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Ian M. Brown

University of Wollongong, ibrown@uow.edu.au

Pauline Lysaght

University of Wollongong, pauline@uow.edu.au

Roslyn S. Westbrook

University of Wollongong, ros_westbrook@uow.edu.au

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Voices of Children: An International Project Where Children Have a Voice Through Image and Text

Ian Brown, Pauline Lysaght and Roslyn Westbrook
University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia

Images and text are powerful mediums for examining the multi-dimensional aspects of children's lives and they provide opportunities for understanding the experiences of others. *Voices of Children* is an international research project that draws on photographic images and written responses contributed by children from many different countries. This international research project was established in 2004 by researchers at the University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia. The project explores the lives of children and young people in a number of different countries through the images they produce, using disposable cameras, as well as written responses to questions about themselves, their families and their worlds.

Images and text are powerful mediums for presenting stories of people's lives. When these two modes of expression are combined, the messages they convey can be even more compelling. Photographs can capture elements of a situation that could not be recorded in a written observation. Written accounts, on the other hand, can provide information that is invisible to the eye. In both instances, when children are provided with the means of producing graphic and textual accounts of their experiences, they are encouraged to explore their personal worlds, as well as aspects of the communities in which they live. At the same time, from the perspective of the participants, an understanding of the experiences of others can also be gained (Brown, Westbrook, Lysaght, 2008). The *Voices of Children* project provides a vehicle to understand identity, race, culture and the inherent notion of social justice. Explicit values can be shared and examined by presenting a child's personal perspective through opening 'their world' to a wider global audience.

The children's contributions in this project are regarded as artifacts reflecting the varied personal, cultural and social dimensions of their lives. The overall aim of this project is to provide opportunities for children and young people to make sense of the conditions that define their daily lives and the lives of others. They are encouraged to make meaning of their real world experiences through mediums that allow what McGirr (2001) acknowledges as "critical engagement in learning". Through their involvement in the project, the participants are able to develop expertise in skills associated with multi-literacies, such as communicating, understanding, translating and visual engagement. *Voices of Children* involves children and young people in developing a critical understanding of themselves and of their world through their engagement in an authentic activity. It is imperative for teachers to combine student experience and interests with the knowledge and skills inherent in effective learning whilst responding to changing societal demands.

The *Voices of Children* project allows children a medium to share the diversity of their backgrounds, the uniqueness of their lives and to display the equity or inequity of their lives. The project also allows a broad theoretical consideration of social justice principles. Barusch (2006) claims that social justice can be viewed from a modern and postmodern perspective, where the modern approach is based on the notion that justice exists as an objective, an achievable end or goal. On the other hand, the postmodern perspective rejects the 'idea of an objective standard of justice, arguing that justice is socially constructed' (p.5). From an audience point of view the notions of wealth, power, possession and societal values may be interpreted, understood allowing for meaning making. From a participant's point of view the project allows children to have a voice. According to Barusch (2006, p.8) 'Voice refers to the person's ability to influence decision making' at various levels.

In this project images and text combine to provide a rich source of information conveying personal and cultural stories, with each dimension supporting the other. Neither of these dimensions preserves meaning within themselves but they represent the participants' views and they mediate the understandings that an audience

constructs. Just as written responses can be read as narratives, images too can be interpreted through visual narrative (Riessman, 2007).

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue that through visual narrative, as we read a series of photographs, many different stories are told at the same time. For example, cultural meaning, individual viewpoints, information about space and interactive sequences can be drawn from photographs (Lemon, 2006). An event, or at least its appearance, is preserved in an image, making visible different elements of a story that, in conjunction with text, allow us to explore the many different positions that may exist within a dynamic situation.

The project provides participants with a writing booklet which accompanies each camera allowing individual participants to produce written accounts of their immediate worlds, as well as a commentary of their global concerns. These responses incorporate the children's experiences at the personal and cultural level. Similar to the images, the written responses can also be read as narratives, sometimes within a response to a single question and at other times across the responses provided by a particular individual. In common with the images exhibited, a story cannot be regarded as a direct representation of reality but rather it is a report of a particular construction of events within a specific set of contexts (Brown, Westbrook, Lysaght, 2007).

As Crotty (1998) suggests, even when we tell our own story it is "the voice of our culture—its many voices in fact—that is heard in what we say" (p.64). In other words, our personal stories can be read at the personal as well as the cultural level. *Voices of Children* presents children and young people with opportunities for presenting their ideas and experiences through the use of basic technology that is readily accessible. The images and text they construct represent their experiences as individuals, their surroundings and their relationships with others. They are empowered through the choices they make when they present their experiences and, at the same time, their responses provide expressions of their particular cultural perspectives (Prosser, 1998). Those who participate are able to analyze their own experiences and engage with the experiences of others, vital aspects of self-awareness and social change. As Frank (2000) observes, "taking the other's perspective is a necessary step in constructive social change" (p. 94, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 668). Through the promise it offers of engaging children and young people whose experiences are often diverse, the voices that emerge reflect the many dimensions of their lives.

Similar to the philosophy of the methodology of Photovoice (2009), *Voices of Children* empowers children through the sharing of their worlds through global exhibitions. Where PhotoVoice's mission is to bring about positive social change for marginalized communities through photography, the *Voices* project encourages reflection at the individual level through engagement with the contributions of the participants. Photovoice allows for the most disadvantaged groups in the world through photography to transform their lives. Similarly, the *Voices* project allows children the confidence to share their world. Photovoice mission states that people find 'confidence in their voices' which enables children to 'speak out about their challenges, concerns, hopes and fears' (Photovoice, 2009). The *Voices* project builds upon this mission by providing children and young people with opportunities for taking part in the creative venture with a focus on issues of identity and inclusion, both critical elements in encouraging academic success. Research suggests that students well-being is more likely to be supported when young people experience a strong sense of self, heritage and culture, as well as a clearly defined place in the world based on their interactions with others.

Photography presents a powerful means of sharing one's world. The *Voices of Children* project espouses the principles of social justice providing an advocacy forum to strengthen democratic values and the promotion of equality. Barriers such as race, gender, and economic inequality are removed as students' images and words are exhibited globally in professional exhibitions that enable equitable participation and outcomes. The *Voices* project promotes for equality and justice for all in every aspect of the children's personal and social lives. It envisages and reflects diversity, equity and social justice by providing a voice for children to express themselves.

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