

Visual narrative: a technique to enhance secondary students' contribution to the development of inclusive, socially just school environments – lessons from a box of crayons

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This paper reports on a project that involved Australian secondary school students working as participatory researchers in collaboration with a researcher and two teachers. Research methodology using visual narrative techniques provided the students with a conceptual lens to view their school community. The examples of visual narrative shared in this presentation depict problems, contradictions of exclusion and celebrations of inclusion in the lived world of the students. Photographs combined with narratives represent students' views of their social, cultural and political environment. This project illustrates how the insights of students can help break down assumptions, values and meanings that block progress to achieving more socially just schools.

Despite continuing education policy and curriculum reform, many Australian secondary school students continue to experience inequality of opportunity and unequal social outcomes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000; Gore, 1998; Teese & Polesel, 2003). Australian Federal policy initiatives and state curriculum reform efforts mirror this international recognition of the power of education to deliver social justice in their focus on mitigating exclusion, discrimination and student disengagement through the development of inclusive, safe and supportive school environments (Department of Education Tasmania, 2000; Education Queensland, 2001; National Safe Schools Framework, 2003; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2004).

The process of review and development for more inclusive and socially just schools requires a culture where people are valued and treated with respect for their varied knowledge and experiences (Carrington, 1999; Carrington & Robinson, 2004; Moss, 2003). Over the last decade, there has been an increased focus in educational research on student voice in school reform and development (Levin, 1994; Raymond,

2001; Silva, 2001; SooHoo, 1993). Conceptual support for the principle of student voice and participation is particularly evident in the extensive literature on the middle years of schooling (Beane 1990; Hill & Crevola 1997; Russell, Mackay & Jane, 2003) and meaningful student involvement has been shown to be a powerful and effective force for school improvement (Flutter & Rudduck 2004; Rudduck & Flutter 1996). For example, a survey of Australian schools in 2002 (New South Wales Department of Education and Training Promoting Student Leadership in Schools, 2005) indicated that 100% of secondary schools and 78% of primary schools had a Student Representative Council (or school parliament in some primary schools). Some of these student representative councils are an integral and supported part of school decision-making processes, while others have a more restricted role, such as contributing to fundraising. When student councils effectively encourage student participation in school decision-making and provide them with real experience of democratic processes, the reported benefits include: (1) increased communication skills and improved academic performance for students involved in the process; (2) greater commitment to the school from the wider student body; (3) positive influences on the climate of the school; (4) strengthened school spirit; and (5) increased cooperation from students (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2005).

A recent study by Carrington and Holm (2005) indicates how the insights of students can help break down assumptions, values and meanings that block progress to achieving more inclusive, socially just schools. The differently constructed social relationships between students, teachers and parents in the reported study were a key catalyst for learning and planning for the future in less bounded and more community-focused ways (Mallory & New, 1994). A student forum and presentation to staff and parents implemented as part of a school review and development process enabled teachers, staff and parents to move beyond the traditional power relationships and encouraged the development of partnerships based on collective values and mutual respect.

This paper reports on the second stage of this school review and development project that explored students' use of photographs as a research strategy for understanding processes of inclusion and exclusion in their secondary school.

Research design

Research design translates epistemological principles into pragmatic decisions and explains the choices we make. (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998, p. 118)

The following discussion builds on the principles discussed in the first section of the paper to explain the choices made about methodology and methods. First, an overview of the secondary school will be presented.

The secondary school

Cotton Tree State High School (pseudonyms are used throughout the paper) is situated close to the heart of what is a rapidly developing regional hub in Queensland, Australia. The school has a special education unit supporting 33 students who have a range of disabilities, including intellectual disability, autistic spectrum disorder, physical impairment and speech language impairment. Of the student population, 3.5% are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and only 3.4% of families indicate that they speak a language other than English in their home (Filipino, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Indian). The number of students enrolled at the time was 468. Student learning outcome data from both primary feeder schools and the high school indicate the need for a different approach to engaging learners. A traditional Student Council has evolved into a strong and committed Student Management Team. This team currently consists of students from Years 10–12 and is growing to ensure students have an active voice in developing and refining school policies and procedures. The school principal of Cotton Tree State High School was looking for ways to facilitate active involvement of the Student Management Team that would challenge, excite and lead to new learning for all in the school community.

Methodology

Participatory action research is the overarching methodology used in this study. It is concerned with, first, creating knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people – in this case a school community; and second, to empower people – in this case a group of secondary school students, at a deeper level through the process of constructing and using their knowledge and understandings about how students are included and excluded in their school community (Reason, 1998). This approach assumes collaboration grounded in democratic values where students work with staff and the researcher in planning, data gathering, analysis and setting agendas (Carrington & Holm, 2005). Finding descriptions of how students have been involved in this type of research was difficult because 'very little literature has been available in the area of research methods which pupils can be in control of. Even if action research, where

practitioners set the research agenda, is used in schools, it is usually not the pupils who research their own situation in their workplace' (Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998, pp. 236–7). The focus in this project was to 'set out to find other possibilities of looking into the "inner world" of school from the pupils' perspective' (Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998, p. 236). This methodology acknowledges elements of individual and group social identity of students to highlight personal perspectives of school culture and relationships.

In recent years visual narrative has been used as a key data source in projects that aim to understand diversity and non-participation in learning in schools (Moss, 2001, 2003; Moss & Hay, 2004). Visual narrative using photography is an information-gathering process that can inform a conscious reflection on previously taken-for-granted assumptions. These visual images 'provide researchers with a different order of data and, more importantly, an alternative to the way we have perceived data in the past' (Prosser, 1998, p. 1). 'Images allow us to make statements which cannot be made by words' and these 'images enlarge our consciousness' (Harper, 1998, p. 38). 'In an action research context the photographs become an instrument for change because the photo documents are harder "facts" than individual expressions by pupils which often do not even reach the ears of the person in charge. In this form they become important pieces of testimony for living out forgotten (or suppressed?) reasoning' (Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998, p. 237). Furthermore, the use of image-based research can contribute to epistemological understandings that are potentially transformative for the researcher and the researched.

Research questions

Members of the school community known as Cotton Tree State High School were in the habit of describing themselves in an inclusive sense, as part of the 'Cotton Tree family' (for more details, see Carrington & Holm, 2005). One of the aims of this second stage of the project was to understand what this meant for students and to provide new knowledge that would inform future planning at the school: What did it mean to be included in the Cotton Tree Family? The second stage also provided an opportunity to take a critical look at exclusion at Cotton Tree State High School. What situations and experiences did students at Cotton Tree State High School describe as exclusive for young people? Wiedel (1995) in her chapter, 'Being There: Using Pictures to See the Invisible', suggests that photographs can be used to help understand life in schools and classrooms. She draws on the cartoon of Michael Leunig, 'The Understandascope' to illustrate the methodology used in her work. In the Cotton Tree State High School project we envisaged a group of students working with digital cameras as their 'Understandascopes'.

It was hoped that multiple threads of digital images supported by narratives would help the school community to continue the process of rethinking and future planning that was initiated in the first stage of the project for the review and development process (Carrington & Holm, 2005).

Figure 1: Michael Leunig, ‘The Understandascope’



Participants in the study

Fifteen students from Years 9–11 were invited to participate in this project. Some of the students had participated in the first stage of the project, which included a student forum and presentation, followed by a focus group interview with members of the school community (see Carrington & Holm, 2005). Some of the students were interested in multimedia studies and two students had disabilities. Two teachers assisted the researcher with the project and had significant roles in facilitation and support for the project which is described in detail below.

The researcher established the theoretical framework for the study: a social-cultural perspective of inclusion and exclusion that incorporates participatory socially just perspectives of school review and development. Interpretation of any photographic data requires a theoretical framework. This interpretative process takes place before the photographs were taken: What images will be selected? Who will take them? A framework also aids management of visual data by providing logic for sorting and categorisation.

The teachers' roles were not focused on directing students but rather on supporting and guiding technical processes. They did not seek to influence the students' choice of photo or their opinions on inclusion and exclusion. The teachers described themselves as 'acting as a sounding board for ideas and a "handrail" if you like. We provided guidance rather than instruction and preferred to encourage peer assistance'. When some students had difficulties, other students offered support and encouragement. This was particularly evident when students from the Special Education Unit needed assistance and encouragement with the phrasing of their responses to the photos and also with their on-camera speaking roles.

Data collection

Initially a meeting was held at the school between the researcher, teachers and students after information about the project and ethical clearance procedures were organised with the school principal. The researcher presented an

overview of the project to the participants and highlighted the research questions. The first expected outcome of the project was described as a set of digital photographs representing the students' views of inclusion and exclusion in their school community. The researcher suggested that the images may focus on identity, place in the group, social networks, class groupings, hierarchies and relationships, achievement, failure, support, learning, leisure, sport and spaces in the environment. In the meeting, students discussed these issues in small groups and shared examples back to the whole group. The second expectation of the project was that the students would write about their images or record an 'oral telling' to explain their interpretation of what they saw/felt at the time, or the messages they wished to convey through the visual images.

After the initial session, the teachers facilitated the progression of the project in the school. The students were given digital cameras and asked to capture events or images that were significant to them. The students, as photographers, demonstrated their understanding of the social-cultural perspective of inclusion and exclusion by the range of digital images selected and shared by individuals and groups. In-depth discussion captured via filming of group processes highlights students' understanding of the theoretical terms, inclusion and exclusion, that developed over time. Some students stayed with existing friendship groups to collect visual images while others established new partnerships based on shared understanding of inclusion and exclusion. Some individuals worked with no particular affiliation to any other students. These students sometimes attached themselves to different groups throughout the process. The images represent a sample of the students' reality of inclusion and exclusion in their school context.

Data management and data analysis

Images are, by their nature, ambiguous and do not in themselves convey meanings which are supplied serendipitally by those who perceive them.
(Prosser, 1998, p. 98)

How can visual images represent research findings in qualitative research? Once students had taken a number of photographs, they brought them to a classroom for printing and sorting. Student teams took anywhere from 15–30 photographs. The photographs were then pinned to notice boards around the classroom for display and discussion with fellow students. 'As a form of data, photographs are not capable of talking for themselves, the information has to be teased out of them, interpreted and decoded, this visual availability of the phenomena has to be unpacked' (Ball, 1998, p. 137). The students then chose photos that best represented their collective ideas of inclusion and exclusion. The students shared the narratives for each photograph and participated in rich dialogue about the social and cultural context of Cotton Tree State High School. A selection of photos from all groups/individuals with still and moving images was included in a DVD entitled 'Student Voices' (approximately 10 minutes in length). The two teachers,

with some assistance from students in media studies, filmed the students in various locations presenting their thoughts on the photos to ensure that each photograph was accompanied by a piece of narrative composed by the students to explain each image used in the DVD. For example, students chose poems, famous quotes, or chose their own words to encapsulate the meaning of the photos. The utilisation of various subtitles and phrases highlighted certain issues that may have been lost. Sifting through the photographs and editing the DVD further enhanced the participatory learning process.

Presentation of data

Seven photographs with accompanying narratives are presented in this paper. Approximately 200 photographs were taken in total with approximately 30 still images combined with video footage included in the 10-minute DVD.



Photograph 1 (Inclusion). We can all take a lesson from a box of crayons. Some are sharp, some are blunt, some have weird names, they all have different colours. They still learn to live in the same box. My opinion of this photo is that we, as a school, are like a community of crayons – all as one group working and getting along together.



Photograph 2 (Exclusion). If the doors were left open – it would attract more people to come into the Special

Education Unit (SEU). But the doors are closed which makes people feel afraid of the different people inside.



Photograph 3 (Exclusion). This is a photo of exclusion in the school because a student has been singled out. The boys in this photo have chosen to pick on this student because they think he can take a joke. But perhaps he can't.



Photograph 4 (Exclusion). Despite having 14 toilet cubicles available for girls there are only three cubicles opened each day. The 230 girls at the school are left wondering which toilets are opened today!



Photograph 5 (Inclusion). I think inclusion is when everyone is welcome. The good thing at this school is that teachers and students sit down and talk together at lunchtime.



Photograph 6 (Inclusion). We need to remember that some people need help to be included.



Photograph 7 (Inclusion). During assembly it doesn't matter what race you are or which grade you are in or if you are a person with a disability, everyone is treated equal.

Everyone is part of the Cotton Tree State High School family.

Discussion

Since organizational life is always constituted by multiple realities, taking photographs offers a challenging opportunity to bring to the fore the different layers of reality. (Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998, p. 246)

Young people are in the best position to give an authentic voice to their concerns and experiences (Freire, 1970) regarding schooling through their involvement in research and action. In this study, the research methodology of visual narrative highlighted student identity and culture issues related to inclusion and exclusion of this generation. The narratives indicate the deep but simple views of the students. The students want to be valued and respected and they want to be a part of a school community where they feel like they belong and can make a contribution. The focus is on relationships: relationships with peers and relationships with their teachers. These ideas resonate with the same issues that focus on respect and value of the members of the school community raised in a recent paper entitled 'Inclusive School Community: Why is It So Complex?' (Carrington & Robinson, 2006) and issues of who is included and who is excluded within education and society generally (Barton, 2003). The methodology that involved students working as researchers using visual narrative techniques enabled students to critique social values and school priorities and prompted them to think about what they wanted in an inclusive school. Through the use of the visual narrative techniques, the students were able to see and highlight inclusive characteristics of their school environment. They were also able to see and raise awareness of their concerns. As researcher and teachers, we observed students develop a greater commitment to social justice, human rights and civic action throughout the research process.

This project was very exciting for the students, the teachers, the researcher and the school principal. The DVD entitled 'Student Voices', a culmination of the work, has been presented successfully to audiences in forums in the UK and Australia.¹ A team of seven students presented their work at the Australian Association of Research in Education national conference in Melbourne in 2004. The students demonstrated confidence and pride on presenting their views of how their secondary school included and excluded young people. Their confidence in answering audience questions was astounding. This had truly been their project. The students were empowered to raise awareness of both systemic and social oppressive forces and to provide feedback on positive school cultural characteristics from their own perspectives. These experiences reflect that 'the heart of the idea of empowerment involves people coming into a sense of their

¹ The DVD entitled 'Student Voices' can be ordered through <http://www.capalabasc.eq.edu.au/>, please contact the school principal. Special thanks to the students involved in the project: Kaitlin, Emily, Michelle, Dale, Sam, Brendan, Alex, Gaylene, Martyn, Josh, Margaret, Julia, Dawn, Melissa and Jessica.

own power, a new relationship with their own contexts' (Fox, 1988, p. 2 cited in Lather, 1991). In addition, the success of 'Student Voices' and associated presentations in the various forums led to a higher level of respect for the students and their views about the environment and culture of the school. This resulted in times when teachers, students, the school principal, the researcher and various audiences discussed issues together that had never been discussed before.

Academically, the task required higher-order thinking incorporating critical perspectives and reflection of the social, cultural and political environment of school. Keeffe (2005) suggests that a critical thinker in an inclusive school is constantly reflecting on his or her own 'situatedness' or personal values and beliefs that create negative stereotypes. In this project, the students learned to unpack their thinking and scaffold their own thought processes in order to explain the narrative behind each photograph depicting inclusion and exclusion. They demonstrated deep, differentiated and sophisticated knowledge of the people and activities they investigated. The photographs and narratives demonstrate how 'the pupils have used the camera as a powerful instrument to freeze some of the different views and opinions about life in an institution like school' (Schatz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998, p. 246). Throughout the project, the teachers reported that they relied less on instruction *to* students and more on conversation *with* students. The teachers developed facilitation skills and learned how to 'step back' from the stereotypical teacher role to enable the development of positive, enduring relationships with the students. The project highlighted that students can steer their own learning adventure without 'top down' instruction.

Socially, the students established new relationships and learned to work collaboratively and flexibly under minimal supervision. Further to this, the DVD illustrates that the students realised their actions impacted significantly upon other students in both inclusive and exclusive ways. They also learned to recognise the signs of inclusion and exclusion in their school community. The completed DVD entitled 'Student Voices' provided a catalyst for discussion about the development of more inclusive schools, both in the school and outside of the school.

The construct of school as community, and in this case as a family, provides a powerful framework for looking at culture and practice and to help schools to more effectively meet the needs of students and teachers. Schools can be a place where students and staff care about and support each other, actively participate in and have influence on the group's activities and decisions, and feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group (Battistich, Solomon, Watson & Schaps, 1997).

An inclusive school community assumes democratic participation of stakeholders. Members of the school community create space to listen to the voice of all client groups. Active collaboration represents a range of interests and perspectives in decision-making. Although this study presents an attempt to involve student voice in school review and development, the obvious question is 'Whose voice is heard and whose voice is not heard?' Future studies need to focus on more equitable student participation to ensure all students have an opportunity to be heard in a safe environment. This will be a focus in upcoming research.

Issues of time and staff commitment need to be raised at this point of the discussion. It is clear that this type of work in a secondary school requires teaching staff who are interested in research and change, along with a principal who will ensure that the research is valued in the school community. The teaching staff were committed to exploring new ways of working with their students and were already challenging the traditional teacher–student power relationships. It is also important to acknowledge that the research team was one that grew out of a history of earlier work at the school where student voice had been a growing priority. Respect for students and their contribution is something that needs to develop over some time. It is evident that this project built on the outcomes of the first stage of the research (Carrington & Holm, 2005) by 'interrupt[ing] relations of dominance and subordination' (Lather, 1991, p. xvii) and enabled the research team 'to document what causes us to be what we are in schools, and hence, potentially, to change what we are' (Gore, 1998, p. 249). This is because the principal, teachers, students and researcher listened to and learnt from each other in new ways. We all developed a deeper level of respect for each other's perspectives and this provided an understanding of relationships and culture in secondary schools that had not been considered before. Hence students, teachers and principal were even more deeply committed to the ongoing development of an inclusive Cotton Tree State High School family.

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