Evaluation of a Photovoice pilot project for school safety in South Africa

Abstract

This study is a process evaluation of a Photovoice program, exploring issues of school safety in a public high school in a poor, peri-urban “township” of Cape Town, South Africa. Originally developed by Caroline Wang and colleagues, the Photovoice methodology allows participants to record aspects of their lives by taking photographs, which are then presented to an audience of community stakeholders with the aim of raising awareness and influencing policy.

The process evaluation is based on the facilitators’ notes, group discussions, photographs taken by students, notes from the community forum, transcripts of a focus group discussion held with the participants, and notes from interviews conducted with two teachers who attended the community forum. To measure the success of the program, we use outcomes from Catalani & Minkler’s Photovoice impact model, including (i) improved understanding of community needs and assets, (ii) greater individual empowerment, and (iii) action and advocacy to affect policy.

The evaluation shows that Photovoice can engage students to think critically about their environment, and raise awareness of school safety issues among teachers, parents, police officers, and community members. The extent to which the Photovoice project will lead to concrete changes in the school is still unclear.

This study is the first of its kind to demonstrate the potential for the Photovoice methodology to engage students and address issues of school safety in South Africa. It adds to a
body of literature which points to the promise of Photovoice methodology in engaging, raising awareness, and promoting change among often-silent populations.

*Keywords: Photovoice, South Africa, School Safety, Process Evaluation*
Background

School violence is a major issue in South Africa. A national survey of 12,794 primary and secondary school students revealed that 15.3% had experienced some form of violence at school, while 80% of principals surveyed reported that acts of physical violence between students had occurred at their schools in the previous year (CJCP, 2011). According to a report by the South African Human Rights Commission, school is the site most commonly reported in cases of assaults and theft of property against students, with 26% and 52.4% of these cases occurring on school grounds, respectively. Schools are also among the most common locations for sexual assault of students, with 21.1% of cases occurring at school. In general, physical and verbal bullying is pervasive, particularly in toilets and playing fields (SAHRC, 2008). In addition, weapons, drugs and alcohol are easily accessible to students, the presence of which fuels and exacerbates violent incidents on school grounds (CJCP, 2011).

The problem of school violence in South Africa is deep-seated, tied up in the country’s endemic poverty, unemployment, notions of masculinity which drive gender based violence, and high rates of alcohol use (Seedat et al., 2009). As such, any intervention hoping to reduce school violence must engage multiple actors to target these issues creatively, collaboratively and at a community level.

We piloted Photovoice, in hope that its emphasis on student empowerment and community collaboration would make it an effective method to begin to address these issues. While photography has been used as a participatory research method to study school safety in South Africa (Abrahams et al., 2006), our study is the first of our knowledge to evaluate the effectiveness of a school-based Photovoice program in South Africa. This paper sets out to
determine whether the photovoice methodology has the potential to engage and empower students, and to stimulate action on school safety.

Photovoice

As a means of fostering community empowerment and mobilization for change, the photovoice method of community-based participatory research has gained traction around the world (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Originally developed by Caroline Wang and colleagues in the mid-1990s, photovoice programs have been implemented in many sites spanning six continents (Catalani & Minkler, 2010) with populations ranging from transsexual adults in the United States (Hussey, 2006) to HIV-vulnerable teenagers in Botswana (Short, 2006).

The photovoice participatory research strategy is largely based on a Freirian concept of critical consciousness whereby even the most marginalized populations can engage with each other to reflect on their lives and mobilize to improve them. Through photovoice, participants are given the opportunity to record aspects of their lives using photography. The photographs are then presented to a target audience of community members with the aim of influencing policy and prompting concrete change (Wang, 1997). In their systematic literature review of 37 Photovoice programs in public health and related disciplines, Catalani and Minkler demonstrated that Photovoice programs typically lead to some or all of the following outcomes: (i) improved understanding of community needs and assets, (ii) greater individual empowerment, and (iii) action and advocacy to affect policy. While inconsistent reporting, vague descriptions of evaluation methods, and lack of community-level analysis in many of the studies limited the authors’ ability to fully gauge their efficacy, the review demonstrated that Photovoice programs
have shown promise in their ability to research and engage otherwise hard-to-reach populations (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

Given its past success as well as its emphasis on community participation and empowerment of otherwise silent populations, photovoice is a promising method for student-led initiatives in health and school safety. The student perspective is critical for an accurate understanding of physical and emotional hazards in a school environment. The photovoice method brings the student perspective to the fore, while also teaching students to advocate on their own behalves by encouraging engagement with the problems in their surroundings, and the generation of solutions.

Methods

Intervention

The Photovoice pilot program took place in a public high school in a poor, peri-urban “township” of Cape Town, South Africa. This particular school was selected for the pilot because of an existing working relationship between the researchers and the principal, and because it is situated in an area that experiences high levels of violence.

Before students were selected, the project was introduced to all grade 8 and 9 students. Those who were interested in participating put their names on a list. In total, 191 students from 12 classes volunteered to participate. From each of the classroom lists, names were picked out of a hat, until 4 boys and 4 girls each from grade 8 and 9 were randomly identified. Selected students were then given more details on the project, and consent forms were administered. One
parent or guardian of each student also gave their informed written and verbal consent for their child’s participation.

The study took place during 8 one-hour sessions after school hours, two sessions per week over four weeks. Sessions were conducted in both English and Xhosa, the home language of the students. The content of the eight sessions is described in Figure 2.

The final photovoice forum took place at the school in the week after the final session. About thirty people attended including the principal, parents, teachers, two officers from the local police station, three representatives from the provincial education department, a member of the School Governing Body, two members of the student government and a community activist. The students presented their photographs in a PowerPoint presentation, along with additional commentary for each slide.

Process Evaluation

The process evaluation of the Photovoice program is based on notes taken by the facilitator after each session, content of the group discussions during the sessions, photographs taken and selected by students, stories written by the students based on the photographs, notes from the community forum, transcripts of a focus group discussion held with the participants following the program, and notes from interviews conducted with two teachers who attended the community forum. The focus group discussion with participants was held in Xhosa and facilitated by a trained researcher and observer. The discussion was audio taped, transcribed, and translated into English.

As a framework for measuring the success of the program, we use the outcomes from the Photovoice impact model (Figure 1; Catalani & Minkler, 2010). As detailed by Catalani and
Minkler (2010), improved understanding of community needs and assets pertains to “photovoice partners, service providers, local policy makers and other influential community members, and the broader community,” and is made possible by the Photovoice methodology’s “unique capacity to engage hard-to-reach groups and to elicit open and honest conversation” (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Action and advocacy includes exhibitions of Photovoice photographs for the broader community, as well as “participant-led action initiatives inspired by Photovoice findings”. The individual empowerment outcome is variously defined as an “increased sense of control over their own lives” (Foster-Fishman et al.,) and the generation of “a social process of critical consciousness and active grassroots participation” (Carlson et al., 2006).

Results

A review of session content, forum notes, focus group discussion and teacher interviews reveal that the Photovoice program led, in varying degrees, to a greater understanding of the school’s needs and assets, empowerment of the individual participants, and action and advocacy to affect policy.

(i) Understanding of community needs and assets

Through the Photovoice sessions, students examined what makes them feel safe and unsafe in their school environment, and conveyed these ideas to a group of community stakeholders during the forum.

A primary theme was the presence of ‘gangsters’ and ‘gangsterism’ on school grounds. Several students at the school are affiliated with gangs in the community, and the participants
attributed most of the unsafe places and events on school grounds to them. Bullying also emerged as a primary form of violence occurring at school, whether in the form of theft of money and school supplies, verbal abuse, or students forcing others to smoke cigarettes. Bullying is particularly a problem during lunchtime, when some students harass others to get their food first. The toilets were also cited to be a hotbed of bullying, as students camp there to smoke and skip class, and to hassle other students when they enter.

Students mentioned that people outside of the school threw stones over the gates, and that non-student gangsters and thieves sometimes jumped over the fence into the school on nights or weekends in order to steal property.

Participants reported that they generally felt safe in spaces that are central and well supervised, including the main courtyard, classrooms, the staff offices and the library. Participants also reported feeling safe when teachers and bambanani (volunteer security guards) were around. However, other participants reported that they didn’t feel safe even under these circumstances. Bullies reportedly steal school supplies or pick fights in classrooms even with a teacher present, and bambanani aren’t always monitoring the spaces where unsafe activity takes place, such as in the school assembly hall or toilets.

Participants generated a list of potential solutions to the problems they identified in their school environment. These included hiring more bambanani to patrol problem areas, and better informing teachers and the principal of problems on school grounds. Students also recommended reporting matters to the police so that they could target their roots in the community (i.e. investigating who is selling cigarettes to the students). The participants also emphasized that the perpetrators of unsafe activities must not be treated too harshly, and should rather be sent to social workers, as these students may have problems at home which lead them into troublesome
behavior. Some felt that the stealing and bullying could be curbed by giving the perpetrators ‘special stationary and food for their home.’

During the forum, students had the opportunity to present these issues and solutions to a group of community stakeholders, who left with an enhanced understanding of the problems facing the school. Following the presentation, many of the attendees expressed dismay that the problems were happening to such a degree on school grounds. There was, however, some tension between the students’ perspectives on feeling unsafe, and assertions from the principal and a teacher that “everything is under control”. The latter parties were concerned that the problems with the school were being overstated, while others, including several student government members, reasserted that these problems are pervasive, and that teachers do not always know what is going on among students.

In general, most of the forum attendees felt they had gained important insights into the goings-on of the school and were more aware of the nature and scope of these issues. During a follow-up interview, one of the teachers stated that Photovoice “functioned as a mouthpiece for students”, and both teachers agreed that they hadn’t been aware of the extent of the problems and how they affected the students prior to the forum.

The program also led to an enhanced understanding of these issues among staff members in general, as the principal reported back to all staff members during a meeting the following day. According to one teacher, staff members were shocked at what the students had found.

However, the program had very little reach into the general student body. Various participants mentioned that some students who were aware of the program felt jealousy or even hatred towards the participants. One participant noted that classmates initially thought that they
were getting money for taking pictures. Still, both teachers felt that the vast majority of students had no idea the program was going on at all.

The teachers and participants cited a success of the Photovoice project to be the facilitation of parent involvement in the school. One teacher emphasized how nice it was to see so many parents at the community forum, as it is typically difficult to get parents engaged in school activities. Some participants also mentioned that their parents were interested in the project prior to the forum, checking in regularly about its progress.

In addition to raising awareness, the community forum allowed the attendees to discuss appropriate solutions for identified problems. All concurred that the problems at school stemmed from problems at home, and that any action taken must be community-based. They agreed that outreach programs should target young and single parents in particular. A community activist offered to bring a program to the school to rehabilitate gang members, which had been successfully piloted at another township high school.

While the forum was successful at heightening awareness of many of the school and community’s needs, Photovoice was not able to bring all issues of student safety to the fore. Not once during the photovoice sessions were intimate partner violence and/or sexual harassment mentioned, although these are pervasive issues among South African youth (Swart et al., 2002). During the focus group discussion, several students reported their discomfort in raising these issues despite knowing that incidents of sexual harassment and dating violence are happening at their school. These students feared that the principal or their parents would judge them harshly, assuming that they were coming to school “for relationships, not education”, should they discuss these problems. Sexual violence is a critical and pervasive matter in South African schools, and
this Photovoice program was not successfully structured to allow students to discuss or present it during the forum.

(ii) Individual empowerment

Photovoice gave participants the opportunity to engage in a process of critical consciousness. The sessions stimulated dialogue between students on their concerns about school safety, and spurred debates on the efficacy of various solutions, such as more surveillance cameras in the classrooms or addressing deeply-rooted social issues. The students’ emphasis on counseling and tackling ‘problems at home’ as answers to bullying demonstrated their complex understanding of the issues that plague their school and community.

The Photovoice project opened up a unique opportunity for learners to have their voices heard by a group of adults. All of the participants agreed that the forum was their favorite part of the project, as they were excited to have all of the stakeholders, particularly the principal, listening to them. Many also expressed their excitement at being able to present in front of their parents specifically. While some of the students also felt anxious during the forum, finding the presence of the principal to be threatening, nearly all stated that the Photovoice program taught them presenting and public speaking skills.

Forum attendees continuously expressed their pride at seeing students speak their mind in front of a room of adults. Many emphasized how unique it was for the students’ to “stick up” for themselves in this way, and felt it should happen more frequently, since students have invaluable insight into what is going on at school.

However, the Photovoice program did not seem to give participants greater control over their environment. Both teachers reported disappointment with the direction of the group
discussion following the students’ presentation at the forum. Both felt that some in attendance were too insistent on stating that ‘things were under control,’ taking agency away from the presenters, rather than accepting the issues and working to address them collaboratively with student input. One teacher mentioned that she would have liked to see more discussion between the students and the audience following the presentation.

(iii) Action and advocacy to affect policy

The Photovoice program included a community presentation and discussion. However, the program did not necessarily lead to any concrete policy change or follow-up program in the school. At the end of the forum, the principal stated that he would consider in the coming weeks how to forward the aims of the project, whether the participants and the forum attendees would be incorporated into an existing committee, or whether a new panel would be created. However at the time of follow-up, no such action had been taken.

Both of the teachers felt that the project did not see adequate follow through. As one said:

“Yes, (Photovoice) is one effective way of giving students a voice, but it is essential to follow it up with concrete steps to see how their recommendations can be seriously looked at.”

Both teachers agreed that there must be continued opportunities for students to voice their concerns and participate in relevant programs, as photovoice shouldn’t simply be “a once off thing”. Without any follow-through, they felt that the school was currently “back to square one”.
Interestingly, many students remarked during the focus group that the Photovoice project had made an impact in their school, since the *bambanani* began to patrol the areas that the students had identified as unsafe, and fewer students were smoking in the toilets. However, when asked about these changes, the principal reported that he had not instructed the *bambanani* to change their stations. It therefore seems that participation in the photovoice project left the students with a more positive perception of safety in their school, and their ability to make a difference, whether or not it spurred actual change.

In general, neither students nor the teachers we re entirely confident that the Photovoice program would be able to make substantial changes in their school environments. The participants felt that time allocated to the project was too little and that a longer program could have brought deeper and more sustainable change to the school.

**Discussion**

*Limitations*

Our evaluation extended to only six weeks following the forum. It is possible that the project will have more concrete outcomes in the coming months. In addition, this evaluation was based on a limited amount of interviews with the participants and two teachers. Interviews with other forum attendees may have revealed more about the impact of the project.

The Photovoice project might not accurately reflect the situation of school and community safety, in that participants were given the option to ‘stage’ photographs. This meant to enable the students to present unsafe situations without having to put themselves at risk. It is possible that staging photographs led to fabrication or over-exaggeration of events. However,
given that various forum attendees stood behind the students’ claims, we doubt that such fabrication has occurred.

The Photovoice project also did not reflect and sexual violence occurring at school despite that in the evaluation, students mentioned it as a problem. In the future, facilitators need to sensitively facilitate the discussion of sexual violence and manage the manner in which students represent such problems to the forum.

Important to note is that some participants did not always feel safe while taking pictures on school grounds; one participant mentioned that other students “hated” them for “exposing what they do”. Several of the participants’ parents also worried about the safety of their children while taking pictures around school grounds, with one even calling her child a “spy”. While most participants felt safe taking pictures, and no serious incidents occurred, this is a potential risk that needs to remain at the center of any Photovoice program. A more thorough presentation of the project to the student body before its implementation may have prevented misunderstandings and animosity towards participants. It also may be prudent for students to photograph along with an adult chaperone. Facilitators and participants need to have an in-depth conversation about the risks of taking photographs, including what specific subjects or areas to avoid, and how to creatively rethink or reframe photographs to avoid danger.

Conclusions

This study is the first of its kind to demonstrate the potential for the Photovoice methodology to engage students and address issues of school safety in South Africa. It adds to a growing body of literature which points to the promise of the Photovoice methodology in engaging, raising awareness, and promoting change among often-silent populations. In line with
Catalani and Minkler’s review, this study adds to the evidence that Photovoice can be successfully tailored to diverse populations, subject matters, and locations, high school students, school violence and South Africa included.

The process evaluation shows that the project can successfully engage and empower students to think critically about their environment, and raise awareness of school safety issues among teachers, parents, police officers, and community stakeholders. The extent to which this one instance of intra-community collaboration and engagement will lead to concrete changes is still unclear. While the awareness raised and engagement fostered may lead to new policies or behaviors on the part of various stakeholders, a Photovoice project needs to build in a more active follow-up if it wishes to make more timely and concrete change in schools and communities.

The opportunity for students to reflect on the problems in their school and community and speak their mind in front of adults is exciting and unique, both in and beyond the South African context. Given the gravity of school violence around the world, and the need for innovative interventions, the Photovoice methodology should be considered as an intra-community and student-centered approach to addressing safety.
Acknowledgements:

The full title of the project is: ‘‘Promoting sexual and reproductive health among adolescents in southern and eastern Africa – mobilising schools, parents and communities’’. Acronym: PREPARE. The PREPARE study is funded by the EC INCO research programme (under the 7th Framework Programme). Grant Agreement number: 241945. The partners and principal investigators include: University of Cape Town (Cathy Mathews), Muhimbili University College of Health Sciences (Sylvia Kaaya), University of Limpopo (Hans Onya), Makerere University (Anne Katahoire), Maastricht University (Hein de Vries), University of Exeter (Charles Abraham), University of Oslo (Knut-Inge Klepp), University of Bergen (Leif Edvard Aarø – coordinator). See also the project homepage http://prepare.b.uib.no/
References


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Figure 1: Photovoice Impact Model (Catalani & Minkler, 2010)

Figure 1. Photovoice impact model.
<table>
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<th>Stage</th>
<th>Content</th>
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| Session 1: Intro to Photography | a) Icebreaker activity  
b) Project introduction  
c) Group brainstorms project goals and guidelines  
d) Introduction to photovoice methodology (worksheet)  
e) Introduction to photography: basic functions of a camera, discussion of literal vs. non-literal photographs |
| Session 2: Story Telling with Photographs | a) Icebreaker activity  
b) Revisit foundations of photovoice, photo ethics  
c) Story telling PowerPoint: students look at photographs, discuss what stories they tell, ways to tell stories through pictures  
d) Story telling activity: small groups are given a ‘story’ to illustrate through a photograph (i.e.: some students disrespect the teachers). Groups take at least 2 different photos to tell their story. Groups reconvene, to present and discuss photographs. |
| Session 3: Group discussion and Risk mapping | a) Group Discussion on school safety: What does it mean to feel safe? What in your life/community/school makes you feel safe/unsafe? What contributes to violence in your school/community? What do you want your parents/teachers/principal to know about your school? etc.  
b) Risk mapping activity: students mark safe and unsafe places with stickers on a printed map of their school  
c) Preparation for photo-taking: students are split into groups and reminded of photo ethics and ground rules for school-day picture taking  
*Students take pictures during the school day before session 4.* |
| Session 4: Photographing | a) Group check-in: questions or concerns from school-day picture taking are addressed  
b) Students photograph school grounds  
c) Facilitator uploads photographs to laptop, and students reflect on how photos can be taken more effectively, what stories are being told, what themes have yet to be captured, etc.  
*Students take pictures during the school day before session 5.* |
| Session 5: Photograph selection | a) Group check-in: questions or concerns from school-day picture taking are addressed  
b) Group looks through photographs, which have been uploaded and grouped by theme (bullying, smoking, etc). Group picks photographs that they want to present at the forum. |
| Session 6: Photovoice caption writing and discussion | a) Small versions of the photographs are printed, and each is paired with a caption-writing worksheet  
b) In groups of 2-3, students select a few of the photographs and fill out the worksheet (*What do you see in this picture? Tell me the story of this photo, as it relates to your lives. What can we do to address the issues in this photograph?*)  
c) Each photograph is presented, and the group has a chance to add...
<table>
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<th>Session 7: Photovoice caption writing and discussion</th>
<th>Continued from session 6, until all photographs are processed by the group</th>
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| Session 8: Preparation for forum | *Before session, facilitators create a PowerPoint with the students’ photos and accompanying stories, followed by their list of solutions. Facilitators print out a copy of the slides.*  
  a) Students choose which slides they will present, and practice their presentation  
  b) Public speaking tips are discussed |
| Forum | a) Photographs and risk map are on display  
  b) Facilitators introduce project, and students introduce themselves  
  c) Students present their photos and solutions  
  d) Facilitated group discussion on reactions to photographs, potential solutions, ways to move forward |
“This is the place where the gangsters chill. Students who usually sit there are dangerous and they always try to prove that they are the best. In this place there are no teachers so they are taking advantage, trying to take your money or sending you to the shop or trying to start a fight. This is the smoking place.”
“We are safe because we have security inside the school because they are against crime. They protect us from gangsterism and bullying. They catch students that are smoking in the toilet. They watch our school and protect it.”
Figure 5: Student photograph

“The students are smoking inside the school. They become high and misbehave in class. They say, ‘smoke,’ and if you don’t they will fight you or stab you. They say, ‘light the cigarette,’ and if you don’t want to, they say, ‘I will slap you after school.’ Try to smoke and you will be a man. If you don’t try, you will be a mofi.”