

“WHY WE DON’T GO TO SCHOOL ON FRIDAYS” ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION THROUGH PHOTO VOICE IN RURAL KWAZULU-NATAL

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ABSTRACT. In this article, we draw on the example of the Friday Absenteeism Project, a photo voice project with sixth grade learners in a rural KwaZulu-Natal school, to interrogate the nature of participatory process and cultural production. In so doing, we explore a number of critical issues related to youth participation, including ethics, citizenship and democracy, false promises, life skills and youth participation, links to media, edutainment, art and social change, participation, and taking action.

« POURQUOI NOUS FAISONS L'ÉCOLE BUISSONNIÈRE LE VENDREDI »
PARTICIPATION DES JEUNES QUI VEULENT SE FAIRE ENTENDRE PAR
LA PHOTOGRAPHIE AU KWAZOULOU-NATAL RURAL

RÉSUMÉ. Dans cet article, nous nous fondons sur l'exemple du projet Friday Absenteeism (absentéisme du vendredi), un projet qui donne un appareil photo à des élèves de sixième année dans une école rurale du KwaZoulou-Natal dans le but de se faire entendre. Nous nous interrogeons sur la nature du processus participatif et de la production culturelle. Ainsi, nous explorons un nombre de questions critiques liées à la participation des jeunes dont l'éthique, la citoyenneté et la démocratie, les fausses promesses, les connaissances pratiques et la participation des jeunes, les liens avec les médias, le divertissement éducatif, l'art et le changement social, la participation et l'action concrète.

[HIV/AIDS] may well force adults to re-conceptualize the ways in which children and childhood have thus far been described, and may force a space where children's power is recognized.... Prevalent notions of the authority of adulthood may be reshaped by the fact that very young people will be the majority of the survivors in places where the AIDS pandemic results in widespread deaths of productive men and women. It will often devolve on youths to devise ways of constituting forms of sociability, responsibility and the protection of younger children. (Henderson, 2003, p. 8)

In this article we take up some of the challenges presented by the South African anthropologist Patty Henderson in relation to the participation of young people in addressing key issues in their daily lives in the age of

AIDS. Henderson is describing a situation that is common in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa where the effects of orphaning due to HIV and AIDS, poverty, social inequalities, unequal distribution of resources in schools and communities, and so on are ever present in the lives of children. A recent study of education in rural communities (*Emerging voices: A Report on education in South African rural communities*, Mandela Foundation, HSRC, and Wits EPU, 2004) explores the complex interplay between poverty, underdevelopment, and achievement in schools. Conducted in three provinces, and with over four thousand respondents, the study examined barriers to learning and opportunity, and generated strategies to deal with challenges associated with the Apartheid legacy which is perpetuated and attenuated as a consequence of rural impoverishment. The report's major finding is that "the great majority of the children in rural poor communities are receiving less than is their right" (Ludman 2005, p. 1), with several factors serving to prevent them from being adequately educated. These include the exploitative (even if unintentional) labour expected from children by rural parents, the arduous travel and danger children face in getting to and from school (girls may be raped on the way to school; children can be killed crossing busy highways that separate their community and the school), HIV and AIDS, orphaning, poverty, food scarcity, parental/community illiteracy (65% of sample), uneven school provision, and the uneven distribution of resources. These factors also include the sometimes adverse and negative perception of the value of education, especially for girls, something that is supported for example by the "scared at school" report by Human Rights Watch (2001) which documents cases of male teachers sexually abusing girls, and the practice of "jack rolling" (gang rape) of girls on their way to school.

Clearly, there is no single solution. However, as teacher educators who work in the areas of media, language, and curriculum in South Africa, we are committed to seeing if and how the work that we do in our university classrooms in relation to teachers as cultural producers can translate into social change in local schools. (See also Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). In particular, we are interested in the ways in which young people become cultural producers and the links between cultural production and youth participation. Following from Henderson, though, we are also interested in such constructs as "cultural production" or "participation" within the social context of growing up in the age of AIDS. Our focus here is on the use of photo voice in relation to cultural production and participation, drawing in particular on the work of Wendy Ewald (2001) and Caroline Wang (1997), who have focused on photo voice methodologies. What do participants do with cameras, and how do they work with the photograph? The project we describe here – the Friday Absenteeism Project – is based on giving rural sixth grade students simple "point and shoot" cameras to document the social conditions around them. The idea for doing this comes out of a graduate

course in which teachers in the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Cinematic, Documentary and Television Texts) used visual methodologies such as photo voice and video documentary to explore the whole notion of participation and “taking action.” As we describe in the next section, an action research intervention was designed by Callistus, a principal of the school, as a result of having been involved in documentary production in the course.

Friday absenteeism: “Where are the learners?”

Callistus, in his role as a principal of a primary school in rural KwaZulu-Natal, has identified the poor attendance of grade six learners on Fridays as a key issue in his school. His school, about an hour’s drive north and inland from Durban, serves a large number of children who live in an informal settlement. The school is not in an area which might be described as “deeply rural,” but rather borders on a zone of small factories and light industry. There are many interruptions to school and the children may miss school for a variety of reasons including caring for a sick parent or younger siblings. These are conditions that are now the norm in a province that has the highest incidence of HIV and AIDS in the country. As Henderson has pointed out, the burden of the disease often falls to children. That they are not in school on Fridays, though, presents yet another challenge. Callistus and the other teachers in the school know why the children miss school; they don’t know, however, what to do about it. Friday is market day and many of the children in senior primary grades, all 12 or 13 years old, are able to work in the market. And while the pay is small (it may be as little as a few rand – a dollar or so), it is still more than they would have if they didn’t work in the market on Friday. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that market day is on a Friday and the beginning of the weekend. The school had a feeding scheme but only during the week.

While there are a variety of approaches that Callistus might have taken to address the problem (including doing nothing, given the range of administrative and social issues that confront school principals), his participation in the course noted above on cinematic and documentary texts has given him the idea of the transformative potential of working with the visual. In that course, he was part of a group video-making project as well as a project on photo documentary.¹ Interestingly, it is a class screening of the film *City of God*, he says, set in a favela of Brazil that inspires him to embark upon the Friday Absenteeism Project. The *City of God* story, told through the narration of a young man who escapes gangster life to become a photo-journalist, gives Callistus the idea that the young people he works with could similarly be empowered to expose the world around them through photography.

The project begins with a consultation with the teachers in the school. Callistus organizes the work around five sessions:

- Session one is a brainstorming session on the challenges as the children see them, coupled with a short introduction to photography. Callistus observes that he presented a few ideas on angles and shots and then showed the children how to operate the cameras.
- Session two is a photo-shoot where Callistus accompanies the children into their own informal settlement to document the problems that they see around them.
- Session three is a photo-shoot in the market. Again the principal accompanies the learners.
- Session four and five give the learners an opportunity to work with their photographs. As we describe elsewhere (Delange et al, in press), the children not only spend time looking closely at their photographs, but also “work with the photographs” producing, for example, photo posters that document what they see as some of the key issues. In producing these photo posters children select photographs that they think are particularly representative or “critical” and also write short captions for each. (See also the International Visual Methodologies Project www.ivmprojct.ca).

What the children find

In this section we draw attention to the some of the issues revealed in the photographs and photo poster narratives. What becomes immediately evident through the photographs and captions is that alcoholism is a key issue in the informal settlement where they live. In fact, some of the photographs show adults of the community inside a shebeen (bootlegger). As the caption on one of their photos reads:

If we look at these people who are living in this shack, they are drinking alcohol. They are not working. The school child cannot survive in this condition.
(Figure 1)

Another photograph shows the effects of high levels of unemployment with several adults whom one might expect to be working, simply in despair, sitting on their front step in the middle of the day. Other pictures draw attention to the need for housing (Figure 2), the lack of clean water and sanitation, and highlight the danger to children of even coming to school because they have to cross a wide highway. What the pictures do, more than anything, is draw attention to the effects of poverty, and provide visual evidence of why children as young as 11 or 12 must supplement the family income or miss school to take care of younger siblings. As the students note:

This photo shows us the rate of children who are absent from schools. These children are absent because they have to look after their baby sister or brother while their parents are working.

“Why we don’t go to school on Fridays”



FIGURE 1. No jobs



FIGURE 2. Free government houses



FIGURE 3. More factories needed



FIGURE 4. Bridges needed

“Why we don’t go to school on Fridays”

The children in the project also take pictures which suggest answers. They photographed, for example, a factory and call for the building of more factories:

This picture is the suggested solution in creating job opportunities. If there can be more factories like the photo, many people will be able to solve their domestic problems. (Figure 3)

They also take a picture that identifies the danger of crossing railways and highways:

It is the solution of a bridge because children when they come to school they know to walk on the bridge. If the bridge does not exist the children they will walk on the train road. (Figure 4)

Their photographs of the market are also revealing for there they have “captured” their own peers at work, as well as images of the adults who run the market and who are trying to make a living. The “photo journalists” interview some of their school mates who they see in the market and discover that one of the seventh-grade girls from their school is there because she is being sexually harassed by the teacher; her solution is simply to absent herself (and earn money). The children also take pictures of learners from nearby schools, demonstrating that Friday absenteeism is a widespread problem in the district.

As one group writes of a boy who just happens to be in the market on his way to Durban:

He absented himself from school because they had a trip to Durban. He decided to look for a part-time job because he needs the money. He has no parents. (Figure 5)



FIGURE 5. Child support grant

Follow-up

Drawing from this rich “insider data,” Callistus was able to do several things, ranging from disciplining the offending teacher, to raising the issue of absenteeism with other principals at the district level, to planning for a community-based stakeholders forum where the children could present their “this is how we see it” posters. And one of the best follow-up actions to this particular project is that there is now a feeding scheme on weekends as well. The intervention serves as an example of the ways in which principals and school management teams in South Africa must, as part of their responsibilities of running an efficient and socially and educationally sound institution, understand how to act in lobbying and advocacy roles. Callistus’ school, for example, is registered as a Section 21 (not-for-profit) company that can approach donors and corporate funders in order to attract financial support for feeding schemes, computers, repairs to the buildings and so on. Callistus has already been able to attract donor support to set up a computer lab but still needs to find ways of ensuring that there is a trained staff member who can manage the lab. What is unique about the Friday Absenteeism Project in his school is its involvement of the children themselves, often the “invisible stakeholders,” as McIntyre (2005) describes children as participants in social and political action.

Youth participation and cultural production: Some critical issues

We have described elsewhere some of the practical issues of doing photo-voice work with children (Mitchell et al, 2005a), and in another article where we describe our work with teachers and community health workers, we talk about some of the issues around ownership of the photographs, positionality and so on (Mitchell et al, 2005b).² Here, however, we want to return to Henderson’s discussion of the changing place and responsibilities of children by looking at ethical issues (including safety), the contribution of children to policy making, and about participation more broadly.

Ethics

We start with ethics because ethical issues tend to be what most adults bring up first in relation to children’s participation, particularly in working with the visual. Given the significance of the emerging agenda on the participation of children and young adults in addressing violence against children globally, it is critical to work out the ethical issues. How, for example, do we ensure that our well meaning interventions as adults do not in any way further endanger the lives of young people? In the case of the Friday Absenteeism Project, the principal accompanied the children to the informal settlement and to the market, and indeed observed that in the market at least, some of the stall owners were angry that their pictures were being taken. The principal explained to the hawkers and stall owners what the project was about – and

also noted that he explained to the children that photo-journalism could be dangerous. "I told them about the dangers," he said, "and that journalists could be injured or lose their lives taking pictures."

While this could be seen merely as a "crash course" in media ethics, the issues were very real since the safety of the child photographers was crucial. While we do not know if the principal's explanation fully satisfied the marketers who, after all, are also trying to make a living (and are from the community themselves), we can see that there is a type of social advocacy underway for the rights of children at work. It may be that as we look at new roles for teachers as community workers in rural areas, the notion of child advocacy also needs to be factored in. The fact that the market is close to the school may mean that in the future there could be some positive relationships between the school and the market. At the same time, there is still the possibility that the intervention will be seen to be exploitative. A criticism of the *Born into Brothels* project based on *Kids With Cameras* work is that these interventions may be regarded as their own form of exploitation, particularly when adults recognize that it is impossible to achieve any sort of insider status without the assistance of children.³

Citizenship and democracy

Can children's voices contribute to policy making? To what extent are adults "using" the voices of children? Does the end justify the means? As we describe elsewhere in an analysis of the use of children's drawing of sexual violence in the video documentary *Unwanted Images: Addressing gender based violence in the new South Africa* (Mak, 2001), to what extent are we re-positioning children in some sort of "from the mouths of babes" place in order to make a point? (See Mitchell, Walsh, & Larkin, 2004). The principal in this case may well have been able to speak at a district meeting about the problems and issues. However, the fact that the children themselves have produced documentary evidence makes the stories more authentic. That the children wanted to exhibit their posters for the benefit of a whole range of stakeholders suggests that they themselves are learning something about citizenship and democracy.

False promises?

Are we romanticizing participation? One concern that Ennew (1994,1998) has raised in her work with street children is that we not promise more than we can deliver. What does it mean to children themselves to participate and what do they expect will come out of participating, and what happens if nothing happens? We know that change can be very slow and we also know that there is a limit to what one principal working in a rural environment with one group of sixth graders can do.

As Helen Roberts (2003) observes:

We cannot always guarantee, of course, that listening to children (or adults) will result in improved policies, or indeed will result in any change whatsoever. On occasions consultations will come up with suggestions which for one reason or another (sometimes rather good reasons) will not be implemented. (p. 32)

A related criticism might be that interventions such as The Friday Absenteeism Project is just a “one shot.” In this case, however, the principal of the school still has the power to give children the opportunity to speak out on other matters (school safety, the environment, and so on), so that the point is to see something like the Friday Absenteeism Project as part of a process, rather than as an isolated case.

Youth participation and life-skills

How does this kind of work contribute to the literature on child participation, and should it be built in as a life skill for young people growing up in rural KwaZulu-Natal? If Henderson is right, and we need to acknowledge the “changing times” for childhood, then programs that highlight participatory processes are essential. In a related way, the Population Council has been developing a program on financial management for young people in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Offering the pilot project as part of an AIDS intervention, their rationale is that young people increasingly are heading up households and that financial management is a strategy against sexual exploitation and transactional sex (Kelly Hallman, personal communication). Clearly there is a critical link between HIV & AIDS and traditional school subjects, such as mathematics.

Youth participation and edutainment

Elsewhere we have described the sheer “joy factor” of participating in photography projects (Mitchell et al, 2005a; Stuart & Moletsane, 2005). The photographs that we have collected of children engaged in picture-taking and picture-viewing are visual testimonies to total absorption in making meaning. We are particularly interested in this idea of “total absorption” because it speaks to an unanticipated component of the participatory process. It is implicit in the work on Entertainment Education that the activity or the text (a soap opera, a graphic novel, etc.) is entertaining.⁴ Much of the research in edutainment concentrates on the effect of communication on the audience. To address this, Singhal and Rogers call for a focus on the play aspects (2002). To date, most of the theory on entertainment education pays attention to the audience rather than to producers. We are focusing on children as producers as a central component of new research in this area.

Youth participation, art, and social change

One of the particular features of the Friday Absenteeism Project and others that make use of photography relates to the links between art and social change, something that Martin (2004), Walsh and Mitchell (2004), and others have explored in relation to addressing HIV and AIDS in South Africa. The use of memory quilts, memory boxes, performances, and other artistic interventions is widespread and supports the significance of the visual in addressing “the face of AIDS.” In our work in another rural district of KwaZulu-Natal, where teachers and community health care workers have been the participants, exhibitions of their work have been set up in local venues (Mitchell et al, 2005a). The photographs, mounted and framed, take on a more artistic look. Even the photographs in the Friday Absenteeism Project – once they are mounted on poster board and are given handwritten captions– take on a new form, and move from simply being visual data for the researcher, to becoming a visual narrative for an audience. Audiencing, as Gillian Rose (2001) observes, is a critical feature of this work. As she points out, how a particular audience responds contributes to an understanding of a particular image, and, as she notes in citing the work of Morley (1980), how different audiences respond shows the complexity of reading images. The fact that the children in their groups are choosing images to present to each other, as well as to stakeholders outside their school, contributes to our understanding of the idea of youth participants as cultural producers.

Participation and taking action

What we want to emphasize here is that participation – hearing the voices of children – should not be separated from taking action. Ethically, it may not always be possible to involve children directly in taking action and, indeed, as we have noted above, we have to make sure that we don’t put them in a more dangerous position as a result of our interventions. At the same time, we must also adhere to a code of conduct where we don’t simply hear the voices of children for the purposes of our own research without ensuring that we take appropriate steps with policy makers. And it is here where we run the risk of devaluing youth participation. A good example of approaches that draw on children’s voices in policy making can be seen in a recent publication by the Population Council (Chung, Hallman & Bray, 2005) on their work with the age category of “very young adolescents” (10-14 years old).

DISCUSSION

Many of us want to claim that the voices of the children with whom we work (of whatever age) are heard. As this issue of the *McGill Journal of Education* attests, the study of the participation of those who are usually marginalized is an area of research that is burgeoning, both in terms of appropriate meth-

ologies and also in terms of fraughtness in relation to ethical issues, levels of participation, tokenism, privileging/romancing the voices of participants, putting our own interpretations on the words of our participants, and so on. When it comes to the participation of minors, the area becomes even more contested. Hart's (1997) discussion of "ladders of participation" is a useful one for monitoring levels of participation on a scale of one to seven. A category one might be children placed on a stage in front of a group of child right" adults to sing "We are the world." In a category seven there might be no adults present at all; children have defined the issues (violence in schools, their right to hold an event) and have taken their own actions to consult with adults to bring about change. Most research studies, particularly those that are funded (and hence require adult participation), will be somewhere in the middle.

Clearly there are power differentials between adult researchers and children "participants." How do we minimize the presence of the former and maximize the presence of the latter? And equally important, are there specific issues that pertain to work with girls and their special needs – or boys and their particular needs – that we need to take account of? Here we are thinking of girls' sexuality, the fact that girls world wide are more likely to be sexually abused than boys, the "gendering" of HIV and AIDS and so on (Leach & Mitchell, in press). How as researchers do we ensure the full participation of girls in talking about what has happened to them or about what potentially is going to happen to them? Retrospective accounts are too late!

In one study with twelve and thirteen-year-old learners in a peri-urban school in Swaziland – where the incidences of sexual abuse at school, in the community, and at home are high – we used photo-voice techniques (Mitchell et al, 2005b) with single sex groupings of children. We asked them to photograph places at the school which they regard as "safe" and "not so safe." (Mitchell & Mothobi-Tapela, 2004). We were struck by the numerous photographs girls took of toilets (toilets, they said, were dangerous because they were too far from the rest of the school and you could be raped there, or there were in such a bad state that you had no privacy and could be attacked). But we were equally struck by the responses of the teachers who were surprised that the girls had taken such pictures. They had no idea of how the girls felt. As researchers, we were also surprised by a series of photographs taken by a group of girls who stage various takes on being attacked and raped in the bushes around the school. While it is beyond the scope of this article to articulate a more extensive analysis of this series of photographs – the expressions on the faces of the two girls who play the attacked and the attacker, speculation about the role of the girl-photographer and the discussions that must have taken place in order to pose the picture or even to decide to take such a picture in the first place – we think that it is this kind of method and analysis that could re-position girls as full participants. At the

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same time, we were interested in the photos that the boys took of dangerous environments. Many of their pictures were of polluted water, debris, broken windows, and unsanitary toilets. Their differing views of the same landscape are important and suggest that we need to do more sex disaggregation when we talk about the participation of young people – and as well come up with safe spaces for young people to engage in dialogue.

More than a decade ago, the sociologist Ann Oakley raised the question “What would it really mean to study the world from the standpoint of children both as knowers and as actors?” (Oakley, 1994, p. 25). While her question even then had a global context that was related to the rights of children, we think that it particularly anticipates the kind of world of Callistus and the learners in his school. As photo-journalists, they show us what it means to be actors and knowers in this age of AIDS.

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NOTES

1. See also *Our photos, our videos, our stories: Addressing HIV and AIDS in the community* (2005, Dir. Monica Mak, Claudia Mitchell, Jean Stuart, Taffeta Productions, Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change). The work of Callistus and other teachers involved in the course on Cinematic and Documentary Texts is featured in the documentary.
2. Clearly, the cost of cameras, film, and film developing is also an issue to consider. The principal has calculated that if the young photographers with their new photography skills could actually take pictures for profit (of births, deaths, wedding, funerals, and identity documents) in the informal settlement with the newly purchased point and shoot cameras they could probably earn enough to pay their school fees (about 60 rand or twelve dollars year). Alternatively, other teachers who have been interested in media and social change have used children’s drawings as the “visual voice” on violence against children (Mbokazi, 2005), and we have also seen the value of collage based on magazines in the study of representations of HIV and AIDS, stigma and so on (see Norris et al, 2005). And a very resourceful grade one teacher, who also participated in the Cinematic, Documentary and Television Texts course and who was interested in the idea of children framing their views of the world through the lens of a camera, simply had children look through the view finder and describe the scene they saw. She would have had them “snap” the picture but had no money for film or development. Her point, though, in doing this was to “see through the eyes of the child.”
3. The Academy Award-winning documentary *Born Into Brothels: Calcutta’s Red Light Kids* (DIR. Zana Briski & Ross Kauffman, 2004) offers a real-life account of how the researcher/film-makers gave children cameras to document their lives in the brothel areas of Calcutta because it was impossible to gain access any other way. The children were given training in taking pictures through the related Kids-With-Cameras Project (<http://kids-with-cameras.org/calcutta/>).
4. According to Singhal and Rogers (2002), entertainment-education can be defined as “the intentional placement of educational content in entertainment messages” and “a strategy used to disseminate ideas to bring about behavioural and social change” (p. 117). They

identify the first intervention of this kind as the 1950s BBC radio drama, *The Archers*, which used a compelling narrative framework to educate its audience on farming methods and practices.

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