

Children as photographers: life experiences and the right to be listened to

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This article is about an investigation of eight-year-old children's life experiences as child citizens in democratic South Africa, their right to be listened to and to participate in the democracy. Research indicates that understanding children's life experiences can influence adults' understanding of what needs to be done to support their participation in democratic processes. I employed photovoice methodology as primary mode for data generation. The young children took photos of their home environment and interpreted the content of each photo. Despite the fact that they live in a central city environment known for its crime, the findings revealed surprisingly positive life experiences. However, they did take photos of negative aspects that could harm their experiences of an open society and a free democracy. Through their photos these young participants showed their capability of acting as agents for transforming their home environment, provided that their voices are heard and they are granted the opportunity to participate in these matters.

Keywords: child citizens, children's rights, citizenship practice, democracy, life experiences, photovoice

Introduction

This article reports on a qualitative study conducted to investigate children's life experiences of their home environment as child citizens in democratic South Africa. One of their primary rights, to be listened to, is the focus of the study (UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Citizenship as an inalienable right for a human being itself is a concept which belongs in a larger discourse (Ghosh, 2008) and is discussed only briefly here. To define child citizenship in a democratic nation-state is complex as the topic belongs to a rich debate (Doek, 2008; Invernizzi & Milne, 2005; Lister, 2008). Cultural attitudes towards the construction of childhood, the position of the child in society (and finally the right to be heard) have undergone many changes in western history to evolve into the idea of the child citizen (Milne, 2008). Doek (2008:xiv) has summed up a key goal for the child citizen as, "the full and harmonious development of the child's personality, not only with a view to becoming an individual with her own personality, but also with a view to becoming a full member of her community and society". The opinions of the children described in this study are expressed amongst politicians and educationists who emphasise the importance of youth for a democratic state in South Africa. In the context of recent history in South Africa the desire to educate for citizenship in a democracy is an understandable one. A shared sense and understanding of citizenship enables the democratic government to exercise its functions and protect its citizens (Wilde, 2005:7). However, democracy is itself a problematic idea. Ross (2000:185) says,

“Citizenship ‘for democracy’ is particularly problematic ... it rather depends on what kind of democracy. Traditional representative democracy puts its energies into ensuring the intermittent participation of the population in elections, through political parties that stand for broad principles. The key actor is the informed voter”.

There are different democratic actions and pressure groups. Children do have opinions about challenging political issues but these are frequently ignored (Stoken, 2005). The struggle for children to move from a marginalised group with low standing as citizens (Lindström, 2004) in the context of South Africa is symptomatic of an international situation. Cohen (2005) has strongly stated that children’s political status leaves much to be desired.

The citizenship of the South African child is in a legal sense anchored in the South African Constitution. Children who are born in the South African democracy are part of the “... common South African citizenship” and “... equally entitled to the rights, privileges and benefits of citizenship and equally subject to the duties and responsibilities of citizenship” (Republic of South Africa, 1996:3). Citizenship as the collection of rights and responsibilities that define members of a community (including children), can be distinguished as citizenship rights and citizenship practice (Inter-Agency Working group on Children’s participation [IAWGCP], 2008). Children’s citizenship rights include a right to a name and nationality and freedom of speech. To practice their rights they need to be educated into democratic action and civic responsibility. Through children’s everyday experiences they need to live what it means to have citizenship rights in a democratic state. There is a need for them to experience the South African democratic values such as social justice and equity, an open society, respect and the rule of law as described by the Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy (Department of Education, 2001). Adults need to take children’s rights seriously as out of it “...will emerge a better world for children and this will redound to the benefit not only of children but of all of us” (Freeman, 2007:20). But there has to be a certain discretion and judgement exercised in educating children for citizenship because politicians have a vested interest in ensuring support for the institutions which enabled them to have and retain their positions (Ross, 2000: 186). It is necessary for everyone, including children to experience the realisation of citizenship and democratic values in their everyday lives, participate in democratic processes and practices or otherwise citizenship itself might be under threat (Joubert, 2010).

There seems to be a tension between the rights accorded to children legally and constitutionally and the reception their voices have despite their rights to be heard as citizens. This is influenced by adults’ perception of the role of the child citizen and by their understanding of the child’s life world experiences. Therefore, the following research question framed this research project: How could eight-year-old children’s experiences of their home environment assist educators to improve these children’s citizenship practice?

Background

Socio-political matters and citizenship education and the role of children’s participation in the context of democratic nation-states are currently part of a larger discourse about global citizenship (Ross, 2000; Joubert, Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2010; Lamprecht, 2012). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) brought together new ideas about the rights of children. Included in the rights of the child are the rights to seek and communicate information, to express thoughts and feelings, to have these listened to, and to participate in decisions affecting them. Although there is agreement on some

fronts (not in certain Muslim countries, for instance) that children should be regarded as active, participative citizens, there is disagreement as to the kind of citizens they are (Jans, 2004). Lockyer (2008:20) articulates the problem concisely (albeit about the UK) when he asks whether, “children, defined as young people below the age of majority, are to be viewed as current citizens, or merely future citizens, partial citizens, or citizens-in-the-making”. According to Woodhouse (1999) reasons for disagreement about children’s autonomy or participation in decision-making might arise from anxiety about the children posing a threat to adults’ rights. Another reason could be that paternalistic policies dictate that children be represented by their parents, which limits children’s ability to act as citizens (Freeman, 2007). For some groups children are seen as change agents who have to transform society into a peaceful and prosperous nation. But fundamentally, they need to acquire knowledge and skills, attitudes and values presupposed in the democratic structures of civil society for them to peacefully live together in a diverse society. Finally, they need to participate meaningfully in and practice civic life in a democracy (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003). For this to be achieved education is needed. Holden and Clough (2000:14) advocated education for participation as a unique feature of a curriculum in a democracy.

In the South African context the then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, encapsulated the vision for the South African youth when he said, “We need to educate our young people not only for the marketplace, but for responsible citizenship; young people who will embrace the democratic values in their everyday lives” and “learners with knowledge, skills and values that will enable meaningful participation in society ... as good citizens” (Ministry of Education, 2001:10). In contrast to this idealism about the role of the youth in the South African democracy, Joubert (2007) found that the child participants of her study believed that adults built a doubtful future, which the younger generation inherits and has to live with long after the older generation has passed on. However, research indicates that young children are concerned about environmental destruction, crime and social inequalities and that they do advocate change (Egan-Bitrán, 2010).

The conceptual platforms of this article are the recent state of affairs of the South African democratic dispensation and the human rights of the child citizen, the social construction of childhood and the participation of child citizens in a democracy. I describe the relevance of each in the following sections.

Democratic dispensation

There are many examples of positive developments in the post-apartheid era in South Africa. The most prominent improvement is the political freedom of all citizens. In general, many South Africans experience better living conditions as a result of expanded infrastructure, yet an unequal divide between rich and poor still remains (Armstrong, Lekezwa & Siebrits, 2008). Regardless of the socio-economic status of all citizens in South Africa the South Africa’s Constitution (1996) is a firm cornerstone of the democracy. The preamble to the constitution states that it aims to establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights, improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person, lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and in which every citizen is equally protected by law (Department of Education, 2002; Department of Education, 2001). The significance is that all of the above pertain to the child participants of this study but in many cases the constitutional values are

undermined by a political culture that often practices the opposite of what it promotes (Alexander, 2012; Makhubu, 2012; Rose & Hofstatter, 2012). This could put democracy and civil society at risk.

The Constitution includes the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights "... enshrines the rights of all people in the country and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom" (Republic of South Africa, Act No 108 of 1996:6-24). This bill is in alignment with the international Treaty on Children's Rights (UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). A significant right of children relevant to this study is the right to be heard (Department of Justice, 1995). To be heard relates to the freedom of opinion, discussion and critical thought which encourage a culture of dialogue and debate. This culture is a characteristic of an open society and rests on the understanding that a society that knows how to talk and how to listen does not need to resort to violence (Ministry of Education, 2001:iv, 17). Joubert (2010) stated that her research revealed the desire of young citizens to be heard in respect of political matters and that they aspired to participate in democratic processes.

Social construction of childhood

Children's perspectives of their world are unique. Acknowledging this distinctiveness provides a strong rationale for listening to them (Egan-Bitrán, 2010:8). Although children need love, protection, and security, they are increasingly stimulated to present themselves as autonomous individuals. However, children's living conditions assume dependability on adults. Jans (2004: 34) refers to this situation as the "ambivalence of current childhood". Instead of cancelling out this ambivalence, it must rather be understood as "a social phenomenon proper to the growing up of children". According to Jans (2004), the challenge is how to deal with this ambivalence. The new sociology of childhood (Mac Naughton, 2003) offers an alternative perspective on childhood. Research on children from this perspective enables an approach to children as an interdependent social group which strives to make sense of their social world and to participate in it (Thornberg, 2008). This perspective regards children as co-constructors of their lives.

Participation of child citizens

When adults consider their expectations of the child's role in the democracy they are influenced by the social meaning they confer on children's participation and active citizenship. Since the commencement of the newly found democracy in 1994 the South African youth were regarded as the hope for securing the democracy (Ministry of Education, 2001). Furthermore, children were expected to embrace democratic values and to claim their rights and take on their responsibilities. Therefore a framework for deepening democratic values and participation in education was designed, based on increased dialogue on these democratic and rights-orientated values (Ministry of Education, 2001). The pathways to reach this were set - namely critical thinking, creativity, participation, expression and teamwork (Department of Education, 2002).

Jans (2004) quoted Van der Veen who distinguished two perspectives to establish new participatory models namely, a system and a life-world perspective. A system perspective on participation aims for the promotion of child participation in order to establish a well-functioning society (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This is especially relevant in a society where individuals and groups have diverse and conflicting interests (Jans, 2004) which might have an effect on safeguarding the welfare state. This neoliberal perspective of the welfare state expects all citizens to actively contribute to the labour market. However, as education does not

have the same status as the labour market, child participation will not be considered part of the active welfare state (Jans, 2004).

A life-world perspective on active citizenship and participation seems to open more possibilities for active child participation in a more meaningful way (Jans, 2004). From this perspective challenges in terms of collective interests motivate citizens to build their own capacity, to connect with the community and groups and to become active citizens (Annette, 2009). Within this perspective, citizenship is related to learning processes which can be considered more valuable than the mere transfer of civic knowledge. Yet, the life-world perspective is applied in an educational context to maintain future citizenship and not as a foundation for authentic citizenship which includes participation (Jans, 2004; Joubert, 2012).

Theoretical framework

When considering children as active meaning-givers or agents, potential active participators contributing to their social and political contexts and the integrated interaction between children and their home neighbourhood, I identified two theories to frame this research. These theories are the theory of ecological zones or the bioecological model developed by Bronfenbrenner (Bergin & Bergin, 2012) and the transforming society theory (Mac Naughton, 2003). The theory of ecological zones proposes a hierarchy of influence on children's development from nearby to far-off factors. The idea of 'ecological' refers to the environment, the community and specifically the space in which a child grows up. According to this theory children are seen as developing personalities who interact with their home neighbourhood or community and who simultaneously have the potential to influence it. Therefore children are seen as active meaning-givers and not merely as objects in society.

The theory of transforming society falls within a post-modern view of society and what is known as the "new sociology of childhood" (Mac Naughton, 2003:71-72). Social constructionists and post-modernists hold the contemporary view that we both transform, and are transformed by, nature and culture and that our capacity to be transformed holds the key to maximise young children's learning (Mac Naughton, 2003). These schools of thought regard the development of the child as a cultural construction in an incoherent and disorderly world. In general, when adults describe the child's development they are describing their own cultural understanding and biases, for example, when they describe the child as weak and incompetent (Ebrahim, 2010). This is contradictory to the beliefs of social constructionists and post-modern theorists. They argue that children can and do construct their own understandings of their social world and that children's ways of knowing or meaning-giving have powerful effects which could influence the world. They believe that educators could work collaboratively with children to create a better world. One possibility to accomplish this is to use the child's circumstances as a major learning resource through critical reflection (Mooney, 2000). In the context of my study, I regard children as capable agents who could act as instruments for transforming South Africa into a prosperous democracy if their participatory roles were made practical and relevant (Department of Education, 2002). This can only be done if we study their life-experiences.

Research methodology

Photovoice as participatory research

As argued in the previous sections of this article, children have the right to be heard and listen-

ed to as child citizens. I used photovoice, positioned within participatory research, to enable the children of my research project to represent their home environment. Photovoice is a process by which people can represent their community through a specific photographic technique (Wang, 1997; Mitchell, 2008). Photovoice as a visual methodology aimed at strengthening the 'voice' of participants, especially underrepresented, marginalised groups in order to access their knowledge (Henry, Ramdath, Thompson, Sum, Mangroo, Kalyn, Dobson, Blunt & Whiting, 2010). Photovoice also promotes knowledge and critical dialogue about important issues. Finally, through this methodology there is an attempt to reach policy makers (Wang, 1997).

When photovoice research is conducted, participants (in this study the participants were children) generate photographs that capture their beliefs, needs and world (Nelson & Christensen, 2009). The image-making process is combined with individual or group reflection through interviews. During the interviews the participants who created the images, lead the interviews and describe to the researcher the meaning and significance of their images as well as their perspectives and understanding thereof.

Photovoice research offers significant benefits. Taking pictures facilitates the active involvement of young people in shaping decisions that influence their lives. It allows youth to be research partners (Henry et al., 2010). The power in the research process is transferred from the researcher to the researched and in this way the researcher gains access to the world of the participants through their eyes (Nelson & Christensen, 2009). Another benefit is the creation of a dedicated physical and social space in which researcher and participants can meet. The researcher is provided with an opportunity to listen deeply to the participants and the participants are given the opportunity to speak about themselves and their experiences in a way that is difficult to do in their normal circumstances. These circumstances could include an informal settlement or a remote rural area. The sharing of ideas could contribute to the participants' feeling of empowerment.

Data generation

The research foundational to this article is part of a larger cohort longitudinal study executed at a government primary school, in the school district of Tshwane South in the city of Pretoria which is located in Gauteng province. The school is situated in the central-city environment of Sunnyside, which consists mostly of flats. The population of this neighbourhood became more diverse after 1994 with families from Africa and the globe, e.g. Angola, Rwanda, Zambia and China, living here. Most of the learners live in the apartments close by the school and therefore walk to and from school. The neighbourhood is known for its dense population and unfortunately, for its crime, drug abuse and violence (Joubert, 2007).

I commenced with the longitudinal study in 2010, investigating Grade 1 learners' perceptions of their participatory roles in the democracy. The aim of the longitudinal study was to strengthen these learners' participation as child citizens (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000: 174-177). All the Grade 1 learners were invited to participate in the project but I only worked with those whose parents gave consent for me to work with their children over a period of five years.

The focus for this article was on the investigation of the learners' life experiences in their home environment as part of the longitudinal study. The aim of this investigation was to embark on a further project in which I hoped to enhance their participation in a social-political

and democratic context. This project was done in 2011, the second year of the longitudinal study. The children were then in Grade 2 and between 8–9 years old. The participatory children were selected according to the consent received from the parents. They were twelve children; five girls and seven boys. They were diverse in terms of home language, race and ethnicity. Although English is the language of learning and teaching at their school, it was most of the young participants' second or third language. However, they could express themselves in English.

For this research project I applied photovoice as described by Wang (1997) and Olivier, Wood and De Lange (2009). My research activities included discussions about their life in the South African democracy. The learners were definite when they talked about what they liked and disliked about their neighbourhood and what they wanted to change. They also expressed their desire to participate in bringing about these changes. The prompt for the assignment was 'take photos of things you like and things you do not like'. Apart from the photos the children took, I used the individual interviews or notes about the photos written by the children themselves and my field notes as data.

Although the camera work and interviews were carried out in the school's hall, the school was not involved in the study. With the help of a colleague, who acted as research assistant, we piloted the use of the single-use cameras with four Grade 2 learners to see if such a project would be practical, considering the age of the participants. It proved to be successful as the quality of the photos they took was surprisingly good. We then spent a session teaching the learners how to use the cameras. We guided them to take a first photo of a friend in the group which they enjoyed, especially when the flash went off. We requested them to take the photos and to return the cameras to their school teacher within a week. At the end of the session the learners took their cameras, and also expressed their excitement about the project.



Figure 1 Handout of the cameras

After collecting the cameras from the school teacher I developed the photos and was pleasantly surprised by the fairly good quality of the photos. The outcome was a collection of 111 photographs. We commenced with the interviews of the 12 learners on the same day that the photographs were returned to them. We wrote verbatim the commentary or narratives on the back of each photo. In a few instances the learners themselves wrote their views on "...aspects of their world captured on the photos" (Sharples, Davison, Thomas & Rudman, 2003:5).

Data analysis

In order to understand photography from a child's perspective, it was important to consider the image of the photos (photographic content) and the practice of photography (photographer's intentions) that took place in the learners' particular contexts (Sharples et al., 2003) (see Tables 1 and 2). This enabled me to create summary tables of the data in order to display emerging patterns. In addition, I employed the constructivist grounded theory analysis of Charmaz (2000:514-521) when I analysed and interpreted the data. This entails a method to assist the researcher to construct meaning by analysing each word and sentence of the data. This method helped me to 'make sense' of the textual data derived from the descriptions of the photos in order to understand the learners' life experiences in their home neighbourhood.

Table 1 Example of the analysis of the photographic content

Number of photo	Photograph context	Time	Participant narrative (intention)	Interpretation	Judgement of quality
1. Photo	Outdoors, recreational, manmade structures	Day	I like to play in the park near my home	The child enjoys playing; there is a park nearby	Structures of climbing apparatus visible. Most part of the photo is the sky
2. Photo	Child's face taken inside class; posters against the wall are visible	Day	I like my best friend	Her friend is a class mate	Good quality for indoors

Table 2 Example of the analysis of the photographer's intentions

Number of photo	Context		Intention	Content	Personal response
	Physical	Social			
1. Photo	Yes		Wanted to show the park	Park	Enjoyed talking about the photo
2. Photo		Yes	Wanted to show her best friend's face	Best friend at school	Was proud of the photo

Working with young children is a daunting undertaking (Punch, 2002:328), especially when dealing with their life experiences. Therefore, I conducted the research in a negotiated, ethical manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I respected the views of the children and took into account their diversity. Further, I designed my research in such a way that it enhanced their new skill of photography and bolstered their confidence while being part of the research (Viviers, 2010). I commenced with the research only after I received ethical clearance from my institution, consent from the children's parents and agreement to participate from the children themselves.

Results

From the 111 photos that were developed 89 photos were taken of 'things' the children liked and only 23 photos were about 'things' they did not like. This is a strong indication that these children felt they had mostly positive life experiences, especially when one takes into account the general characteristics of their home neighbourhood. Their neighbourhood is known for its crime. Resulting from the data analysis I present the findings in two distinctive broad themes, each with its relevant categories. The two manifested themes are *What I like* and *What I do not like*, as it correlates with the prompt I gave them.

Table 3 Summary of themes and related categories

Theme	1. <i>What I like</i>	2. <i>What I do not like</i>
Category:	1.1 They are my best, best friends 1.2 My home is special 1.3 I feel safe 1.4 People that help me 1.5 Places I like to play	2.1 People who do not obey rules make me unhappy 2.2 Dirty places are not nice 2.3 I hate dark photos

The learners were explicit in describing their photos and the quotations presented with each theme and categories are the verbatim expressions of the children given during the interviews (see Figure 2).

1. What I like

1.1. *They are my best, best friends*

This category emerged most prominently and demonstrates the children's sincerity about friendship. The participants took 38 photos of their friends and therefore the words 'best friends' and 'friends' emerged several times from their narratives. Attributes given to their friends were helpfulness, friendliness, sharing, caring, nice and kind, 'to be good to me' and 'plays with me'.

"*They are my best friends. Sometimes we call ourselves sisters*" (child 1, photo 1.1).

"*I like my best friend [he] likes to borrow me stuff*" (child 3, photo 3.3).

"*I like my friends at the flat they are kind and helpful*" (child 4, photo 4.6).

"*I like to play with my friend ... we are just two friends ... he is beautiful*" (child 5, photo 5.4).

"*I like my best, best friend*" (child 9, photo 9.5).



Figure 2 Writing the narrative to each photograph

1.2. *My home is special*

The children took 16 photos of their homes; the inside of the rooms and especially their rooms, the food in the fridge, the pot plants on the window sill, the physical features of the home like the lift of the flat, the garden and the gate of their homes. Many of these photos were taken of the outside of their flats. In this category I also placed photos and narratives of possessions like their cars.

"I like my home because it is a nice home and it has a nice dining room" (child 2, photo 2.3).

"I like my room it's very nice and bright" (child 2, photo 2.6).

"I like the flat ... because I live there, I was happy there ... I feel safe ... I like the other people living there like my mother, father, five children, cousin, brother, sister" (child 6, photo 6.2).

1.3. *I feel safe*

The participating children took 11 photos of places where they indicated that they felt safe. These places included their homes, the video shop, the pharmacy and the park. It is apparent that child 4 was especially concerned about safety.

"I like the video shop...I feel safe...there is someone taking care...I never go alone" (child 4, photo 4.3).

"Like the gate when people do not brake it. It make me feel safe" (child 4, photo 4.6).

"I like the park. I find new friends at the park. It is safe...there are people taking care of us" (child 4, photo 4.8).

1.4. People that help me

Six photos were taken of people who take care of the participating children in different ways. These persons included their parents and their extended family members like their aunts and cousins. Most children seemed knowledgeable about their parents' jobs and where they worked. Two children took photos of a taxi driver's car and one child took a photo of a male caretaker at the flat where he lives. These two persons seem to play a major part as role models in the neighbourhood.

"I like it ... my father works here. He brings pizza every day. He bakes pizza or he is in the front taking money".

"My mother works at home. She gives people jobs. White people look for black people. She takes their CV and arrange work with white people. Black people also ask for people to work for them" (child 4, photo 4.5).

"I like the taxi...there is a big screen ... my friend come to school with the same taxi and driver" (child 5, photo 5.3).

"I like the taxi driver ... every day in the same taxi ... listen to music ... no eat ... every time he sees trouble he stops and he help other people" (child 8, photos 8.2, 8.3, 8.4).

"Law of our flat is Shorty. We call him this because that is his name. I like him because he does lots of jobs for all of us. He is also protecting the flat. He fix broken windows. He takes care of you if your Mom is not at home. If you are hungry he gives you a bun. Children and adults love him" (child 7, photo 7.2).

1.5. Places where I like to play

The participating children took photos of themselves playing with other children. Two boys spoke about photos that were taken of them playing on the pavement. Child 5 took a photo of six of his friends playing soccer on a pavement and said that they like to play soccer (photo 5.7, 5.8). It was evident that child 11 enjoyed playing soccer as he took four pictures of his 'soccer team' (photos 11.1, 11.4, 11.5, 11.6).

Only a few learners described recreational activities when visiting a park. Two children took photos of a park during day time where they liked to go.

"I like the park ... it is an outing ... went to play" (child 3, photo 3.2).

"I like the park. There are many nice things to play with. Like swings and the jumping castle in the holiday. The owner put the castle there" (child 4, photo 4.8).

2. What I do not like

2.1 People who do not obey rules make me unhappy

Regardless of their age, the young learners demonstrated their understanding of negative behaviour. Although this second theme did not emerge as robustly as theme one, the children took 12 photos related to people who do not obey rules. This includes adults and children with negative attitudes. Photos were not necessarily taken of the people themselves but narratives about their homes or friends revealed the dismay of the children at people drinking beer near their homes and littering. This category corresponds with unhealthy behaviour like smoking and eating unhealthy food.

"I do not like people who do not obey the rules" (child 4, photo 4.9).

"I do not like her ... she do not like sharing with me and other children" (child 3, photo 3.4, 3.5).

"I do not like boy nr 4 [who] walked into the picture and he is not a friend and ruined the picture" (child 8, photo 8.5).

"I hate it ... he is rude sometimes and bites us sometimes ..." (child 9, photo 9.11).

"I do not like when my baby brother fights with my sister" (child 12, photo 12.8).

"I do not like smoking and people drinking beer ... near my house" (child 4, photo 4.9).

"I do not like smoke. Will ask my father to call a meeting to tell people not to smoke. I do not like people who smoke" (child 5, photo 5.11).

"Sometimes my Dad says I am fat. My Dad says if I eat too much I will become fat" (child 7, photo 7.1)

The same child said of photo 7.3

"I like to eat ice cream but not for free. Buy ice cream next to my flat".

2.2 Dirty places are not nice

Six photos were taken indicating a dirty environment or something unpleasant regarding the immediate environment.

"I do not like rubbish" (child 4, photo 4.9).

"I do not like the rubbish. People throwing rubbish on the road. Near my home" (child 4, photo 4.9).

"I do not like the dustbin. Everytime I close it, it stinks. Everybody throws waste in the dustbin" (child 7, photo 7.8).

"I do not like the pavement because he trips over when playing soccer" (child 8, photo 8.6).

"I do not like dirty" (child 10, photo 10.2).

"I do not like the streets because they are dirty" (child 2, photo 2.5)

2.3 I hate dark photos

Although this category does not relate to their home environment it is important. What appeared to be insignificant comments of the children about using the cameras become noteworthy when I carefully studied their commentary about some of their photographs. When they referred to some of their photos they used the words 'ugly', 'black' and 'dark'.

The children were excited when we handed the cameras to them during the training session. From their comments it was clear that the children enjoyed using the cameras. Child 7 said,

"I was happy to get camera. I thought I have to pay for the camera and then they gave it for free. Now that I see the photo I like it" (photo 7.13).

After only the one training session and considering their age I did not expect the children to take perfect photos. However, when doing the interviews I became aware of their intentions to acquire the skill of photography. It appears that the children were determined to take good quality photos but the light quality of a few photos was poor and therefore the image was indistinct.

"I do not like it is durk [dark] and agle [ugly]" (child 1, photo 1.2)

"Do not like the wall...it is dirty and black things in the corner. This was an accident to take the wall picture" (child 5, photo 5.5)

"I hate this picture because you want to take a photo of his face" (child 8, photo 8.3) [the image of the photo was blurred]

Discussion

The findings from the photovoice data signified that these participating children do have a voice about their life experiences in their home neighbourhood. They expressed their ability to construct and understand their immediate neighbourhood which relates to the theory of the new sociology of childhood (Thornberg, 2008; Mac Naughton, 2003). Their positive experiences were far more than the negative ones. However, the negative experiences were alarming; especially when they commented that they “liked the burglar bars of their apartments because people cannot break it” (child 4, photo 4.9). Their articulation of their wish to change the ‘things’ they do not like indicated their willingness to participate in a social-political context.

Most of their experiences related to what they regarded as important; the people in their lives. The high emphasis on the role of their friend(s) was surprising as I expected them to take more photos of their close family members. However, their focus on friends relates to the model of Bronfenbrenner (Bergin & Bergin, 2012) in which the microsystem is about the influence of the immediate environment on the individual. The microsystem closest to the life of the individual (for this study the learner), includes peers, family and school. Most of the aspects that the learners did not like were also related to people. This is significant as it signals that people have an immense influence on children’s lives.

The children’s voices indicated that they are concerned about present-day and related issues (Holden & Clough, 2000; Joubert et al., 2010). According to O’Grady (2008) the neighbourhood can determine the well-being of the child. Expressions about their safety emerged robustly. This is understandable as their neighbourhood is situated in an inner city area with a high crime rate.

The emphasis on a ‘clean’ and ‘beautiful’ environment was prominent. Yet, an unsafe pavement where the boys played soccer was photographed. This photo not only showed the danger of an unsafe pavement but also indicated the risky practice of young boys playing soccer on the pavement of a busy street. After visiting the area I understood their concern as there are only a few open spaces and parks where children can play in the densely populated area.

It was apparent that the use of the cameras made them feel empowered. The fact that they did not like ‘bad’ photos indicated that they were eager to obtain a new skill as for most of them having an own camera was a first experience. However, one should be cautious about the giving of cameras to young children as it may expose the child to negative behaviour as the one child said another child grabbed the camera out of his hand (child 11, photo 11.3). The eagerness of these young children to master the skill of photography and to feel empowered by mastering it relates to the theory of the new sociology of childhood which emphasises the ability of the young learner to learn in order to make meaning of their world. Adults and teachers should be knowledgeable about this.

By being actively involved as research partners the learners took ownership of their photos. They were clear about their intentions when taking the photos and could talk with confidence about their photographs. When they talked about the things they did not like they expressed their desire to participate in transforming these aspects. Learners’ life experiences should be utilised as a major learning resource at school to promote participation as an important aspect of democracy (Mooney, 2000). In addition, they showed that their participation in the photovoice research had empowered them (Mitchell, 2008). This relates to research findings of a similar project in which the authors stated that children enjoyed “the mastering of the skill of photography” (Sharples et al., 2003:6).

Following on these findings I involved the children in choosing a focus for a follow-up project in which they could be participants playing a distinctive role. Through a voting session they had to choose between assisting people or helping to create a cleaner environment. They chose the project concerning people. This is significant for new involvement and new research questions that would inform educationists. Instead of a purely intellectual exercise, such as learning about the emblems of South Africa, the young child would benefit much more by being actively involved in a project that is closely related to their home neighbourhood.

Conclusion

An educational vision is to assist children to participate in social change and to live the core values on which just and peaceful democratic societies are built (De Melendez, Beck & Fletcher, 2000; Savage & Armstrong, 2004). However, the empowerment of young children to participate in real life activities concerning their immediate home environment seems to be problematic. The photovoice method can assist younger children to define their world and affirm their citizenship practice. It can also provide adults with an opportunity to listen to children as citizens.

The leading government should take note of children's voices as it has a responsibility towards its citizens in terms of the enhancement of a democratic culture. In the post-modern era in which the child has to be protected against negative influences there are opportunities for children to get acquainted with the practice of citizenship. Children are capable of intervening and giving meaning to their world. Despite the fact that they are influenced by their environment, in many cases in a negative way, they wish to participate in changing their home environment. Participation could assist the child citizen to enhance the values and practices of democracy.

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