Chapter 13
Through Their Eyes, in Their Words: Using Photo-Elicitation to Amplify Student Voice in Policy and School Improvement Research

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Abstract Although various measures of student success are often used as data points in scholarly and policy debates about how to improve schools, the policy and school-level changes that stem from these discussions are presumed to be taken on *behalf* of students without very much effort to meaningfully include students' perspectives on the proposed changes. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the promise of photo-elicitation-based data collection to authentically leverage student voice in research on policy and school improvement in ways that promote equity and critical social justice. Photo-elicitation, in its simplest form, involves inviting research participants to take photographs of a space (e.g., a school) under a broad prompt (e.g., places where you like to have fun) (Harper, *Visual Studies, 17*, 13–26, 2002; Torre & Murphy, *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 23*, 2015). This chapter highlights methodological choices researchers must make in utilizing photo-elicitation and how these choices bear on the equity implications of this method.

In this chapter, we hope to highlight the potential of a data collection method known as photo-elicitation for better incorporating student voice into both education research and school and policy change efforts. Photo-elicitation, in its simplest form, involves either inviting research participants to take photographs of a space (e.g., a school) under a broad prompt (e.g., places where you like to have fun) or researchers selecting photographs and asking participants to respond (Harper, 2002; Torre & Murphy, 2015). Researchers then ask additional questions to elucidate participants' experiences fully.

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Although various measures of student success are often used as data points in scholarly and policy debates about how to improve schools, the policy and school-level changes that stem from these discussions are presumed to be taken on *behalf* of students without very much effort to meaningfully include students' perspectives on the proposed changes. Recently, scholars have been more attentive to the potential of incorporating "student voice" into school change efforts in order to generate more authentic and inclusive reform initiatives (Jones & Yonezawa, 2002; Mitra, 2014; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).

We argue that greater incorporation of student voice holds promise for producing greater social justice in education because it helps researchers, educators, and policymakers "recognize that relations of unequal power are constantly being enacted"—particularly between adults and students—and asks educational stakeholders to "think critically about knowledge; what [they] know and how[they] know it"—particularly with respect to meeting the needs of all students (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, pp. 20–21). However, several obstacles remain to fully incorporating student voice into educational reform and research efforts. First, there has been little effort to incorporate student voice into policy initiatives. Second, efforts to incorporate student voice often leads to "surface compliance" rather than a deeper commitment to understanding and using students' input (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006, p. 219). Third, some of the ways that researchers and practitioners elicit students' input have the effect of narrowing or prejudicing the scope of students' responses. Surveys and semi-structured interviews may pre-define the topics of responses in a way that does not fully capture students' experiences.

In the present study, we first offer a brief synopsis on how a researcher's choice of method may implicate issues of educational equity and social justice. Then, we thoroughly explore photo-elicitation methodology and its variants. Next, we highlight the ways photo-elicitation creates more room for meaningful student voice in school improvement and policy research. We briefly sketch the use of photo-elicitation in school improvement and policy research conducted by the authors and conclude by appraising the benefits and shortcomings of photo-elicitation and potential alterations to the method based on emerging video and social media technologies.

Relationship Between Method and Educational Equity

A researcher's choice of method is inextricably tied up with questions of how the research will be interpreted and how it may be used by stakeholders. Some educational researchers claim to be neutral analysts, while others hope that their research will produce a fairer or more ethical society. What, then, does it mean for a researcher to center social justice in the researcher's choice of method? We believe Charmaz (2008) offers some important insight:

> An interest in social justice means attentiveness to ideas and actions concerning fairness, equity, equality, democratic process, status, and hierarchy, and individual and collective

rights and obligations. It signifies thinking about creating good societies and a better world and being human, national and world citizens. It means exploring tensions between complicity and consciousness, choice and constraint, indifference and compassion, inclusion and exclusion, poverty and privilege, and barriers and opportunities. It also means taking a critical stance toward actions, organizations, and social institutions. Social justice studies require looking at both realities and ideals. Thus, contested meanings of "shoulds" and "oughts" come into play. And, unlike positivists of the past, these researchers openly bring their shoulds and oughts into the discourse of inquiry. (p. 207)

One broad heading of research that is closely tied to questions of social justice and equity is participatory action research. Participatory action research is a community-based research method that emphasizes action and broad participation and seeks to co-create new knowledge between researchers and participants by attempting to produce change in the community (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). Many participatory action research projects have made use of visual methods such as reflexive photo-elicitation or a variant known as photovoice (see, e.g., Jurkowski, 2008; Wang & Burris, 1997).

One particular branch of participatory action research, known as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), focuses on teaching youth to confront and resist the forces that reproduce inequities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). YPAR provides youth with an opportunity to engage in their social context and acquire the knowledge necessary to broaden their personal perspectives (Cammarota & Romero, 2010). It encourages youth to participate in research practices, such as reflexive photo-elicitation (which we describe in greater detail later), aimed at understanding current community injustices and creating safe, vibrant neighborhoods that lead to healthy, positive youth identities. Ultimately, YPAR can help youth develop skills to become active civic participants and confront social justice concerns (Rodriquez & Brown, 2009).

We believe that reflexive photo-elicitation (as well as photovoice, a technique explored in the next chapter in this volume) is an important research method for facilitating students' participation in both school improvement and the policy arena, and thus an important approach to foreground issues of social justice and equity and ensure that students can have a meaningful voice in these settings. In the next section, we explain photo-elicitation in greater detail.

Understanding the Photo-Elicitation Methodology

In this section, we detail the history of photo-elicitation briefly, important decisions to be made by researchers employing photo-elicitation techniques, and briefly survey some of the variants of photo-elicitation. It is important to note that the later variants on the original method have greater application to social justice and equity than do the earlier uses. At the conclusion of the section, we briefly discuss the relationship between photo-elicitation and student voice.

Brief History of Photo-Elicitation Research

Using photographs in research is not a new practice, the anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson used photographs in their study of Balinese culture in the 1940s (Bateson & Mead, 1942). Before that, anthropologists used photographs in field studies dating back to the early twentieth century (Harper, 1998). However, photo-elicitation in its most basic sense (using photographs *in the interview process*) was first employed by John Collier (1957) in mental health research. In a later text, Collier described photo-elicitation as a form of open-ended interviewing. In Collier's description, and in traditional photo-elicitation research generally, photographs are selected by the researcher and interpreted by the research subject. Harper (1998) describes how photo-elicitation can help researchers to "see" cultural knowledge that they may have otherwise missed: "a shocking thing happens in this interview format; the photographer, who knows his or her photograph as its maker… suddenly confronts the realization that she or he knows little or nothing about the cultural information contained in the image" (p. 35).

Since Collier's original explication of photo-elicitation, the method has gained popularity and also produced a number of variants. However, in 2002, Harper found only 53 academic studies using photo-elicitation. Looking at the field of education, in particular, Torre and Murphy (2015) found only 35 peer-reviewed studies utilizing photo-elicitation as of 2015.

Choices About Data Collection and Data Analysis

Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, and Baruchel (2006) highlight several important considerations about photo-elicitation research methods: who will take the photographs, what will appear in the photographs, and how will the photographs be used in the interview setting. In the sections later, we address each of these questions in turn and conclude by examining ties between photo-elicitation research and student voice.

Who takes the photographs? In traditional photo-elicitation interviews, photographs are either taken by a researcher or selected by the researcher from pre-existing photographs (e.g., from historical archives or photo albums) (Lapenta, 2012). This approach has practical benefits, such as allowing the researcher to focus interviewees' attention on particular spaces or places within their setting and allowing researchers to gather multiple viewpoints about a particular image. Furthermore, to the extent that photo-elicitation is intended largely as a rapport-building technique, having a common set of photographs for interviewees to react to is likely to help the researcher build relationships.

Harper (1998) points out that differences in how researchers use photo-elicitation techniques often stem from the different ways that researchers think about knowledge and what we can know about the world (also known as epistemology).

Researchers who believe that there are objective truths about the world and that the purpose of research is to uncover these truths (also known as post-positivist researchers) are more likely to use a form of photo-elicitation where the researcher selects the photographs. Post-positivist researchers are likely to be relatively comfortable establishing categories of analysis (Crotty, 1998). Other researchers, who believe that reality is socially constructed and depends on lived experience (interpretivist researchers), or researchers who believe that unequal power relations is the social force that most animates how people experience the world (critical researchers) are more likely to use photo-elicitation techniques where participants generate photographs. Interpretivist and critical researchers are likely to believe that categories of analysis generated by participants, or in a partnership between researchers and participants, are a better way to understand the social world than categories of analysis generated only by the researcher. We believe that forms of photo-elicitation where participants take the photos that guide the interview are more useful to researchers committed to producing greater equity and social justice in education, for reasons that we detail later.

There are two main variants of photo-elicitation that involve photographs taken by participants: reflexive photo-elicitation and photovoice. Reflexive photo-elicitation is similar to the traditional form of photo-elicitation described earlier, except that the photographs are taken by participants rather than researchers. Lapenta (2012) identifies two advantages of reflexive photo-elicitation. First, it allows participants "to have increased voice and authority in interpreting their own… social contexts" and reduces "researcher bias in the selection of specific images" (Lapenta, 2012, p. 205). Second, reflexive photo-elicitation can contextualize other sources of data (i.e., surveys, etc.) by allowing participants to give a rich local rendering of their experiences (Lapenta, 2012, p. 205).

Photovoice extends reflexive photo-elicitation techniques into the realm of participatory action research (Wang, 1999). According to the originators of the technique, photovoice has three goals: "(1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 370). Because photovoice is a participatory research method, it involves initial training on the power dynamics and ethics involved in capturing images, followed by extensive large and small group discussions on which participant-generated images best capture the story (or stories) of the community (Lapenta, 2012, p. 6). Finally, participants describe "issues, themes, or theories" exemplified by the photos they have selected, which helps researchers to "hear and understand how people make meaning themselves, or construct what matters to them" (Wang & Burris, 1997, pp. 381–382).

Traditional photo-elicitation, reflexive photo-elicitation, and photovoice can be conceived of along a spectrum based on whether they are researcher driven or participant driven. Traditional photo-elicitation is more or less fully driven by the researcher, while photovoice is driven primarily by participants. Reflexive photo-elicitation involves a negotiation about meaning between the researcher and the participant.

Another way in which photovoice differs from both traditional photo-elicitation and reflexive photo-elicitation is that it highlights the assets and issues of a community, rather than foregrounding a researcher-defined problem or question: the community itself is the object of analysis. Once researchers have decided on who will take the pictures, they must decide what the photographs will contain.

What appears in the photographs? The question of who will take the pictures bears on what ultimately appears in the photographs. If researchers select the images, they have complete discretion about what the photographs contain. In this case, researchers may choose photographs to help them understand the context of physical or social spaces or may select photographs of a local phenomenon that researchers hope participants can help them better understand. Harper (2002) suggests that photographs should appear from an "unusual angle" in order to help participants think about their everyday experiences in a novel way.

In the case of reflexive photo-elicitation, or photovoice, researchers have considerably less discretion about the content of images. Researchers may choose to prompt participants based on topic (e.g., "a place where you feel you don't belong") or spatial or temporal issues (e.g., "the places where you spend the most time"). Researchers may also choose to limit the number of pictures they ask participants to take or ask them to take pictures in ways that are ethically bound (e.g., limiting the amount of time disrupting daily school activities) (Torre & Murphy, 2015). In photovoice, because prompts are more likely to be participant driven, training on the ethics of camera use and image capture is especially important (Wang & Burris, 1997).

How are photographs used in the interview and analysis? Torre and Murphy (2015) note that photo-elicitation interviews may "proceed much like a typical qualitative interview, except that researchers are able to prompt participants to give deeper explanations by referring to particular pictures" (p. 10). Researchers may make a number of choices about how to use the pictures in the interview, including who will decide what order to talk about the pictures in, what criteria to use to decide which pictures to talk about (e.g., the most important), and whether participants will be asked to manipulate or sort pictures (e.g., to put them in chronological order). If the photographs are selected by the researcher, the researcher may choose to present pictures to participants in the same order each time or to change the order across interviews.

One reason why photo-elicitation interviews are useful for exposing and challenging extant power structures is that talking about photographs breaks the natural question-answer turn-taking system of a research interview (Lapenta, 2012). Because participants are encouraged to grapple with the images on their own terms, their descriptions of the images are not directed as answers to particular research questions. Thus, researchers should take care during interviews to leave space for photos to remain uncategorized.

Researchers operating from a variety of qualitative analysis methods use photo-elicitation techniques, including action research, grounded theory, and ethnography. One important decision for researchers to make about data analysis of photo-elicitation interviews is whether the photos themselves will be analyzed (Torre &

Murphy, 2015). Some researchers elect to simply analyze the transcripts of the interviews, while other researchers make the photos an integral part of their analysis; for example, some researchers analyze the differences in photographs between those who occupy different social positions (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Researchers thus have a variety of research design decisions to make about how photographs will shape the reader's understanding of what happened in the research.

Relationship between photo-elicitation and student voice. Photo-elicitation is an important method to bring authentic student voice into the research process. Broadly, student voice is defined as the ways in which all students have opportunities to participate in and influence the decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Student voice is often seen as a more equitable and social justice-oriented approach to impacting reforms in school communities as students' experiences, particularly those of underrepresented youth, are brought to the forefront (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Both participatory action research and photo-elicitation, through reflexive photo-elicitation and photovoice, offer opportunities for students to deeply engage in the research process and take ownership over the experiences shared (Cammarota & Romero, 2010; Torre & Murphy, 2015). Surveys and traditional interviews may have the effect of delimiting the topics to which participants respond, resulting in responses that do not fully capture students' experiences. The inclusion of research methods that promote student voice is likely to result in more equitable and socially just research outcomes as researchers gain a fuller and more authentic understanding of students' lived experiences.

Using Photo-Elicitation in Data Collection: Two Case Study Examples

As noted, photo-elicitation is an important method for facilitating the inclusion of students' experiences in school improvement and the policy arena and thus an important approach to foreground issues of social justice and equity and ensure that students can have a meaningful voice in these settings. In this section, we examine how photo-elicitation was used as a data collection method to highlight student voices and promote equity in two studies performed by the authors: one focused on school improvement and the other focused on education policy. While each study utilized a different approach to photo-elicitation, they both empowered students to discuss their experiences as well as challenge researchers' understanding of how students understand educational environments.

Photo-Elicitation in School Improvement Research

The school improvement study explored how adults collaborate to produce socially supportive school environments and how students experience those efforts. The researchers decided to utilize photo-elicitation in order to explore tensions in how school adults use their positional and relational power in their efforts to care for students. The study took place at two middle schools and involved participant observation and semi-structured interviews of school personnel, as well as photo-elicitation interviews of students where students took photos and discussed them with the interviewer.

In this study, photo-elicitation was especially useful at highlighting students' experience of school as continuous and highly social, rather than discrete and based on academic content (e.g., students don't take pictures of individual classes; they are much more likely to highlight social spaces or to think about classes in terms of relationships). Students' photos often highlight the "gray zones" of life in schools, places where rules and relationships are unsettled (e.g., hallways, times before and after school). Student photos frequently challenge adults' notions of acting on behalf of students' interests and highlight environments that are comfortable for students but not adults (e.g., conflicts over lunchroom seating arrangements and lunchroom volume). Student photos often highlight power structures in terms of what activities and behaviors are recognized and what is less valued (e.g., the well-maintained athletics display cases vs. the defaced student art projects). Without the use of photo-elicitation with students, the author may not have been able to capture how students experience their school environment or dig deeper into the inequitable power structures present within the school.

Photo-Elicitation in Education Policy Research

The education policy study explored how students, through intentional efforts to advance student voice, collectively participate in and influence the policymaking process for state-level K-12 educational decision-making. The study examined how members of two state-wide student voice efforts impacted policy and involved participant observation and semi-structured interviews of high school student members and adults. During interviews, students discussed how they utilized social media and photos to influence policymakers. Students selected and examined photos posted on social media (taken and posted by student members) that they believed were important to how they experienced and influenced the policy process.

Students' photos of the policy process highlight whom they believe to be the education decision-makers (e.g., legislators), where decisions are made in the process (e.g., the state capitol), and how they see themselves in the process (e.g., testifying or writing policy briefs before meetings). In discussing the photos, students

explain how some photos felt empowering (e.g., a picture in the capitol after an important meeting with a legislator), while others felt *tokenizing* (e.g., when legislators wanted to take photos with them instead of discussing policy priorities). Students assert that the empowering photos pushed them to keep working on the policy changes they were seeking, particularly after receiving positive feedback through comments on social media, while the tokenizing photos helped them establish relationships with key legislators and enabled them to get first meetings. Students demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the hierarchical power relationship between their peers and legislators and used photos to leverage this relationship for future policy reforms. Via the use of photo-elicitation, the author was able to deeply explore how students experienced the policymaking process, and particularly how they perceived and responded to power structures between students and decision-makers.

Future Directions

Photo-elicitation is a data collection method with the potential to authentically leverage student voice in research on policy and school improvement in ways that promote equity and critical social justice. Photo-elicitation provides researchers and students with an opportunity to dig deeper into their experiences in education environments and uncover the ways in which they may be inequitable. While there are many opportunities in photo-elicitation for deeper understandings of student experiences, there are also limitations. Photo-elicitation is unusually dependent on a researcher's ability to build meaningful rapport with students, although the technique may also facilitate rapport building. It also requires that researchers create an environment where students feel comfortable sharing their social world. Furthermore, photo-elicitation can be misapplied to reinforce researchers' preconceived notions about schools and student voice in education policymaking.

Nevertheless, as social media lowers the barriers to meaningful student participation in the policymaking arena (e.g., Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School students following the February 14, 2018, school shooting), researchers need to utilize innovative methods to capture students' experiences. Interview techniques that leverage students' photographs and other media are critical to understanding their social world. Moreover, students are increasingly engaging in social justice efforts via social media and other electronic platforms. Research techniques that allow students to both speak about the ways that schools and policies intersect their lives and engage via mediums they are accustomed to using are important for authentically incorporating student voice in school improvement and policy change efforts.

Suggested Readings

Lapenta, F. (2012). Some theoretical and methodological views on photo-elicitation. In E. Margolis & L. Pauwels (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of visual research methods* (pp. 201–213). London, UK: SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446268278.n11

Lapenta's chapter offers a good overview on the methodological variants of photo-elicitation research. Additionally, Lapenta discusses some of the ethical considerations of photo-elicitation research.

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

Wang and Burris provide an overview of photovoice and photovoice's potential as a participatory action research method. The article includes a discussion of the full arc of the photovoice process.

Cammarota, J., & Romero, A. (2010). Participatory action research for high school students: Transforming policy, practice, and the personal with social justice education. *Education Policy, 25*(3), 488–506. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904810361722

Cammarota and Romero offer a discussion on how to enmesh youth in participatory action research to achieve social justice aims.

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