Photovoice in the Middle: How our Students Experience Learning at School and Beyond

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SETTING THE SCENE

One morning in May 2007 in a small, tucked-away disused office space at William Colenso College a group of eight Year 8 (Grade 6) boys has assembled for their first photovoice session. Many are still unsure of why they were selected to participate and whether or not they themselves will choose to stay.

> *What's this about?*
>
> *I'm not sure I want to be here!*
>
> *I've got nothing to say!*
>
> *We're all the naughty kids – are we in trouble?*

The conversation continues like this with each boy talking himself out of participating in a research project organized to find out more about how young adolescent students, loosely classified as 'at risk', experience school and learning, and more generally what makes them 'tick'. Kate (Middle School Director of Curriculum and my research off-sider) and I can feel the session slipping away and the potential of our research evaporating. One of the boys (a leader and an influence in the group even at this early stage) draws breath and shares HIS view with the group [said with fist banging the desk and with true Dr King charisma]:

> *My mum says being part of this group is an opportunity for me to have a say – to tell the truth about school.*

A ripple goes through the group, the energy skyrockets and all the boys respond 'Yeah!' And so, *Photovoice in the Middle: How Our students Experience Learning at School and Beyond* is born.

One year on and the full staff of William Colenso College are preparing to begin the 2008 school year. They are engaged in a two-hour workshop looking at how their planning and practice in Term One can address explicitly dimensions of engaged learning and conditions for engagement selected from the findings of the Photovoice project. What makes this professional development session a little different and very exciting is that the material the teachers read, discuss and

respond to are selected images and illustrative interview conversations between the student participants, Kate and myself. Collaboratively in small groups the teachers identify the messages the students seem to be sending and take stock of how their teaching practice addresses these currently. By the end of the session each teacher has a greater understanding of the conditions for engagement from the viewpoint of their students and an action plan identifying the practical steps they will take to promote these conditions from day one, Term One, 2008.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND STUDENT RESEARCH SAMPLE

William Colenso College, a Secondary school located in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand, caters for years 7-13 (Grades 5-10) students. The school is organised into a separate middle school (years 7-10) and a senior college (years 11-13). The school's zone (student catchment area) draws students from a predominantly low-socioeconomic area with a small percentage of students from more affluent homes.

William Colenso College's Middle School was established recently in 2004. Classroom teachers are working to develop teaching methods and relational strategies developmentally appropriate to young adolescents. This research project and findings inform the development of this uniquely middle school culture.

Student participants were drawn from Years 7, 8 and 10. No Year 9 students were included because we had conducted similar research with Year 9 students the previous year. Teachers selected students who they considered to be 'at risk' in terms of their academic achievement, engagement with learning and engagement more generally with school. Most importantly teachers selected students they wanted to know more about personally and as learners in order to gain insights into how they might relate to, re-engage and teach these students more effectively.

Some students selected declined to participate. The final participating research group comprised 20 students – 4 girls and 16 boys – of which 12 were Maori students and 8 were New Zealand European students. Over the course of the project we lost 4 students – one left the school and three pulled out of the project at varying points.

PHOTOVOICE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Photovoice is a research methodology used in participatory action research and needs assessment research across multiple disciplines. These research genres are underpinned by a common assumption that researched groups hold valid and valuable knowledge about their own needs, preferences and answers. Research methods are designed that access this knowledge and in so doing amplify the 'voice' of participant groups. In photovoice research this is achieved by participants generating photographs, drawings and other images that capture their beliefs, needs and world. Such research methods shift power in the research process from the researcher to the researched and in this way researchers gain access to the world of the participants through their eyes, with minimal interference in how this view is generated. The image-making process is combined with

individual or group elicitation interviews (discussions) where the participants who created the images lead the interviews and talk researchers through the meaning and significance of their images as well as their thinking and perspectives.

THE BENEFITS

The Photovoice in the Middle project provides teachers with a picture of their students' perceptions of themselves as learners, their experiences of schooling and insights into their lives beyond school. This qualitative data rounds out other student achievement and learning progress data teachers collect adding the students' voice to the portfolio of evidence that informs their planning and teaching practice.

More importantly photovoice represents an opportunity for teachers to listen deeply to their students and for their students to speak about themselves and their preferences in a way that is difficult to achieve in classrooms. This is because the relationship between students and teachers is governed to a large extent by a power relation whereby teachers make decisions for students and students comply. Students expressing their views and preferences as learners to their teachers can easily be perceived as a challenge to the teachers' authority and professional standing or an invitation to mutiny.

Photovoice research sessions represent a dedicated physical and social space where teachers and students can meet separately and together, to talk, consider each others' views and respond to each others' perspectives with some inbuilt distance that serves to defuse potential feelings of threat or challenge. For most students having such a space to talk with each other about learning and their experiences in classrooms is new and empowering. Many teachers cheerfully inform us that their students return to class with a bounce to their step, happy and keen to share what they have learned about themselves.

Even though the research space is deliberately created to give teachers and students the space to talk and explore their own and each others' views it is seen as an interim step. Once students and teachers become comfortable with sharing something of themselves with each other we anticipate teachers taking more opportunities to invite student perceptions and involvement in decision-making about learning.

For teachers, involvement in the photovoice experience sparks discussions about their professional ideals and the barriers they grapple with daily that halt some of these ideals coming to fruition. Deep discussions occur also about individual students and their needs and strengths and continue well after the students have left clutching their photo albums. Insights are translated into action planning and teachers leave photovoice sessions with new possibilities and strategies to try.

The power dynamic inherent between students and teachers in classrooms and weighted in favour of the adults is mediated to a large extent by the role Kate and I play in the research. We guide the research sessions with the students and the sessions that involve class teachers too. We analyse the data and present the findings and pose the questions each group has about each other – we act as

go-betweens within the research space. In our relationship with the students we take the position deliberately that it is a privilege to hear what they have to tell us. This means in practice that we afford and respect the students' choice to participate and not participate in the research, stay neutral on any issues raised during image-making and elicitation sessions, accept the students' perceptions without judgment, ask questions that lead us to a deeper understanding of each student's perspective and show the students respect by relating to them as research partners and experts about their own experiences.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The Photovoice in the Middle research design draws heavily on the design of a similar project carried out in one Cincinnati, US (Kroeger et al., 2004) middle school with 'at risk' students and from research conducted in Vermont, US that used student-generated drawings coupled with elicitation interviews to find out more about middle schoolers' perceptions of engagement (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005). These studies are underpinned by a common a belief on the part of the researchers that students themselves hold valuable knowledge about the conditions that need to be present for them to feel engaged in the learning process as well as a belief that inviting students to share their perceptions further promotes engagement. Photovoice is a powerful and practical means of shifting power to students in the research process and encouraging dis-engaged students to participate actively in portraying their needs, strengths and aspirations.

Additionally in the Cincinnati project the researcher and teacher-researchers were interested to find out more about the lives and interests of their students beyond school in order to uncover more about what inspired and engaged their students as young people. The findings were incorporated by class teachers into learning and pastoral care processes within the school with the aim of ultimately re-engaging the students with learning at school.

In the Photovoice in the Middle Project we wanted to know more about the middle school students labeled 'at risk' as learners at school **and** beyond because I had noticed through earlier photovoice research that students identified as 'poor' or 'at risk' learners at school are almost always very competent, resilient, and resourceful learners in some aspect of their life beyond school. We thought that if we could build a picture of this competence and share it with classroom teachers we could take a step towards doing things differently for these students based on the insights gained from them.

Classroom teachers too were keen to learn more about the students they struggled with in the classroom in the hope that they might use their insights to develop more effective teaching and relational strategies and more fully meet these students' learning needs. We had high levels of enthusiasm and support for the project with teachers often asking us how the study was going as well as feeding back to us their perceptions of how their students were doing in the project.

The students were given disposable cameras and a photo assignment consisting of broad prompts to focus their photography.

PHOTO PROMPTS

Take up to five photos that show:

❖ What is really important to you in your life;

❖ Who you really are;

❖ Things that involve learning for you at school;

❖ Things you do that involve learning for you in your life out of school; and

❖ Things that really bug you.

If you have any photos left on the film – take photos of places and/or activities that are really important to you.

The students could take photographs at school and at home with the proviso that anyone captured by their lenses had to first agree to be photographed. We also held regular drawing sessions where we gave the students prompts and asked them to draw in response:

Draw a time when you were really engaged in learning in the classroom.

Draw a time when you really weren't into your learning in the classroom.

If you could change anything about your learning environment at school what would you change to better support your learning?

Kate and I participated in these drawing sessions alongside the students and addressed the same themes. Our participation modelled the relationship we were promoting as possible between students and adults within schools – a relationship based on mutual trust and open sharing of views. Each drawing session included a group discussion around the students' drawings and the perspectives these captured. These discussions ranged far and wide and were very loose. The looseness often created the conditions for something important to be said. The students often took time to warm up and talk beyond the surface of what they had drawn.

Additionally each student participated in an individual interview with Emily revisiting their drawings and photographs. These individual interviews allowed the

students to really open up about their views and their lives in a way that the group discussions did not. We found that in group discussions the students shared their views but also invested quite a bit of time in projecting their 'image' to their peers. Group discussions also moved off on tangents that were valuable but sometimes cut off a promising topic mid-track. Individual interviews allowed exploration of topics and issues in more detail and the students dropped most of the bravado that was evident in group sessions.

The students were not involved in analysing the data of the project. We realized very early on that the allure of the research for them centred on playing with cameras and technology, having their say, listening to each other, getting out of class, being taken seriously by adults, and being involved in something different. Kate and I conducted the analysis. We had the group and individual interviews transcribed and analysed these ourselves, taking questions and findings back to the students as a member-checking or checking strategy. We also hosted sessions with class teachers where we read through and discussed interview transcripts (once we had removed any features that might identify individual students) and the issues relating to teaching practice these raised. It is important to note that we did not analyse the photos and drawings the students produced, only what they chose to say about these. In this respect photovoice uses images as a starting point for discussion not as stand-alone data.

The research design allowed the students multiple opportunities to represent themselves and their world visually and to discuss these images and their emerging perspectives. We balanced the opportunity for individual and group participation and we worked with students in groups of eight (in Year group cohorts) weekly over a 10-week or one school term. This extended time period allowed us to grow and cement strong, mutually trusting relationships. Each context was structured slightly differently and the data generated was treated differently. Student photographs about their lives beyond school and their preferences as learners were discussed openly with class teachers whereas their drawings and their individual interviews were transcribed and names edited out so that the students could talk more freely about engagement and disengagement to Kate and me without fear of censure or fallout back in the classroom.

It was lovely to see students, initially ambivalent about the value of their relationship with their teachers, guide these same teachers through photographs during photovoice discussion sessions and show them people, things, relationships and activities that were most important to them. It was not uncommon for students to dart from the room with their albums under their arms to track down other teachers and adults in the school with whom they wanted to share their images.

FINDINGS

Two findings from the research will be illustrated and described here. First is the strongest finding of the research (in that most of the conversations around learning at school and themselves as learners hinged around it) and in many ways the most unsurprising – the students favour relaxed, mutually respectful relationships with

their teachers. Second is that our group of 'at risk' learners are a group of highly competent learners in their lives beyond school.

What was most insightful to Kate and me was the degree of importance students assign to establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship with their teachers and the ripple effect the quality of their relationship with their teachers had on their learning and engagement. They identified the presence or absence of mutual respect as a key factor in their decision to engage with learning at school. They are more likely to engage with subjects and learning experiences where they respect the teacher; and they will work 'for' and try their best 'for' teachers they respect and who respect them.

From the students' perspectives relaxed, respectful teachers show a genuine interest in their students as young people getting to know their personalities, issues and the challenges they face. Relaxed, respectful teachers provide students with choices within the classroom programme and ask students to share their own preferences when designing tasks and requirements. They afford students multiple opportunities to meet their own personal needs within the classroom environment; for example, providing comfortable seating as an alternative to sitting at hard school desks.

Relaxed, respectful teachers afford students respect and protect their dignity when the relationship or student behaviour or an individual's achievement veers off-track. These teachers are committed to students' personal well-being, they provide constructive advice, mete out correction with a big dose of humour, and draw on their knowledge of students' aspirations, life challenges and interests to help students make connections within their learning.

Students actively give back to respectful teachers:

> *They listen to you, they help you out, they be nice to you and you be nice back.*

They recognize and appreciate their teachers' efforts:

> *He's helpful. He's helping me – he's helped me ever since I been at school probably helped me every single time I need help … he treats me like I'm his own kid.*

The students included many photographs of individual teachers captured in smiling semi-formal poses; their willingness and genuine caring for their students preserved for posterity.

On the flip side, the students also described how they punish teachers who do not maintain consistently respectful relationships with them. A rift in respect is characterized by teachers yelling, making an example of students who ask for help too often and not listening to students and taking their views into consideration. What was interesting was how the students chose to punish teachers who they perceived to disrespect them in some way. They responded by mucking around, talking back and refusing to participate in class and in selected lessons. Refusing

to participate in many examples shared with us involved wandering around the room and mucking around with friends – low-level resistance and challenge to the teacher.

Predictability and unconditional acceptance are additional characteristics of a relaxed, respectful teacher-student relationship. Students want to be able to ask teachers for help as many times as they need. In contrast, they describe potential unpredictability in the response of their teachers as a stress in the learning environment that puts them off asking for the help they need. Unpredictability refers to being told off for asking questions about concepts and tasks once these have been explained and not knowing the degree of public humiliation that will come with the telling off. To avoid this humiliation, and the accompanying expectation that they should have got 'it' the first time, students ask their classmates for help. On the surface this may seem a sensible learning strategy but the students describe their peers as often confused also leading to more widespread and unaddressed confusion about the learning concept and/or task.

COMPETENT LEARNERS BEYOND SCHOOL

Most of the students took full advantage of the opportunity to capture photos of the things that are most important to them. Their images included snaps of family and friends, prized possessions and pets as well as shots capturing aspects of their involvement in hobbies, leisure activities, sports and their home responsibilities. Conversations about their abilities in areas beyond school flowed with a spontaneity not matched at all in their conversations about learning at school. We came away from these conversations with a strong sense that at school we were missing so much of these students.

The students are expected to take on some very real and important responsibilities in their lives beyond school. Many care for siblings, help cook meals, take care of their gardens and lawns as well as care for pets. Almost all of the students took photos of their pets and talked about the importance of their reciprocal relationship with their animals. For many, their dog, bird or cat is the only living being that they take full responsibility for and that they perceive loves them unconditionally. They share in detail countless anecdotes of their pet's behaviour and foibles as well as what they are expected to do to look after their animals.

Photographs of prized possessions were often artifacts that represented significant relationships with family, extended family and family friends where the students felt valued and connected. They described activities that they engaged in with their fathers, grandparents, old ladies next door and uncles such as fixing mowers, fixing bikes, fixing cars – lots of fixing and tinkering! When we asked them how they learnt new skills in these activities they told us they watched and followed the example of their adult mentors, they asked questions as many times as necessary and they tried strategies repeatedly until they were successful. They talked of perseverance as a common strategy at the centre of their learning beyond school but employed in personally engaging contexts and supported by significant and accepting relationships with adult mentors.

We became aware through our discussions of the students' photographs of their sometimes extensive self-knowledge. The students offered insightful and realistic appraisals of their skills as learners beyond school especially within sporting and personal endeavours. They drew on feedback from adults and described their strengths as well as areas that needed improvement in a matter-of-fact manner. They shared big aspirations for their lives beyond school; being a boss, making money, playing professional sport and becoming a dancer to name a few and what they would need to do to achieve these aspirations – do well at school, stay out of trouble, and persevere. In contrast, what stood out for us was that during conversations with the students about themselves as learners at school many of the students could not describe many strengths and positive qualities but were sure they were not good learners for various reasons ranging from being 'disruptive', poor readers, bored and just 'not good at it'.

IMPLICATIONS

The photovoice process is one way of bringing teachers and students together to share viewpoints and find out more about each other. More than this, the photovoice process itself seems to strongly engage students and stimulate insights about themselves and their lives. The students had so much to teach us and we were glad of the lessons. We learnt that the students do not necessarily need to like a teacher to engage with subjects and learning experiences but need to recognise a level of mutual respect. The students know their learning preferences even if they cannot always fully articulate these – that is, how they work best, subjects and topics that excite, engage and motivate them and methods of teaching that work best for them. They admit they do not have all the answers as to how they should be taught but would appreciate being asked more often for their input. Their pedagogical preferences ranged from the unworkable to the highly insightful; for example, more than one student suggested that teachers could make greater use of games as a vehicle for teaching diverse concepts.

The choices the students make in their lives beyond school throw up some interesting implications for teachers also. Many of our participating students participate regularly in online gaming and social networking sites such as Bebo. They make movie choices based on reading reviews posted by their peers, learn about the value of money from playing Runescape and adopt flexible identities strategically – girl avatars get more stuff online. Bebo connects them with friends and perspectives a world away and because participation is prized they are very careful of their language online to avoid being barred.

Each of these snippets tells us something about the lives of the young people we teach and how they view their world. Sometimes the lessons are just out of reach; we know we heard something important but we are not quite sure what to make of it yet. But with the discussion and reflection that comes from teachers participating in photovoice with their students, the connections each teacher makes (as a result of engaging with their students' new approaches and strategies to try in their classroom practice) open up a rich vein of relevant contexts

to draw on to help students make connections within their learning and broaden their professional view of what engages their students.

The most obvious implication of our study is that to gain access to the expertise embodied in each student, the students need to be invited to share their knowledge. This is much easier said than done. Teachers and adults inviting students to speak and open up can be met initially by distrust – distrust that they will be taken seriously and that their views will make a difference to what happens for them in their classroom. Inviting students to speak and share is as much about forging a mutually respectful relationship between students as teachers – a partnership – as it is about asking students for their ideas. This relationship begins with the recognition that current teacher-student relationships as with most adult-child relationships are governed by an authority imbalance weighted in favour of the adult. A completely free exchange of views is unlikely and in some cases undesirable. However, within this context, vast scope exists for teachers to look for opportunities to find out what their students know, think and prefer and to involve them in deciding how things happen within their classrooms and learning.

Photovoice gives students a practical, hands-on strategy to use to express themselves and to uncover their views. We use the word 'uncover' because it has become apparent that students very often do not have a cohesive and coherent perspective formed and waiting to pop out of their mouths. The photovoice process seems to help students construct their views and uncover tacit knowledge of their preferences as learners by giving them a focus, a visual strategy and an extended time period to explore, communicate and refine their thoughts.

Photovoice implemented as we have described it also comes with cost – the cost of cameras and photo processing, the cost of releasing teachers from classrooms to facilitate photovoice sessions with students, the cost of disrupting students' learning continuity in classrooms, and the cost of the time involved to make sense of all the data generated. These costs may preclude teachers from undertaking a photovoice project of any magnitude that extends beyond their classroom. However, the principles behind photovoice outlined throughout the story of *Photovoice in the Middle* can be implemented into practice with little cost. The journey starts with the desire to know more about what makes your students tick, a willingness to share decision-making power with students and the recognition they may have some invaluable perspectives to share.

The teachers who participated in this study valued the opportunity to see something of their students' lives beyond school and to listen to them talking about themselves as learners within and beyond the walls of the classroom. In an ad hoc, organic way, the teachers made changes to their thinking and practice in light of the insights they gained from their students. In many cases for the teachers involved, just hearing about the world of their students from their students increased their awareness of the person they are charged with teaching – beyond the 'at risk' label.

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