parent–child activities hosted by the library.

Third, participants also agreed that the use of photographs could support family service workers’ ability to “see” an authentic version of the family. This is an important finding as both families and family service workers described how children and adults often act differently in the presence of unfamiliar adults. Photographs that showcased how children behaved outside of school and how the family interacted with one another in an authentic manner could provide family service workers with information to help them identify specific interventions and supports that ultimately benefit the child and family.

Finally, family service workers believed that the use of photographs could support their ability to learn families’ stories while building rapport in an informal, relaxed atmosphere that was responsive to differences in personality or styles of communication. They recognized that not all families were comfortable sharing intimate details of their families’ lives (Hurworth, 2003); therefore, by looking through self-selected photographs, families could lead the conversation in a direction that was comfortable, yet still meaningful for them (Mandleco, 2013). Given these potential benefits, using photographs to elicit personal information could be especially beneficial during the initial stages of a relationship.

Findings from this study suggest that photo-elicitation could serve as a tool to learn families’ stories in a meaningful way; however, it should not replace the information gathering tools implemented by Head Start (e.g., family assessment booklet, parent collaboration form, family partnership agreement, etc.). There is currently limited evidence describing the benefits of photo-elicitation with families of young children with disabilities; therefore, findings from this study begin to address this gap. Further exploration of how photo-elicitation can be used to learn families’ stories of what it is like to care for a young child with a developmental delay or disability is warranted.

Limitations

While results from this study add to the current literature base, it is important to acknowledge limitations. First, it is important to consider the demographics of study participants. Both groups of participants were primarily women (family = 95% and family service workers = 94%). This study ascertained the perceptions of multiple female caregivers and early childhood professionals related to the benefits of photo-elicitation for supporting effective collaborations; however, the male voice was missing. Head Start is a staunch advocate for empowering fathers to not only be *involved* in their children's development but to be fully *engaged*. According to the Head Start Father Engagement Birth to Five Programming Guide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2013), fathers who are engaged are committed to partnering with others invested in the overall well-being of their child and family. Furthermore, true engagement requires partners to build effective, meaningful relationships with one another. Head Start diligently applies strategies for encouraging father engagement within their program; therefore, it would have been beneficial to have recruited more fathers to share their perceptions on the topic as well. Adding the voice of male participants in future research on parent-professional collaborations is important because researchers have found that gender may affect the formation of meaningful, relationships, and collaborations between families and professionals (McBride et al., 2017).

Second, it should be noted that families only participated in one photo-elicitation interview. As this was a new strategy for sharing their family stories, it is unclear whether or not participants would identify additional benefits or challenges to using this particular strategy if they were able to engage in further photo-elicitation interviews. It would be warranted to explore families' perceptions of this strategy after multiple exposures.

Third, self-selection among participants may have limited the applicability of the findings to Head Start families and family service workers outside of those represented in this study. According to Robinson (2014), participants who volunteer for research studies may be different from their peers as they may be more open to sharing personal information or have a personal interest in the research topic. Thus, self-selection bias can lead to researchers collecting data representing the views of participants possessing these attributes rather than a comprehensive view of the topic from multiple viewpoints.

Finally, while Head Start serves a large number of families who primarily speak languages other than English, especially in the larger Midwestern state, we were limited to families who were comfortable speaking English with minimal or no need for translation, primarily due to cost and logistics. To accurately and appropriately collect and analyze data from these families, resources providing the cultural and linguistic contexts within which each of these families operates is necessary. Additional research to examine ways of supporting such relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse families is warranted.

Implications and Future Directions

As a primary goal of Head Start is to facilitate family engagement, the results of this study offer recommendations for research, policy related to supporting family engagement, and training that enhances the relationship between Head Start professionals and families caring for young children with disabilities. An innovative component of this study revolved around the use of photo-elicitation to learn families' stories of what it is like to care for a young child with developmental delays or disabilities. Literature describing how this strategy has been implemented with families caring for young children with disabilities is limited; therefore, this study begins to address this need. Perceptions of study participants suggest that photo-elicitation could serve as an effective tool for supporting families' ability to "tell their story." Despite the lack of literature on this

specific population, findings from this study mirror previous findings related to the benefits and barriers to using this method. Mandleco (2013) contends that one benefit of photo-elicitation is the power participants possess when deciding which stories they want to share. Head Start families who told their stories using photographs indicated that they enjoyed being able to share photographs that highlighted their strengths as a family.

A potential barrier, as suggested by both families and family service workers, is the potential for families to “stage” the photographs they choose to share. Researchers attribute this phenomenon to concerns individuals might have regarding how they might be portrayed if they shared photographs of their “real” lives as well as what authentic photographs might say about themselves or their family (Allen, 2012). The tendency to “stage” photographs may especially be true for families experiencing multiple risk factors who do not feel comfortable showing their “true selves.” This suggests that the potential benefits of photo-elicitation for learning families’ stories could be dependent on the timing of when the strategy is implemented (i.e., at the beginning of the relationship or after a trusting relationship has been established). Further research examining how timing affects the potential benefits of photo-elicitation for learning families’ stories is needed. A strategy for eliciting this information would be to recruit participant “teams” comprised of a Head Start family caring for a child with disabilities and their designated Head Start family service worker. Information could then be shared regarding the length of their relationship, the frequency, and the nature of their interactions with one another.

Conclusion

Since its inception in 1965, Head Start has provided comprehensive services for children and families experiencing multiple risk factors. A key tenet of the program is empowering families to serve as active and engaged partners with Head Start professionals so that child and family outcomes are positively affected. To accomplish this goal, we must first focus our attention on building meaningful relationships with families. Although we recognize that building meaningful relationships with families with multiple risk factors is not always easy, the challenges we face should not dissuade us from accessing every available resource and implementing effective, family-centered strategies. Every family has a story to tell. To effectively collaborate with families, we must do everything in our power to truly *hear* it. Results from this study suggest that photo-elicitation could, if used effectively, serve as a tool for achieving the ultimate goal of forming effective collaborations between families caring for young children with disabilities and early childhood special education professionals; as it is through the act of sharing stories that meaningful relationships can be built.

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