Photo Interviews: Eliciting Data through Conversations with Children

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Photo interviewing is a useful method for qualitative inquiry in classrooms and with children. The idea of photo elicitation is especially relevant when interviewing children who have preset ideas about interacting with adults. Interviewing children is complicated by the school setting, in which children perceive the researcher to be some sort of teacher. This study explores the potential of photo interviewing to get around these problems, with data from one study of children’s perceptions about classroom writing.

Keywords: photography; interviews; literacy; qualitative methods; education

They are working together and like I said, Joanne is a [pause] tells the truth and that is what she is doing in that picture.

—Ally (see Figure 1)

Researchers working with children are responsible for choosing an appropriate research method and should “ensure that the work is enriching to both you and your young participants” (Mathews and Tucker 2000:299). Parkinson (2001:138) advocated for a “child-friendly research design” to explore children’s perspectives. Mauthner (1997:17) argued for a “child-centered approach to data collection which views children as subjects rather than objects of research.” In light of our responsibilities to our young participants, traditional interviews with children face many quandaries. Children quickly grow tired of simply talking about what they know during the interview process. In addition, they sometimes struggle for words to accurately describe their processes for writing because they are limited by vocabulary, development, memory, and their ideas about expected behaviors in the classroom. Including photographs in the interview process has the potential to combat these problems.

Collier (1957) first made systematic use of photographs to elicit narratives during interviews. In a semicontrolled study, he found that photo interviews yielded quantitatively and qualitatively different responses when compared to verbal interviews. Photographs offer a way to potentially “enrich and extend existing interview methodologies” (Collier and Collier 1986:99), particularly when working with children.

“Effective consultation depends on children being responsive and engaged in the research process” (Mathews and Tucker 2000:302). Parkinson (2001:150) recommended researchers have children engaged in doing something during the interviews as a way to keep them “busy thinking.” Because children are not usually asked to work with cameras and photographs in their classrooms, these become tools for engagement, sustain interest (Mathews and Tucker 2000), and promote genuine curiosity about the research agenda.

Mathews and Tucker (2000) realized that children are not traditionally encouraged to express their ideas. Therefore, “if conducted in a supportive and respectful manner interviews can be an empowering experience for children” (p. 308). Photographs may provide insights into children’s perspectives and inspire expression not normally encouraged in children. Images can be manipulated and shared “creating a common base for discussion, not dependent on verbal skills” (Mathews and Tucker 2000:310). Similarly,
Prosser and Schwartz (1998:123) suggested photo elicitation as a tool for working “with children, and those who respond more easily to visual rather than lexical prompts.”

The idea of photo elicitation is especially useful when interviewing children who have preset ideas about the dynamics of interacting with adults (Dempsey and Tucker 1994; Preskill 1995; Mauthner 1997; Parkinson 2001). Regardless of our role in the everyday classroom life and activities, we cannot get to the “insider’s view”; we are adults, and in schools that is a position of power and authority. Interviewing children is further complicated by the school setting, in which children may see an interview as part of doing school work and treat interviewers as some kind of teacher. This results in children putting on their best school behavior and feeding researchers information that they think the researchers want to hear rather than engaging in thoughtful dialogue. Photographs have the potential to challenge classroom conventions and “shatter the composure of a guarded reply” (Collier 1957:854). In this article, I explore how photo interviews enhanced conversations with young children and helped me understand the children’s perspectives.

**SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS**

As part of a larger study on the writing practices of young children, I conducted photo interviews with six- to nine-year-old students at an urban Southern California elementary school. In part, my research explored the purposes that children bring to classroom writing and the role that writing plays in shaping their social identities.

The study was approved by my university’s IRB after many rounds of revisions to the consent and assent forms. The university committee was worried about how I would use pictures of the children. The final assent forms read, “The photographs will be used in academic contexts only and will not be shared publicly for any other purposes.” The issue of human subjects is a real one when photographing children and at school sites.

The study covered one ten-month school year in a unique public elementary school. Unlike traditional schools, this school was composed of eight multi-age clusters of children in which each class covered a three-year age span (approximately two grade levels). Clusters are team taught in double-sized classrooms adapted to accommodate forty or more children. There were no graded tracks or commercial textbooks at the school. The curriculum emphasized interdisciplinary activities in which students assume responsibility for their learning. Students came from all over the city and comprised a culturally and linguistically diverse population.

The forty students in the classroom studied reflected the school’s demographics. They brought a wide range of abilities to school, including students who qualified for gifted enrichment programs, received help from a special education resource specialist, and participated in a schoolwide intervention program. It was an ethnically and linguistically diverse group as well. The children were African American, Korean, Latino, and white. Many students were classified as English Language Learners and brought either Spanish or Korean language to the classroom from home. In addition, several students qualified for reduced lunch based on income guidelines. Their diversity reflected much more than ethnic diversity.

My study concentrated on eight informants, identified through observation and the help of the classroom teachers. We felt these children represented the overall population of the classroom. When identifying these focal students, we considered ability, gender, ethnicity, age, and perceived willingness to participate in the study.

**DATA**

Data were collected through participant observation, document analysis, interviews, and photography. These methods yielded field notes, writing samples, interview transcriptions, and hundreds of photographic images. During my time in the classroom, I took detailed notes about instruction. I observed the range of language arts instruction but focused my attention on classroom writing experiences. I also spoke informally to the children about their writing. The transcripts from these conversations were combined with observation notes in my field notebooks. In addition, I analyzed the children’s writing samples at various stages of development. Samples included workshop writing as well as classroom writing worksheets and the products of teacher-directed collaborative compositions.

I also conducted interviews with the teachers and the children. This gave them an active role in the research and provided data about the teachers’ and students’ beliefs about writing. All key informants participated in two rounds of interviews. The first interviews were open-ended and followed a protocol to gather information on students’ ideas about classroom writing events and their perceptions of themselves as writers. I asked, “What helps you write?” “Where do you get the ideas for your writing?” “What do you think is the most important meaningful kind of writing you do?” along with other questions. In the second interview, I brought my preliminary findings back to the participants as a way to check my understandings about their perceptions of classroom writing events and about themselves as writers. In this second
interview, I used writing samples and photographs as interview tools. The writing samples came from a variety of classroom experiences including workshop, literature responses, and biography projects. The photographs emerged from several sources and were assembled into a photo interview kit.

**The Photo Interview Kit**

There are several approaches to the photo interview, but all advocate thoughtful planning and organizing of the "photo interview kit" (Bunster 1977). Images assembled for the interview must be carefully chosen according to the goals of the research. There are two effective ways to do this. First, a preliminary interview, either formal or informal, may provide information about what is important to an informant (Collier and Collier 1986; Dempsey and Tucker 1994; Orellana and Hernandez 1999). The photo interview is a place to expand on ideas revealed in earlier formal or informal interviews. In addition, informant-made images may be used (Bunster 1977; Bintz 1997). Using photographs that the study participants compose themselves prompts another level of questioning. Informants may be asked to discuss their own purposes and intentions for creating the images. I borrowed both ideas in planning my photo interviews with children. My photo interview kit supported findings from earlier interviews and informal classroom conversations, and included images that the students made themselves.

Like Wagner (1979), I created a photo interview kit with images specifically chosen for the purpose of the interview. The pictures in the kit included the likenesses of the participants engaged in the many stages of classroom writing. I hoped the photographs would generate questions as well as answers. The pictures were assembled in a large binder and protected by clear sleeves so the children could easily remove and organize them. Nearly 100 4 × 6-inch images were included in the kit. All were coded and numbered for easy rereading after the interview. The photographs were not captioned, but the binder was separated into three clearly defined sections: children at work, public displays, and informant-made images.

**Children at Work**

During the ten-month study, I created several photo essays with the specific purpose of producing images that could eventually be included in the photo interview kit. I created the photo essays as a way to capture events throughout time as well as offer many views of a specific classroom-writing event. In addition, the photo essays reminded me to keep my camera on tar-

get. It helped me set boundaries and goals for photographing in the classroom. Because writing was my focus, I planned photographic studies that would explore writing activities and other components of the writing process. Images were created for the purpose of being grouped together to represent writing that developed throughout time. The essays also allowed me to represent multiple visual perspectives of an activity. One early essay assembled several photographs onto a 2.5- × 4-foot map of the classroom. Other essays focused on interdisciplinary writing experiences, test preparation, and specific functions of the writing workshop. The pictures captured the children in various areas of the classroom as they used resources (books, magazines, and charts), conferred with each other, and wrote on paper and on the computer.

One photo essay, Author's Chair, documented the way the teachers introduced a particular element of the writing workshop to their class. The author's chair is a conferencing activity used when a student author shares a piece of text with several classmates to get feedback. The photos in this essay depict the lesson sequence including the explicit instruction, directed practice, and independent participation in the author's chair. In the photo interview kit, I used images that included the focal children, their teachers, and those highlighting the children in collaborative stances. This section of the photo interview kit contained forty-three images.

**Public Displays**

I made a habit of photographing public classroom writing that was typically either ephemeral or too large to photocopy. Charts, for example, were often collectively composed and scribed by students and teachers. Together, they wrote to make rules, tell stories, state opinions, and develop writing lessons for later use in their writer's workshop. I photographed instructions on the white board and other temporary public writing before they were erased. Products of shared and interactive writing activities were constructed at various classroom-writing times and displayed around the classroom. This section of the photo interview kit contained fifteen photographs (see Figure 2).

**Informant-Made Images**

Students' perceptions were of paramount interest to me, so I offered them disposable cameras to record their observations about important classroom writing. Cameras were a tool for expressing their ideas—a way that was different from typical school expressions. Many children were not accustomed to using cameras, which I believed added to their level of engagement. In addition, "photographs provide useful insights into how children see and
experience their localities” and “[put] young people in control” (Mathews and Tucker 2000:309). I asked the children to photograph “important writing” in their classroom. I wanted to know what writing was the “most meaningful” and invited the students (not just the focal participants) to show me through their pictures. They often shot photographs in my absence, when they were free to compose without my observation. Cameras were signed out in a log, which became my way of linking photographs with photographers. These informant-made photographs were important inclusions in the photo interview kit, because they were explicit reflections of their beliefs. I included nearly all the informant-made images in the photo interview kit. The images they created challenged my beliefs and helped me understand this community’s ideas about classroom writing (see Figure 3).

THE PHOTO INTERVIEW PROCESS

The eight photo interviews were audiotaped and supported by handwritten notes, and the tapes were transcribed. To reduce distraction, most inter-views were conducted outdoors at picnic-style tables and benches designed to accommodate elementary school students. We had plenty of room to lay open the photo interview kit and manipulate the images. I tried to limit the interviews to thirty minutes, because children may quickly lose focus. The photographs kept them engaged, and many children were sorry to see our conversation end.

In organizing for the interview, I considered the history of each child in the overall study. I reviewed transcriptions and notes from initial interviews and included their writing samples in the bank of documents. At the start of each photo interview, I highlighted images of the student at work as well as the photographs they made themselves. This introduction was the children’s first glimpse of the pictures and successfully established rapport. This simple technique guaranteed their being engaged in the process. Every focal child participated enthusiastically, and the photographs served as prompts for conversation. As Secondufo (1997) and Kvale (1996) suggested, I kept interviews open-ended, although I did have a semistructured protocol to refer to if I needed help leading the discussion.

I asked the children to describe what was going on in the photographs and then asked them to separate photographs that show “something important”
and to explain why they believed it so. The photographs helped students remember classroom-writing events and provoked detailed descriptions. The images also helped students justify their stance. Questions guided the process: What is going on in this picture? Why is this important?

Once we isolated all the “important” images from the photo interview kit, I asked the students, “What can we say about the photographs you chose?” Together, we categorized the images, forming and reforming groups, and doing preliminary analysis as the children named the groups. Later, I asked the children to rank the images (Wagner 1979) that depicted something important. Again, questions guided the process: “Which shows the most important part of writing?” This additional analysis broke down the categories even further for a clearer look at what the student deemed important writing.

**FINDINGS**

The photo interview provided me with new insights into the child participants’ perspectives on classroom writing. Going into this research, I believed that when the children photographed the important work of writing, they would focus their lenses on the aspects of the classroom-writing process they felt most fed their successful products. I thought their efforts would yield pictures of writing conferences, research activities, and concentrated pencil-to-paper time. As predicted, several students photographed their classmates in writing conferences or using a variety of resources (like books or computer) for their writing. There was, however, another, unexpected outcome. Most children photographed their own written products, choosing to create images of the pieces they felt were the most important because of what they expressed or because of the role the particular piece played in the classroom-writing community. They made pictures of finished products and samples from their writers’ workshop folders. They also photographed their finished writing products on display in the classroom, assuming that by hanging up their work, the teachers conferred importance on their finished pieces. Later, these images were consistently identified as “important” during the initial stages of the photo interviews (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

One Student’s Important Writing

![Image of a student’s writing](image_url)

Jared: It’s one of my first stories. You can see about a million mistakes and eighteen staples.

Marva: That makes it important?

Jared: Yeah, it shows how much I learned since the beginning of the year … maybe staples is just an example. There is a thousand editing mistakes.

The photo interviews put the children at ease. The children enjoyed manipulating the images and were sorry when the interviews were complete. The photographs provided many “Oh yeah” moments from the children and made their experiences easy to share by providing a focus for detailed information. In many instances, the “photographic probes sharpened … memory” (Collier 1957:849), an especially helpful aid when talking with children. As a result, the second (photographic) interviews combated the problem of “diminishing return” (Collier 1957:853) that commonly occurs in a series of interviews.

The abstract concept of “importance” was made accessible, especially during the sorting exercise. I watched the children’s thoughtful engagement as they carefully sorted and ranked the images. Some children were able to talk about important or meaningful writing because the images helped them identify and verbalize their perceptions—something they were unable to do in the first, entirely verbal interview. Furthermore, the photographs helped children think about things outside of the usual terms they learn in school. I believe I was able to get at deeper understandings of the children’s ideas about writing because photography is not a typical school exercise. Young
children, therefore, have not yet learned—and are therefore not limited by—the acceptable school-type answers to questions about the photographs. The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates the point.

Marva: Let’s start with these [pointing to the first page of images in the photo interview kit]. Do you think any of these three are important?
Jamili: No, do you?

When we ask children if something is important, they are accustomed to responding in the affirmative. They know that we wouldn’t ask the question if we didn’t think something was important. But with the photos, Jamili felt free to answer, “No, do you?”

As we sorted the photographs, the children helped me come up with categories for further analysis. Some students manipulated and organized intensely until they felt that they expressed themselves clearly. Alexander, whose role in the class was identified as an apprentice boy-in-trouble, carefully and deliberately organized the photographs to show students working hard or thinking hard and not being distracted by or distracting anyone. He included eighteen photographs in this category. Eight show children working solo.

Marva: [Why did you choose these pictures, Alex?]
Alex: Astrid looks like she is really working hard.
Alex: Because they are working hard and they are revising.
Alex: In that one, it looks like he is working hard.
Alex: Because they are working hard... and I can tell this whole bunch is working hard.
Alex: Jared is working hard you can tell that, working at book talks.
Alex: Dylan is working really hard, see, you can tell.
Marva: How can you tell?
Alex: She’s like trying not to let anyone bother her. I can tell.
Alex: Here David is really working hard. Look, he is facing his work not other people that are like looking at it, trying to see other people to see what they are doing. David—he’s working hard and he not distracting anyone while they are working.
Alex: Jared is like thinking hard.
Alex: And they are not bothering anyone. I can tell. (Note: Alex did not choose one image because “I can tell they’re not working.”)

Children made thoughtful and deliberate choices; many images were left in the photo binder during all eight exit interviews. Six of the children included pictures of themselves in important images. Six children highlighted pictures that illuminated their social roles in the classroom (apprentice boy-in-trouble, performer, English language learner, and so on). In all, sixty-one of the one hundred images were highlighted as “important” by the participants. Twenty-two of the sixty-one photographs were chosen by a single student, suggesting that importance is an individual concept. These images depicted a wide range of classroom-writing activities including conferencing, writing on your own, and working with adults. Sixteen images were labeled “important” by two children, and thirteen images were picked by three.

Three different images were called “important” by five children: CM29, a participant-made photograph, shows a picture of a draft titled “Best Friends”; CW15 shows children working on their written pieces; and PW2 is an illustration of a teacher-created concept map. Like the image of the concept map picked by five participants, the one image highlighted by six participants includes teacher work. In AC12, we see one of the teachers editing with a student while others wait for their turn with her.

Only one image (shown here as Figure 3) showed something important to seven of the eight children interviewed. It depicts a display of classroom writing, finished products chosen by the classroom teachers as work worthy of showcasing, suggesting that in school, children value writing work seen as valued by the school (the teachers).

In all, two large categories emerged from the data. One came from what the children said about the photographs they believed showed “important” writing, and the other came from the photographs themselves. Four of the eight children named one of their categories kids working together, teamwork, or helping each other. These images showed children engaged in revising or editing conferences and activities. The other category comes from the pictures most chosen by students. Three of the five most popular images reinforce the teacher’s role in establishing what is valued in classroom writing. In one, we see the teacher’s written work and ideas on a classroom concept map. In another, we see one of the teachers helping children make decisions about their writing. The most frequently picked image shows student work that the teachers decided was important enough to display in the classroom.

Finally, the photo interviews supported other qualitative methods used in the larger study, allowing a richer perspective to emerge of the classroom community and the children’s perceptions about classroom writing. The photographs not only enhanced the interview process but also allowed me an easier, more efficient way to collect the classroom documents created with the teacher in temporary situations. In addition, my field notes, created through participant observation, were more explicit and detailed. Photography has demonstrated its usefulness for qualitative inquiry when the participant’s perspectives and intentions are important data. This is especially true when the participants are children limited by memory, language, and school setting.
REFERENCES


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Thinking Aloud to Create Better Condom Use Questions

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Measuring the effects of HIV/AIDS prevention efforts through self-reported condom use data is problematic since such data are frequently subject to bias. The purpose of this study was to pretest a sexual behavior instrument to identify ways to improve comprehension and decrease recall and social desirability bias. The method used was cognitive interviewing, in which fifteen sex workers were asked to “think aloud” as they problem solved simulated tasks. Results indicated that (1) a lexicon of culturally appropriate terms for sex and partner types should be provided to interviewers, (2) recall of sexual behavior may be aided by using grids to record information, and (3) social desirability may be decreased if not established with the participants. Using the “think aloud” method to pretest instruments may help improve the validity of self-reported sex acts, but only more objective measures of condom use may help to quantify such improvements.

Keywords: bias; condoms; recall; sex workers; thinkalouds

Accurate accounts of condom use and sexual behavior are critical to gaining an understanding of behaviors that inhibit or facilitate HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) within populations targeted for risk-reducing interventions. Acquiring this information through surveys, however, can be tremendously difficult (Catania et al. 1990), with some scientists suspecting underreporting (Allen et al. 2003). In fact, a review of the litera—

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