

CHILDREN FRAMING CHILDHOODS

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Children Framing Childhoods is a participatory visual ethnography about how working-class boys and girls view family-school-community relationships. The children's use of photography (the images they take and the explanations they provide) puts a face on complicated processes of growing up/bringing up, accustomed gendered inequality and racial segregation, and their feelings and fears about love, care and learning in contexts of immigration, economic instability and family hardship.

This work has made me question any single or monolithic framework for understanding immigrant and working-class childhoods "through children's eyes"; or any simplistic notion about the meaning of children's or youth "voices"; or that children/youth can speak in unison within a global community about the issues they face in local contexts. Indeed, the complexities of children's/youth's feelings, intentions and aspirations as *individuals* as well as *members of families, social and cultural groups*, deserves more rigorous and analytic attention and investigation. I propose a research and pedagogical practice that combines ethnography, narrative and visual methods and analysis -- what I call *collaborative seeing and hearing* -- that aims to close the gap between how children and teachers engage enduring themes of working-class and transnational childhoods. The camera is one among many tools for engaging adults and children in collaborative ways of seeing and hearing. But photography is an especially useful metaphor for thinking about how children read their social worlds. Their pictures make visible childhood contexts, including particular spaces and places they inhabit and relationships that matter. The children's pictures also serve as clues to what is hidden just outside the frame, in the shadows, a moment before or after the shutter snapped.

My Process

I first visited the school -- a K-6 urban, "low achieving" public elementary school in Worcester, MA -- in the fall of 2003. Out of discussions with the principal about her most pressing school concerns came several initiatives, including one that would evolve into *Children Framing Childhoods*. The principal explained that there were increasing numbers of immigrant children arriving to the school, and she was looking to develop strategies for better integrating these students and their families into the school culture. I saw this as an opportunity to join interests—the school's and my own—to investigate the lived experiences of transnational childhoods and to consider the cultural knowledge of immigrant children as a rich resource for learning, rather than as a problem to the school or a deficit.



1. *Selecting Participants:*

The 5th grade teachers, the principal and technology instructor selected the participating children with attention to the following three criteria: a) racial, ethnic and economic diversity, making sure to include students from the school's two largest immigrant groups (i.e. Asia, Latin America); b) both boys and girls; and c) a range of current academic performance levels.¹ All the children spoke English fluently, with the exception of one child from Iran who was learning English during her first year in the project. Securing parental permission and consent was brokered by various members of the school (the principal, teachers, school secretary) and evolved over time to include permission for release of video and photographic images as parents became more comfortable. Children's assent was built into the project design in several ways and included their active editing and decision-making about which images and text to make public.

2. *Developing the Picture Taking Prompts:*

The principal, technology teacher and I met to discuss what prompts to provide the children for their photographs. We wanted to provide direction, but not too much, so that the children would be encouraged to photograph their surroundings from their own perspective and with their own agenda. We agreed on the overall prompt for the fifth grade children—***"You have a cousin who is your same age and is moving to Worcester and coming to Columbus Park School. Take pictures of what you want her/him to know about your school, family and community"***—to emphasize the children's roles as "experts" and "guides".

We brainstormed with the children and generated more specific prompts, including:

- Take pictures of what learning is like at school?
- What makes you feel proud (of your school, family community)?
- What is something that concerns you about your community?
- Who or what do you admire?
- Take pictures of places inside and outside of school where you feel comfortable.
- Take pictures of places inside and outside of school where you feel respect.
- Take pictures of places inside and outside of school where you feel like you belong.
- What you do after school and on the weekends?

The technology teacher provided folders for each child that included these prompts, as well as a space for them to write freely about these topics as a way to jumpstart ideas about what photographs to take.

3. *Explaining the Project:*

My research assistants and I met with the children to explain the project and each child was given a disposable camera with twenty-seven exposures. We provided minimal guidance on how to use the camera.² We told the fifth-grade children they had four days – from

¹ According to the principal, "some students had special education I.E.Ps to address cognitive challenges, others had I.E.Ps that focused on social-emotional and behavioral challenges and others were typically developing" (personal communication). I was not aware of students' academic performance levels while conducting the interviews.

² I take a different perspective on children/youth photography than the one taken by many photographers who are engaged in projects with children and youth. For example, Jim Hubbard, renowned professional

Thursday to Monday – to take photographs. We discussed the prompts for the photographs and who their audiences would be. We told the children that their photographs and commentaries would be used in a course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education to help educators-in-training – e.g. teachers and principals – learn what they think is most important about their school, families and community lives. We asked about the children’s own experiences taking photos, and learned that for many, this would be their first camera. In the words of one student, “having a camera is a big responsibility.” We also showed the children some photos taken by children in other projects and asked them what they thought the young photographers were hoping to convey. Finally, we discussed the ethics of using photography, generating a list of guidelines, making sure to highlight those related to intrusion, embarrassment and consent. This session took forty-five minutes.

4. *Interviewing the Children Individually:*

We brought back the developed pictures and met with each individual child to talk about his/her photos. We did not view the photographs beforehand; we invited the children to view their set and remove any pictures they might not want to discuss (no child chose this option).

The conversations were opened-ended guided by the following questions:

Tell me about this photo?

What’s going on here?

Why did you take it? What about the photo is important to you?

What does the photo say about your school, family or community?

Are there any photographs that you wished you had taken but didn’t?



At the end of the session we asked each child to select their 5 favorite photographs and to explain why they had made those selections. These sessions were videotaped and transcribed, and lasted from 30-60 minutes. One set of photographs was given to the student after the interview, in addition to a disk containing all their photographs. We kept another set as well as digital copies for analysis.

photographer explains that “unless there is a competent and ongoing tutorial elements, most children will not produce images that truly depict the vast array of elements a community is comprised of... Without ample guidance, the kids will take pictures of cars/hubcaps, hood ornaments, flowers, trees, grass, cats, dogs, and each other.” Whereas Hubbard’s *Shooting Back* project emphasizes preparing youth to “perfect their photographic skills and their willingness and ability to self reflect and critique their community”, I believe there is equal merit in projects that seek to understand and preserve the meaning of these ordinary pictures to the children, on their own terms.

5. *Group Conversations about the Photos:*

After the individual interviews, we met with the children in groups of six (preferably, three girls and three boys). We laid out their five favorite photos on long tables and asked the children to look closely at each other's pictures. We asked, "**what do you notice about the photos?**" These sessions lasted from between 30-45 minutes and were videotaped and transcribed.

6. *Another Round of Reflection and Discussion:*

About a month later, we returned to the school to show the children edited versions of their individual interviews. We had edited each interview to include what a child had said about his or her favorite photographs. We asked for their responses and any changes they wanted to make. In some cases, a child wanted to add or subtract something from the video-clip; in other cases, a child was satisfied with what she/he saw. We did this in groups of three or four children. These sessions last 30-45 minutes. Talking in small groups provided another opportunity for the children to consider how they wanted to represent themselves and their concerns – what they wanted to make public about their lives.



7. *Planning for a Public Exhibition:*

We met with the children to "curate" an exhibition for the public. Each year of the project the children have made different decisions about how to curate their show – including power-point presentations accompanied by text and music, and a videotaped presentation of each child talking about selected photographs that were enlarged and framed. Exhibitions have been held at several local settings, as well as the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Exhibiting the work is a critical part of the process in that it makes visible to a larger audience what the children care to show.



8. Teachers Read the Photographs:

While a picture may be worth more than a 1,000 words, photographs do not “speak for themselves”. The final stage of the process was to bring adult members of the school community together to reflect on what they saw (and didn’t see) in the children’s photographs; to ask what the pictures made them want to know more about the children’s lives; to engage in the feelings aroused by specific photographs; and to exchange multiple perspectives. These group deliberations brought into shaper focus the values, beliefs, and assumptions that were shaping teachers’ eyesight and understandings.