Chapter 14
Using Photovoice to Resist Colonial Research Paradigms

Susan Cridland-Hughes, McKenzie Brittain, and S. Megan Che

Abstract In this chapter, we explore a critical version of photovoice to describe a study of single-sex middle school classrooms in a small school in the Southeast (single-sex is the term used by the school district so we preserve its use here while acknowledging the term is inaccurately conflated with gender by the district). Photovoice is the use of photo documentation by community participants to investigate a particular aspect of a community (Wang & Burris, *Health Education & Behavior, 24*, 369–387, 1997). Students were asked to document their experiences in middle school, single-sex classrooms through photos and captions, and the submitted photos were coded for themes. We share now a critical analysis of the implementation of photovoice and our imperfect research process. This analysis is guided by recommendations by members of historically marginalized communities for reframing research to be collaborative and responsive to the needs of the community (Bishop, *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005).

Why do researchers engage in research? Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh (2002) argue that research reflects the desire to "discover general principles or interpretations of behavior that people can use to explain, predict, and control events in educational situations" (p. 17). This goal is important—we can answer important and socially relevant questions such as the patterns and trends of social patterns and access and denial to resources by looking at large-scale, quantitative data. However, this is by no means the only reason that we as researchers engage in research. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) establish the goal of qualitative research as "better understand[ing] human behavior and experiences…because it is with concrete incidents of human behavior that investigators can think more clearly and deeply about the human condition" (p. 38). This desire to explore both specific instances and broad analyses

S. Cridland-Hughes (✉) · M. Brittain · S. M. Che
Clemson University, Clemson, SC, USA
e-mail: scridla@clemson.edu; mhoxit@g.clemson.edu; sche@clemson.edu

highlights multiple ways of knowing and being in the world, and the range of methods within the research tradition helps us probe not only ways of knowing but also ways of engaging in research.

Qualitative research specifically emerged from a desire to understand the lived experiences of individuals and communities, exploring the nuances that undergird the more commonly reported statistics and analysis of the behavior of people across large groups (Erickson, 2011). Qualitative studies ask questions and record answers that offer the potential for community members to take a central role in interpreting the norms and expectations that affect decision-making both as an individual and as a member of a group.

This description of qualitative research is a simplified version of a more complex discussion: calling something qualitative research does not immediately absolve the research of positivist notions of expertise and authority. Critiques of quantitative research reflect how study participants become discrete data points, rather than complex individuals within communities with perspectives and interpretations of what has value (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Smith (1999) reminds us that "ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples" (p. 5). The goal of this chapter is to explore the necessary conditions for facilitating social justice research with individual communities through qualitative research and specifically through the use of photovoice as a research method. Our hope is that examples of where these attempts have succeeded and failed will help researchers consider how they enter a space guided by the participants, where the researcher-participant relationship adjusts to achieve balance, "flattening" power dynamics in the co-negotiation of meaning.

Entering the Space: Acknowledging and Resisting the Colonizing Nature of Research

For qualitative research specifically, researchers draw boundaries around a place and space in order to understand how a group or community "make[s] sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Researchers draw boundaries when we determine research questions, when we decide we will examine women in mathematics rather than men, and when we choose a theoretical lens through which to explore our research questions. In the most respectful examples of qualitative research, the work helps us understand people across a broad array of experiences and spaces. For example, as ethnographers, it may help us understand why a particular group chooses to do things in a particular way. While in some perspectives even this is colonizing, it simultaneously recognizes that there is no one location of knowledge but rather many locations and many types of knowledge.

While qualitative research often highlights issues of power, it does not inherently resist the colonizing impulse. In many cases, the drawing of research boundaries

often originates far away from the community and the members who interact in that community. As we make choices about inclusion and exclusion, we colonize the space of research that "serves as a metaphor for colonial knowledge, for power, for truth" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1). By the time research is presented to the participants, we have mapped the space of analysis such that the community itself is no longer allowed to negotiate boundaries and meaning. In this chapter, already we have bounded the analysis such that the reader is limited to the scholars and goals that we have included, even though the reader has knowledge of his or her own goals that may add to or challenge the goals presented here.

Paris and Winn (2014) criticize:

> a history of qualitative inquiry seeking to, at worst, pathologize, exoticize, objectify, and name as deficient communities of color and other marginalized populations in the U.S. and beyond, and at best, to take and gain through research but not to give back. (p. xvi)

Decolonizing qualitative research resists colonial research paradigms, opening up, as Smith (1999) articulates, "different approaches and methodologies… to ensure that research with indigenous peoples can be more respectful, ethical, sympathetic and useful" (p. 9). The idea of decolonizing raises questions about how much a research relationship can be decolonized. Although qualitative researchers may develop rich relationships with community members, and, in many cases, even create shared spaces where both negotiate and examine meaning, there is often a separation between the observational lens of the researcher and the lived experiences of a community.

This understanding that researchers inherently colonize space has led qualitative researchers to explore ways to decolonize research and assume responsibility for the colonizing nature of the researcher gaze (Smith, 1999). Members of historically marginalized communities have offered suggestions for reframing research to be collaborative and responsive to the needs of the community so that there is bidirectional sharing of knowledge and resources. Bishop (2005) describes how, in research conducted with Maori communities, the Maori have highlighted five key questions: who initiates research, who benefits from the research, who determines the representation of the community, is the research legitimate, and who is accountable for the researchers entering into the space and publishing about the community. These questions are not questions that are specific to this one community but rather are questions that govern every study done by a researcher seeking to engage a community in dialogue.

The Theoretical and Philosophical Underpinning for Choosing Photovoice

The five questions provided by Bishop offer a useful frame for assessing the balance of power in research, a balance particularly important when engaging in qualitative research. In our study, we attempted to flatten the research relationship by using

photovoice methodology to explore the experiences of youth in single-sex class-rooms. We use the term single-sex because that is the language of the district, but we discuss later how the choice of terms challenged our attempt to locate research power with the participants.

Photovoice is a community-based participatory research methodology with three goals: (1) record and reflect community strengths and concerns, (2) promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues, and (3) reach policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice draws on similar epistemological orientations to photo-elicitation, as described in Chap. 13 by Walls and Holmquist (2019); however, pho-tovoice requires that the photos used are generated and provided by community members. While photo-elicitation can use any image, photovoice sees the images created by participants as the researcher lens. A research orientation focused on dialogue with the community about issues of concern to the community shifts the theoretical considerations of the role of the researcher and the research participant, as well as the negotiations necessary for building a non-hierarchical relationship between all people interested in making sense of research questions. It is important to note that there is also a well-established tradition of critical research within youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) that cedes responsibility for research to youth (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). The YPAR orientation emphasizes pro-viding support to youth asking questions about their own communities and helping youth explore how educational decision-making interacts with their communities in problematic ways. Additionally, design-based research methods such as social design experiments (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016) operate from the frame that the research space can be one that dismantles existing hierarchies and structures in search of new, more socially just interactions between stakeholders. These evolving research methodologies, including photovoice, reflect the need to include members of communities in the design of research and in the interpretation that occurs both before entering a community and while engaging in data collection and analysis. Photovoice offers one way of structurally privileging the voices and analyses of community members, but it is not the only way to approach the responsibility of ceding space for meaning-making.

One primary reason that researchers in education employ a photovoice methodol-ogy is to understand and center student perspectives (in contrast to teacher, parent, or school leader perspectives). For instance, Whitfield and Meyer (2005) use photovoice to establish a relationship between the teacher and students to understand students' ideas about science and about connecting the classroom to students' lives. Cook and Quigley (2013) use photovoice as a pedagogical tool to investigate ways university students connect with science. The researchers use photovoice to reveal students' inter-est in an inquiry project, reflecting on science embedded in the community around them. Cook and Quigley (2013) additionally examine relationships between the par-ticipant, the image, and the way the image was produced. The theme in these educa-tional photovoice studies is that they each center and explore student perspectives.

Another purpose for the use of photovoice in educational studies is to illuminate realities in diverse and often marginalized contexts in ways that privilege participant voice, knowledge, and perspective. In Graziano's (2011) study of educational

realities of 16 Hispanic[1] English Language Learner (ELL) students in an urban elementary school, she found that student participation in photovoice was connected with those students' opportunities for developing verbal, written, reading, and listening language skills. Simmonds, Roux, and Avest (2015) incorporate a narrative-photovoice methodology in a study with South African schoolgirls to capture and understand these students' lived experiences, particularly of gender (in)equity. The activity of capturing photos provided opportunities for participants to critically reflect on their lives as girl students in their particular context. Similarly, Shah (2015) utilized a photovoice methodology with adolescent-aged girls in Western India, specifically attending to power-sharing and production of each girl's "voice."

Our photovoice study also employs a critical version of photovoice because the aim of our study was connected to concerns for power dynamics and reification of traditional gendered norms and expectations. We were wondering (and, to some extent, concerned about) how the act of separating students into two apparently distinct genders might influence the ways in which students went about the complicated process of constructing their identities. We asked students about their experiences in these gendered classrooms, and we share now a critical analysis of our imperfect research processes.

Designing a Photovoice Study

Our photovoice study asked the following questions: how is being in a single-sex classroom different from being in a coeducational public academic classroom and does this differ across content areas? We recruited youth from a rural middle school in the Southeastern United States that assigned students to single-sex academic classes for grades 6–8. We had 12 participants in all, across grades 6–8, 6 male and 6 female, enrolled in a combination of single-sex and coeducational academic classes. Each student participated in five interviews over the academic year including these topics: what it is like for the students to be in single-sex and coeducational settings, what are their perspectives of single-sex and coeducational settings, do they have preferences for one class type over the other (and why), why did they decide to participate in single-sex settings, and what connections, if any, do the students see between class type and their learning.

In addition to semi-structured individual interviews, students were asked to document their experiences in single-sex and coeducational settings with photographs that capture the essence of what it means, from their perspective, to be in a single-sex or coeducational classroom. Students were asked to provide 10 photographic images that convey an aspect or aspects of their experiences in single-sex and coeducational classrooms at the rate of approximately 1–2 images per month and to construct a brief caption for the images they provide to the research team. We have included some data from those images and captions to demonstrate how youth participants (referenced in the text by pseudonyms) used the photo as a lens into their worlds.

Applying the Five Questions to Our Photovoice Study

Initiation of research. This research reflected questions and study design established by the external researchers. Additionally, our participants were still within a very traditionally hierarchical middle school environment. Initial access to the school came primarily through administration, then teachers, then parents, and then through the students themselves. While this is understandable given the strict scrutiny provided to research done with students, this also changed our access to the community as a whole. Although one researcher had a long-standing relationship with school administrators who were interested in how the single-sex education structure was functioning in their school, our focus on the students as a community could have been perceived by the youth as imposed from outside. However, using photovoice allowed youth the opportunity to guide both the focus of the study and the follow-up questions.

Who benefited? Students involved in the study benefited financially from participation because they received incentives. In some cases, they also seemed to benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. The data youth participants submit will benefit the research team as it is incorporated into presentations and publications. Adult members at the school receive very little in the way of benefits.

Representation. If we are moving through gatekeepers to recruit participants, then how can we know when we have reached a representative group of participants and collection of images? At one point, the teacher helping us reach out to students for participation expressed concerns about whether one student was a "good" student for the study. Her internal assumptions about what would make a good student affected the recruitment she did for participation.

Legitimacy. We asked youth participants to submit photos and captions so that our interpretation of the caption was connected with their own understanding of what the individual student was capturing. As we analyzed the data, we refined the semi-structured interviewing protocol to reflect data from the specific images from the individual student—Brooke's questions would be tied to the previous images and captions that Brooke submitted. The generic nature of the questioning, then, gave way to dialogue about individual ideas and perspectives.

Accountability. Our study revealed that we had limited accountability within the larger community. We privileged the voices of students to the exclusion of the story that the leaders wanted to tell. The lines we drew about whom to include and whom to exclude in the image collection process meant that we protected space for students but were more vocal in our resistance to adult members of the school. Much as in Cushman's study, we had to choose a side.

Tensions and Tradeoffs with Photovoice as a Methodology

Navigating Power Dynamics Between School, Students, and Researchers

One of the first tensions we encountered as we began the study was how best to support students as they started to explore the images they wanted to capture. The research team continuously discussed how to navigate freedom and to value participant perspectives while also giving guidance to students who did not necessarily know what to look for when taking photos. We questioned how to balance structure with agency, particularly in photovoice where the primary goal of the research study is allowing participants to guide the interpretation through their own lenses.

We also questioned how and whether to isolate the goals of the students from the goals of the adults in the space. It may be that when photovoice is done in communities that do not have bureaucratic barriers to participation, the interaction and negotiation with individual members of the community reflect a flattened hierarchy. In a schooled setting, researchers were constantly negotiating access from adults while students were operating within pre-established norms.

One of the other tensions that emerged was around the use of incentives for student participation. Our study was funded through an internal grant; students were using their own devices to capture images, so we provided Amazon gift cards rather than providing individual cameras. We did not notify students that they would receive Amazon gift cards for their participation until after they agreed to participate in the study; however, once they began the study, they knew that the submission of images and captions would result in a form of compensation for their time. One student started late, but none of our youth participants dropped out of the study, and all of them submitted the target number of images and captions. Additionally, they all participated in the follow-up interviews. In one way, this appears to be a success of the study: we had a complete data set for students allowing us to follow the trajectory of their perspectives when asked about their experiences in single-sex education. However, the depth of the captioning and the images recorded varied greatly across participants. This led to many conversations among the research team members about the motivation for students to continue to participate in the study. For example, at one point, a student submitted the following photo and caption (Fig. 14.1).

This image does not appear to have any immediately discernible connection to the student's experiences in the single-sex educational environment; however, the caption does offer some thought regarding the student's understanding of the environment. Our research team chose to code and analyze all data that were submitted without attempting to judge the motivation of the student.

Fig. 14.1 "Discipline from the teachers can be difficult because sometimes the guys (or girls) in the class don't want to listen"

Identifying Filters and Their Contributions to Dehumanizing Research Practices

While the previous section focuses on the power dynamics of the study, there were other tensions connected with how filters contributed to dehumanizing research practices. One of the filters we did not anticipate was the sorting process that occurs at a single-sex school when students are placed into classes and classified as male and female. The research team used the linguistic boundaries drawn by the school to choose students for the study, recruiting "a total of 12 students (six female, six male) who are concurrently enrolled in at least one single-sex academic class and one coeducational academic class" (Recruiting Script, Single-Sex Education Study, 2015). We recruited 11 students, and our study attempted to privilege student perspectives and specifically looked for student perspectives from boys and girls. However, there is an implicit assumption that students selected for this study agreed with the school-level determination based on sex, and there was no space for students to determine whether their gender matched the assigned placement. We accepted existing boundaries based on the comfort level of the school community around terminology; while we could have responded by removing sex- and gender-connected pronouns as we asked students to record their experiences, we continued to operate within colonizing language and structures. In our debriefing conversations, we reflected on the challenge of access being predicated on administrative comfort and how the students operating in these colonizing structures were also not served if we were unable to ask critical questions about those structures.

There was also a filtering process in place when students were recruited for the study. That filtering process was both technological (did students have access to a device) and attitudinal (did students possess habits of interaction valued by the school such that they were recommended for the study). This filtering process may have resulted in students who were recognized as "doing school well" and thus good representatives for the school as a whole. While students who worked with us did identify problems, those most likely to identify the problems with single-sex education might be those students who were least likely to be identified as good students.

Practical Affordances for a More Humanized Approach to Research

After reading about the challenges and limitations we experienced, you may be wondering whether the process of transferring power to community members and equalizing power is worth it. Our use of photovoice, however, revealed that even with the challenges of filtering and motivation, there were successes for data collection and data analysis.

With regard to data collection, we were able to hold space for students to guide the questions connected with their daily lived experiences. Photo submissions from the students did not go through the administration of the school but were submitted directly to a member of the research team. In a research team memo dated November 6, 2016, the following clarifications were made:

1. (School contact) will be present to ensure that cell phones are used in a responsible manner by students solely to transmit study data to the research phone number.
2. Students are solely responsible for the content of the caption and the selection of images.

This flattened research centered youth voices about their experiences in data collection. The administration of the school did not have a role in determining the value of the images and captions submitted, and the research team did not overlay on their observations of the experience their own assumptions about value and merit. Instead, we limited our analysis to the images and asking questions about the text that students provided.

In some cases, the process of taking photos and creating captions helped youth participants critically explore the structures that surrounded them. Over the course of the data collection year, some students created captions questioning the value of using sex assignments to delineate classes. For example, Brooke started with the following image that seemed to accept that single-sex classes were positive for students (Fig. 14.2).

Her final image and caption, however, reflected an analysis that was critical of the single-sex environment, emphasizing the competition between peers (Fig. 14.3).

Fig. 14.2 "Students seem
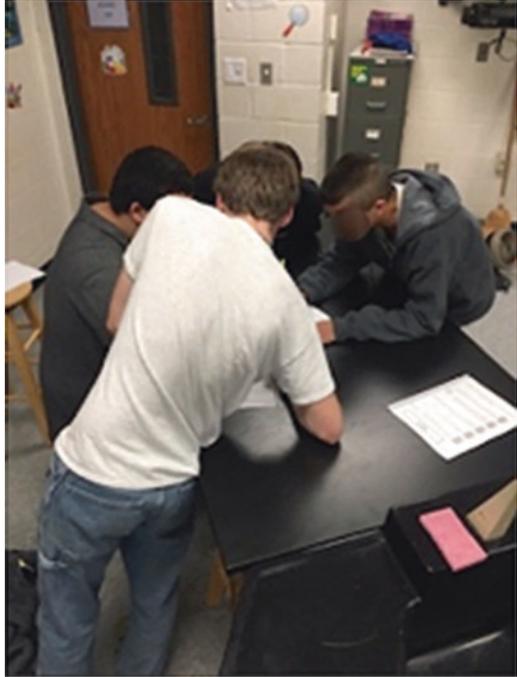more focused and on-task"

Fig. 14.3 "In a unisex
class, we always thought
that we were bigger than
each other. Our egos were
high"

Additionally, students in the older grades were able to reflect on their previous
experiences in single-sex classes and the transition back to integrated classrooms.
The photovoice methodology allowed them to direct the research to both current
experiences and how those experiences compared with their previous experiences.

The self-directed nature of photovoice as a methodology allowed students to control what they chose to share as well as how they wished to process their experience of this single-sex middle school environment.

Questions to Consider when Doing Photovoice

Embarking on a photovoice study requires a particular philosophical and practical orientation to the planning and design of research, and we recommend that you ask yourself the following questions as you design and engage in the research process:

Philosophical Questions

1. How does this research study resist notions of researcher primacy in the critical process?
2. How does this research directly benefit the community to whom I have reached out and position community members as equal partners in the research space?
3. What safeguards can I put in place to ensure that there is constant attention to the negotiated relationship that privileges community knowledge and community insight?
4. What are the existing structural filters that make it difficult for individual community members to reflect honestly on their experiences (e.g., oppressive discourse or hierarchical structures)?

Implementation Questions

1. How can this research study respond to a community need?
2. When working with participants who require additional protections, how can we add those protections without limiting participants' opportunities to critique and evaluate the community?
3. How will members of the community be involved in the interpretation of the images and captions submitted?

Understanding the ways researchers colonize can help us understand methods for avoiding colonizing processes within a perpetually asymmetric power structure that undergirds society. As researchers, we can and should intentionally plan for humanizing and socially just research.

Suggested Readings

Delgado, M. (2015). *Urban youth and photovoice: Visual ethnography in action*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Delgado explores photovoice in urban communities with young people, highlighting how photovoice incorporates skills from youth who have grown up with easy access to phones and photographic technology.

Edwards, M., Perry, B., Janzen, K., & Menzies, C. (2012). Using the artistic pedagogical technology of photovoice to promote interaction in the online post-secondary classroom: The students' perspective. *Electronic Journal of e-Learning, 10*(1), 32–43.

Edwards, Perry, Janzen, and Menzies used photovoice to promote interactions in online post-secondary classrooms, focusing on students' perspectives regarding the effect of photovoice on interactions in the courses.

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples.* New York, NY: ZED Books, Ltd.

This text is particularly important for understanding the historical and contemporary implications of research with historically marginalized communities and to understand the responses by indigenous communities to outsider representations of their communities and culture.

Note

1. The term Hispanic is preserved from the original study.

References

Ary, D., Jacobs, L., & Razavieh, A. (2002). *Introduction to research in education* (6th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Bishop, R. (2005). Freeing ourselves from neocolonial domination in research: A Kaupapa Maori approach to creating knowledge. In N. Denzen & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 109–138). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Cook, K., & Quigley, C. (2013). Connecting to our community: Utilizing photovoice as a pedagogical tool to connect college students to science. *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education., 8*(2), 339–357.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2005). The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzen & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative Research* (3rd ed., pp. 1–32). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Erickson, F. (2011). A history of qualitative inquiry in social and educational research. In N. Denzen & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 18–43). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Graziano, K. J. (2011). Working with English language learners: Preservice teachers and photovoice. *International Journal of Multicultural Education, 13*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v13i1.354

Gutiérrez, K., & Jurow, A. (2016). Social design experiments: Toward equity by design. *Journal of the Learning Sciences, 25*(4), 565–598. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2016.1204548

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mirra, N., Garcia, A., & Morrell, E. (2016). *Doing youth participatory action research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators, and students*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Paris, D., & Winn, M. T. (Eds.). (2014). *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

Shah, P. (2015). Spaces to speak: Photovoice and the reimagination of girls' education in India. *Comparative Education Review, 59*(1), 50–74. https://doi.org/10.1086/678699

Simmonds, S., Roux, C., & Avest, I. (2015). Blurring the boundaries between photovoice and narrative inquiry: A narrative-photovoice methodology for gender-based research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 14*(3), 33–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691501400303

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. New York, NY: ZED Books, Ltd.

Walls, A., & Holmquist, S. (2019). Through their eyes, in their words: Using photo-elicitation to amplify study voice in policy and school improvement research. In K. Strunk & L. Locke (Eds.), *Research methods for social justice and equity in education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Wang, C., & Burris, M. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior, 24*(3), 369–387. https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309

Whitfield, D., & Meyer, H. (2005). Learning from our students: Photovoice and classroom action research. *The Science Education Review, 4*(4), 97–103.