Researching School Wellbeing with Autistic Students

Photo-elicitation driven by those who participate to explore the school experience


Engaging Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder in Research Through Participant-Driven Photo-Elicitation Research Technique*

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Participant-driven photo-elicitation, a visual research technique, is commonly used with marginalised and vulnerable groups of individuals. Reflections on the use of this technique are illustrated through a study examining the conceptualisation of student wellbeing from the perspectives of teachers, parents, and students with autism spectrum disorder. Interviews were used to collect data from teachers and parents, while photovoice, a community and participatory action research strategy, was used as a data collection method for students. Although participant-driven photo-elicitation (a component of photovoice) requires much planning, resources, collaboration with teachers, and the flexibility of the researcher, it empowers and engages students with autism spectrum disorder, helps develop social, communication, and self-awareness skills, enables the collection of rich data, and enables the voices of these students to be heard.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder (ASD), photo-elicitation, photovoice, visual research

The rights of children, including those with disabilities, to express their views and make decisions regarding matters affecting them were articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). This emphasis on children's rights has inadvertently led to an increasing recognition among researchers about the necessity to seek the perspectives of children with disability in research concerning them (Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012). Additionally, it has been demonstrated that the worldviews of adults and children may be fundamentally different as a result of their differing sociocultural contexts (Llewellyn & Leonard, 2010). A study by Fattore, Mason, and Watson (2009) examining the conceptualisation of wellbeing from children's perspectives revealed that although adults believed that children's wellbeing is a multidimensional construct, children conceptualised their wellbeing as mostly consisting of their emotional lives. It is therefore essential that researchers adopt appropriate research techniques that are well suited to the needs and abilities of children with disability to enable them to participate meaningfully

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10 students

7 institutes

2 meetings

What we wanted to understand

How autistic students understood a "good life" at school and what situations, spaces, or relationships favored or hindered their well-being (Danker et al., 2017).

Why this methodology

The photographs offered concrete stimuli to talk about well-being, reduced the centrality of the immediate verbal response, and allowed each student to decide what they wanted to show and in what order to explain it.

Application sequence

1 Prepare for participation

Easy-to-read materials, visual explanations, and agreements on consent, use, and transfer of photographs.

2 Organize the photo assignment

Each student was given folders to classify the images: well-being, aids and obstacles.

3 Produce the photographs

Their own devices were used and images were taken at times and spaces authorized by each center.

4 Discuss images

In the second meeting, the photos were discussed in a flexible interview adapted to each student.

What the process contributed

The technique made it possible to choose what to show, control the order of the conversation, document school moments that the team did not see directly, and correct the researcher's initial interpretations.

Example of the interpretative process

A photograph of a clock was placed in the folder "which prevents me from having a good life at school." The conversation made it possible to understand that the clock symbolized the boredom of some classes and the wait for them to end.

Critical point

A visual methodology does not automatically eliminate barriers to participation. Times, questions, support, and the presence of familiar people had to be adapted to each student.

What students learn from education

Accessibility must be planned. Institutional norms are part of the design, resources are not equally distributed, and photography only makes sense when it is asked before interpreting.

The school experience does not depend solely on autism. Age, communication needs, concurrent diagnoses, type of schooling, adult supports, and the rules of each school also play a role. The all-male sample limits the analysis of how gender can modify these experiences.

Reference

Danker, J., Strnadová, I., y Cumming, T. M. (2017). Engaging students with autism spectrum disorder in research through parti cipant-driven photo-elicitation research technique. Australasian Journal of Special Education, 41(1), 35–50. https://doi.org/10.1017/jse.2016.7

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