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Having a voice and being heard: Photography and children's communication through photovoice

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Abstract

Photography can be a powerful tool for self-expression. For those who are less empowered in our community, such as children, photography can provide a voice through images. It is a form of creativity that can provide a new way of seeing. This article examines the potential of photovoice as a meaningful way to develop critical thinking and communication approaches. Photovoice is a method of participatory action research that is innovative in the ways by which it enables participants to identify and represent their surroundings. Photovoice has been used in anthropology, public health, social work and education, and is associated with empowerment and valuing subjective experience. For this article, we draw upon the outcomes of photography workshops held with children whose families are the recipients of welfare support, and who have agreed to participate in the Hand Up: Disrupting the Communication of Intergenerational Poverty Linkage project. We examine the processes of photovoice, in which every child's perspective is valued. The children are active participants, empowered through capturing images through professional cameras, selecting and editing their work and, importantly, talking about their photographs, all of which encourage engagement in critical consciousness. There was also a focus on the directness of communication, in the way personal thoughts and ideas were handwritten alongside the photographs produced. In particular, we were interested in the significance for the children of creating a photo album. In our age of digital images, which are viewed on screen, the children were given photo prints, and had a new tactile experience as well as a lasting reminder of their personal photographs, which could be shared and discussed.

Keywords: children; communications; participatory research; photography; photovoice

Introduction

Photography provides selected visions of the world. It can provide interesting perspectives, record a moment and, significantly, is a form of expression. The power of photography to communicate and document is of central focus in this article. In particular, within documentary photography, photographic images are used to draw

attention to social issues; however, the images typically are taken from the photographer's outsider viewpoint. In traditional documentary photography, the photographs are also taken from a position of power. Martha Rosler, in her much cited statement about photography, asserts that 'Documentary, as we know it, carries (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful' (1981, p.179). In her critical account of the tenets of documentary photography she highlights significant concerns about the power relationships, in what is described as socially 'concerned' photography, and in which the images are taken to seek an awareness of a situation and/or 'Others' (the poor, the working class, etc.).

Since the 1980s, there has been a movement of socially concerned documentary photography projects, which attempt to dismantle the power hierarchy between photographer and subject. One such method is photovoice: 'Photovoice researchers put cameras in the hands of individuals who are often silenced' (Sutton-Brown, 2014 p. 170). In this method, instead of the photographer taking pictures of subjects and then turning the photographic subjects into objects (of the gaze), the subjects become active participants empowered by being given a camera to document their own experiences. This participatory approach was used on the current research project, part of an ARC Linkage grant titled 'A Hand Up: Disrupting the Communication of Intergenerational Poverty', which builds on a strategic alliance between Edith Cowan University (ECU) and the St Vincent de Paul Society of Western Australia (SVDPWA).

SVDPWA is one of the largest providers of non-government welfare in Western Australia. The organisation's vision is to provide 'a hand up' so that people can move forward with their lives without becoming dependent upon welfare (St Vincent de Paul Society, 2017). The Hand Up research acknowledges that many of the challenges faced by people in need are linked and exacerbate each other. For example, poor housing options can trigger mental health issues, leading to reduced work options, potentially causing greater poverty. The project investigates the perspectives of families and SVDPWA volunteer members in identifying such challenges and barriers. It explores the possible changes desired and makes specific interventions in direct response to individual families' needs. In the project, such interventions take two pathways. First, the individual needs of each family are identified in a qualitative interview process, and a way to support the child or family to revision their future as more hopeful is sought. Second, a photovoice project has been established by Chief Investigator Panizza Allmark to assist in empowering primary school-aged children from the families that receive support from SVDPWA; the children were supported to revision their world through photography, and thus were enabled to 'find their voice' and a new way of looking at their lived experience in the world.

A previous study has shown that 'photovoice can be an important tool not only in promoting the inclusion of children in research, but also in the inclusion of young children with varying living realities' (Alaca, Rocca & Maggi, 2016, p. 1111). Including children in research through a creative process such as photovoice, which provides them with some control of the expression of their realities, also helps to overcome 'the challenge of the power differential that exists between the adult researcher and the child participants' (McBlain, Dunn & Luke, 2017, p. 39). The children who participated in the project have challenging home lives, in which their families are striving to make

ends meet. Families may struggle to afford outings and activities for their children. In addition, some children are experiencing multiple hardships, such as parental separation, domestic abuse, parental drug dependency and periods in state care.

One example of a child experiencing multiple hardships who participated in a photovoice workshop is a ten-year-old girl. She is from a large family supported by a sole parent, with several older siblings living away from home and several school-aged siblings currently living at home. The mother is a lifelong substance abuser but in the last year has stopped using hard drugs. The mother recently received support from a women's charity and SVDPWA in order to move due to domestic violence. The young girl has had difficulties in school, as well as suffering from ongoing health problems. Stress, hardship, social isolation and feelings of insecurity can have an adverse effect on children. Photovoice can provide an outlet for creativity, which separates children from such challenging everyday experiences and circumstances. In an interview for the ARC linkage project, which took place after the photovoice workshops, the young girl spoke about her photographic experiences. Of central importance to the research is seeking strategies of empowerment and giving a voice to those who have difficulty being heard. 'There are cultural and artistic precedents speculating that children might use photography as a way of defining their world and affirming their control over important aspects of it' (Sharples et al., 2003, p. 323). Particularly notable was that, when asked about the photography workshops, this shy, introverted girl became highly animated and vocal about her photographs and her use of the camera. The child mentioned how much she loved taking photos at the kids' camp: 'I took pictures of around … the trees and that … and took pictures inside and we took pictures outside. We took pictures of the sky.' Asked whether she wanted to do the workshop again, she nodded 'yes' repeatedly. Asked whether she preferred to be given help to take the photos or liked going off and taking them herself, she replied, 'It's fun on your own and that.'

In this article, we examine not only the potential of photovoice, but also the strategies to empower the children involved in the workshops through capturing images. In particular, we consider how this empowerment is manifested through a sense of achievement in producing a creative outcome and how this creative outcome (the photographs and photographic album) assisted in developing and enriching communication with others. As Samantha Punch (2002, p. 323) highlights, 'Children are marginalized in adult-centred society. They experience unequal power relations with adults and much in their lives is controlled and limited by adults.' Given the opportunity, children can thrive when their experiences are valued and when they are given tools of empowerment. In terms of empowerment, it is useful here to consider the notion about power *to* and power *with: '*Power *to* is affirmative power, the ability to accomplish things. Power *with* is the ability to work with others toward a common purpose' (Wang & Burris, 1994, p. 174). The photovoice methodology attempts to achieve this dual notion of power for the child participants.

Literature review

Photovoice has been used in anthropology, social work, public health and education. Of interest to this project is how photovoice has been used with children to encourage

creativity and communication. Sharples and colleagues (2003) have provided the only detailed account of children as photographers. They worked with 180 children from five European countries, aged seven, eleven and fifteen, who were given disposable cameras to take whatever they liked over the course of a weekend. They were then interviewed about the process of taking the photographs and the photographs produced. Their findings 'contradict the view of children as immature and untutored wasters of film. Children's photographs are not just their "view of the world", but are also a construction of their identity in relation to their parents and their peers' (2003, p. 234).

Recent use of photovoice with children includes Judy A. Wright's 2015 doctoral research, which focuses on a case study of photovoice and digital storytelling with fourth grade English learners. Wright (2015, p. 17) considers how these approaches could enhance motivation and academic achievement. Through the use of photovoice, she concluded that the children were motivated by the personalised approach in which they created their own stories. Using photovoice, with its student-centred approach, encouraged children 'to become involved in purposeful and creative activities with other children; make major choices among hands-on learning activities' (2015, p.175). These opportunities for self-empowerment are key aspects of photovoice, alongside a collaborative approach to creative expression.

Wendy Ewald, documentary photographer, applies the collaborative approach of photovoice in her extensive work with children over the last thirty years:

> With her artistic and educational framework, she combines her skills and vision with her subjects' imaginations. Together, Ewald and hundreds of children in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Europe have created a compelling portrait of what matters most to children in their everyday lives and interior worlds – their fantasies and sleep dreams, their family and community lives, their past journeys and thoughts about the future. (Hyde, 2005, p. 172)

Ewald's photovoice work with children highlights the work as being both insightful and complex, with the emphasis on how children can 'communicate their stories through photography' (2005, p. 172).

World Vision has used photovoice as a tool for advocacy. The group PhotoVoice.org delivered two advocacy projects for World Vision between 2009 and 2011: one with young people affected by HIV HIV/AIDS in St Petersburg, Russia and one in Bosnia Herzegovina. *See it Our Way* was a project that involved groups of young people in communities affected by child trafficking across Eastern Europe and the Middle East. It involved an intense series of ten workshops. The body of work produced conveyed insights into the underlying causes and the impact of child trafficking. What is significant about this work, alongside other similar projects from other NGOs, is that photovoice provides an opportunity for participatory research that is highly engaging by providing a creative outlet to communicate issues that may be difficult to articulate through traditional research tools such as interviews and surveys. The potential of photovoice to provide insights into particular points of view has also been utilised in education. For example, in Australia, the New South Wales Department of Education (2017) has provided an online information guide for photovoice to be used as a method for seeking the views of children in classroom evaluation.

Methodology

Melvin Delgado (2015, p. 22) asserts that 'photovoice democratises the research process in a manner that does not exclude the subjects'. It is an arts-based qualitative research method that has much in common with action research, because the ultimate goal or outcome is addressing positive social change. Previous studies have suggested that photovoice has been a successful approach for developing self-empowerment, critical reflection and artistic expression (Hyde 2005; Punch 2002; Sutton-Brown 2014; Wang & Burris, 1994). In Catalini and Minkler's (2010) extensive review of the literature of photovoice, they assert that most photovoice workshops have facilitated the empowerment of the majority of participants. They assert that 'there is no trend indicating that quality of participation differed by participant characteristics such as age, race/ethnicity, income level, or geographical residence' (2010, p. 448). Kuratani and Lai (2011) highlight the worldwide appeal of photovoice because of its participatory nature, flexibility and ability to generate subjective insights. This research suggests that photovoice provides an opportunity to encourage engagement and development of communication skills.

Photovoice is a method of participatory action research that is innovative in the ways in which it enables participants to identify and represent their surroundings. Photovoice is associated with empowerment and valuing subjective experience. It is a method that enables participants 'to control the photographic process in order to express, reflect and communicate' (Wang, 1999, p. 186). It is about valuing the personal and political. In the photovoice workshops, the participants become photographers. They are sharing their vision and insights with others, as well as creating artworks for themselves.

In photovoice, the cameras are given to the participants to document their own lives and their own vision. The images are therefore taken from an insider's perspective. The photovoice research method involves participants taking photographs and then using them to tell their stories. It offers an opportunity for reflection and creative expression. The participants are given the opportunity to share their perspectives through taking the photographs and adding their own writing to their images. This process aims to create a dialogue, alongside individual reflection. It may be described as an attempt to attain 'critical consciousness' as articulated by Paulo Freire (1970), whose emphasis was on increasing self-liberation to achieve positive outcomes. Critical consciousness principles, in conjunction with photovoice, 'assume everyone has the capacity, with the right tools and collective processes, to critically reflect upon their social world, their place in it, their personal perceptions and all the contradictions within and between each' (Stambe & Fryer, 2014, p. 3). When children are given cameras, they can be seen as tools through which they can convey their version of their world, in realist or abstract terms.

The workshops

In 2016, two photovoice workshops were conducted with children attending a SVDPWA camp in rural Western Australia:

> The aim of the camps is to provide an enjoyable holiday, contributing toward the physical and emotional well-being of the children that attend … it provides an outlet where they can experience another environment … The children and their families are assisted because they are experiencing financial and/or emotional problems. (Kids Camp Training Manual, 2016, p. 7)

There were two workshops: the first taught the basics of photography and camera use; the second helped the participants to select and explain the photographs they had taken. The aim was to build their photography skills and their self-confidence through creative self-expression. Through their participation in the photographic workshop, the children were given opportunities to engage in a different space and visually represent another environment outside of their home sphere. Three facilitators conducted the workshops: Panizza Allmark, who had extensive work overseas on similar feminist-based photo projects; Talhy Stotzer, a documentary photographer and researcher; and Jacqui Warwick, who runs Camerastory, a not-for-profit organisation based in Perth, which provides photography workshops for children and young people.

An ethical research practice, in keeping with the partner organisation's focus on promoting its client's autonomy and dignity, was embodied in the photovoice approach. Prior to conducting the workshops and attending the camp, the children and parents were fully informed about the project, initially when given an information letter and consent form, which very clearly allowed the children to opt in or out of the workshops, and second when researchers met with the parents and children at camp sign-in to fully explain the project and ensure consent was understood. Other strict ethical protocols were followed in order that workshop leaders were fully prepared to work within the partner organisation's guidelines for working with children, including attending organisational ethos training and camp training, in particular about enabling the camp's child-centred 'warm and fuzzy' atmosphere. All researchers had Working with Children cards, and police checks were conducted immediately prior to the workshops. Elements about the workshops were conveyed around two main ethical considerations: 'What does participation in the photography workshops involve?' and 'What will happen to the photographs? Is it private and confidential?' It was explained in writing as well as verbally that the children who were attending the Vinnies Youth camps were invited to participate in photography workshops designed to help them take photographs of their own choice. The children and parents were also informed that their work may be published and/or exhibited, but that this would only occur if the child and parent had agreed to it.

The parents and children were also informed about the privacy and confidentiality involved in taking photographs. For example, it was made clear that the children would be instructed about camera usage guidelines in the first workshop at the camp and would not be permitted to take photographs in bathrooms or sleeping dorms. Children would be de-identified in any photographic images so that no one would see the children's faces. These de-identified photographs may be used in the exhibition if the child chose to participate in this, and may also be published in this de-identified form in a report, conference paper, journal or book about the Hand Up research project.

Significantly, participants were advised that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at anytime (although none did.)

Around 32 children, aged between eight and twelve years, attended the camp and participated in the workshops. They were divided into three groups. Camp volunteers helped to manage the groups. The children were given cameras to capture the nearby Australian landscape and the camp premises from a range of different perspectives. They recorded their personal experiences of internal and external communal spaces, away from their suburban homes. As well as visually representing their encounters, the children were given the opportunity to reflect about their experiences with poignant handwritten thoughts. Helping them to voice their stories meant these children experienced empowerment and had an opportunity for self-direction and autonomy. It also provided a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. As Wright (2015, pp. 40–1) suggests, 'photovoice can be used to deepen knowledge and develop higher order thinking skills by having students take part in an authentic inquiry where each student draws upon his or her own experiences'. It encouraged them to write a different narrative from the one that may have been imposed on them externally or that they may have inherited.

In the first workshop, the children were instructed on how to use the digital SLR cameras. Most literature about photovoice advocates the use of disposable cameras due to affordability (Alaca, Roca & Maggi, 2016; Zartler & Richter, 2014). Disposable cameras are also non-technical and easy to use. Instead, large digital cameras were provided for this project because they were a similar medium to the cameras used by professional photographers, thus providing a rich learning experience. The cameras are relatively expensive compared with disposable ones, and it provided the children with first-hand experience of a camera they may rarely have used, and to opportunity to acquire a skills set of using such a camera that they most likely would not have learned elsewhere. The use of these cameras also highlighted that we trusted the children with expensive equipment and that the work produced by them was deemed to be of substantial value. This was one of the empowering outcomes of the workshops for the children, as they were able to achieve mastery of their cameras.

In terms of developing photography aesthetic skills, the children were advised of the process of following the three tenets of photography: find, frame and focus. This involves a slower engagement than a rapid succession of photographs that are often taken with a camera phone or other simple digital cameras. In following the find, frame and focus tenets – emphasised as the 'the three fs' – each child took more care and time thinking about what they would like to photograph and the aesthetic qualities of their chosen subject. For example, they considered how their choice of camera angle and the composition changed the way an image would look. The process involved artistic reflection in the sense that the children were encouraged to consciously compose the images of their own choosing. Subjective photography, in which there are no clear rules on what to photograph, was encouraged. The children were given the opportunity to express their perceptions freely. The most notable aspect of the photovoice workshops was that the children were also very vocal. Shy children who had barely spoken a few words at the commencement of the workshops began to freely talk about their images. They approached the facilitators and

volunteers to share their images, with comments such as 'Look what I have taken'. The transformation in the children's behaviour was remarkable.

The children were empowered through the process of being given cameras. The children had mastered the ability to use the cameras – for example, they knew how to control the SLR camera alongside framing and viewing their images. The children displayed satisfaction in this achievement, and this was noted through the large number of photographs taken by each child (which were between 20 and 50 images), their careful selection and editing of their work, and their verbal comments praising each other's photographs. As Punch (2002, p. 333) highlights in her work with children:

> The main benefit of using the photographic method was that the children enjoyed taking the photographs and learning how to use a camera; most of them had never held one before … The photographic technique did not depend on the children's ability, or their perceived ability, to depict an image.

Certainly, the children's engagement and enthusiasm conveyed during the workshops showed that this opportunity was a positive aspect of photovoice and, as Punch (2002, p. 333) suggests, it was 'something novel and different for them to do, so it was a fun way for them to express themselves'.

Themed as a safari hunt, the children were 'shooting' what they were interested in with the camera. The children were taken outside the building to the outdoor area, which consisted of the campgrounds and the native bush. The immediate environment was a source of inspiration, and they were engaging with and experiencing the space in new ways. For example, they were searching for details and differing angles of seeing. The shoot was constructed as a fun experience, in keeping with the camp ethos. This activity provided an escape from the everyday realities of their home life, as a follow-up interview with a child participant about the photovoice experience illustrated: 'I forget all about the things that's just past, all the like hard things, you know, that I go through and stuff.' Being able to explore, as a photographic 'hunter' on safari, was also an empowering role. They were active players in that were able to choose and aim for their photographed targets (in a non-threatening manner). A child stated, 'I liked being free to go outside and inside and take photos of whatever I wanted.' The process of being given an opportunity to freely photograph challenges the conventions of traditional documentary, which include searching for images of injustice.

Photovoice does not follow the traditional tenets of documentary photography, as outlined by Rosler (1989), whereby an outsider takes photographs of a powerless group. In the workshops, each child was empowered in the finding and framing of their subjects. This was an individual undertaking that gave them control of what they photographed and how they wished to edit their work.

As a documentary photography project, it can best be described as 'the creative treatment of actuality' (Grierson, 1966, p. 147). Acknowledging the creative impetus in photography also highlights how 'photographing areas of interest and importance allows youth to identify, record and share with adults in a manner that encourages them to do so in a way that is affirming' (Delgado, 2015, p. 8). In this project, the

children's visions as documentary photographers were valued through the praise and recognition of the group. But the project also provided a personal subjective opportunity not only for reflection on the images, but also for self-reflection in considering what the images meant to them personally.

The second workshop consisted of a reflexive art practice. The children were given their photographs and were asked to select images to put in a photo album. Giving the children prints of the work made this process a tactile experience and gave the work further value. In this way, 'the physicality of the encounter with the photographic object … characterised by hyper-saturated colours or by muted tones, forms part of the experience of viewing thereby influencing the way in which we respond to and are affected' by the work (Wells, 2015, p. 347). The photographic prints were physical evidence of what the photographer found interesting or important. The process of physically touching the photographs, ordering the work and editing required thinking about a narrative structure as well as refining editing skills. Discussion with facilitators, peers and the camp volunteers was encouraged. This was an empowering activity, as each child could select the sequence of the images to create a personal narrative and talk openly about their images.

From the array of images, the children were asked to select their favourite image. This photograph was pasted onto a sheet of paper. Each child was encouraged to write down their feelings about the image, or a story about it. For example, in one image of an extreme close-up of bark, a child wrote, 'When I look at this photo it makes me feel happy, because I love to go outside. I love nature.' In an image of the children's camp gear lined up outside, another child wrote, 'It makes me happy of how many people came to the camp!' The photo narration process was an opportunity for each child to convey how they felt about their photographs and increase visual literacy.

Through this process, children were able to construct stories that were concealed within the photographs. In the personal narratives, notions of family, pleasure and memories were evoked. As in other photovoice projects, 'while listening to the children's voices in this study, it was also noted that the children controlled the conversation about the pictures, giving the message: I know my life in a way that you do not' (Keat, Strickland & Marinak, 2009, p. 16). One interesting example of transformation was that of a young boy who was unruly at the beginning of the workshops. He was not particularly respectful to the facilitators or the other children, although he clearly enjoyed using the camera and had taken around 40 images (almost double the number of the other children). When it came time to select a favourite image and write about his photograph of a tree, he conveyed a very sensitive narrative about the notion of family and home. He wrote, 'Once upon a time there was a bird who lived in the tree and the bird family grew up in the tree and the whole family lived there'. In the photovoice workshops, it was important that the children were given time to express their unique vision. It was also an opportunity for creativity. For example, in a close-up image of an organ in the camp hall, a child wrote, 'This is no ordinary keyboard. This keyboard plays by itself.' The child was then encouraged to share their perspectives with the group. The children had the power in the group, and the facilitators quietly listened to the children speak. In photovoice workshops, allowing

time for each participant to photograph and articulate their views is crucial to maintain child agency:

> One of the main advantages of using visual and written methods is that it may lessen the problems of an unequal power relationship between the adult researcher and the child participant, where the child may feel under pressure to respond relatively quickly in the 'correct' manner. (Punch, 2002, p. 336)

The photographs were finally viewed in PowerPoint format on a large screen. The screening of the children's images took around twenty minutes. Each child's name and a selection of their images were on display. The images displayed on a large screen gave further emphasis to the work. All the children could see each other's work, and receive acclaim for their artwork from their peers, facilitators and camp volunteers. This gave visual recognition of their work, built pride and aided in building self-esteem for the children, in that their work was respected and appreciated. Children freely clapped to applaud the work. It was also an opportunity for children to inspire each other and comment on the value of the photographs. Spontaneous comments arose from the children, with statements such as 'that is awesome' and 'I really liked that close-up'. Viewing the photographs as a collective experience gave recognition to each child's artwork in a positive and encouraging environment.

Results: 'We got to take photos and I still got the photos!'

The above comment from a child in the workshop provides a basis for the results of the photovoice project. An important aspect of this photovoice project, which is unique in comparison to other photovoice projects, is the culmination of the children's oeuvre in the form of the personal photo album. In other photovoice projects, participants view their images on screen or they are distributed as prints to facilitate discussion for further analysis of the participants' values or interests. In this project, the emphasis was on creative expression, and on providing the children with a photo album that they could keep as a record of their work. The tactile nature of the photographic work carefully edited into a photo album was an activity in which the children engaged very well. The high level of excitement from the children about completing their album, as well as sharing with each other their work was observed. There was such an abundance of enthusiasm expressed about the completed photo albums that the camp leaders decided to collect all the albums so that they could be distributed to each child at the conclusion of the camp. By doing this, the camp leaders felt that the children could focus better on the many other activities that were to be undertaken over the course of the week. A high level of excitement was shown by the children when their albums were given back to them and also when they showed the albums to their parent(s) when they returned from the camp. In follow-up interviews with families in relation to the wider focus of the research into intergenerational poverty and circumstances, it was recorded that each child was 'very enthusiastic' about showing the photo book to the interviewer, and even a shy child became very animated explaining the photos one by one.

It is important to consider that the physical photo album, common up to a generation ago, has now been replaced by online formats: 'Over the last decade photographs have

been increasingly experienced as images that are not prints, rather they shimmer on laptops … rather than existing as tactile objects for which scale, surface and luminosity are contributory components' (Wells, 2015, p. 347). Having the photographic prints and album in hand was quite a special, personal and intimate, experience for the children. Also, for the families who may not have ongoing access to digital technology, the material personal photo album is a portable, accessible and meaningful record of photographic memories. Thus the photovoice project, which gave the children the opportunity to develop photographic skills and communicate their personal visions, has further benefits that extend beyond the parameters of the workshops and its limited timeframe. The possession of the personal photographs encouraged subsequent dialogue about the photo album, and memories of the camp, in the home space.

Martha Langford (2004) discusses the afterlife of memory in photographic albums. She highlights that the 'showing and telling of an album is a performance'. Langford states that 'its personal nature and intended restriction to a circle of intimates, even to an audience of one, licenses singular arrangements of situational images that need explanation and are enhanced by a tale' (2004, p. 5). Similarly, Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (2004, p. 11) assert that:

> Albums in particular have performative qualities. Not only do they narrativise photography, such as in family or travel albums … but their materiality dictates the embodied conditions of viewing, literally performing the images in certain ways.

For each child, sharing their photo album with family members is a performative and intimate experience. It has the possibility of opening up channels of communication, which may not be present within the family. Photography has been identified as a method through which 'individuals can engage in cross-generational dialogue and meaning making' (Chen, 2016 p. 21). Also of consideration is that photographs 'will have … many meanings across time and generations' (Keary, 2012, p. 13). Talking about their photographs to others, reflecting on the photographs individually, narrativising their work and eliciting memories of their creative visions are of significance for the children in developing communication skills. They are developing their visual literacy and, furthermore, finding a voice and using it.

Unlike traditional documentary photography, photovoice provides an insider's perspective, but it also gives agency and voice to those who are often disempowered and are more vulnerable in society. It is also important to consider that it may be difficult for 'an adult researcher ever to totally understand the world from a child's point of view' (Punch, 2003, p. 325). Having children talk about their work is one way of providing further insights. The photographs offer a visual prompt to engage in conversation that has the potential to deepen communication with others. Photography projects such as this provide an opportunity to engage, inspire and reflect on different ways of seeing and experiencing the world, while also providing an opportunity for the children to feel empowered. The power of photography is explained by Marvin Heiferman (2012, p. 16): 'Photographs don't only show us things, they do things. They engage us optically, neurologically, intellectually, emotionally, viscerally, physically'.

Summary of outcomes

The outcomes of the photovoice workshop components of the Hand Up Linkage research project, in which ECU partnered with SVDPWA, were child-centred. These outcomes related to the child workshop participants' skill development as photographers and also as autonomous agents curating the depiction of their lived experience, whereby their voices were heard, their visions were witnessed and they were controllers of how their photographic visions were conveyed to others.

In relation to skills, in just two hours all children who participated in the workshop were able to master the use of an SLR camera to the point where they were capable of independently taking photographs. In relation to voice, all children told stories or conveyed verbal representations about how they felt about their favourite photograph. In terms of encouraging autonomy, the children conveyed the ability to be self-reflective in reviewing their photographs and considering what they would like to photograph at a later time. Furthermore, in the photovoice workshops, each child exerted editorial control by editing all their images taken in order to select their favourite images and sequencing these for their photo album.

When the participants controlled the photographic process in a way that embodied (as Wang suggests of such engagement), self-expression, reflection and communication (1999, p. 186), each child conveyed their individual perspective of reality. The children photographed what they saw as important to them and further articulated this importance when they narrated their photographs to the group. This process of reflexively considering their photographs and communicating this understanding to the group fostered a critical consciousness in the children (Stambe & Fryer, 2014, p. 3), whereby they could critically reflect on their own social world. A sense of empowerment was manifested through their sense of achievement as a result of producing a creative outcome, and this creative outcome facilitated enriched communication skills with others, thus becoming a process of meaning-making (Chen, 2016). Compiling their albums embodied performative qualities, whereby the children 'narrativised' (Edwards & Hart, 20014, p. 11) their lived experience.

Conclusion

As it approached its 150th birthday, the St Vincent de Paul Society of Western Australia partnered with Edith Cowan University in this ARC-funded Linkage research project, 'A Hand Up: Disrupting the Communication of Inter-generational Poverty; Promoting Independence and Building Capacity'. The Hand Up project was seen as one way to address the challenges experienced by those supported by the society who face inter-generational poverty. The photovoice workshops were a strategy to promote independence and capacity-building among the disadavantaged children of those supported by the society. In this way, the workshops – like the project itself – were positioned as way of starting small in the first instance of intervening in communication about welfare dependency, but with a view to acting as a catalyst for larger change in the future. The photovoice workshops were a deliberate strategy to encourage a positive vision of the future for the children, in line with Delgado's (2015, p. 18) argument that 'marginalised groups and communities benefit from having their stories

or narratives told to increase positive attention and resources to their communities, and by creating a sense of control over their lives, an increased awareness of the importance of relationships'.

The photovoice workshops provided a new way of seeing and 'speaking' in which every child's perspective was valued and in which the children were active agents, empowered through capturing images using professional cameras to see and feel their place in the world a little differently. The outcomes of workshops supported the society's aim of engendering positive feelings for the children, while at the same time supporting the children to share their feelings and experience through creative expression. Further workshops held in 2017, and a proposed public exhibition of the children's artworks in the same year, were designed to build on the 2016 workshops discussed in this article, and to provide further opportunities for the children to experience control over the expression of their lived experience.

For those who are less empowered in our community, such as the children of families supported by the St Vincent de Paul Society of Western Australia, photography can provide a voice through images. The taking and narrating these images in the photovoice workshops, in the safe space of the society's children's camps, provided a platform from which voices of disadvantaged children could be heard.

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