Exploring culture through the Voices of Children

Pauline Lysaght
University of Wollongong, pauline@uow.edu.au

Ian M. Brown
University of Wollongong, ibrown@uow.edu.au

Roslyn S. Westbrook
University of Wollongong, ros_westbrook@uow.edu.au

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Introduction
What happens when disposable cameras, accompanied by requests for photographs of everyday experiences, are given to children in a number of different cultures? This paper explores the photographic images and text that children from five different countries have contributed to an innovative research project called *Voices of Children: Exploring Childhood and Culture through Visual Literacy*. Their photographs and words reflect the various personal and cultural dimensions of their lives, providing a basis for exploring the diversity of their experiences across a range of contexts. Global trends in education include rapid technological and cultural shifts evidenced by the move from traditional classroom practices to the incorporation of authentic and relevant educational experiences. The changes in practice that have ensued encourage students to make meaning of their real world experiences. This project provides opportunities for them to do this by requiring them to construct photographic images that have relevance for their lives through a medium that encourages critical engagement in learning (McGirr, 2001).

*Voices of Children* has enabled students from various cultures to develop the skills they require for communicating, understanding, translating and critically examining their different worlds. A unique feature of this project is the use of image and text to complement one another. Images are intriguing because what they reveal to the viewer may not appear in the written word. Conversely, what is written may not be visible in an image. In both cases, image and text are the result of what Muffoletto (2001, p. 2) terms "ideologically formed intentional acts" that allow viewers to construct their own meaning. Those viewing the travelling exhibition are afforded glimpses into the children's worlds that only an "insider" could provide (Bautz, 2005). As global boundaries become less clearly defined, the images in particular contribute to a common language that speaks to audiences across their own and other cultures.

Classroom practices and everyday experiences evidence a shift towards what is now referred to as multi-modal practices for new learners (Unsworth, 2001). Education has broadened its base and the simple concept of literacy has diversified to meet the demands of changing curricula in a global setting. Effectively participating in this new learning requires skills not necessarily, nor adequately, provided by traditional education practices. Exploring meaning through sharing images of authentic experiences requires children to develop a broader range of skills that must be encouraged by educators. Through the travelling exhibition, this project allows educators and researchers to examine an approach within education that is gaining popularity (for example, Briski, 2005; Jiranek, 2005; Prosser, 1992; Ridge, 2003; Sharples, 2003).

Constructing Cultural Identities
According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1994, in Williams, 2003), rather than occupying a single identity, we construct multiple shifting identities that are personally, socially and culturally determined. The intangible nature of individual identities is made visible through images and symbols that reflect the different ways in which we position ourselves, as well as the ways in which we are positioned by others (Downey, 2005). Children live in a world that is saturated with images and, through a variety of mediums, they often communicate and make sense of the world through the visual. The image is a critical vehicle for embodying the individual’s values, attitudes and perspectives. According to Fuery and Fuery (2003: xiv), "Images have replaced the word as the defining aspect of cultural identity...they have become part of the attempt to create a global culture". Images shape and, in turn, are shaped by cultural processes which, when revealed to an audience, become open to interrogation.

The images exhibited in *Voices of Children* provide a vehicle to create socio-cultural discourses. Their purpose is to reflect the lived experiences of the individuals involved rather than to create an artistic product. From the perspective of an audience, "the images are continually being located as a culturally formed structure of social discourse" (Fuery & Fuery, 2003, p. 90). Within each image, cultural elements are represented and it is through their engagement that the audience can create an understanding of the particular culture that is represented.
Framing the Exhibition

The works of children from five different countries have been gathered into a public exhibition that will travel to each of the countries involved in this project. In keeping with other curated exhibitions, decisions involving the selection of works by the researchers include considerations such as design, format, organization and presentation. A motivation underpinning the exhibition is that, whilst representing individual identities, it will be sensitive to issues of gender, socio-economic status and culture. As both the images and the exhibitions will be located in a variety of contexts, it is important to acknowledge that each viewer will engage in the process of making meaning in ways that are quite distinctive.

In an attempt to encourage dialogue through multiple voices, all of the children who have taken part in this project will be invited to the exhibition as it is being held in their particular country. This will enable them to respond to all of the images in a way that encourages a greater degree of engagement and connectedness to the combined result of their efforts than is possible otherwise. In addition, in an attempt to provide a basis for continuing comment and evaluation, the children and others who view the exhibits will be encouraged to respond to both image and text by noting their comments in a book that will travel with the exhibition. This will create opportunities for cross-cultural interactions and dialogue that allow multiple voices to be heard whilst providing a basis for continuing comment, reflection and evaluation.

Locating the Audience

As viewers, we read images and construct meanings on the basis of the understandings we develop through interaction with the exhibition. Fuery and Fuery (2003, p. 87) state that “the elements of the image we look at deal more with the position of the image, its effect and how culture fits in with the image”. Our aim for the exhibition is that it will be viewed by deconstructing the images, not merely from a structural viewpoint but through a socio-cultural discourse. A distinctive feature of the exhibition is that the images are layered or embedded with text. The addition of text to the images in *Voices of Children* allows for a “structural support” or an “invitation into the meaning of the image” (Fuery & Fuery, 2003, 97). Traditionally, from an ethnographic perspective, images were used to support text whereas in this exhibition the text is used to complement the visual. Bautz (2005) comments that, as a practice, “ethnography is about negotiating a cross-cultural encounter...becoming familiar enough with another way of life, another way of seeing the world, another set of conditions and demands”. *Voices of Children* challenges the viewer to report and reflect upon unfamiliar elements of images of cultures embodying actions and beliefs that become open to scrutiny.

In this project, the children as artists and the images as artworks have set the terms of encounter as far as the audience is concerned. In this sense the exhibition is a true mode of representation—a selection of images and words that has allowed the children to control the content. As an audience, where the children lead we will follow in our attempts to understand why we have been taken on the journey. When exploring the exhibition, it is the viewer who must make meaning of the images portrayed, enabling an understanding of the visual sensibility that is presented. An example of this can be seen in the variance between images relating to a backyard Australian barbeque compared with the view of life offered from a high-rise apartment in Hong Kong. When exploring the exhibition, the viewer must make visual sense of the context of the images, enabling an understanding of the visual narrative presented.

Reading the Image Across Cultures

Images can be used by people to communicate information about themselves, their relationships with family and friends and the contexts in which their lives are lived. They form a link between past and present, imposing structure on the ongoing flow of experience and giving meaning to particular aspects of the individual’s life. In this project it is the child who chooses the focus, what is to be emphasised and preserved as image and text, as well as what is to be shared with the audience. When we engage with the images and text provided by the children for the *Voices of Children* exhibition, we become able to recognise “the existence of diverse viewpoints and cultures” (Joubert, 2002, p. 3). Individually, the image represents a snapshot of a child’s life at a particular moment and location however, taken together, the photographs speak of larger social conditions and ideologies that shape the children’s lives (Bautz, 2005).

Conclusion

Elizabeth Grierson (2002, p. 15) has stated that “Each particular ‘art form’, each specific historical narrative, each story, idea or concept translated into material practice contributes to the defining processes of specific life-worlds and realities”. In this project, children have been provided with opportunities for constructing images and text that define and shape their identities as individuals whilst locating their artworks both within and between cultures. We have given children in five different locations a license to show us where to look and what to see. Through the construction of image and text they have provided their audiences with an imprint that
allows each viewer to step in and share aspects of their worlds (Downey, 2005). If we are prepared to value children’s perspectives in this way, we contribute to education’s endeavour to encourage people to share what they know. This exhibition allows us to see the world through young eyes, reflecting both the innocence of childhood as well as a sense of hopefulness for our future. Importantly, it also contributes to UNESCO’s notion that “the arts shape the world” through the efforts they make towards the goal of “living more harmoniously” (Joubert, 2002, p. 3). The challenge we face, individually and collectively, is to work collaboratively across cultures to achieve this goal.

References
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