

Editorial: Visual Methodologies in Educational Research

Guest Editor: Naydene de Lange

An article by Claudia Mitchell that appeared in SAJE in 2008 paved the way for this special issue. Mitchell, who introduced visual methodologies into educational research in South Africa, wrote "... I address educational research in South Africa at a time when questions of the social responsibility of the academic researcher ... are critical" (2008:365). What is the social responsibility of academic researchers in the social sciences, and in education, in particular? Of course, the social responsibility is researching relevant problems to generate new knowledge that would be useful in understanding the educational challenges which confront our society.

But what if the educational researcher – through the chosen methodology – could, at the same time, contribute to social change? What if the researchers in the ‘ivory tower’ of academia could cross the ‘moat’ to the communities around them, engaging in research that could, potentially, make an immediate difference in the lives of people? This, I believe, links to the call in The Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences (2011:67) for “research in the social sciences and the humanities to take their place again at the leading edge of our struggle for transformation and the development of South African society”.

While there has been a burgeoning of innovative methodologies in the social sciences in general, South African educational researchers too, are embarking on cutting-edge visual research (see, for example, the work of De Lange, Ebersöhn, Karlsson, Khau, Moletsane, Mitchell, Olivier, Pithouse, Stuart, Theron, Van Laren, and Wood). Visual methodologies in educational research have been used in studies on: resilience, sexuality, gender, gender-based violence, HIV and AIDS, and so on. These studies have involved learners, students, educators, parents, community-health workers, department officials, academics; they have focused on urban, peri-urban, and rural contexts.

I concur with Mitchell (2009:265), that we need to "... ensure that the term “visual methodologies” is not simply reduced to one practice or to one set of tools ... and ... at the same time ... [to] ensure that this set of methodologies and practices are appreciated within its full complexity”. It is this complexity that this special issue appreciates, by drawing together a collection of research articles – each of which demonstrates the value of using visual methodology as a mode of inquiry, a mode of representation and a mode of dissemination, while also engaging critically with the conceptual, methodological, interpretive and ethical issues peculiar to visual methodologies.

Working "... with the visual creates a generative space for looking, and then looking anew [which]... for researchers and research students new to the area of visual methodologies ... can be a liberating experience” (Mitchell, 2011:xiii).

This special issue offers a collection of thirteen articles, showcasing visual research, spanning the use of drawing, photographs, participatory video, role-playing, and artefacts as material culture.

A set of five articles bring together drawing as a research method (see also Theron, Mitchell, Smith & Stuart, 2011). The article, *Drawing on resilience: piloting the utility of the Kinetic Family Drawing to measure resilience in children of HIV-positive mothers*, shows how

drawing could be used as a culturally appropriate and relevant measure of resilience. Showing how the use of drawing as a psychological measure has cross-cultural utility, not only positions drawing as a possible tool to complement data generation in the absence of 'standardised' measures, but also to access and engage with issues, which are difficult to articulate.

The article, *How youth picture gender injustice: building skills for HIV prevention through a participatory, arts-based approach*, takes up a 'difficult to articulate' issue – with school youth using drawing, exploring how they engage as key actors in educating their peers on HIV prevention. Using drawing to work with educators, *Picture that: Supporting sexuality educators in narrowing the knowledge/practice gap*, demonstrates how using drawing could facilitate interrogating one's own beliefs and practices in sexuality education. *The use of drawings to facilitate interviews with orphaned children in Mpumalanga province, South Africa*, also shows how drawing enables children to talk about hidden issues in a non-threatening way. The article, *Does visual participatory research have resilience-promoting value? Teacher experiences of generating and interpreting drawings*, offers an interesting phenomenological investigation into teachers' experiences of generating and interpreting drawings.

Two articles offer some insight into the use of photographs in visual research (see also De Lange, Mitchell & Stuart, 2007). The article, *The potential for using visual elicitation in understanding preschool teachers' beliefs of appropriate educational practices*, suggests that the choice of visual methodologies could mitigate the limitations inherent in self-reports, and that capturing the implicitness embedded in teachers' beliefs would not have been possible without the use of visual methods. *Children as photographers: Life experiences and the right to be listened to*, shows the potential of photovoice to engage eight-year-old children in making meaning of their experiences of their home environment, and used to inform citizenship practice.

The articles, "*Youth envisioning safe schools: A participatory video approach*" demonstrates how participatory video could be used with youth to encourage agency, while "*We grew as we grew*": *Visual methods, social change and collective learning over time*, highlights the use of visual methodologies, including participatory video (see also Milne, Mitchell & De Lange, 2012), with a group of youths in Cape Town, South Africa, over a number of years. This article points to a key tenet of visual research, i.e. social change, by exploring – in a longitudinal study – what difference the work has made in the lives of the youths.

Another interesting article, *Towards academic generativity: working collaboratively with visual artefacts for self-study and social change*, shifts to material culture, with the authors (two academics) using artefact retrieval as a visual method to initiate an exploration into generative possibilities for becoming agents of social change through their own educational research.

Two further articles speak to the role of the visual and its potential for engaging participants in self-reflection in an attempt to change behaviour. *Exploring the use of role-play in a school-based programme to reduce teenage pregnancy*, examines whether role-play is an effective teaching and learning method to promote safe sexual behaviour, while *Visual graphics for human rights, social justice, democracy and the public good*, contends that the visual graphics curriculum offers an opportunity to engage students in human rights issues and so contribute to social change.

Another article, *On the use of visual methodologies in educational policy research*, quite

appropriately points to ways in which visual methodologies can be used to interrogate how knowledge is produced through the construction and representation of policy texts and discourses, particularly in relation to studying social differences in globalizing conditions.

This is not a definitive collection of articles on visual research; but it clearly paves the way for more researchers to engage in visual research, as a way to contribute to social change.

References

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