

Engaging Youth through Photovoice

By: [Robert W. Strack](#), Cathleen Magill, Kara McDonagh

Strack RW, Magill C., & McDonagh, K. (2004). Engaging youth through Photovoice. *Health Promotion Practice*, 5(1), 49-58. doi: 10.1177/1524839903258015

Made available courtesy of Sage Publications: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1524839903258015>

*****© Sage Publications. Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Sage Publications. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document. *****

Abstract:

The photovoice process aims to use photographic images taken by persons with little money, power, or status to enhance community needs assessments, empower participants, and induce change by informing policy makers of community assets and deficits. This article describes a youth photovoice project implemented in an after-school program that attempted to adapt the photovoice method to youth participants, test the effectiveness of the method with youth, and develop and refine a curriculum for replication. A process such as photovoice provides youth the opportunity to develop their personal and social identities and can be instrumental in building social competency. Youth should and need to be given the opportunity to build and confirm their abilities, to comment on their experiences and insights, and to develop a social morality for becoming a positive agent within their communities and society. For more examples of photos taken by the youth during this project, visit <http://www.jhsph.edu/youthphotovoice>.

Keywords: youth | adolescents | photovoice | empowerment | needs assessment | community assessment | evaluation | community-based programming | university-community collaboration | participatory research

Article:

“Photovoice is a method by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique.” Wang and Burris (1997, p. 369)

The photovoice process aims to use photographic images taken by persons with little money, power, or status to enhance community needs assessments, empower participants, and induce change by informing policy makers of community assets and deficits (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997).

The method, as developed by Caroline Wang and colleagues, has been successfully implemented in many different settings and with several different populations, including rural Chinese women,

homeless persons, and urban populations (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997, 1994; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). In some photovoice projects, youth have been involved as one subgroup within a larger project (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Bell, Hutchison, & Powers, 2000). There is little question that youth fit the description of persons with little money, power, or status who thus might be ideally suited for engagement in the photovoice process (Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996). In recognition of the potential use of the method with youth, a youth-only photovoice project was designed for adolescents attending an after-school teen center in Southeast Baltimore. This article describes the youth photovoice curriculum that was implemented, provides an evaluation of the program, and makes a number of recommendations for future photovoice projects with youth.

BACKGROUND

The principle foundation of the photovoice process is built on the fundamental tenets inherent in documentary photography, feminist research theory, and Freirian empowerment that in part advocate for all individuals to be involved in the public health conversation (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). Within documentary photography, photographic images are used to draw attention to social issues; however, the images are typically taken from the photographer's outsider (etic) viewpoint and may therefore fail to capture the insider's (emic) perspective (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). The principles of feminist theory specify that no one is in a better position to study and understand the issues of a group than are the people within that group, and that discovery is best promoted through shared experience (Keller & Longino, 1996). Although developed with specific reference to women, its principles are also applicable to other groups (Wang & Burris, 1997). The inspiration for Freirian theory, as in photovoice, is that people should be active participants in understanding their community's issues, facilitated through the sharing of mutual experiences, and become agents of community change (Freire, 1973).

Photovoice is a participatory action research method that entrusts cameras to persons "who seldom have access to those who make decisions over their lives" (Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996, p. 1391). Participants of the photovoice process learn how to operate cameras and are invited to take pictures of strengths and weaknesses in their communities. The specific aims of the method are to enable participants to

1. use photographic images to document and reflect on the needs and assets of their community from their own point of view,
2. promote dialogue about salient community issues through group discussion of photographs, and
3. promote social change by communicating issues of both concern and pride to policy makers and society at large (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997; Wang et al., 1996).

The intended outcomes of successful engagement in these aspects of the method are threefold: empowering participants, assessing community needs and assets, and taking action in the community (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). Ideally, these three endpoints are outcomes of the same process.

One of the opportunities presented by this project was the chance to observe how the characteristics of adolescence would influence the photovoice process. Adolescence is a period of identity development in which youth are actively shaping their personal identity while being challenged to begin the process of forming their social identity. The development of personal identity is primarily an internal struggle in which youth endeavor to understand their strengths, skills, interests, desires, and weaknesses, whereas the development of social identity challenges youth to look beyond themselves to the larger society (Erikson, 1968; Youniss & Yates, 1997). The development of social identity requires skills in building relationships with others, in understanding social roles, in developing social morality, and in building social competency. Socially competent individuals have a sense of belonging, feel that they are valued, and are eager to contribute as a member of society (Gullotta, 1990; Gullotta, Adams, & Markstrom, 2000). A process such as photovoice provides youth the opportunity to develop their personal and social identities and can be instrumental in building social competency. Youth should and need to be given the opportunity to build and confirm their abilities, to comment on their experiences and insights, and to develop a social morality for becoming a positive agent within their community and society (Youniss & Yates, 1997). By providing an opportunity for youth to gain perspective on issues such as culture, community norms, behaviors, social structure, and desires, youth are encouraged to develop an understanding of themselves and their community. The project described here attempted to recognize and accommodate the challenges specific to the developing adolescent in carrying out a photovoice process with youth.

METHODS

The Baltimore youth photovoice project described in this article was designed to (a) adapt the photovoice method to youth participants, (b) test the effectiveness of the method with youth, and (c) if appropriate, develop and refine a curriculum for replication. A variety of methods were employed to collect process and outcome evaluation data as follows: structured surveys and qualitative interviews conducted near the end of the project, the authors' observations and field notes, and feedback from practitioners at the teen center and exhibit attendees. The remainder of this section provides a brief description of the implementation process from site selection and recruitment to final exhibit preparation.

Site Selection

The after-school teen center chosen for the youth photovoice program is located in the heart of a multiethnic community in Baltimore and serves adolescents between the ages of 11 and 19. Several unique aspects of the community site's philosophy made it a particularly appealing site

for implementation of the program. Most important, its functional model hinges on the notion of “community development” rather than “social service,” and the staff members recognize the importance of empowering youth by encouraging them to be active and responsible participants in society.

Staff Selection

The project was designed as a university-community collaboration that aimed to optimize the research skills of university scholars and the insights of community practitioners. By linking forces and capitalizing on areas of expertise, the likelihood that scholarly research will be channeled into action and converted into policy changes is enhanced (Ebata, 1996; McHale & Lerner, 1996; Small, 1996). Toward this end, faculty members and students from the university and staff members from the community site collaborated in both the design and implementation of this project.

Equipment

The owner of a local camera shop was informed of the project and generously offered to donate 60 roles of film. In addition, he agreed to develop all rolls of film at one third the normal price. A total of twenty 35-mm point-and-shoot cameras, priced at \$30 apiece, were purchased, as were 20 memo-sized notebooks for youth to hold their photo-release forms and comments. Later in the project, a variety of materials and tools, including 80 glass frames, two exacto knives, a metal straight edge, and matt paper, were purchased for use in the photography exhibits.

Youth Recruitment and Demographics

All youth members of the teen center were informed of the upcoming youth photovoice program. Those who expressed interest were encouraged to participate, and no formal selection process was employed. All participating youth and a parent or guardian signed an assent or consent form informing them of the program’s purpose and confirming their willingness to participate in the program. A total of 14 youth committed to attending the twice-weekly sessions and becoming youth photovoice participants.

The youth photovoice participants ranged from 11 to 17 years, were evenly distributed by gender, and were representative of the multi-ethnic community in which the project was based (seven or 50% were non-Hispanic Black, four or 29% were non-Hispanic White, one or 7% was Hispanic White, and two or 14% identified themselves as mixed race). The youth attended six different schools—one elementary school, two middle schools, and three high schools.

Although these statistics provide a glimpse of the diverse nature of the participants, they fail to capture the real-life challenges faced by the youth of this project. During the course of the project, virtually all of the participants personally experienced at least one of the following: drug use and trafficking by immediate family members, an eviction, the recent death of a parent,

parental abuse, the hospitalization of a parent for mental illness, teen pregnancy, and injury from violence at school and in the community. In addition, multiple youth moved during the course of the project, and many experienced prolonged periods of phone disconnections. In summary, this group of adolescents encountered many of the challenges associated with living in a predominately low-income, urban neighborhood. The effect of the youth's backgrounds on their participation in the photovoice project will be discussed in greater detail in later sections of this article.

The Curriculum: An Overview of Sessions

A total of 20 two-hour sessions were held twice a week during the course of 12 weeks. During these 20 formal sessions, the following topics were covered: introduction to photography; photography ethics, power, consent, and safety (including the use of photorelease forms used to obtain photo subjects' permission to take the photographs); photographic techniques; cataloguing of photographs; picture-taking expeditions; discussion sessions using the SHOWeD method; and exhibit preparation. The SHOWeD method consists of five questions that lead the group through the images being discussed and are as follows: What do you see here? What is really happening here? How does this relate to our lives? Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist? and What can we do about it? Each question progressively challenges participants to dig beyond the surface of the image to discuss causes and potential solutions.

Later in the program, the project coordinator and one lay facilitator met with participating youth on 11 different days, helping them to select their photos and write captions about them for the photovoice exhibits. Although this element of the project was not originally envisioned, it became apparent that many of the youth needed individual attention, especially when writing narratives and captions. In addition, participation in sports and other after-school activities, such as homework help, work, and other social interests, precipitated a need for the project staff to be flexible when working with youth with busy schedules.

Exhibits

Exhibits were envisioned at the start of the project in order to showcase the youth's photographs, provide a venue for informing policy makers of youth's concerns in the community, and draw positive attention to the teen center. A total of four exhibits were held. The first exhibit was held at the teen center and provided an opportunity for family and friends to admire the youth's work. The second exhibit, displayed at the university, exposed faculty members and students to the youth's voices. The third show brought local policy makers and influential community members into the teen center and placed them in contact with youth's concerns. The fourth exhibit was displayed for a 2-week stretch at a local community cultural arts theatre.

RESULTS

The results presented are a synthesis of the data collected through observation, surveys, and participant interviews conducted at the conclusion of the project. The primary function of the evaluation data collected was to (a) assess the program's effectiveness for engaging youth in the photovoice process and (b) provide insight for refining a youth photovoice curriculum based on the experiences of this project.

Photovoice Components

Taking Pictures

Getting youth to take pictures was somewhat more challenging than anticipated, and there was much heterogeneity in picture-taking rates and quality. Some teens took pictures at a rapid pace and always wanted more film, whereas others took very few pictures and had to be reminded and encouraged to take more. Camera difficulties early on due in part to misuse of relatively inexpensive cameras also slowed the process.



FIGURE 1 I took this picture because it is an abandoned building, and nobody pays it attention. It's somewhere that I have visited, and I've seen the inside. I knew there was more to it than just what is on the outside. I noticed the flooding in the basement. I noticed the holes in the ceilings and floors. Also, I noticed rusty elevator shafts. One whole floor had metal rails all across it. The entire floor was nothing but metal rails. Kids go there because it's fun, and it's a place to get away from adults nagging. It was once a nice building, and now it is decayed. I think it's a bad idea for kids to go there, but it's fun. SOURCE: Youth photographer, age 14.

Early in the project, many of the youth were more interested in taking pictures of friends and families than of community assets and deficits. Photographs were viewed as a way to tell the world about themselves. This coincides with the appropriate developmental stages of youth, with youth at earlier developmental stages focusing on personal identification and more

developmentally advanced youth moving beyond self to a social identification perspective. In recognition of this, the project staff members decided to encourage all youth to take pictures describing their lives and identifying who they are while challenging more developmentally advanced youth to expand their subject matter to include social context. In keeping with this, the exhibits were divided into the following two sections: personal photographs and community photographs.

Survey results indicated that whereas many of the youth had little difficulty getting the subjects of their photos to sign photo-release forms, nearly half of the youth thought it was a challenge (45% agreed or strongly agreed, $n = 12$). Although it was clear that youth became more adept at using the photo-release forms, it is important to consider the challenges inherent in their use when designing future projects and training youth. Helping youth feel more comfortable with the photo-release process might be improved by more discussion, role-playing, and modeling during early training and photo expeditions.

Group Discussion of Photos

Group discussions are a critical aspect of the photovoice process because they create opportunities in which participants can inspire each other to take better, more informative pictures; develop a collective voice; and mobilize for unified action. Getting the youth to discuss their photographs in a group setting proved challenging at the onset, and it was quickly recognized that the large and developmentally heterogeneous nature of the group was impeding the discussion process. Based on this realization, youth were split into smaller, more developmentally homogenous groups improving the dynamics of the discussion groups considerably. In the reconfigured groups, youth were extremely eager to talk about their lives and photographs, using the SHOWeD method as a springboard for dialogue.

In the same manner that Freire's (1973) line drawings served to personalize issues for discussion, the youth's own photos created a great sense of pride and ownership that contributed to their exchange of views. This newfound strength seemed to embolden the youth with a degree of authority and zeal when describing their photographs, which was perhaps most apparent by their behavior at the four exhibits. All of the youth participants were extremely eager to show off and discuss their photographs with exhibit attendees. A member of the university faculty attending the university exhibit expressed her admiration of the youth's photos but indicated she was especially moved by the captions on the photos and by the personal discussions she had with the youth regarding their works.

The two photographs displayed in Figures 1 and 2 represent some of the youth's perspectives of issues in their community. Figure 1 shows an old abandoned building that stands in the heart of the community in which the project took place. The 14-year-old photographer fully recognizes the dangerous elements of the structure and knows that kids should not go there; yet, she also fully grasps what most adults probably cannot see: that "it's fun," and as long as it is standing,

kids will continue to frequent the site. Figure 2 shows a 6-year-old boy¹ standing next to a cigarette vending machine in the entryway of a bar. As the 12-year-old photographer points out, any teen in the neighborhood has access to this vending machine and probably the alcohol at the bar.



FIGURE 2 I took this picture because I am concerned about this situation. There is a six-year-old boy in a bar with a 17-year-old sister who was drinking. He was right next to a cigarette vending machine and could have access to cigarettes as well as myself or any of the other teens around my neighborhood. NOTE: It should be noted that for issues of confidentiality, the boy's identity has been blocked out. SOURCE: Youth photographer, age 12.

Informing Policy Makers

The following story beautifully illustrates how the youth photovoice program affected one policy maker. A few weeks after the hanging of the first exhibit at the teen center, an assistant to the state comptroller came to the teen center for a community meeting. He paused at a 12-year-old photovoice participant's photograph of a crumbling classroom ceiling at a local middle school with a caption that read: "My middle school is a bad school. The ceiling is falling apart and it is not good" (see Figure 3). The comptroller wrote down the name of the school and promised to look into the matter.

In addition to this story, the number of exhibits and the attendance at them suggest that the program did a relatively good job of informing policy makers and the public at large of issues important to these adolescents. As previously mentioned, four exhibits were conducted to achieve this end. Unfortunately, attendance at the third exhibit, which was intended specifically for policy makers, was not as high as hoped. In hindsight, the program's coordinators and youth should have given more attention to developing strategies that would ensure a larger turnout by the community. Although youth in the program were encouraged to be proactive, program

coordinators must keep in mind that most youth lack connections to the larger community and rely on the influence of connected adults to function as modelers. For more examples of the photographs taken by youth during this youth photovoice project, visit <http://www.jhsph.edu/youthphotovoice>.



FIGURE 3 My middle school is a bad school. The ceiling is falling apart and it is not good.
SOURCE: Youth photographer, age 12.

Effectiveness of the Youth Photovoice Program at Engaging Youth

Youth Satisfaction

The results from the structured surveys ($n = 12$) and supported by the qualitative interviews indicate that the youth enjoyed taking pictures (91% agreed or strongly agreed) and wanted to take more (83% agreed or strongly agreed). Other results from the surveys indicate that the youth enjoyed talking about the photos they had taken (100% agreed or strongly agreed), felt they were taking pictures that accurately reflected life in their neighborhood (73% agreed or strongly agreed), and were glad to be part of the youth photovoice project (100% agreed or strongly agreed). When asked, the youth were adamant about their desire to remain in the program, with 100% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing to a question about dropping out of the program. The data from the qualitative interviews confirm and enhance the survey data. When asked during interviews whether they would participate in the project if it were offered again, all youth said “yes,” with some adding an enthusiastic “definitely.”

Youth Empowerment

Evidence gleaned from both observations and youth interviews suggests that participation in the project was in some way empowering. At the very least, it got them thinking about their community and their place within it. As suggested by the pictures they took, nearly all of the youth particularly enjoyed taking pictures of their family and friends; however, most also talked at length about the insight they gained by taking pictures of positive and negative things in their community. Many stated that being in photovoice had caused them to think about their community for the first time. One youth said she now takes notice of trash in her neighborhood and even tells others to pick it up. While talking about things he does not like about his community, another youth said, “As a matter of fact, I might get some of my friends and get some gloves and clean up the area.”

For those youth with several pictures in the exhibit, it seemed to be a uniquely powerful experience. For many of them, it was a rare occasion in which they were the recipients of positive attention. Here are a few of the ways the adolescents described how participation in the exhibit made them feel: “recognized,” “proud—like I was important,” “it was cool . . . made me feel alright.”

The effect of the state comptroller’s interest in one youth’s photograph of his dilapidated school also points to the potentially empowering effects of engagement in the photovoice process. It is interesting that this youth did not originally plan to hang this particular photograph in the exhibit, saying “I don’t want people to know that I go to a crappy school.” The project coordinators explained to him the potential impact of his picture, and the youth decided to hang the photograph. Upon learning of the state comptroller’s interest in his photograph, the picture became a tremendous source of pride for the youth. On numerous occasions, he was heard telling others how the state comptroller had looked at his picture and said he was going to do something about it. Also, when asked what she would take pictures of if she were given the opportunity to keep her camera for a longer period of time, one of the female participants responded: “An idea that came from [one of the youth], take pictures of my school and maybe hang them in the exhibit so people can see how trashy it is.” Stories such as these are emblematic of the potential power of the photovoice method among youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE YOUTH PHOTOVOICE PROJECTS

During this project, a number of obstacles were encountered that hindered its implementation. Some of these issues are unique to the particular setting of the project, but most are common to all community-based youth settings in an urban environment. Although these barriers make implementation of a youth photovoice program challenging, they do not preclude its success. Based on both the obstacles faced and successes experienced in the youth photovoice program, we have developed a number of recommendations for future projects. A revised photovoice timeline incorporates these recommendations into a suggested curriculum (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Recommended Photovoice Curriculum

Introduction to Photovoice
Session 1: Introduction to photovoice
Session 2: Exposure to photographs
Session 3: Ethics of photography and photo expedition
Principles of photography
Session 4: Introduction to photography and photo expedition
Session 5: Photography Session 2 (led by a professional photographer)
Photography fieldtrip
Session 6: Trip to a photo exhibit or newsroom
Discussion of photographs
Session 7: Photograph critique session
Session 8: Introduction of the SHOWeD method
Youth as community researchers
Session 9: Get youth thinking of themselves as researchers
More discussion of photographs
Session 10: Photograph discussion
Session 11: Photograph discussion
Session 12: Photograph discussion
Session 13: Photograph discussion
(Add more discussion sessions as time allows)
Exhibit preparation
Session 14: Caption writing and exhibit preparation
Session 15: Exhibit logistics
Session 16: Exhibit preparation
Session 17: Framing
Session 18: Hang the show
Session 19: Program dress rehearsal
Session 20: Exhibit

Site Selection

It is critically important to select an appropriate site for the project. The staff members must be committed to the goals of the program and excited to participate in each step of its implementation. It is also advisable to select a fairly stable site, which will help to decrease attrition and hasten the pace of the project. The youth photovoice program described here was conducted in an after-school community setting. This setting has a number of advantages, including time for nonacademic activities and after-work hours. However, the photovoice method is certainly worth exploring in a school system where there is typically more structure and disciplinary control.

Curriculum Planning

Organizing a relatively detailed timeline for the project is recommended; however, room for flexibility should be made because not everything will work out as planned. Some flexibility in planning will allow for the ideal situation in which the youth assume some sense of ownership of the project and implement ideas of their own; however, keep in mind that many youth, especially younger ones, will need a good deal of guidance and structure. Thus, neither giving participants a blank slate nor predetermining all activities is advisable. Instead, providing them with a couple of options at each session is suggested.

Participant Recruitment

To reduce attrition and decrease the length of the orientation phase, finalizing recruitment prior to the initiation of the actual sessions is strongly recommended. Youth should be alerted to the arrival of the new photovoice program at the site through posters, fliers, and possibly telephone calls and invited to apply for participation. Depending on the literacy levels of the population, application might involve a personal interview or a brief essay explaining why they want to be in the project. At this time, the coordinators should detail the youth's responsibilities and the consequences if they are not upheld. All those who are chosen and/or decide to participate should be required to sign a contract outlining their responsibility as participants. The idea is not so much to exclude youth as it is to establish expectations for project involvement and hold them responsible for subsequent behaviors.

During the course of the youth photovoice program, concern arose over the appropriateness of the photovoice method for some adolescents, especially those who were developmentally younger. When designing similar projects, one should plan to frequently split the larger group into smaller groups based on developmental stage. The project should also be tailored to address the developmental needs and capacities of the youth in these different groups. Finally, it is advisable that the group size be kept to a manageable level based on the adult or supervisory support. Youth-to-adult ratios of 10:1 or more are unrealistic given the intensive nature of the photovoice process. Ideally, youth-to-adult ratios of 5:1 or less provide a much more conducive environment for carrying out the photovoice steps necessary and ensuring a richer process.

Duration of the Project

The appropriate duration of youth photovoice programs and the length of sessions need to be further explored. Based on the experiences described in this article, a longer project period during the course of 4 to 6 months is recommended. This type of format would provide youth the opportunity to become more expert at operating cameras and researching their communities—activities that should serve to increase levels of empowerment.

Curriculum Specifics

The youth photovoice curriculum recommended in Table 1 spans 20 weeks. The first eight sessions focus on building youth understanding of the photovoice process, their appreciation of

the power and ethics of photography, and their competency in photography. In the remainder of the sessions, youth use their photography skills to document youth health issues in their own lives and communities. The idea is for them to envision themselves as researchers and reporters of salient issues in their lives. Their efforts culminate in an exhibit and/or news story through which they can inform and influence policy makers. Specific curricular recommendations are explained as follows.

- Hands-on activities should be incorporated into each session. This keeps adolescents actively involved in the project and prevents boredom. Creative approaches for keeping youth engaged should be used in situations where youth are voluntarily attending sessions in a community center setting.
- The youth-to-adult ratio should be kept relatively low (ideally no more than 5:1).
- Team building needs to be a primary focus during the first few sessions, as it will also allow for better discussions and foster group work later in the project.
- Exposing youth to photographs by taking them to an exhibit at the start of the project is strongly recommended. A trip to a newsroom might also be considered.
- One or more “photo expeditions” in which an adult lead team of youth go into the community to take photos should be conducted early in the process. The expeditions allow youth, with adult guidance, to practice taking pictures in the community and learn from modeling and practice how to ask a subject to sign a photo release.
- A professional photographer or photojournalist should teach at least one session at the beginning of the project and preferably another one a few weeks later, at which time he or she can provide constructive criticism and feedback regarding pictures taken by youth. The Baltimore youth photovoice project enlisted the voluntary assistance of a professional photojournalist from the *The Sun* (Baltimore’s primary newspaper) to engage, inspire, and instruct the youth of the project.

As a way to spark exploration of photographic subject matter while providing loose boundaries (which some adolescents need), specific photo assignments or “missions” are recommended. The “missions” given should be worded very generally so as to encourage picture taking but not to dictate the subject matter or content of photographs, such as “Take pictures of things you love about your street or neighborhood and of things you would love to change.” Once the youth have mastered the basics of photography and are taking good pictures, consider reintroducing them to the idea of working together in teams as researchers of health issues in their community. Each team might decide to focus on taking a series of pictures on 1 to 2 concerns and 1 to 2 assets in the community. The goal would be for them to work together and act as reporters of these topics. Keep in mind, however, that some youth might work better independently and design the program accordingly.

Allow ample time for development of the final product (i.e., an exhibit or news article). The selection of photographs, writing of captions, and organization of the event all take time.

Building on successful group discussions of photographs using the SHOWeD method will provide a modeling opportunity for youth to record the oral discussions in a written form.

Incorporation of direct community service activities involving one or more of the topics researched through their photographs deserves consideration. This would allow youth to do something directly about the issues that concern them in addition to exposing others to them through photographs. For example, a team that focuses on trash and pollution in the community might participate in a neighborhood cleanup.

CONCLUSION

The youth photovoice experience suggests that the photovoice method has great potential as a means for enhancing the empowerment of youth and informing policy. However, a number of measures should be taken to ensure achievement of these goals when working with adolescents.

To achieve success, it is imperative that photovoice projects be tailored to the developmental capabilities of participants. For different adolescents, such abilities span a wide spectrum. In general, the primary focus of a youth photovoice program should be empowerment at the individual or psychological level. This is especially appropriate for developmentally younger adolescents who are just beginning to formulate notions of self and place in the larger context of society. In addition, group efforts combined with activities that focus on individual competency building can reinforce one another and lead to empowerment at multiple levels. It is extremely important to accurately identify and assess the abilities of youth in a given photovoice project and to group them appropriately.

Toward achieving the goal of psychological empowerment, photovoice programs designed for adolescents should focus first on competency building through acquisition of photography skills and other hands-on activities. Learning to operate a camera and take visually stimulating photographs builds self-esteem and improves self-competence—both of which are integral aspects of the empowerment construct. In addition, participation in photovoice can be a great tool for enhancing identity formation, which is also an important cognitive step on the pathway to empowerment. As learned from the youth photovoice pilot program described in this article, taking pictures of family, friends, and community allows youth to reflect on who they are and who they want to be.

As youth gain individual skills-based competence, growing emphasis should be placed on group work, thoughtful discussion, and collective action in the world. Placing emphasis on their roles as researchers will help inspire a sense of responsibility and purpose in society that should contribute to increasing their social competency. Participating youth were empowered through their newfound awareness that their thoughts and opinions do matter. The exhibits represented opportunities for youth to inform policy makers of their concerns and were critical culminating events of the photovoice process that should not be omitted.

When applying the photovoice method to youth, it is important to consider youth's roles in society. How much power do they really wield, and thus, to what extent can they be empowered? By law, youth in the United States are dependent on parents or other adult guardians and lack a voting voice. For these reasons, youth are typically reliant on adults for expression of their thoughts at the policy level. This reality must be kept in mind when developing a photovoice program for youth. Program staff members should strive to provide a semistructured process that stimulates youth to find solutions to problems and express their voices. However, adults involved in the project must find the avenues by which youth can express these opinions to influential adults. Remember that photovoice is a process. Persons do not achieve full empowerment during adolescence, but it is a time of life when the process should begin and develop. Assistance from adults is needed to launch the process.

Although photovoice has great use as a method for enhancing empowerment and informing policy makers, like other one-time interventions, it is not a panacea. Engagement in a photovoice program will not lead to a complete state of empowerment. Moreover, a program such as photovoice has the potential to create the negative outcome of raising hopes but failing to inform policy or rally public concern. Such a situation could leave participants feeling more hopeless and unempowered than when they started the program. It is imperative that concerted actions be taken to prevent this negative consequence. Thus, early planning, which strives to garner the support and interest of community leaders and policy makers, is of the utmost importance (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang, Cash et al., 2000). In addition, it is imperative that researchers select sites for implementation where an ongoing commitment to youth empowerment is already in place. This ensures that the goals of the photovoice method can continue through engagement in other empowering activities.

Applying the photovoice method to inner-city adolescents requires special measures. Initially, the process of identifying community deficits and reflecting on them may cause anguish among some youth populations. As mentioned in the Methods section, many of the adolescents in the youth photovoice program did not photograph some of the more devastating aspects of their communities. It is uncertain whether this was a concerted decision or whether such adolescents failed to recognize the significance of what they consider everyday realities. Sensitivity to the psychological repercussions associated with reflecting on unfair circumstances in youth's lives is needed in projects aimed at working with such youth. In addition, a longer project would allow for more discussion of sensitive issues, leading to better pictures and heightened levels of empowerment.

In addition to the possibility of reducing rather than increasing levels of empowerment, failure to implement photovoice properly could result in other negative consequences. Most notably, if participants take pictures of persons who do not wish to be photographed, serious consequences might ensue, especially in communities where illegal activities are common. Other ethical issues that should be considered include potential for invasion of privacy, recruitment, representation, participation and advocacy, and methodological issues inherent in the photovoice process (Wang

& Redwood-Jones, 2001). If carried out as designed, however, with adequate training and the use of photorelease consent forms, the photovoice method should not pose a serious threat to participants.

It is important to involve parents and guardians in the lives of youth. Photovoice may provide such an opportunity; however, this may prove challenging in low-income, inner-city communities where it is common for parents to face a variety of stressors and competing demands. Because parents are sources of both solutions and problems in youth's lives, alerting them to the project early and then later showing them youth's photographs can have a strong impact and might improve parent-child relationships. The parents and loved ones who attended the youth photovoice exhibits and beamed with pride when admiring their children's works indicates that many parents can be successfully incorporated into such a program.

Although photovoice is not without its limitations, it has great appeal as an exciting grassroots method of engaging youth in the political and social lives of their communities. To further understanding of the utility of the method, new projects are needed that hopefully will take into account some of the suggestions made in this article. To fully understand the capacity of engagement in photovoice to empower youth, better tools for measuring empowerment among youth need to be developed. Good qualitative data from in-depth interviews and field observations are also needed to better address this issue. Youth living in inner cities deserve innovative methods of participatory education that aim to empower them, inform others, and help them work together to improve their own lives as well as the health of the communities in which they live. The photovoice method is one example of a promising approach.

REFERENCES

- Ebata, A. T. (1996). Making university-community collaborations work: Challenges for institutions and individuals. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 6*, 71-70.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Continuum.
- Gullotta, T. P. (1990). Preface. In T. P. Gullotta, G. R. Adams, & R. Montemayor (Eds.), *Developing social competency in adolescence* (pp. 7-8). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Gullotta, T. P., Adams, G. R., & Markstrom, C. A. (2000). *The adolescent experience: Fourth edition*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Keller, E. F., & Longino, H. E. (1996). Introduction. In E. F. Keller & H. E. Longino (Eds.), *Feminism and science* (pp. 1-14). New York: Oxford University Press.
- McHale, S. M., & Lerner, R. M. (1996). University-community collaborations on behalf of youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 6*(1), 1-7.

- Small, S. (1996). Collaborative, community-based research on adolescents: Using research for community change. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 6, 9-22.
- Wallerstein, N., & Bernstein, E. (1988). Empowerment education: Freire's ideas adapted to health education. *Health Education Quarterly*, 15, 379-394.
- Wang, C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health*, 8, 185-192.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. (1994). Empowerment through photo novella: Portraits of participation. *Health Education Quarterly*, 21, 171-186.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education and Behavior*, 24, 369-387.
- Wang, C., Burris, M., & Xiang, Y.P. (1996). Chinese village women as visual anthropologists: A participatory approach to reaching policymakers. *Social Science and Medicine*, 42, 1391-1400.
- Wang, C., Cash, J., & Powers, L. (2000). Who knows the streets as well as the homeless? Promoting personal and community action through photovoice. *Health Promotion Practice*, 1, 81-89.
- Wang, C., Morrel-Samuels, S., Bell, L., Hutchison, P., & Powers, L. S. (Eds.). (2000). *Strength to be: Community visions and voices*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Wang, C., & Redwood-Jones, Y. A. (2001). Photovoice ethics: Perspectives from Flint photovoice. *Health Education and Behavior*, 28, 560-572.
- Youniss, J., & Yates, M. (1997). *Community service and social responsibility in youth*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.