

BRIEF REPORTS

Photo Collages and Near-Peer Interviewing: Scaffolding Data Collection in Youth Participatory Action Research Projects With Children

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In this brief report, we describe photo collages generated by youth researchers as a photo-elicitation technique in youth participatory action research focused on food (in)security. The approach was implemented with 11 high school students over the course of one semester in an agriscience class at a K-12 alternative school. Student researchers used photo collages as data collection scaffolds within near-peer interviews with elementary students to prompt sharing about food experiences and inequality. This report illustrates how youth-led photo collages are a useful approach to engaging youth as co-creators of knowledge by scaffolding research capacity for high school students and engaging elementary students in research.

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) positions youth as knowledge creators and agents of community change (Camarrota & Fine, 2008). Though often taking place in learning contexts outside of public schools, YPAR is increasingly being integrated into the regular school day and curricular and instructional programming (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Giraldo-García & Galletta, 2015; Kornbluh et al., 2015; Ozer et al., 2013; Ozer & Wright, 2012). A common aspect of YPAR is that adults support youth's development of research capacity to conduct their selected data collection methods. Systematic reviews of YPAR indicate that youth often learn new research skills, including survey development, qualitative interviewing, or photovoice methodologies (Anyon et al., 2018; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). Attention to how research skill development and data collection procedures are scaffolded within YPAR is an important factor for adults to consider when engaging youth as co-researchers.

Scaffolding is a teaching technique where complex tasks are deconstructed or simplified to support the development of higher order skills. Research has emphasized that photo-based methods are useful scaffolding tools for engaging both adolescents and younger children in research. For instance, inclusion of children in research requires developmentally appropriate data collection methods (Ali-Khan & Siry, 2014; Epstein et al., 2006; Pyle, 2013). Photo-elicitation interviews (Torre & Murphy, 2015) may be particularly useful for children due to language development limitations in which they may not be able to share perspectives in verbal-only interviews (Epstein et al., 2006; Pyle, 2013). Visual activation of thoughts and memories through photos may help fill verbal communication gaps in the interview (Smith et al., 2017). Additionally, the usage of photos can serve as an ice breaker prior to a set of

interview questions, acting as a catalyst for children to share their knowledge (Harper, 2002), and may help reduce power imbalances between the researcher and participant being interviewed (Van Auken et al., 2010). In sum, existing research illustrates that photo-elicitation methods are a tool to support a young person's engagement in the developmentally complex task of interviewing. This approach can be presented as one data generation option to emerging youth researchers alongside other quantitative and qualitative methods, like developing surveys or focus groups.

In this report, we illustrate how youth-led photo collages can be used as a photo-elicitation technique within near-peer interviewing to engage children and adolescents as co-creators of knowledge in school-based YPAR. "Near peer" is a concept often used in education and mentoring to describe interactions between a more advanced peer and a relatively younger peer within a shared setting or experience (Herrick-Reynolds et al., 2019; Karcher, 2005). In this context, near-peer interviewing refers to interviews between an older and younger student in a K-12 alternative school.

Project and School Context

This YPAR project took place over the course of one semester with 11 students in an agriscience class at an alternative school. The school served K-12 students who had been removed from their home schools for disciplinary infractions. The first and third authors had partnered with the school for several years, and the second author for one semester. At the school, there were strict limits on students' use of technology, formal and informal policies that limited peer interaction both in classrooms and in the broader school community, and rigid expectations about students' physical movement in the building, which we have reported on elsewhere (Anderson et al., 2021; Anderson & Baggett, 2020). Our class was unique in that we were given greater autonomy than many adults in the building. For example, we were permitted to engage students in instructional strategies not afforded to teachers in other classrooms, such as discussion-based lessons, group activities, regular trips to the community garden via the school bus, and the ability to visit other classrooms (for detailed description of class lessons, see Anderson et al., 2021).

Our class was composed of students in grades 9–12. The instructor of record was responsible for day-to-day instruction with students both in the classroom and at the community garden. We met with the class weekly to engage in topics of concern around food (in)security and food justice, which were part of the curricular and instructional goals outlined by course standards and set forth by the instructor of record. Their research questions centered on exploration of their own school community's experiences with food insecurity.¹

¹ To mitigate the potential of food insecurity among students in our class, we provided a buffet of snacks at the beginning of each class session.

Photo Collages in Near-Peer Interviews

In initial class sessions, youth had begun exploring food trends using national food data. Subsequent lessons included analysis and discussion about local food bank data and barriers to food access in the community, including the documentation required to access the food bank, geospatial analysis of grocery stores with fresh food, and (lack of) transportation in the community to travel to sources of fresh food (Anderson et al., 2021). They were surprised by global food insecurity trends regarding women caregivers and children as affected by food insecurity and wanted to know if their local context was similar. Thus, they identified a research question related to school community members' experiences with food. Exploring this question positioned the students to then provide actionable solutions to school leaders about food insecurity.

After determining an overarching research question, youth researchers ultimately determined that they wanted to generate data—including surveys and interviews—from classmates to support their interest in youth experiences with food security. In an effort to build students' research capacity and actualize their selected data generation choices, we developed lessons to write survey questions, transform them into interview questions, practice interviewing skills, and integrate photo elicitation approaches for their planned near-peer interviews with elementary students. We decided that youth should integrate photos into the interviews because they set up youth researchers to ask child participants experience-near questions (i.e., Josselson, 2013), or related, non-judgmental questions without asking them directly about a research question (i.e., “Are you food insecure?”). We next describe how this approach was scaffolded with youth researchers during the data collection stage of the project by illustrating four phases used in classroom sessions.

Developing Collages about Food

To prepare for their interviews, students were introduced to photo elicitation methods with the following prompt: “Sometimes interviewing can be easier when you have some images to talk about. So, today, we’d like for you to work on the computers to choose five images that illustrate an idea.” We scaffolded students' selection of images by asking them questions about what food insecurity, broadly, might look like, and more specific ideas including the actions we talked about taking to address food insecurity: little pantries in neighborhoods, bookbags home from school, and restaurants donating unused food. Students decided that asking their younger peers in elementary grades about their favorite foods would be a good entry point into asking other questions about what types of foods were often found in their refrigerators and cupboards at home. Students reasoned that by prompting conversations about what kinds of foods the children typically had in their homes, they might be able to make inferences about access to nutritious foods. These questions also mirrored some of the survey items they had developed (i.e., “Select the following foods that are typically in your refrigerator/pantry,” etc.).

Photo-elicitation methods vary; they sometimes involve researchers presenting photos to participants, or researchers asking participants to take their own photos to talk about in interview contexts (Epstein et al., 2006). In this approach, rather than using cameras to take photos, students used classroom computers to create “food collages” with images they found on the internet which would later be printed. Not only was this a way for students to develop a data collection tool, but they applied what they had learned so far in class about food security. Namely, they had learned that food insecurity does not always look like malnourishment in a distant country or “starving children in Africa,” as they put it, but rather is widespread within the United States. Put another way, students had learned that even folks who had access to some types of food could also be food insecure based on barriers to nutritious, fresh foods.

Deciding Who to Interview

Once students were introduced to interviewing and photo elicitation methods, they identified who they wanted to gather information from in order to answer their question. Students engaged in a whole class discussion using the following prompt from our lesson plan: “If we’re going to collect information from people, we have to have some ideas about who to ask. Let’s brainstorm some people we could ask to complete our survey or participate in an interview. Let’s also set goals for the data we’ll have the next time we see each other.” Students identified members in the school community, with an initial interest in interviewing same-age peers in different high school classrooms. However, only elementary school teachers were available to host us for interviews, and ultimately students interviewed near-peer students in these classrooms. They came to this decision not only because of school logistics but also due to prior classroom discussions about national data that women caregivers and children in the U.S. were the most likely to be food insecure. Students were also excited about the possibility of talking to elementary-aged students. In this small, fairly tight-knit community, many of the elementary students were siblings and cousins of classmates or friends.

Practicing Interviewing Classmates Using Voice Recorders

Expanding from their survey knowledge, students practiced interviewing one another in class before interviewing elementary students. This activity was prompted with the following instructions: “One part of getting people’s ideas and perspectives is surveying. Another way to get some ideas from people is to interview them and make a recording of their responses. Later today, we’re going to practice interviewing with a partner and a voice recorder. First, let’s return to transforming some of our survey questions. Let’s work through these questions to make sure we get as much information as possible.” By now, students had generated their food collages and they synthesized the images they selected with the survey items they’d written in order to generate open-ended questions that would invite their peers to share personal experiences and narratives. Students then formed groups to practice their interview protocols and use the digital voice recorders. We also note the novelty with which many

students approached the use of voice recorders; as previously mentioned, students were prevented from keeping smartphones and other technology on their person while at school. In some ways, the single-use technology of a voice recorder introduced an opportunity of playfulness in what might have been considered an otherwise serious topic of study and context.

Interviewing Elementary Students

After students became more comfortable with peer interviews, they prepared for the interviews with elementary students. This included their revised interview questions to be more developmentally appropriate for younger children, as well as the inclusion of the food collages to support their interviewing interactions. The instructor of record for the class had contacted the elementary teacher at the alternative school a few weeks prior in order to schedule our interview day. During our class period with the students, we walked down to the elementary school room and did some introductions. We paired the teenagers with children and reminded them to record their conversations as they talked about their photo collages and used their interview protocols ([Figure 1](#)). The pairs sat at round tables together in groups, and at times the conversations crossed over and teenagers supported one another in getting the children talking. Conversations centered on favorite foods, foods that were typically around in their households, and ideas about who usually did the shopping and cooking at home. Most interviews lasted around 10 minutes. (For further reading about the content of these interviews, see Anderson et al., 2021). When we came back together, students debriefed in a whole-class discussion about their experiences interviewing the children, as well as the content of their conversations. Some remarked that the children they interviewed were talkative while others were quiet or shy, also noting that many of the foods children had described as being in their households were some of the less nutritious options we had explored earlier in the semester. Youth researchers listened back to their recordings later in the semester as they prepared their presentations for stakeholders.

Conclusion

In this report, we described how we used photo collages as an elicitation technique in near-peer interviewing to support data collection in YPAR about food (in)security. This brief report supports other research on the benefits of photo-based methods in education research (Torre & Murphy, 2015) by illustrating how we implemented this approach over multiple class sessions to engage youth researchers as co-constructors of knowledge about food issues.

This approach offers at least two benefits for youth knowledge construction within YPAR. First, it allowed for the scaffolding of research capacity-building within the project for youth researchers. Based on work with the current students, as well as prior work with college and graduate students, we recognized interviewing as a complex skill. We learned that practicing interviews with peers and near peers—as well as structuring those interviews with pre-selected images—rendered designing and conducting interviews more

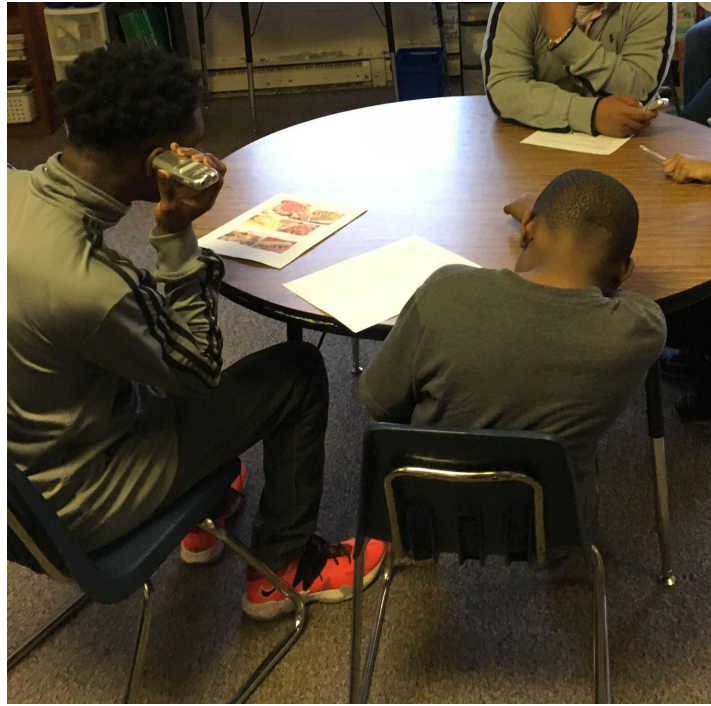


Figure 1. Youth researchers interviewing elementary students with photo collages and voice recorders.

accessible to inexperienced researchers. Students applied their learnings about food security to developing “food collages” that would later aid in near-peer interviews. Students shifted from being intimidated by the open-ended nature of designing an interview protocol and finding an interview participant to expressing confidence and eagerness to try out their interview questions. That shift happened because the use of photographic collages made the planning and conduct of the interviews more doable and near peers made interviewing less intimidating. Additionally, students in the school were prohibited from having phones; thus, developing photo collages was better suited to the setting compared to other photo-based methods that would require cameras (Epstein et al., 2006). This adaptation may be useful for other YPAR collectives with similar barriers to youth generating their own photographs.

Next, photo elicitation in near-peer interviewing supported youth-led data collection efforts. Youth researchers selected elementary students as a valuable source of knowledge regarding food access in their communities because of prior class lessons on food trends and the impact of food insecurity on women and children. Photo collages worked to spark conversation and prompt sharing with elementary students, whom prior literature has indicated might experience barriers to sharing their experiences within research (Pyle, 2013). Moreover, photo elicitation with elementary students is an approach that validates that children are valuable informants on food security and can contribute to knowledge construction by sharing their experiences (Ali-Khan & Siry, 2014).

We also acknowledge the tensions inherent in our YPAR work at the alternative school. First, we had been careful to support the discussion of food security by providing food to high school students each day. We did

not, however, provide food to elementary school students during near-peer interviews. As previously stated, we had been granted permissions not available to other teachers in the building, and we suspect we would not have been allowed to take food to that teacher's classroom. However, in hindsight, we recognize that we should have been more assertive in our planning to engage with elementary students, many of whom may have been experiencing food insecurity. We were also navigating the tensions between and among our perception of youth as important collaborators, sources of information, and stakeholders, while contributing to the oppression of children and adolescents by working in (i.e., implicitly condoning) a punitive, alternative school environment, which we have explored elsewhere (see Anderson et al., 2021; Anderson & Baggett, 2020; Baggett, 2021; Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2021). For further reading about tensions in YPAR work, see Anderson (2020); Call-Cummings et al. (2022); Kirshner (2010); and Mirra et al. (2016).

This approach may be useful for future research inside and outside of education. Near-peer interviewing may be a useful way for adult researchers and teachers to support youth researchers in developing their interviewing skills, which can be intimidating and awkward at first. Furthermore, generating data with very young participants in an age-appropriate manner may be useful in gaining a holistic understanding of a problem of community concern. In sum, photo-elicitation collages can be used as one additional data collection modality to engage youth as co-constructors of knowledge in participatory action research.

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