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The Journal of Early Adolescence 2007; 27; 241

DOI: 10.1177/0272431606294834

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Engaging Young Adolescents in Social Action Through Photovoice

The Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) Project

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The Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) project is an afterschool empowerment program and research project for underserved early adolescents. Central to YES! is an empowerment intervention that provides early adolescents with opportunities for civic engagement with other youth around issues of shared concern in their schools and neighborhoods. This article specifically focuses on the use of Photovoice as a promising way to engage youth in social change as they take photos capturing strengths and issues in their environment and use these as the basis of critical dialogue and collective action plans. Adding to a growing body of information on using Photovoice, this article reports how early adolescents in the YES! afterschool program experienced the Photovoice process, moving from photography and writing to initiate group-designed social action projects. Recommendations are offered for others engaged in empowerment work with early adolescents.

Keywords: *early adolescence; empowerment education; Photovoice*

Photography is increasingly being used as a way to view the social and economic worlds of youth (Briski & Kaufmann, 2004; "Slum Children's Lives," 2003; "Young Lives Transformed," 2003). Photovoice (Wang, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1994) is an approach that incorporates photography with participatory action. In Photovoice, participants represent their world with their own photographs, which they then analyze to surface their meaning. The format for reflecting on the photographs is to respond in writing (a "freewrite") to the following questions (which are referred to by the acronym SHOWED): What do you See here? What's really Happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this problem or asset exist? What can we Do about it? (Wang, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1994). Engaging in critical thinking through freewrites expands both individual and group awareness of the social causes underlying the issues or assets. The Photovoice approach has been used effectively with diverse groups (Strack & Magill, 2004; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000; Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004; Wang & Pies, 2004; Wilson, Minkler, Dasho, Wallerstein, & Martin, 2006b; Wu Kun Yi et al., 1995) to create needs assessments for social action by providing participants with cameras to create "images of their world." Through guided facilitation, participants use these photographs to engage in critical analysis of the meanings and social conditions they represent.

This article specifically focuses on the application of Photovoice to an early adolescent population participating in the Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) project, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)-funded project through its Community Based Prevention Research (CBPR) program mechanism (Grant No. R06/CCR921439-01). The purpose of CDC's CBPR program was to support investigator-initiated participatory research that operated at multiple levels to enhance community capacity for prevention of more than one health condition. The YES! project is an after-school empowerment program and research project that provided underserved early adolescents with opportunities for civic engagement with other youth around issues of shared concern in their schools and neighborhoods. The complexity and challenges in doing youth-led action research have been well documented (Anyon & Naughton, 2003; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, &

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Hawkins, 2004). This article examines the use and efficacy of Photovoice for engaging early adolescents in critical thinking for social action. In this article we specifically examine how working with this age group (10-12 years) presents unique challenges: addressing cognitive development in the curriculum, social development and group issues, and moving into social action.

Background

In the United States, alcohol, tobacco, and other drug (ATOD) use, fighting, bullying, and other risk behaviors are serious concerns (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). Although risk behaviors are often seen as matters of individual choice, the decision to participate in these behaviors is set within a broader societal context (Minkler, 2000; Smedley & Syme, 2001; Wilson, Syme, Boyce, Battistich, & Selvin, 2005). Individually based interventions that offer refusal skills, scare tactics, or health information as the sole component of the intervention have often had disappointing results (Lynam et al., 1999; West & O'Neal, 2004), at least in part because the underlying fundamental cause of the risk behavior environment has been left undressed (Link & Phelan, 2000).

The Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) program is an example of an alternative approach that engages youth as critical thinkers and problem solvers (Blaine et al., 1997; Cheatham, Shen, 2003; Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki, & Dow, 2004; Whaley, 1999). Prilleltensky, Nelson, and Peirson (2001) propose a construct of wellness for youth that not only includes the satisfaction of material needs but also opportunities for participation and self determination (voice and choice), competence and attitudes (self-efficacy) to enact personal power and control, and a skill set to help them become agents of change in their community. The approaches used in the YES! program were intended to create a group context in which cognitive and social skills were taught and practiced in the course of democratic decision making to encourage meaningful contributions to group-designed social action projects in the participants' school and neighborhood communities.

Methods

This section describes the participating sample, the YES! group sessions, and the curriculum developed by YES! staff for implementing Photovoice. Examples of participant photographs, writing, and the social action projects that emerged are provided in the Results section.

Description of Participants

YES! participants were identified as high risk by virtue of attending Title I public elementary schools serving low-income communities in West Contra Costa County, California. Volunteer participants were recruited by YES! staff through classroom presentations in six YES! program schools that expressed an interest in the project. Because we contend that exposure to social and environmental disorganization in the community places these children at risk, we recruited through presentations to all fifth-grade classrooms. All volunteer students who provided written assent and caregiver consent were assigned to a same-gender group of 6 to 10 students at their school. Together with a small number of continuing sixth graders from the pilot year, there were 122 participants in 13 groups. Of these, 53.3% ($n = 65$) were girls. Ages ranged from 9 through 12 years (mean = 10.3). The self-reported ethnic/racial makeup of the sample included 65 Latino/a (53.3%), 3 (2.5%) Native American, 1 (0.8%) Caucasian, 18 (14.8%) African American, 19 (16.9%) Asian, and 14 (11.5%) "other," which included mixed race/ethnicity. Two students left this question unanswered.

Each YES! participant received an easy-to-use nondisposable camera (Olympus Trip XB400) to keep and multiple rolls of film for YES! group photo assignments. As an incentive for being in the program, additional film and processing were also provided for personal use. The YES! groups met at the elementary schools, with room location and meeting times set by the school.

YES! Group Sessions

Participants met in groups for 90 minutes weekly after school, for approximately 25 sessions during the 2003-2004 school year. Each YES! group typically worked with a pair of cofacilitators who were recruited from local high schools and from the University of California at Berkeley's graduate student population. A graduate student and a high school student were paired for each group. The selection and training of facilitators, described in detail elsewhere (Wilson et al., 2006a), included 30 to 60 hours of interactive training in participatory education techniques, youth development, group facilitation and management, and conducting social action projects with youth.

The YES! Curriculum

The facilitators received a sequential curriculum to cover the first 25 YES! sessions. Although most groups completed one lesson plan per week,

Table 1
YES! Curriculum

Topic	Activities
Group formation	Team building Establishing group norms Learning cooperative skills
Photography	Sessions and photographic assignments on light, balance, perspective, rule of thirds Looking at other people's photographs to interpret their meaning
Photovoice	Taking photos of issues and assets at the school Doing SHOWeD freewrites Engaging in critical dialogue and reflection with others
Community organizing strategies	Group identification of priority social action project topics Democratic decision making about social action project topic and methods Strategies for action planning Recruiting allies for support school community engagement
Engaging the group in social action	Engaging in social action with the group
Engaging the community in social action	Engaging in social action with the school community

facilitators were encouraged to be flexible, pacing important activities according to group needs. Table 1 summarizes the YES! curriculum.

Group Formation

The YES! sessions began by consciously addressing group formation. The groups engaged in cooperative activities to support team building, established group norms, and learned skills for offering and receiving constructive input from other group members. Activities included whole group work as well as working in dyads and triads. An explicit goal was that all students would be able to work with anyone in their YES! group. Although continuing to do weekly fun activities, attention shifted to assignments designed to prepare participants for Photovoice.

Photography

Based on participant evaluation of the first pilot year, the curriculum for Year 2 was revised to include more information on photography. After

instruction in the mechanics of the camera, the groups were introduced to and practiced composing photographs using concepts such as lighting, camera angle, and placement of focal points. Assignments were then given involving photographing objects in multiple ways to see the effects of their choices. Example photos were discussed to demonstrate the use of documentary photographs.

In the eighth week, groups began looking at photos as a way to tell their own stories by photographing something of personal importance. During the pilot year, students had difficulty understanding that the SHOWeD question: "How does this affect our lives?" was a prompt for causal explanations of the meaning of the image. For this reason, storyboarding was used to introduce the idea of causality in a more concrete narrative way. Students created a storyboard consisting of simple drawings and captions to describe the following: (a) their picture (why they took the photo and what someone else might see in the photo), (b) what they thought or felt about the subject of the photo, (c) what might have happened right before the photo was taken, (d) why it happened, (e) what would happen next in the story, and (f) what they hoped would happen in the future. This exercise allowed group members to grasp the idea of causality by seeing a photograph as a moment in a narrative sequence.

In the next supervised assignment, students brainstormed about places in their school environment that had various contrasting attributes, such as quiet/loud, clean/dirty, and safe/unsafe, and then photographed them. Group members selected the photos they felt successfully portrayed a quality they were hoping to capture. These were posted on a group-made 7' × 3' map of the school grounds as a way to map and discuss assets and issues at the school.

Photovoice

Writing about personally important things and photographing school attributes were precursors to the independent Photovoice assignment: to capture images representing things at school that made students feel happy, healthy, or safe (assets) or feel unhappy, unhealthy, or unsafe (issues). Individuals selected photos from this assignment to write about using the Photovoice freewrite approach. Facilitators assisted participants who had difficulty writing, and in some cases received dictation. The group members read aloud their freewrites. With the goal of deepening the groups' level of thinking about the effects of these assets and issues at the school, other group members and the facilitators probed the writer's reasoning to clarify

an identified asset or issue and to examine its cause. These discussions also explored preliminary ideas for projects that might help to ameliorate the issues or honor the assets.

Following the initial freewrite discussions, the groups also identified additional assets and issues, which they had not photographed, to expand the potential topics for social action. In the absence of images, group dialogue about these topics used the last three SHOWeD questions (How does this affect Our lives? Why does it exist? What can we Do?).

At this point the sessions no longer could rely on lesson plans and the facilitators consulted weekly with program staff to help support the group's selection, implementation, and evaluation of the projects. Generally the groups had about 6 weeks to complete their projects before the end of the school year.

Community Organizing Strategies

To help identify and prioritize potential social action topics, the groups used decision-making strategies drawn from principles of community organizing. The facilitator introduced criteria, such as cost, feasibility, importance, degree of opposition, and time to ultimately narrow down potential topics to identify a single project. One YES! requirement was that all social action projects were to be decided by group consensus.

Groups presented their proposed project to the school principal or after-school program coordinator, both for support and for permission. A second YES! program staff requirement was that social action projects had to engage other students, using strategies such as participation, presentations, voting, and information campaigns, so that individuals and groups would be aware of having an impact on the school community.

Results

Of 13 groups, 12 were able to design and implement a social action project about assets or issues at their school. Because of group dynamics, one group of sixth-grade boys had trouble moving through the curriculum and was unable to choose a specific issue or asset to develop into a project. Instead, they created a lunchtime exhibit of their "issues and assets" photographs for students and faculty. Of the 12 groups who completed group-generated social action projects, 8 developed their projects directly from an asset or issue that was subject of a Photovoice freewrite. Because of safety concerns, the YES! project did not allow 1 group working at the neighborhood level to photograph the

Table 2
Summary of YES! Group Social Action Projects

Issue or Asset Selected	Social Action Theme	Project
School 1 fifth-grade girls: Student misbehavior—messing up the bathrooms and pulling fire alarms*	Students need more attention at school	Awareness campaign: Skit presented to the school in assemblies on how to get positive attention
School 1 fifth-grade boys: Fighting*	People need alternatives to fighting	Awareness campaign: Skit presented to the school showing ways to deal with scarce resources, disrespect and bullies
School 2 fifth-grade girls: Unclean bathrooms*	People have to be responsible for their behavior in the bathrooms	Awareness campaign: made presentations to all classes, collected pledges of commitment and placed framed pledge posters in each classroom
School 2 fifth-grade boys: Playground litter*	Raise awareness and get students involved in playground cleanup	Organized a “delitterization” pledge in classrooms and a Cleanup Afternoon
School 3 fifth-grade girls: Graffiti in the bathrooms*	Unchecked graffiti encourages others to do it	Cleaned and painted two bathrooms (posted before and after pictures)
School 3 fifth-grade boys: Loss of sports and teachers because of district finances*	Raise district awareness of students’ concern about personnel cuts	Petition campaign (using posters with photographs from Photovoice)
School 3 fifth-grade boys: Dangerous shed on campus*	Get the district to fix up or tear down “The Scary Place” shed	Organized vote of third to fifth graders and wrote request to school district to fix shed
School 5 fifth-grade girls: Fighting*	Rumors get started in the bathrooms and cause fights	Presented skit to school on how to react to rumors to avoid fights
School 6 sixth-grade (co-ed): Gangs and drugs*	Peer pressure to use drugs	Presented skit to school on how gangs push drugs on younger kids and causes violence
School 2 sixth-grade (co-ed): School did not fund a yearbook	Desire to show school spirit	Produced a yearbook. YES! required group to include a positive campaign, which the group did in the form of two short “Photo Novellas” about avoiding conflict

Note: Asterisks denote issues identified through Photovoice.

topic of drug use. Group members used the O-W-D questions from SHOWeD to produce freewrites. The four remaining groups who selected issues or assets elicited after the freewrites also used the “O-W-D” SHOWeD questions for critical reflection and discussion.

In keeping with the goal of fostering both individual and group empowerment, all groups achieved consensus on both the theme and method for the project, and all group members contributed their different skills and interests to carry out the project. The social action projects are summarized in Table 2.

Examples of the Photovoice Process

What follows are closer descriptions of how three YES! groups progressed from taking photographs and composing freewrites to carrying out social action projects. The 12 social action projects differed in the degree to which Photovoice was central to determining the project, the depth of the social action work, and the degree of support required from facilitators. The examples chosen for this article represent the range of projects, providing contrasting portraits of how the groups used the Photovoice process.

The Scary Place

A group of fifth-grade boys was concerned about a tin shack on campus. The shack, “The Scary Place,” was covered with graffiti and bullet holes. The following freewrite is from one of the group’s members.

“The Scary Place”

The first thing you see in this picture are bad things. The issue about this picture it is dirty and has bad things. In this picture you can see that somebody broke it. It makes me feel sad to know that we have a dirty and scary thing in our school. I think that the school should tear this down. I think that other people would feel sad, too, because of how dirty this is. I think this issue is important because if was not here, the people that broke it would try to do something bad to us. This affects us by affecting our school. This issue exists because it used to be the heater for our school. We could break it down and the school would be a better place. (fifth-grade boy)

The boys in this group discussed their concerns and initially wanted to tear down the shack. After exploring the shack, they realized they needed to gather more information about the building’s history. By interviewing the school principal, they learned about the purpose of the building, and found that they would need to make a request to the school district to do anything

Figure 1
“The Scary Place”



to the building. The boys decided they wanted to learn about other students' opinions, so they prepared posters, gave presentations, and surveyed third- to sixth-grade students about whether the building should be torn down or fixed. The boys then composed a letter to the school district's chief engineer, explaining their project and their survey results:

Dear Mr. [Chief Engineer]:

Thank you for putting up the new door on the building surrounding the underground well at X Elementary School. We found out that the building we call “The Scary Place” was securing the well and that the well was used for watering the grass. We interviewed our principal and she said that the pipes under the ground broke and flooded the field a few years ago.

We call the building “The Scary Place” because there is a lot of graffiti, gunshots, alcohol and bad people hang out there, and sometimes there are bullets on the ground. This is bad because it influences other kids to do the same. We're sending some pictures we took so that you can see what we mean.

We have a project we want to accomplish and have asked the third-, fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students to vote on whether they think the building should be fixed up or if we should tear it down. Students voted this week and we would like to have the building fixed up so that it does not have the graffiti, gunshots and other bad things. 162 kids (56.8%) want to fix it, 123 kids want to tear it down.

Sincerely, The X *YES!* Group

Figure 2
“Writing on the Walls”



Following this request, the district painted the building during the summer and put on a new secured door. Unfortunately, fresh graffiti now adorns the building.

Writing on the Bathroom Walls

A group of fifth-grade girls was concerned about school fighting that was provoked by written rumors that started on bathroom walls. The following two freewrites generated the theme for the group's project.

“Talking About People”

People were talking about this person. The issue is about hating people and writing about people. It makes me feel bad and I think this person should be suspended. I imagine others might feel sad, some of them who know her. And some of them will laugh about it. This issue is important because they need to stop talking about people. This issue affects our lives because some people will talk about them and they might feel bad and be offended. This issue exists because people hate her. She is talking bad about that person. I think they talk about people because they got in a fight or are enemies. What we can do at this school about this issue is to tell the principal or the teacher. Bringing the people that were fighting together to calm down and talk about the problem, be friends and respect each other. (fifth-grade girl)

“Writing on the Walls”

What I first see in the photos is writing on the walls. The issue is that a lot of people write on the walls bad words, like the “B” one. Also they write that people are ugly. It makes me think that there are a lot of people that are not respectful. I imagine that others will feel like me. Also, maybe some will not care because they did it. This issue is important because if people would not write on the walls, the school would look better. It will affect other people’s feeling because somebody wrote about them. This issue exists because a lot of people don’t care about school. They maybe don’t care about school because they don’t like school or they don’t care about other people’s feelings. To make it better we could talk to the principal about our putting posters at the school, to inform people not to write on the walls because they could get suspended. So, that will help a lot because people don’t want to get suspended. (fifth-grade girl)

After further dialogue, this YES! group wrote a skit about “Fighting and Bathroom Wall Writing” and presented it during several school assemblies. The girls decided to follow up on their skit with a “petition” stating, “Friendship is more important than writing on the bathroom walls. Sign here if you do agree.” The principal took the opportunity to lead a debriefing session at the end of each of the skits, asking the cast about their character’s motivation and the audience about their reactions to the play. Sixty-five students signed the petition, including all group members.

The Declaration of Litterization

At a third school, a social action project, aimed at a schoolwide playground cleanup campaign, originated from discussion about the following freewrite:

“Littering”

I see a lot of trash everywhere under the ramps. People put trash under the ramps so they won’t get caught, also, because it’s school property and that’s why they throw it under the ramps. It makes me feel sad because people litter in a clean country. I don’t know how others think because it’s their opinion. I think they feel the same because they might not like littering either. It makes our lives dirty and filthy. Also, when people come from another country they are going to say, “Oh my god, they don’t keep things clean.” Also, it would make everybody stink, like trash. Littering exists because, as a rule, people don’t know where to put trash if there isn’t a trashcan. It’s a

Figure 3
“Littering”



rule because people see people throwing trash around. What we can do is to have cameras around the school to see if people are littering. Also, have a patrolling teacher or security guards around the school. Also something we can do is to put signs around the school saying for everybody that you're going to get in trouble if you litter. (fifth-grade boy)

Participants in this group organized a schoolwide cleanup campaign by inviting other students to stay after school one day to help clean up the playground. Thirty-five students participated in the clean up, and gathered nine large bags of trash. They also took “before” and “after” photos that were included on a group-made poster for presentations to classrooms, during which they asked others to sign the “Declaration of Litterization,” a pledge to keep the playground clean. Eighty-one students signed the declaration.

Discussion

Although the groups experienced a sense of success with the completion of their projects, many of the projects did not achieve the anticipated depth of thinking and action. “The Scary Place” was one of the few projects in which the group actually conducted research to better understand the problem and the only group to ask the school district to address the problem. This school’s principal was an ally to the YES! groups. Both the litter and

bathroom projects did not address the source of their issues but acted to ameliorate the symptom. The litter project operated on the theory that the pledge would solve the problem and the bathroom project on the theory that once the bathroom was pretty, people would leave it that way. In contrast, the inherent theory of change of most of the projects (e.g., skits and posters) was that creating awareness would bring about behavioral changes. Although this approach has proven effective in some relatively straight forward adult education and public health campaigns (e.g., the “back to sleep” campaigns to prevent sudden infant death syndrome), the complexity of factors impacting on health and social behavior more often renders this approach overly simplistic.

Two aspects of the YES! program design and implementation clearly affected the results of the social action projects: the quality of facilitated group time and the amount of actual time participants spent in YES! groups. First, facilitators varied both in their ability to manage group behavior and in their ability to elicit and deepen participants’ critical thinking through group discussion (Wilson et al., 2006a). Second, the “yearlong” intervention was actually only about 40 hours, which proved to be inadequate to accomplish all the program goals (group bonding and efficacy, deep writing and discussion, and successful project design and completion) in some of the groups.

In addition to these programmatic shortcomings, the importance of modifying the Photovoice approach for use with early adolescents in an underserved community also became apparent in the course of this program. Considerations included addressing the cognitive developmental appropriateness of the method, managing social development and group issues, and intervening in the process of implementing social action.

Cognitive Appropriateness

When confronted with the difficulty our population had with the SHOWeD freewrite task, our first concern was that it might be ill suited to the group members’ levels of cognitive development. A “high-quality” freewrite and discussion ideally would (a) get below the surface description of a photographic image to describe the meaning of the picture as an asset or issue, (b) display thinking deeper than surface description of symptoms to analyze the social/political context that causes the situation, and (c) suggest an action step logically related to the problem and its cause(s). Some individuals in each group had great difficulty creating a sequential causal chain of events in the storyboarding activity and many participants tended

to produce discursive rather than analytical responses in the SHOWeD freewrites. However, the limited analytic thinking displayed in many SHOWeD freewrites may not be evidence that the students are too young developmentally. Cognitive capacity is a product of both internal development and environmental support (Feldman, 1994). As Rogoff (1998) notes, the capacity to learn is a "situated activity" that consists of an interaction between an individual and a context. Specifically, youth may exhibit more ability in an area with which they have familiarity and support. Because critical thinking often is not part of traditional educational method, especially with elementary school students, group members needed much more support in the YES! activities for this aspect of the work.

Social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1962) supported by current adolescent development research (Cole, 1996; Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984) maintains that cognitive performance can be coached to push development beyond what the individual would be capable of performing on his or her own. The evidence of the lack of analytic thinking displayed in many of the SHOWeD freewrites begs the question of whether these students lack stage readiness or do not experience pedagogy that encourages analytic thinking. In addition, given that many of the students are second-language learners, the quality of their freewrites may be the result of language issues rather than of cognitive development. YES! operated in underperforming schools, which have been under close scrutiny to follow a basic skills curriculum designed to improve scores on state achievement tests. Consequently, we noted that some students were excited to be able to share their ideas, whereas many others continued to try to figure out what the facilitator wanted as the "right answer."

Another contextual factor that affected the efficacy of using Photovoice was low participant motivation to engage in critical thinking. Interviews revealed that many of the participants expressed a strong belief in the importance of getting a good education and most aspired to attend college; however, many of the students disliked school. These students complained about YES! activities they thought were "schoolwork," particularly writing. Additionally, interviews revealed that a significant minority of boys found "discussions" undesirable for the same reason. Some facilitators found themselves negotiating with students to work on tasks in exchange for free time outside.

Another challenge to the use of SHOWeD was the logic of moving from description and analysis to the action or "What can we Do?" step of SHOWeD. As mentioned earlier, many had great difficulty understanding the idea of causation ("How does this affect our lives?"). This sometimes

resulted in ineffective analysis of the meaning behind the photograph. Facilitators sometimes compromised the Photovoice method by soliciting ideas from other students to augment what the actual photographer had written or said. This had the effect of asking the group to come up with plausible alternative interpretations of the photographer's issue or asset rather than beginning a critical dialogue to get a deeper understanding of the topic. In summary, it is simplistic to view cognitive development as an inherent limitation for the use of Photovoice for needs assessment in programs serving underserved early adolescents. However, to support their engagement, a program must accommodate their frequent lack of experience with critical thinking, resistance to writing, and negative attitudes toward school.

Social Development and Group Issues

Although the facilitators strove to engender an empowerment ethos of democratic collaboration, this goal often came into conflict with both group members' social agendas and their expectations about the role of authority. Driven by the early adolescent developmental task of identity formation, a preoccupation with peer approval, establishing dominance, ostracism, clowning, and putdowns were often in the foreground of group dynamics. Thus people might refuse to work with each other, sometimes resulting in denigration of each others' ideas during discussion and in verbal sparring or silencing of some voices. Male groups typically contained one or more members who were less socially immature and who provided silly or tangential responses during serious discussions, as well as others who seemed preoccupied with trying to leave the room to make phone calls, go to the bathroom, or spy on other groups. The mixed-gender sixth-grade groups often spent considerable time on their group dynamics and personal issues. In some groups, discussion was often more effective with cofacilitators each taking half the group, and planning worked better with pairs or triads to assigned tasks. However, especially in boy groups, partnerships sometimes had to be carefully matched up to avoid conflicts or degeneration into goofiness.

Moving From Critical Discourse to Social Action

We now turn our attention to an analysis of the final two steps of the Photovoice process—moving from critical discourse about the identified issues or asset and having the groups design a social action project. Given the issues discussed above, groups needed more extensive discussion time than anticipated to decide on a goal for their social action projects. Often a

topic that was initially selected evinced a limited understanding of the problem and would have resulted in a social action project that did not reflect the group's true concern—for example, focusing on a symptom (e.g., *How will we get rid of the graffiti on the wall?*) rather than the cause (e.g., *Why does the graffiti exist?*). Guided discussion was essential to clarify the identified asset or issue and to explore its social context beyond what had been identified through the freewrite.

In contrast to some other applications of Photovoice with early adolescents, which were designed to culminate in a photography exhibition (Strack & Magill, 2004), YES! was specifically interested in the potential of youth empowerment through group-determined design and implementation of an action plan. Ideally, this process would be entirely led by the group members. Thus, YES! was conceived to be more youth directed than approaches that use Photovoice to create photography exhibitions as the form of social action and less ambitious than using it to change social policy. In Wang's (2003) conception of Photovoice, the link to policy makers is essential. In the YES! program, however, because the school environment was the focus for social action, the groups reached their "local leaders" by presenting their program ideas for approval and support from their school's principal or afterschool program coordinator. Typically, these meetings did not involve discussions of policy per se.

YES! program staff found that facilitators needed to take responsibility to help the groups through each phase of social action, from framing the project to implementing it. Ten- to 12-year-olds did not possess the background knowledge to select topics that could feasibly be accomplished with the available time and resources. Whether they could gain this knowledge through investigative work was made moot by the time constraints of the project. For example, facilitators steered groups away from challenging school district budgets, the creation of organized sports teams at the end of the school year, or building new playgrounds because they felt these issues were either not winnable or too difficult for the groups to address. Where possible, groups were guided toward a feasible level of intervention through dialogue or the use of a set of criteria (i.e., importance, resources, cost, time frame, allies, and obstacles.)

In terms of choosing topics and developing social action projects based on Photovoice, it may be more appropriate to engage young participants in clarifying discussions about their actual identified assets and issues, rather than to probe for the "root cause" of the issue or asset. Although root causes such as racism and social injustice were addressed through group dialogue when they came up, helping groups find and carry out a project to address

a more concrete and winnable goal appeared more likely to help members achieve an increased sense of power and control.

The majority of social action projects that took place in YES! groups involved doing skits to communicate problems and solutions, or doing school cleanups or petition drives. For group members, success could be measured by the number of people convinced to participate. It may be that helping early adolescents choose a more concrete project reduces the potential for developing critical thinking. This is particularly true for Photovoice projects that have only one "round" of taking photos, student analysis, and action. However, as in the multiyear YES! program design, using multiple rounds provides opportunities to deepen the cycle of dialogue, reflection, and action.

Recommendations

Curriculum Planning

To bear fruit, the Photovoice process must be augmented by curriculum that supports its use. The youth in our study required both prewriting activities and modifications of the Photovoice freewrites to successfully generate a needs assessment for their social action. Creating the conditions for group efficacy, empowerment, and group bonding requires time for group formation and teambuilding activities, interpersonal problem solving, and group free time.

Facilitation

Facilitation for empowerment requires a diverse and demanding skill set, including motivating youth, incorporating program goals, time management, modifying curriculum based on the needs of the group, managing group behavior, instructing, and guiding critical dialogue. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on the selection and training of appropriate facilitators, training and supportive supervision of facilitators must be a high priority in Photovoice driven social action (see Wilson et al., 2006a).

Duration

Meeting weekly for 1.5 hours requires a large investment in human resources. Moreover, the Photovoice cycle of taking pictures, getting them developed, doing freewrites, and discussion can take a month. The kind of social action project that can be carried out in 6 weeks is necessarily quite modest in scope. A 2- to 3-month gestation for social action would provide a much more empowering experience but would also require more attendance commitment from youth. To create a longer timeline, a project could increase the frequency and/or length of the group meetings.

Conclusion

It's fun. It's something you can do when you're bored and a really good way for me to know about photography and help our community. . . . Social action means to help our community, not just thinking about it but doing it. (fifth-grade girl)

Our experience has demonstrated that the Photovoice approach provides an opportunity for youth to actively engage with their social environment through photography, participate in critical analysis, and take action to respond to the issues or assets they identify as important. As with all participatory action research approaches, Photovoice has to be adapted for its specific population and environment. When working with young adolescents, we have three specific recommendations. First, sufficient time and hands-on training should be allotted early on to help beginners experience success with picture taking by learning skills in silhouetting, close-ups, and so forth. Second, facilitators need to appreciate the challenge of "writing as thinking." One-on-one assistance is necessary to draw out developing writers to express their thinking in freewrites. Finally, facilitators must be able to balance the goal of allowing youth personal control and power with the need to provide guidance to avoid predictable failure. Bearing in mind these cautions, the Photovoice process does provide a rich tool for youth development. Furthermore, it offers a promising prevention approach by affording young adolescents the opportunity to experience participation and self-determination (voice and choice), to learn new skills, and to take action about things that, *from their own perspective*, affect their health and safety concerns in the community.

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