

Taking pictures/Taking action! Visual Methodologies in Working with Young People

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Introduction

Research and interventions that purport to engage youth as active participants and agents of change in their own lives are increasing both locally and internationally.

Documentation of tools and practical strategies for effectively and fruitfully engaging youth is, however, lacking. In this article we draw on our work with children and young people using photo-voice techniques in order to explore some of the ways in which the creative process can itself be a key feature of engaging children and youth and ‘taking action’ in the context of HIV and AIDS. While this is not a new idea, we think that what is often overlooked in research projects and interventions with young people that use these techniques is some way of acknowledging and analysing the entertainment factor in cultural production. Increasingly donor organizations, researchers and NGOs are incorporating these techniques into their work plans and research designs, but are often at a loss as to how to make sense of their findings.

Peter McDermott, a UNICEF country representative in Zambia a few years ago proposed that what is needed in the challenge to the ‘one size fits all’ approaches to addressing

HIV and AIDS is a commitment to what he described as ‘masses of small projects’, conceptualised in terms of some key principles (e.g., participatory process, ownership, and active engagement), worked out at the local level. This article is, in a sense, a nod to McDermott’s ‘masses of small projects’ in that we highlight the ways in which we have been using photo-voice approaches with children and young people both to understand more about how they see challenges and solutions to addressing HIV and AIDS in their communities, but also to see how their very involvement as photographers can become part of an intervention strategy to taking action. We describe three small projects, each involving children (all around the age of 12 and 13 and in grades six and seven in KZN and Swaziland), and all part of a larger ‘youth, gender and sexuality’ project which has at its centre a focus on visual methodologies and social change. In looking at these three projects together, we highlight the ways in which the creative process itself can address issues of evidence, evaluation, and sustainability of ‘what works’ in terms of HIV and AIDS interventions targeting young people. We also highlight the issue of children and youth ‘having fun’ as significant to thinking about new links between photo-voice and Education Entertainment.

Visual Arts-Based Methodologies and HIV and AIDS Research

Within the social sciences generally there is a great deal of interest in using visual and participatory elements for research designs, which have a built-in ‘research as a social change’ orientation. In their book called *Research as social change* (Schatz and Walker, 1995), for example, include a number of different tools and approaches ranging from drawings and visual mapping to photography. Notwithstanding the accessibility afforded by such approaches, and a democratising of research itself (Mitchell, 2004), a number of

questions emerge: Is/should there be blurring of boundaries between and amongst the uses of visual texts as modes of inquiry, modes of representation, and modes of dissemination? What are the boundaries in terms of what counts as an intervention and what counts as data, and even, as we explore in this article, in our work with children and young people, what counts as ‘work’ and ‘serious research’ as opposed to just ‘having fun’ in these interventions? In entitling our article ‘taking pictures/taking action’ we wish to highlight the particular ways in which ‘doing research’ and ‘having fun’ as part of photo-voice techniques with children and youth, can also lead to them taking action. In so doing, we draw on our work using photo-voice with groups of children and young people in several projects related to HIV and AIDS, examining in particular the ways in which these discrete projects can help us to understand more deeply why and how action oriented projects are central to working with children and young people.

Although there are an increasing number of social scientists working in the area of visual methodologies, issues related to working with, storing, retrieving, and exhibiting visual data are ones that remain to be addressed. (See also Mitchell, 2004c; Weber and Mitchell, 2004). Karlsson (2004) in curating an exhibition of school photography in South Africa from the first ten years of democracy suggests that we need to explore issues of documentation and draws attention to the possibilities for digital archives.

From the above frameworks, several questions are worth posing: What approaches are most useful in working with the collection of photographs and documentaries that will be produced in this study, and how can we use our understandings to contribute to broader debates and issues related to visual data: how do we address issues of ownership? How

do we assist schools to use the visual representations? How do we address some of the ethical issues related the uses of the visual data, particularly those involving children?

The power of the visual and other arts-based methodologies in relation to conscientising and ‘taken action’ in addressing HIV/AIDS is well recognized (See Martin, 2003). In this work we were interested in exploring approaches to *working with* children and their photographs that maximize the potential value of their work in a research as social change focus.

The Interventions

Our analysis in this article uses three projects: a photo-voice project with grade seven learners in Durban, a photo-voice project involving grade seven learners in Mbabane, and a photo-voice project involving grade six students in a deeply rural school in KZN to highlight the ways in which these initiatives can contribute to deepening our understanding of ‘what works’ in terms of HIV and AIDS interventions.

Feeling safe/feeling not so safe in Mbabane, Swaziland

This project involved 30 grade seven students in photographing what they saw as images of ‘feeling safe and not so safe’ in their school environment as part of a study of sexual abuse in and around schools in Swaziland (Mitchell and Motoba-Tapela, 2004). Divided into small same sex groupings, the children had approximately 45 minutes to take pictures on the school grounds. Their fascinating photographs included shots of ‘staged rape scenes’ in the bushes by several of the girls, to environmentally unsafe sites near the

school (polluted water), and many pictures of toilets. In particular, when asked why they had taken photos of toilets, the girls spoke about the fact that you could be raped in the toilets, there is no privacy and hence they are dangerous, or they are dirty and unsafe.

Their choice of safe spaces though was also interesting. One group for example had photographed a girl sitting in her desk in front of the chalkboard on which was written 'now safe'. The picture was a strong reminder that schools can also be safe havens. The teachers when they saw the photographs spoke about how surprised they were that so many learners found the toilets a dangerous area (something also uncovered by Heather Brookes in her work in South African schools). Similarly when members of the Child Protections Unit of UNICEF looked at these pictures they began to reframe some policy issues related to linking the work on Water and Sanitation to Sexual Violence projects.

Feeling strong/Feeling not so strong in Durban

The 'Feeling strong/feeling not so strong' project involved grade seven learners in a primary school in Durban. While situated in a relatively affluent neighbourhood, the school draws children from a number of informal settlements and townships around Durban. The actual project was organised around learning more about HIV and AIDS and youth participation and included a number of activities over several weeks (including reading a text written by other young people on HIV and AIDS, viewing a documentary about youth and AIDS activism, *Fire and Hope*(2003), and writing about their own experiences of HIV and AIDS). The final activity with the group used photo voice in which the classes worked in small single sex groupings, with each group taking pictures

of safe/not so safe places and feeling strong/not so strong. When their photos were developed the learners continued to work in small groups to organize their photos into a documentary album where they selected the pictures that they thought most represented the issues, and wrote short paragraphs explaining how their chosen pictures represented the above.

Firstly, there was an obvious pleasure in working in this medium, with one boy thanking the research team and commenting that he *'had fun learning how to use the camera'* doing the project. Secondly, in contrast to the Mbabane children, learners in the Durban school mostly chose to take pictures of 'feeling safe' and 'feeling strong'. Reflecting their confidence in the caring and support they receive from the staff in the school and their 'feeling safe and strong's' within school premises, some of the learners' written comments included:

I am feeling safe because I am at school and at school nothing bad happens;

It's a safe place because we are with our teacher, someone we trust and who educates us; and

We are safe when we are by the [school] office because if we are in trouble we call for help and someone from the office can come to the rescue. And to top it all, we are with the school HOD Mrs Toby!

Friday Absenteeism in a rural KZN School

'Friday Absenteeism' is a project that started with the recognition of the principal¹ of a primary school in rural KZN that many of the learners, especially those from the nearby informal settlement missed school on Fridays because they needed to earn money in the

¹ Identity withheld to protect the identity of the school and the learners

market. While the amounts they would make working at the stalls would only be ten or twenty rand, according to him, it was enough to see them through the weekend in terms of food and necessities. The principal, though, was concerned that the learners could not afford to miss a day a week of school, and also that it sent a message to other learners that school was not important. He worked with the grade six learners over five to six class sessions, starting with giving them some basic instruction on using disposable cameras and brainstorming with them some of the issues in their community that might keep them from coming to school. The photo taking was divided into two sessions: In session One the principal accompanied the learners into the community to take pictures of 'the issues': Poverty, alcohol, HIV and AIDS, pollution, poor housing, inadequate toilets. The next day in Session Two, he accompanied them into the market where they took pictures of the children working in the market, working conditions, etcetera, and where they also conducted interviews and kept field notes. Sessions Three to Five were devoted to:

- (1) looking at the pictures in groups and selecting particular pictures that 'told the story' of problems and solutions;
- (2) putting together in each group a poster that included the five 'best pictures' of the problems along with a narrative write-up; and
- (3) a session where the groups presented their work to each other. As a follow-up the students were to present their findings to the whole school and a stakeholders forum.

The 'findings' from the work of the learners in the community were dramatic: Images of adults drinking in the middle of the day, the inside of a shebeen, dangerous places for

walking, pollution and so on. Their images in the market were even more dramatic. For one thing, they discovered that it wasn't just children from their school who were skipping school; there were learners from many other schools. One of the girls from the school was there, she said, because she was bullied at school. When she had reported it to the teacher, she was told to ignore it, but her way of ignoring it was to leave the school. In this case it was the principal who took action to confront the teacher. The children's posters suggest ways of following up, but the presentation of the posters to the community exists as a 'follow up' in and of itself for taking action.

Some Observations

While it is beyond the scope of this article to give an in depth analysis of the impact of each of these projects, we draw attention to some of the process issues that we see 'run across' the three projects, and what are key in terms of deepening our understanding of photo voice as a tool for taking action.

Working with the photos

Engagement, Enjoyment and Activism

In all three projects children were involved in some activity in which they engaged with their own photo productions. In the case of the Durban school, each group produced a small photo album documentary based on the photos that they thought most represented 'feeling strong/feeling not so strong' as well as their photos of the process itself. In the

case of the Mbabane children, we were only able to allocate a little over an hour to 'picture viewing' and choosing photos to write about, but we could, nonetheless see the potential for how their photos contributed to their sense of taking action. In the case of the Absentee Friday learners who had several classes to work with their photos and who were to present their findings to the community, we can see the obvious 'taking action' of their work. We also see the ways in which the actual 'working with the photographs' is central to the work on cultural production that Buckingham and Sefoton-Greene (1994) and others in Media Education describe.

Firstly, the photographs that we have collected of children engaged in picture taking and 'picture viewing' are themselves visual testimonies to total absorption in meaning making. We are particularly interested in this idea of 'total absorption' because it speaks to some of the issues and concerns in the whole area of participatory process in AIDS activism more generally, and youth activism in particular.

Secondly, one of the issues implicit in the work on Entertainment Education is that the initiative/activity or the text (a soap opera, a graphic novel, etc) is entertaining. However, how best to actually operationalise entertainment value is not easy. In the case of the three projects we have evidence of the sheer joy of looking, but also comments by the children who spontaneously noted that they loved learning to use a camera. Much of the research in Education Entertainment concentrates on the effect of communication on the audience but there has been a call by Singhal and Rogers to focus on the play aspects (2002). These young people point to the need to value, incorporate and research ways

to maximise the fun/play element for participants and to research the educational impact of taking action and becoming cultural producers. To date most of the theory on Entertainment Education pays attention to audience rather than to producers. We are seeing the limitations of this theory and locate our reading on children as producers as a central component of new research in this area.

Implications

Based on these three small projects with children we see several implications for further consideration. The most obvious one is to engage in follow up activities with the children themselves. One of the features of much of the literature on photo voice as a technique is that we are often left with the idea of a ‘once off’ activity ... or a product (a book, an exhibition, a documentary) but no real sense of the impact of the work over a longer period of time. The work of Wendy Ewald is a good example of the expansiveness of children taking pictures across continents and across social circumstances, but there has not been, to the best of our knowledge, a project of going back over this kind of work to see what other types of ‘taking action’ children might have engaged in after the project has ended.

While in the case of Mbabane a gender and schooling ‘toolkit’ that will include a protocol related to school toilets was developed for teachers as a result of the children’s pictures, it would be useful to take this work back to the children who initially participated for their input. The Friday Absenteeism study, for us, represents one in which there is already an immediate planned follow-up in the form of the community

stakeholders meeting where the children will continue to document the process, as well as a plan on the part of the principal to have the children continue to take pictures in the community as a small ‘cottage industry’ project in which they use their photo skills to provide a service in the informal settlement where many of them live.

A second area to consider is the actual level of ownership/participation, something that Malone (2004) has explored in her work with children and participatory projects. In her work she has developed a ‘continuum approach’ for describing participation – ranging from what is primarily tokenistic (children being called in to ‘perform’ for adults) to projects that are totally child developed and child led. In our three photo voice projects, we can see none of them as totally led by children but would see that clearly Friday Absenteeism has a much stronger ‘buy in’ from the children than either the Durban or the Mbabane project. Interestingly, however, because the photos from the Mbabane project were part of a UNICEF initiative, the impact of the actual photos on social change may be the greatest since the photos were studied by the Child Protection Unit in New York and led to a re-examination of some of the policies around the environment and school safety.

We are interested in exploring further work around visual data, children and ethical issues. In the Friday Absenteeism project, the children were involved in photographing people in the market who didn’t necessarily want to be photographed. The principal intervened and explained to the various hawkers and stall owners about what the project was about – and also noted that he explained to the children that photo journalism could

be dangerous. While this could be seen as a crash course in Media Ethics, it is also important to ensure the safety of children, whether physical or emotional, in the various participatory projects they are often roped in to participate in. In a related way however, we can also see how projects like this one could be situated within a ‘schooling and democracy’ framework, where children are an integral part of identifying the issues/problems and their solutions.

Finally, on our initial questions about ‘sheer enjoyment value’ and entertainment, we think that a feature of engaging children of necessity must include close attention to ‘having fun’ . We see the potential for this work with specific groups of children such as AIDS orphans, children themselves who may be living with HIV as an empowerment tool, but we also see that it is important to not lose sight of what it means to be taken out of the everyday world around to somehow ‘reframe’ it through a camera. In our work with adults as well (e.g., community health workers and rural teachers), we have been struck by what might be described as ‘total abandon’ in doing camera work, both in small groups as well as individually (de Lange et al. 2004).

While there are many projects that use photography as a way to give voice to participants, we think that giving children this tool has opened up an important space for us to see the possibilities for taking action. It has given a very visible face to HIV and AIDS, and related issues of sexual violence, poverty and so on, and suggests ways that even very young people can work with their communities to come up with their own creative solutions to very serious problems. They are not waiting for the research team to come

back to give them the answers. The photographs they have produced are provocative, and more than anything have given the participants visual hope.

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