Seeing Learning Through Children's Eyes

Photo-elicitation to learn how children interpret their experience in early childhood education


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Engaging young children in research through photo elicitation

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Embracing the new sociology of childhood, this paper describes a participatory research method built on a belief in the competency of young children. The paper begins with a critical review of the photo elicitation literature exploring the varied levels of children's participation. Drawing on the strengths of the previous research, a multi-step photo elicitation method was developed and implemented with 32 kindergarten-aged children that provided opportunities for the collection of both verbal and non-verbal data. These young participants both supported and provided additional insights into the method while demonstrating their ability to contribute meaningfully to research about their classroom-based learning experiences.

Keywords: photo elicitation; early years; research with young children; children's perspectives; kindergarten

1. Introduction

Historically, many academics have viewed children as 'future adults' who are not yet developmentally capable of being active research participants (Cronin & Slatter, 2004; Harris & Barnes, 2009; Mayall, 2000). However, recent research has demonstrated an alternative perspective that reflects the paradigm shift in the study of the sociology of childhood which recognises that children have agency. This shift is, in part, the result of a deepening understanding of the Vygotskian constructivist perspective of children as active participants in their own learning (Stephenson, 2009). Embracing these advancements, in this paper I describe a participatory research method built on a belief in the competency of young children. Empirical evidence supports this perspective and suggests that young children from three to six years of age can share reasonably consistent self-conceptions (Measelle, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 1998) and accurate personal experiences (Hogan, 2005).

The method I describe is drawn from a critical review of the photo elicitation research involving young children, exploring the varied levels of child participation and the resulting strengths and challenges. Drawing on the strengths from previous research and strategies rooted in classroom practice, I developed a multi-step photo elicitation process that encourages child participation in the data collection and analytic processes while mitigating against some of the weaknesses of this prior work. This method serves as an evolution of photo-elicitation that integrates non-verbal

Ontario, Canada | 32 girls and boys | 3 meetings

What we wanted to understand

What places, activities, and people children considered important in their daily experience, and how they explained the relationships between play, teaching, and learning (Pyle, 2013).

Why this methodology

The photographs offered a concrete reference to talk about experiences that could otherwise be abstract. They allowed participation through visual and verbal languages (Pyle, 2013).

Application sequence

1 Building trust

Previous presence in the classroom to learn about routines and differentiate the research role.

2 Producing images

Each participant practiced with the camera and took two meaningful photographs.

3 Select and talk

In small groups, 5–10 images were observed, chosen, and discussed.

4 Create and review the workbook

The group reviewed the images and was able to correct or expand the associated texts.

What it allowed to know

The photo-elicitation contextualized conversations about play, reading, directed activities, meaningful places, and the role of the teacher. The process showed that children aged four and five could produce data, discuss it, and participate in its interpretation.

Example of shared interpretation

A reading photograph with the teacher made it possible to go from describing a scene to explaining a learning strategy: looking at the images in the book helped to check if they were reading correctly (Pyle, 2013).

Critical point

Who interprets the images? A photograph can be understood differently by an adult and by the person who produced it. For this reason, the selection, conversation and revision of the text were part of the interpretation process.

What students learn from education

Adapting the technique involves recognizing capacities, rhythms, and forms of communication. The camera expands participation, but it requires practice, clear boundaries, continuous consent, and ethical decisions about the dissemination of images.

What's missing from the intersectional gaze

The article mentions that girls and boys with different backgrounds and verbal abilities participated, but does not develop an analysis differentiated by gender, cultural origin, racialization or socioeconomic position. The intersectional view is concentrated on age, communication, functional diversity and power relations with adults.

Reference

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