Empowering Belizean Youth through Photovoice

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Abstract

Today's youth are faced with a number of different "roadblocks" on their way to becoming successful adults. Navigating adolescence is often difficult in its own right, but many youths have to deal with issues such as, poverty, unsafe neighborhoods and schools, drug/alcohol addiction, and disjointed homes to name a few. Although not all youth are faced with the same obstacles, these abovementioned obstacles can detract youth from becoming socially productive. Using Photovoice, a process by which participants identify, represent and enhance their community using a specific photographic technique, this study connected Belizean youth to their community through the process of identifying and taking photos of community strengths and weaknesses. After completing shared data analysis, the photos and a description of the meanings behind the photos were presented to a number of dignitaries in the community. The main themes presented were Responsibility and Support. This presentation gave youths voice in their community and allowed them to discuss strategies on how to increase community strengths as a way to reduce community weaknesses. Upon completion of the presentation, the dignitaries answered questions posed by the youth and offered collaborative strategies on how to promote social change.

Keywords

Photovoice, Empowerment, Youth

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Today's youth are faced with a number of different "roadblocks" on their way to becoming successful adults. Navigating adolescence is often difficult in its own right, but many youths have to deal with issues such as, poverty, unsafe neighborhoods and schools, drug/alcohol addiction, and disjointed homes to name a few. Although not all youth are faced with the same obstacles, these abovementioned obstacles can detract youth from becoming socially productive. Using Photovoice, a process by which participants identify, represent and enhance their community using a specific photographic technique, this study connected Belizean youth to their community through the process of identifying and taking photos of community strengths and weaknesses. After completing shared data analysis, the photos and a description of the meanings behind the photos were presented to a number of dignitaries in the community. The main themes presented were Responsibility and Support. This presentation gave youths voice in their community and allowed them to discuss strategies on how to increase community strengths as a way to reduce community weaknesses. Upon completion of the presentation, the dignitaries answered questions posed by the youth and offered collaborative strategies on how to promote social change. Keywords: Photovoice, Empowerment, Youth

The National Youth Development Policy of Belize (2012) indicates that the Belizean youthful population (70% of the population is below the age of 29) is doing well. However, there are a number of barriers youth face in developing into social, productive adults. For instance, there are a number of challenges that prevent youth from reaching their optimal well-being. More specifically, Belizean youth claim that adults only see them as problems to be fixed rather than resources to be nourished. In an attempt to remedy this situation, the Belizean government is committed to ensuring young people are empowered, thus increasing their likelihood of reaching their full potential and optimal well-being. Therefore, it is necessary to design and implement a variety of positive youth development programs to increase youth voice and overall development. Positive youth development programs should be designed to contribute to the overall healthy development of youth. According to the *Handbook of Applied Developmental Science* (2003) the basic needs critical to all young people's survival and healthy development include: a sense of safety and structure; belonging and membership; self-worth and an ability to contribute; independence and control over one's life; closeness and several good relationships; and competency and mastery. While this handbook refers to youth in general, it does align with the National Youth Development Policy of Belize (2012) in the sense that both believe youth need opportunities for empowerment. Further, both encourage adults to view youth as assets to be nourished rather than problems to be solved.

One goal of this research project, and in line with recommendations from the National Youth Development Policy of Belize (2012), was to empower youth; that is, provide them with a platform to have their voices heard in their community by connecting them with the ears of people in positions of power who can assist them with identified issues. While many youths are learning to function peacefully and responsibly, many are still learning negative, habit forming, life altering behaviors that may prevent them from achieving great success in society.

Regardless of their life circumstances, all youth need ample opportunities for supervised growth promoting activities both inside and outside of school (Stiehl & Galvan, 2005).

Photovoice is a participatory research method that was developed to promote empowerment and provide marginalized individuals with a platform to be heard in their own communities. According to Wang & Burris (1997) Photovoice is a technique or process by which individuals can identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. Photovoice has three main goals: (1) enable people to record and present their identified community strengths and areas of weakness, (2) promote small group dialogue about newly identified community issues, and (3) present salient findings to community dignitaries and persons in positions of power. Moreover, Loeffler (2004) argued that photographs can capture grander levels of detail about the emotional meaning of experience versus words-only data.

Photovoice remains the most commonly used form of visual research in social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Entrusting students with digital cameras and allowing them to photograph what they see as strengths and weaknesses in the community is the beginning of gaining voice. Further, Sanders-Bustle (2003) contend that by giving students cameras and asking them to photograph their lived experiences, they could capture a perspective that might otherwise be overlooked. For instance, youth may have an easier time communicating through pictures versus communicating verbally. As a researcher, it can be difficult to take a step back and facilitate the empowerment process; however, in order to maximize empowerment, researchers were careful not to lead photographers in what to photograph. The same held true for the analysis stage. To truly allow disadvantaged group members to gain voice in their community, they were listened to carefully.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to have students (1) identify strengths and weaknesses in their surrounding school community in Belize City as a way to capture their unique perspectives. An equally important aspect of this research was (2) to empower Belizean students by making their opinions and voices heard within the broader community through a public art exhibition.

Theoretical Stance

A critical aspect in designing qualitative research is to explain the epistemological framework used to conduct the study. According to Crotty (2003), epistemology is the lens through which the study is conducted and also explains "how we know what we know." A constructionism framework provided philosophical grounding for this study because it is congruent with the research focus of understanding subjective experiences. Constructionism maintains that meanings are not discovered, rather they are constructed by people interacting with one another and with the environments and settings around them. This understanding posits that different people can construct different meaning from the same situation (Crotty, 2003).

Overview of the Research Design

Using qualitative methods (Merriam, 1998), this study explored the lived experiences of Belizean youth in their community. More specifically, this study employed Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) as the research design. The Belizean youth Photovoice project described in this paper was designed to give youth voice in their surrounding community. Using

a combination of digital photography and guided discussions, 16 St John's Anglican Primary School students explored the strengths and weaknesses of their community. Community was defined as their school grounds and the surrounding one block area. Travelling beyond the one block was deemed too dangerous by the school. The 16 students were entrusted with Kodak Easyshare®, digital cameras and were instructed to take 4 photos of what they perceived as community strengths and 4 photos of weaknesses or areas of concern in their community. To construct and describe students' understanding of community strengths and weaknesses, data collection and analysis used an emergent (as opposed to a pre-determined) design. Data were collected during 4 sessions. Data collection procedures included (1) students' photographs (2) researcher's observations and field notes, and (3) Belizean student informal interviews. Approval by the University Institutional Review Board was granted and all participants in this study completed a parental consent and assent form. In addition, permission was granted to use the participants' real names and photos.

Participants

For the past 11 years, Bridgewater State University (BSU), a mid-sized Liberal Arts institution located in Southeastern Massachusetts, has been travelling to St. John's Anglican Primary school in Belize City, Belize during January break to complete a service project with 12 BSU students. In addition to providing service (painting a newly constructed school building) to the St. John's Primary School, a Photovoice project was included in the spring 2016 visit. All 12 BSU students assisted with the entire research process, including teaching about cameras, explaining the research process, to assisting, but not influencing students in taking photos and assisting with data analysis. The young St. John's Anglican Primary School students, ages 12 to 13, were selected to participate in this research project by the principal and a cooperating teacher, they chose students they believed would enjoy learning about and conducting a small research project.

Data Collection

Data were collected to provide rich, thick description of the students' understanding of community strengths and weaknesses during the 5 day Photovoice project. Data collection procedures included (1) students' photographs (2) researcher's observations and field notes, and (3) informal interviews. Observational data were collected all 5 days and were noted in the researcher's journal. Informal interviews occurred during all 5 days and photographs were taken on Day 1 and Day 2. Day 3 was devoted to data analysis. Day 4 was devoted to creating titles and captions for the photos, and Day 5 was dedicated to a formal presentation by the St. John's youth to an audience of dignitaries from the community, including governmental dignitaries such as, the CEO of Belizean Education, a local Belizean police officer (police department is located across the street from the school), and the St. John's principal and cooperating teacher. Inviting the Belizean Police to the presentation was not only intentional, it was also necessary based on the fact that many Belizean youths view the police as corrupt. Having them at the presentation, showing the youths that the police in fact care, was powerful. In addition, Bridgewater State University's Dean of the College of Education and Allied Studies was in attendance and provided a link to international support.

Prior to arriving in Belize, the St. John's cooperating teacher described the research project and process to his students. This training explained the research process, informed how to teach youth to take photos, and gave an overview on the data analysis procedures. Upon arrival the researchers met with students Monday through Friday for 3 hours each day, thus totaling approximately 15 contact hours. Session 1 was conducted on Monday and included a

brief discussion about the Photovoice project and the students' role as expert photographers. The remainder of Session 1 was devoted to teaching students how to use the cameras. Practice pictures were reviewed to help stimulate ideas for their research photos. Careful attention was paid to not influence or lead the students in what to photograph. This is important to remember because it is central to the empowerment process and gives voice to the students. Next, the researchers emphasized the power of the Photovoice project as it related to educating and informing others about their identified community issues.

Session 2 started with students filling out a worksheet detailing what matters to each of them in their community. Questions from the worksheet included, (1) Describe what things you are proud of in your family and in your community, (2) What would you like to see changed in your community, and (3) Why do you think things are the way they are in your community? This worksheet was included as a way to get young students to start thinking about their values and how those values could help promote social change. Upon completion of the worksheet students were ready to walk the surrounding neighborhood/school community to take their respective photographs. It's important to note that the school community only included a 2-block radius of their school. We were alerted by the cooperating teacher that it was not safe to wander any further than the 2 blocks due to increased gun violence.

As part of session 2, a total of 128 photographs were taken for the Photovoice project (4 strengths photos and 4 weaknesses photos x 16 students) however, only 16 photos were included in the presentation to dignitaries. Once all photos were printed and handed back to the rightful owners, analysis began in earnest.

Session 3 was an intense 3 hours of collaborative photograph data analysis. Due to the intensity of the assignment, 10 minute breaks were taken every hour to get the youth moving to help keep them focused. Youth photographers conducted the data analysis with the assistance of the researcher and the 12 BSU students. Each pair of St. John's students was partnered with at least 1 BSU student for the remainder of the research process.

Data analysis was designed to bring about conversations about the significance of the photographs. Session 3 began with a brief discussion about data analysis and an explanation of the SHOWeD method that was going to be used to categorize their photos (Wang, 2006). Commonly used in photovoice projects, the SHOWeD method is a means to getting to root causes of identified problems through guided discussion. Discussions about each photograph occurred within the same small groups that took the photos. The SHOWeD process includes the following questions, What do you **S**ee here? What is really **H**appening here? How does this relate to **O**ur lives? **W**hy does this problem or strength **E**xist? What can we **D**o about it? to facilitate discussion (Wang, 2006). As part of the SHOWeD process the St. John's students and the BSU students and researcher systematically coded all 128 photos. Initial codes were based on key words from the photo captions. Once the 128 photos were analyzed using the SHOWeD method, students were required to choose 1 strength or 1 weakness photo to be included in the art exhibit. This was difficult for the youth because they really liked all of the photos and thought that all 128 photos should be included in the art exhibition. After a number of grumbles, the youth understood the difficulty of exhibiting more than 16 photos and all chose their best depiction of a strength or a weakness. After reviewing the broad categories, the researcher and students revealed the following two themes; (1) responsibility, and (2) support. Using constant comparison methods (Patton, 1990), the researcher read each data source multiple times looking for trends and explanations. Each excerpt of data was coded according to content and then data were combined into categories.

Findings

As a result of the data analysis phase, there were two themes common among the Belizean youth, ***responsibility*** and ***support.*** Both of these themes emerged from photographs of both community strengths and weaknesses. Each of these themes was generated from and supported by sub-themes and initial codes. These themes captured the St. John's Anglican school students' perceptions of community strengths and weaknesses. The following section will provide a detailed description of both themes.

Responsibility. Dramatic pictures of compulsive littering and ramshackle houses/buildings were represented in many of the photos. However, the theme that emerged for these photos was *responsibility*. While garbage and litter were included in the original codes and categories, the theme *responsibility* encompassed the notion that garbage and litter were more problematic than simply being unsightly. In fact, many students remarked that the garbage and litter problem in Belize was and continues to be a big problem; however, upon closer examination students were concerned with "who" should be responsible for managing the trash problem. Students were baffled as to why more work was not being done to remedy the trash problem. At the crux of the trash matter was responsibility. For instance, looking at figure 1, title and caption, she, like others, believed that trash was a problem, but the responsibility was put on the government versus taking personal responsibility. As noted by Student 1, others in the community should be keeping their area cleaned. However, not one student accepted personal responsibility for keeping the community cleaner.

"*Cleaning Truck*" – Men taking garbage from bins and putting it in the garbage truck. More people in the community should help pick up trash on the streets. The government should provide jobs to keep the community clean. Photo by *Student 1*

Figure 1. Cleaning Truck

Similar to figure 1, the next photo, title, and caption lend evidence to the idea that rather than taking personal responsibility for the litter problem and helping to keep the environment clean (including the sea), "others" were identified as those being responsible for putting up more no littering signs around the city.

"*Garbage in the Water*" – This photo shows that there is a lot of garbage in the water. People throw garbage into the water and it is very upsetting because it goes into the sea. This could be changed by cleaning up and stopping littering. No littering signs might help, as well as adding more trash cans. Photo by *Student 2*

Figure 2. Garbage in the Water

Also stopping short of taking personal responsibility for the litter problem in the city, the next figure, title, and caption show that it is the community's responsibility to make recreation areas safe to play and watch others play. Specifically, student 2 expressed concern that people in the community were being disrespectful for allowing play areas to get run down. Again, personal responsibility for making positive change was not evident, but desiring others to do the work was blatantly obvious.

"Cheering for Improvement" – There are broken bleachers and the roof needs to be fixed because there needs to be seats and a shelter. People in our community should be more respectful to public property. Photo by Student 3

Figure 3. Cheering for Improvement

In addition to the Figure 1 photo, the following photo, title, and caption reinforced the idea that students thought that the government should be responsible for not only keeping the community clean, but also keeping the community safe. Student 4 was the first to note personal responsibility as a solution to a community issue. Not only were the police recognized and applauded for taking on the responsibility of keeping the school children and other community members safe, but he noted that he and other schoolmates can take on the responsibility of keeping the community safe by becoming future police officers.

"Protection" – Police help keep the community safe. People need to know police are important in the community. When we grow up we can become police officers.

Photo by *Student 4*

Figure 4. Protection

While the photo in figure 4 *"Protection"* was described as a strength not all students believed the police officers' were doing their job of protecting community members. Others, like Student 5 noted that some of the police were rude and bossy and it was the government's responsibility to change the officers' attitudes. In group discussions, many St. John's school students remarked that they felt the same way as student 5 and believed that the government should change the police from harming others to helping others.

> **"Stay Safe, Be Alert"** – They caught the criminal. The police are alert. Some of the police are bossy and rude. We can talk to the government about their attitudes. Photo by *Student 5*

Figure 5. Stay Safe, Be Alert

      Support. While students believed that it was the police officers' responsibility to provide a safe community to live in, others believed that support needs to come from others as well as the police. The second theme, ***support***, highlights a number of support systems youth have available to themselves. For instance, looking at the next photo, "Garden Girls" and reviewing the comments by student 6 it is clear that these young ladies displayed one way in which they could help their fellow students and community. It is also true that this photo and caption could fit into the responsibility theme. This was the first instance in which youth felt responsibility to care for others. It bears repeating, that despite the young girls feeling and taking responsibility related to gardening, they did not find it their responsibility to clean up litter.

> **"Garden Girls"** – The girls in this photo are helping each other. By growing plants, they are protecting people and helping people live. Photo by *Student 6*

Figure 6. Garden Girls

Similar to the photo by student 6, the next photo, title, and caption showed that the youth had a number of support systems within the four walls of their school. In fact, the cooperating teacher was noted as a great leader in the school, someone to look up to for guidance. Students also remarked that if they had more teachers like Mr. Antonio, the community could be stronger.

> **"Community Helper"** – He makes the community stronger, our teacher is standing to support the group. If we have more leaders like Mr. Antonio we could have a stronger community. Photo by *Student 7*

Figure 7. Community Helper

In addition to the students recognizing Mr. Antonio for his leadership and support, they also viewed BSU students as part of their support system at school. For instance, looking at the "*Kindness*" photo, students 8 and 9 expressed their gratitude towards BSU for assisting them with their school work. Again, this photo could also fall under the *responsibility* theme. That is, the photographers and other students felt as if it was everyone's responsibility to help make one another smile.

"*Kindness*" – This photo teaches people how to share, care for each other, and be kind. If you put a smile on other peoples' faces you will put a smile on yours too. Photo by *Students 8 & 9*

Figure 8. Kindness

The final photo, titled "*Classmates*," depicted how the St. John's students felt about one another as part of the support system at school. A lengthy conversation about how students supported one another ensued. Students took great pride in being part of this school community and many noted that it would be up to all of them to support one another throughout the school year. They noted that when they are all together, especially in their school green, they were a stronger group. Similar to the "*Kindness*" photo this picture could have been included in the *responsibility* theme. Although students recognized that they could be part of a solution, they fell short of articulating specific ways to take responsibility of self and others.

"*Classmates*" – All of the class is together, everyone is happy, and we are all wearing full green. Photo by – *Student 10*

Figure 9. Classmates

As a culminating experience, and perhaps the most important aspect of this research, students were provided a venue to be heard. With that said, the students presented their findings to the following dignitaries; the CEO of Education in Belize, the cooperating teacher, Mr. Antonio, St. John's Primary school principal, local police officer, and BSU's Dean of the College of Education and Allied Studies. In addition, all other St. John's Primary students, BSU students, and St. John's Primary school teachers were in attendance. All of the students' photos, with titles and captions were hung outside for all to see. At the time of the presentation, all of the dignitaries were seated in front of the photos and listened intently as each student introduced him/herself and spoke to why they chose to take the respective photo. This gave the students an opportunity to share the meaning behind their photo. As part of their presentation, students were also given the opportunity to directly ask the dignitaries how they planned on helping remedy the social problems identified by the students. This was very powerful! One student in particular did a wonderful job of presenting the fact that the school grounds were littered and unsafe; followed with the question to the CEO of Education, what are **YOU** going to do to help

us make things better for St. John's? Interestingly, the schoolyard dumpster that had been overflowing the entire week was emptied 20 minutes after the presentation. Although this was a small victory, students remarked that they felt like they were heard by people in positions of power as they witnessed the trash being emptied. In fact, during a conversation with a group of the students involved in the research, many were overjoyed with the idea that they were responsible for getting the trash emptied.

Discussion

Photovoice was a novel and effective methodology to study Belizean youths' perceptions of community strengths and weaknesses. Application of the Photovoice method within a school setting helped achieve health-promoting environments more effectively than other approaches. Also, shifting the teacher's role to that of facilitator enabled more trust to be established with students, supporting healthy relationships founded on dialogue. Further, interpretation of the findings and Photovoice analyses reflect the outcome of the Photovoice project. The Photovoice process revealed students' ideas about community strengths and weaknesses and ways in which social change could occur. Interestingly, students did not see themselves as agents of change as related to the trash and litter problem in their neighborhood. In fact, overwhelmingly so, students believed it was the responsibility of the government and others to keep the community clean and safe. A future direction for this research would include surveying or interviewing dignitaries to see how they can promote personal and social responsibility in youth. Moreover, it would be beneficial to follow up with the 16 Belizean youth to see what, if anything, has been done to help them become stewards of their community. That is, what can be done to encourage youth to be social change agents?

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Article Citation