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A Different Lens: Using Photo-Elicitation Interviews in Education Research

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Abstract: The purpose of this systematic literature review is to document how scholars in various fields have used Photo-Elicitation Interview (PEI), explain the benefits and obstacles to using this method, and explain how and why education researchers should use PEI. The key features of PEI are that a researcher or participant takes pictures about a research topic that are then used to elicit dialogue during an interview. The results of our review suggest that education scholars and school practitioners can use PEI methods to better understand school communities and the children, parents, and school staff who inhabit them. Utilizing this technique, the research community will be better positioned to speak on behalf of school stakeholders when contributing to policy discussions and when seeking solutions to improving schools.

Keywords: photo-elicitation interview; qualitative methods.

Una lente diferente: Cambiando perspectivas utilizando Entrevistas Photo- Elicitación

Resumen: El propósito de esta resumen sistemática de la literatura es documentar cómo los académicos en diversos campos han utilizado la Entrevista Photo-Elicitación (PEI), explicar los beneficios y obstáculos con la utilización de este método, y explicar cómo y por qué PEI debe ser utilizado por investigadores de la educación. Las características clave de PEI son que un investigador o participante toma fotos relacionado a un tema de investigación que se utiliza para provocar diálogo durante una entrevista. Los resultados de este resumen sugieren que los académicos y profesionales de educación pueden usar métodos de PEI para entender mejor a las comunidades escolares y los niños, padres, y personal quienes forman parte de la comunidad escolar. Utilizando esta técnica, la comunidad de investigación estará mejor posicionada para hablar en nombre de las partes interesadas de la escuela y contribuir a los debates sobre políticas en la búsqueda de soluciones para mejorar las escuelas.

Palabras-clave: entrevista photo-elicitación; métodos cualitativos.

Uma lente diferente: Mudando perspectivas usando Entrevistas Photo- Elicitação

Resumo: O objetivo desta revisão sistemática da literatura é documentar como os estudiosos de diversas áreas têm usado Photo- Entrevista Elicitation (PEI), explicar os benefícios e barreiras para a utilização deste método, e explicar como e por que PEI deve ser utilizado por pesquisadores educacionais. Principais características do PEI é que um pesquisador ou participante tira fotos relacionadas com um tópico de pesquisa que é usada para provocar o diálogo em uma entrevista. Os resultados deste resumo sugere que os métodos de ensino acadêmico e profissional pode ser usado para entender melhor as comunidades PEI escolares e crianças, pais e funcionários que frequentam a escola. Usando esta técnica, a comunidade de investigação será em melhor posição para falar para os das partes interessadas da escola e contribuir para os debates políticos na busca de soluções para melhorar as escolas.

Palavras-chave: photo-elicitation entrevista; métodos qualitativos.

Using Photo-Elicitation Interviews in Education Research

In education research there is an inherent tension between research and practice. Education researchers are often located outside of schools and classrooms, and while they may occasionally enter these spheres, they are not first hand witnesses to the daily intricacies of the places and people they study (Labaree, 2003). Practitioners, on the other hand, are removed from the world of theory and research, focused instead on their primary task of caring for and educating students. Teachers and school leaders may study education research for their certification requirements or as part of professional development, but often research-based recommendations fall flat in the face of classroom or school realities. And somewhere, lost in the shuffle of education research and practice, are children, the supposed beneficiaries of the thinking and work of scholars and educators, who often have no voice in shaping the institutions around them (Bragg, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2002).

Photo-elicitation Interview (PEI) is a qualitative research method developed by anthropologists and sociologists that can help build bridges across the chasms that currently separate researchers, educators, and students. In PEI, researchers or study participants take photos that are used to anchor subsequent dialogue about the experiences of the participant. This method is a novel tool that researchers and education leaders can use to understand the less visible dimensions of the school community and to empower students, teachers, and family members (Allen, 2009; Werts, Brewer, & Mathews, 2012).

The purpose of this article is to document how scholars have used PEI to study various topics in order to derive key understandings about how PEI can be used to highlight the voices of practitioners and children. Specifically, we answer the following questions:

1. For what purposes was PEI developed and how has it been used historically?
2. What are the benefits of PEI as an empirical method?
3. What obstacles must researchers using PEI overcome?
4. How can education researchers use PEI to understand school contexts and effect policy and practice?

Methodology

The findings in this article are based on a systematic literature review. This type of review is a methodical approach to searching for and selecting information for inclusion in order to mitigate bias and to document the extent of the literature that exists on a particular topic (Okoli & Schabram, 2010). The procedure for conducting a systemic literature review is as follows: 1) Identify the research question(s), 2) Identify relevant studies, 3) Assess the quality of the studies, 4) Summarize evidence, and 5) Interpret findings (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2001).

After developing our research questions (listed above), we queried Google Scholar, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and Academic Search Premier using the following search terms: “photo-elicitation”, “photo voice”, “auto-driven interview”, and “visual studies” in combination with terms such as “education”, “student”, “school”, and “teacher”. We also searched through the table of contents of several relevant English language journals, including *Visual Studies*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, *Qualitative Sociology*, and *Visual Anthropology*. The results of our initial search included 58 articles, dissertations, books, and book chapters. We expanded our search by including relevant publications cited in these sources and ended up with an additional 24 publications. The initial collection of sources (n=82) covered a broad swath of the current education literature regarding PEI. We used the following criteria in selecting studies to prioritize for review, and Table 1 describes the percentage of articles that met each criterion:

- 1) The study use PEI as a research methodology where participants or researchers took pictures that were used in subsequent interviews.
- 2) The study had been published in a peer-reviewed journal (i.e., no dissertations or conference papers).
- 3) The study was related to K-12 schooling (e.g., participants are students, teachers, or principals, the study occurs within the school, the study is related to curriculum or pedagogy).

Table 1
Summary of Education Related PEI Articles

Criteria	% of Articles
Study used PEI as a research methodology where participants or researchers took pictures that were used in subsequent interviews.	78%
Study was published in peer reviewed journal	95%
Study was related to K-12 schooling	63%
Study met all three criteria	43%

We did not limit our search by year of publication as the vast majority of articles using PEI were written since 1980 (see Figure 2) and previous work was valuable for understanding the historical roots of PEI as a methodology. After applying our criteria we had a sample of 35 studies, 18 of which were conducted in the United States.

Given the relative scarcity of PEI methodology used in education research, we subsequently extended our reach into the literature to include studies on topics not directly related to education. These studies are categorized as pertaining to health, childhood and families, or society and culture. Additionally, we extended our search to include reviews or conceptual pieces to undergird our understanding of the field. In total, we collected 29 additional studies for a total sample of 64 studies. Table 2 shows the number of studies in each category.

Table 2
Topics in Expanded Sample

Subject	Total
Education	35
Health	2
Childhood/ Family	9
Society/Culture	9
Review/Conceptual	16
Total	64

To summarize the research we collected and organize our findings, we created a framework for understanding how and why PEI is used. As we read each piece we added and deleted components from our framework, and used evidence to deepen our understanding of each component of the framework. Figure 1 shows the framework that we ultimately created through the review process. Below we report the results of our review and the implications of our review for education researchers, educators, and policy makers.

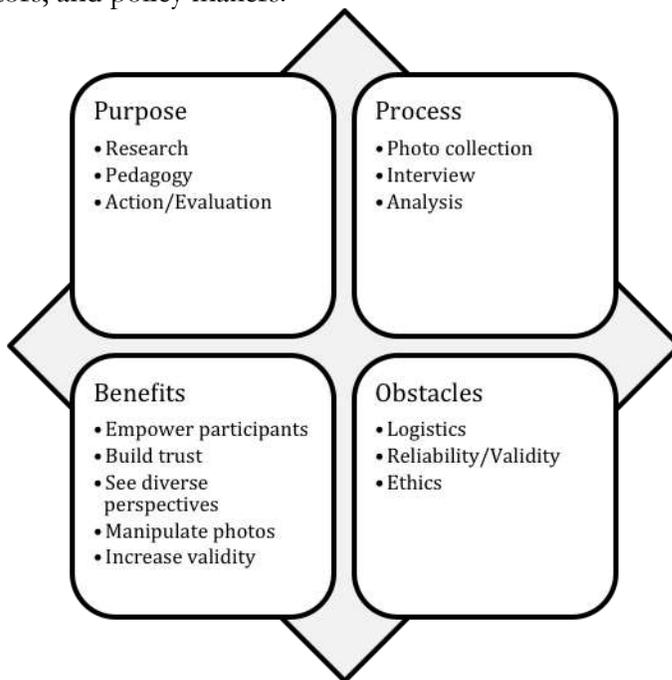


Figure 1. Framework for understanding PEI research

A Review of the PEI Literature

Our review begins with a brief history of how PEI developed within the fields of anthropology and sociology. Then, following the multiple components of our framework, we elaborate on the multiple purposes driving researchers to use PEI, the process for conducting a PEI study, and the benefits and obstacles of PEI.

History

PEI is not a new methodological tool in the social sciences and is one of many methods, along with documentary film, photo-essays, and video ethnography, which belong under the umbrella of visual sociology (Harper, 1998). In the early 1900s, anthropologists often used photographs to document the human experience (Harper, 1998). During the progressive era, visual methods fell out of favor as social scientists worked to mimic researchers in the “hard” sciences and create reproducible and “objective” results. Later in the century, the use of photographs as a form of data was re-popularized by Mead and Bateson in their studies of Balinese culture (Bateson & Mead, 1942). In their study, photos became part of the process of observing rather than evidence of a priori assumptions (Harper, 1998).

The term photo-elicitation was first used in the late 1950s by John Collier in his study of the influence of environmental factors on mental health outcomes (1957) and became more popular as a research tool in the subsequent decades. This movement was influenced by the work of documentary photographers who purported to be both artists and social commentators (Harper, 1998). Sociologists built on the foundations laid by documentary photographers by attaching theory to analysis of the “what and why” of images (Becker, 1974).

Despite its increased popularity, Harper (2002) found only 53 academic studies written before 2002 that explicitly used PEI as a method. As evidenced by the sample of articles used for this review, this number has increased substantially since that time. Figure 2 shows the growth in the number of PEI related articles published since 1956 in the journals and databases queried for this review. While there has been a rapid increase in articles using PEI, especially in the last decade, PEI remains a far less common method than non-visual qualitative methodologies.

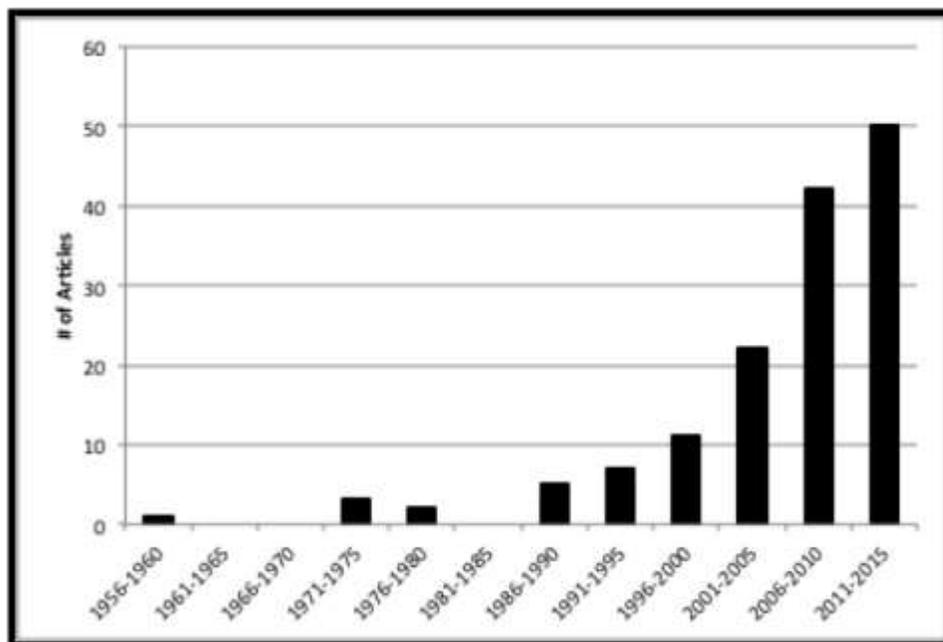


Figure 2. Number of PEI articles published since 1956.

Purposes

Researchers in fields beyond anthropology and sociology, such as education research, marketing, and health care, have coopted photo-elicitation to “(1) document and reflect on the needs and assets of the community; (2) promote critical dialogue about issues of importance to the community; and, (3) promote social change via communication of issues to community and policy makers” (Richardson & Neru-Jeter, 2011, p. 60). In 90% of the articles in our sample, PEI was used as a tool for conducting research. The remaining articles used PEI as a pedagogical tool in a classroom setting or as an evaluation/action research tool.

Research tool. Researchers using PEI are generally ensconced in a post-positivist paradigm and see photos as a method for uncovering how both the researcher and the participant understand the world. Taking the view that “realities are not flat; they are not consistent, coherent, and definite” (Law, 2007, in Agbenyega, 2008, pp. 55), PEI researchers analyze photos, or participant reaction to photos, to uncover the values and perceptions held by participants (Heisly & Levy, 1991). When using PEI, researchers create theory using inductive reasoning.

Researchers using PEI ask open-ended questions, seeking to see the world through the eyes of the participant, and often uncover ways of knowing that are quite different from their own. Several authors describe PEI as a particularly appropriate research method for studying and interviewing children and marginalized groups (Bunster, 1977; Cappello, 2005; Packard, 2008; Pyle, 2013). Children are taught to respect adults as authority figures, defer to their direction, and occlude true feelings in order to acquiesce to explicit or implicit expectations of behavior (Clark, 1999). Children’s responses are highly influenced by context (Cappello, 2005; Clark, 1999). Responses to personal questions may be muted or changed if parents are physically present or if children believe their parents will be informed of what they say during an interview (Mannay, 2013; Zartler & Richter, 2014). PEI allows children to become partners in research as they take on the role of a teacher explaining their ideas and perspectives to the adult researcher (Cappello, 2005; Clark-Ibanez, 2004).

Furthermore, PEI used with children acknowledges them as active participants in their own lives (Almqvist & Almqvist, 2015; Clark, 1999). Young children can be disadvantaged in traditional interviews because they may have neither the cognitive and social skills to participate in question-and-answer dialogue, the language skills to understand particular questions, nor the ability to explain their understanding of certain concepts or experiences (Crivello, Campfield, & Woodhead, 2009). As Shohel and Mahruf (2012, p. 3) note, “knowledge is not filed away in children’s heads in answer form, waiting for the stimulus of the perfect question to realize it... most of what children know, they know implicitly, and yet in an interview, they are asked to make that knowledge explicit.” Using pictures can help make abstract ideas concrete for children. For instance, Weigner (1998) uses pictures of houses to represent disparities in wealth in her study of children’s perceptions of future job opportunities.

Likewise, PEI has been used in studies involving populations that are typically considered marginalized, such as Bunster’s (1977) study of indigenous Peruvian market women. Bunster recruits market women to help her organize pictures in a photo kit and then uses the kit in her interviews. She writes, “We doubt the existence of a better means ...than the talking pictures technique for establishing communication. Meaningful photographs had a cathartic effect on the women of our sample” (p. 290). The participants had not previously had an opportunity to view, reflect, and discuss their own lives openly and often had emotional reactions during interviews. For populations who are not literate and do not routinely engage in structured reflective activity, PEI can be a powerful tool for eliciting responses from participants (Joanou, 2009).

Pedagogical tool. PEI has also been used in classroom settings as a pedagogical tool to guide inquiry (MacDonald, 2012; Sánchez, 2015; Sinatra, Beaudry, Guastello, & Stahl-Gemake, 1989; Zenkov, Ewaida, Bell, & Lynch, 2012). Zenkov and her colleagues (2012) use PEI to encourage reflection, discussion, and writing in a middle school ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) class. They find that the PEI process helps them, as teachers, better understand obstacles to learning faced by the students, and also helps students identify and share personal aspects of their lives. Additionally, through group discussion, the students are exposed to varying experiences and perspectives.

Similarly, Sensoy (2011) describes a project in which middle school students create photo-essays depicting their understanding of race, class, and gender. The project was grounded in a critical framework (Solórzano & Yosso 2002), and students were encouraged to identify mainstream narratives about race, class, and gender and offer their own counter-narratives. Informal interviews with students allowed the researcher and teacher to understand how race, class, and gender shaped student identity as well as how they could continue to empower students to become critical thinkers.

Researchers using PEI with children in classroom settings frequently observe that the technique is also a means of engaging and motivating children (Cappello, 2005; Zenkov et al., 2012). Describing one student in their study, Zenkov and her team (2012, p.6) writes, “Miguel struggled to participate and complete assignments in our English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class, but he began to engage with writing tasks when we relied on image-based inquiries into his relationship to school as the starting point for our lessons.” Students become engaged not only because they are generally working in groups and doing a more hands-on activity, but also because teachers using PEI in the classroom are demonstrating that they care for the students and want to understand the student’s perspective. The students’ personal stories become the center point of learning and their lives inside and outside school are validated and respected.

A final note regarding studies that use PEI for pedagogical purposes is that photos are often used to elicit written narratives or group discussion rather than dialogue in a formal interview

(MacDonald, 2012; Sánchez, 2015; Sensoy, 2011; Sinatra, et al., 1989; Zenkov, et al., 2012). The focus of PEI for pedagogical purposes is to help students understand their own experiences and the world around them, rather than to help researchers understand a topic from an alternative perspective.

Action research and evaluation. PEI is also used in action research to discover or highlight an issue that needs attention. Wang (1999) offers a framework for using PEI for action research grounded in five key ideas: 1) images teach, 2) images can shape policy, 3) community members should participate in creating the images that influence policy, 4) organizers must bring policy makers to the table to view and react to images, and, 5) PEI emphasizes both individual and community action. Using this framework, she explains how community organizers can plan and implement PEI in order to understand community needs, document community assets, evaluate policies and programs impacting communities, and collect evidence for action.

Researchers, teachers, and community organizers have applied frameworks and processes similar to those described by Wang to effect change in their local community. Thompson and Gunter (2008) use PEI in a classroom as a way for students to investigate problems in school. Through a process of taking pictures and discussing them with their classmates, students identified bullying as a key problem and created a focus group that included the principal in order to identify strategies to remedy the problem.

Process

At its most basic, PEI simply calls for photographs to be used in the interview process (Biag, 2014). The implementation differs in how participants are selected, the way photos are collected, how the photo interview is conducted, and how the resulting visual data are analyzed. Terms describing particular manifestations of PEI include photo-essay, auto driving or the auto-driven interview, reflexive photography, and photo-narrative (Shohel & Mahruf, 2012).

The general process of PEI is as follows:

1. Researchers identify a topic for investigation.
2. Researchers identify and invite participants to the study.
3. Researchers or participants take pictures relevant to a particular question or topic.
4. After pictures are developed, researchers use pictures to guide interviews and elicit dialogue.
5. Researchers analyze data and report findings.

The key component of PEI is that photographs are used during an interview. There are many studies that do not use photographs to elicit dialogue, but instead rely on images as visual data that speak for themselves (Chappell, Chappell, & Margolis, 2011; Margolis, 1999; Margolis, 1999, 2004). For instance, Margolis (1999; 2004) uses photos culled from historical archives to study how schools shape student identity. The photos function as individual pieces of data rather than focus points for discussion.

Participant selection in PEI studies follows methods typical of any qualitative project, including convenience sampling (Weinger, 1998), snowball sampling (Shwartz, 1989; Steiger 2008), purposive sampling (Buss, 1995; Richardson & Nuru-Jeter, 2011), and maximum variation sampling (Mayhew, 2004). Because taking photos may be more of a burden for participants than simply participating in a verbal interview, it can be more difficult to recruit participants (Clark-Ibanez,

2004). Researchers have avoided this pitfall by allowing participants to keep copies of the photos or the camera as an incentive.

PEI method selection. The researcher must decide who will take the photos that will be used in the interview. Traditional PEI is generally understood to be a method in which the researcher takes the photo. Auto-driven interview is the term used to describe studies in which the participant takes or selects photographs (Clark, 1999; Comeaux, 2013). Traditional PEI is considered more appropriate in conducting deductive studies, whereas auto-driven interview is useful for conducting inductive, theory-producing studies (Frith & Harcourt, 2007).

In some cases, rather than take pictures, the researcher or the participant will select pictures from an historical archive (Gubrium, 2006) or popular media (Stockall & Davis, 2011). Gubrium (2006) used historical pictures to elicit responses from elderly participants who had participated in a school walkout nearly 40 years before. In another study, the researcher selected just two images intended to represent middle-class and working-class neighborhoods in order to probe children's understanding of their career opportunities (Weinger, 1998). In a third study, the researcher instructed pre-service teachers to select images of young children from popular magazines to study how the teachers understood childhood (Stockall & Davis, 2011).

Maps have been used in addition to photos in order to understand how participants experience particular places (Richardson & Neru-Jeter, 2011; Woolner et al., 2010). In these studies, participants are asked to physically interact with the maps in order to identify how they use or understand space. For example, in a study of school safety, students were asked to identify places in their school where they had witnessed bullying or peer harassment by marking a map with an X (see Biag, 2014, p. 173, for example).

Drawings have been used with both child and adult participants to elicit representations of abstract ideas (Buss, 1995; Crivello et al., 2009; Ganesh, 2007; Guillemen, 2004). For instance, in a study of post-partum depression, the participants drew images to represent their feelings, a facet of their experience that would not be possible to photograph (Guillemen, 2004).

Photo collection. In the auto-driven interview process, photo collection typically begins with the researcher setting parameters for what the participant should photograph. Typically, researchers will ask participants to take photos that illustrate a particular aspect of their lives. In the study of spaces where students felt safe in schools referenced above, researchers instructed children to take photos of “five spaces on campus where they: felt safe, felt unsafe, liked to have fun, felt welcome, and could talk to someone about their personal problems” (Biag, 2014, p. 170).

The amount of instruction researchers give to participants will depend on the participants and the breadth of data that the researchers desire. In two examples described above, researchers put a limit on the number of pictures students should take in order to manage the time frame of their studies that were being conducted in classrooms during the school year (Sensoy, 2011; Woolner et al., 2010). In contrast, researchers conducting a study of women's experience of chemo-therapy and recovery asked the women to take pictures depicting their experiences and emotions related to their changing health over the course of a year and did not limit the number of photos the participants should produce (Frith & Harcourt, 2007).

While most studies ask participants to take photos on their own time and independently, some researchers accompany participants on a “walk and talk” in which both researcher and participant survey an area together and as the participant takes photos they also explain their reasoning to the researcher (Orellana, 2008; Prosser, 2007). This method of photo collection is useful in studies involving children where adult supervision of the child is necessary.

Finally, some researchers create, or ask participants to create, photo-kits that will be used in subsequent interviews. In projects using photo-kits, all participants who are interviewed interact with the same set of photos. This is in contrast to studies where each participant interacts with his or her own personal set of photos. In one project, students working with researchers decided to take pictures that represented scenarios where students might perceive a threat or be in danger of bullying (see Thomson & Gunter, 2008, p. 190, for example). The students then created a set of photos that they used to elicit discussion during focus groups with their peers.

Interview and photo manipulation. After photos have been taken, researchers probe participants for further detail through verbal interviews or written narratives. The interview process proceeds much like a typical qualitative interview, except that researchers are able to prompt participants to give deeper explanations by referring to particular pictures. The researcher may begin the interview by showing participants particular photos (Schwartz, 1989; Weinger, 1998), may ask participants to choose the most important photos (Smith, Steel, & Gidlow, 2010), or may review each usable photo that was taken (Shohel & Mahruf, 2012). Researchers suggest interviewing children in dyads or in focus groups to increase their engagement and reduce their anxiety (Cappello, 2005; Shohel & Mahruf, 2012).

In some cases, researchers ask participants to manipulate photos during the interview process. Participants might be asked to rank photos chronologically or in order of importance (Smith, Steel, & Gidlow, 2010) or to group photos according to a particular theme (Clark, 1999). The way participants manipulate photos produces an additional layer of data. In Cappello's (2005) study of children's understanding of the writing classroom, she unearthed important themes by comparing which types of photos were most frequently selected for or eschewed from discussion. Clark (1999) gave children "thought-balloon" stickers to add to their photos in order to elicit information about their private thoughts.

Several researchers have asked participants to explain or respond to photos through written narratives (Comeaux, 2013; Kettle, 2010; Mayhew, 2004). Mayhew asked college-aged participants to select 10 of the 24 photos they were asked to take representing their understanding of spirituality and provide a one-sentence caption explaining the importance of each image. By combining the captions and images, Mayhew created a mini-album for each participant that served as a prop during individual interviews. In a slightly different variation, in a traditional PEI study of eight school principals Kettle (2010) asked participants to respond in writing to researcher produced portraits and photos. She found that while responses varied widely in their level of detail, they were all useful additions to her own field notes and information gathered during the interview process. In a study of faculty perceptions of male college students, the researcher asked a random sample of faculty to record their reactions to a photo-based scenario in writing (Comeaux, 2013). This method allowed the researcher to collect information from a larger sample ($n=137$) than typical for most PEI studies.

Understanding photos. People are inundated with photos in their daily lives through mass media and taking and sharing photos is a regular occurrence. While photos are taken-for-granted objects in daily life, critical consideration unveils how photos can aid in understanding how both the photographer and the viewer construct meaning.

Researchers have delineated several ways of viewing a photo. Harper (2002) explains that the most basic use of photography in academic research is as a visual record of events where photos stand in for the researcher and are another means of observation. In Mead and Bateson's (1942) pioneering work with the Balinese people, Mead especially was of the view that photos could be used to allow readers to physically observe as much of the field as the researchers had and that little should be done to manipulate or frame photos for the sake of artistry (Mead & Bateson, 1980). In

this manner, researchers can revisit “objective” depictions of reality over time to scrutinize them using evolving theory.

Bateson took a decidedly different view, arguing that photos never “exist unaltered,” because the production and presentation of a photo is the result of many subjective decisions made by the photographer (Mead & Bateson, 1980, p. 265). This post-positivist approach acknowledges that while photographs are a physical representation of an observed reality, how a viewer interprets a photograph depends on what is within the photo’s frame, as well as the personal experiences of the viewer and the context of the viewing.

Casual viewers tend to use an *attributional*, rather than *symbolic* strategy to talk about photos, meaning that viewers “treat an image as a natural event rather than as a symbolic event, and they fail to consider the author’s intentions guiding the structure and meaning of the image” (Shwartz, 1989, p. 122). In other words, viewers do not typically attend to the framing, subject matter, and photographer’s intentions in constructing meaning. Instead, viewers tend to understand photos in relation to their personal experience: that is, instead of discussing the photo as a concrete object or in a symbolic matter, the viewer uses the photo as point of reference to share a personal narrative.

Because photos are understood on a personal level, they naturally elicit multiple interpretations depending on the viewer and the context in which the photo is viewed (Shohel & Mahruf, 2012). Each viewer brings his or her own opinions, experiences, biases, and understandings to his or her interpretation. It follows then that in PEI, the photograph is often less important than the reflections, narratives, and explanations that the photograph elicits. Frith and Harcourt (2007) explain their use of photos this way: “We saw the photographs as a reference point to be used in conversation rather than an objective representation of reality that has a meaning independent of these conversations” (p. 1342).

Analysis. The way that a researcher understands photos and the process of photography might lead to distinct methods of analysis. While all PEI research studies employ qualitative analysis methods, such as grounded theory (Biag, 2014; Richardson & Nuru-Jeter, 2012), constant comparative method (Bhukhanwala & Alleksaht-Snider, 2012), or content analysis (Agbenyega, 2008), researchers diverge in their analytical strategy in regards to whether photos will be analyzed in addition to interview transcripts. Some researchers regard photos “primarily as elicitation tools during interviews” (Werts, et. al, 2012, p. 826) and analyze interview transcripts much like researchers using traditional interview methods would. For instance, Bhukhanwala and Alleksaht-Snider (2012) use the constant comparative method developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) to code transcripts and derive properties, categories, and larger themes to form conclusions about how pre-professional teachers understand diversity in mainstream classrooms.

Others analyze photographs in addition to interview transcripts to gain an alternative or deeper understanding of the participants’ motives, perceptions, or psychological states. In explaining his rationale for analyzing photos, Agbenyega (2008, p. 56) writes, “Images are communication tools and messages they convey reflect the psychological state of the image producer. . . . Communication in any form, whether verbal or non-verbal, is central to human existence and its content represents a unit of analysis.” Researchers analyzing photos as well as interview transcripts typically attend to the symbolic characteristics of the photo such as framing, foregrounding and backgrounding, and what is included versus left out of photos (Fischman, 2001; Packard, 2008; Stockall, 2011; Zenkov et al, 2012). Orellana (2008) sought to understand the symbolic representations in her participants’ photos by grouping and regrouping photos to find patterns within and between participants. Using a similar grouping method, Clark-Ibanez (1994) found systematic differences in the types of photos taken by

boys and girls. Boys were more likely to take pictures while they were outside in the neighborhood, while girls tended to take pictures of the view of the outside from inside their homes. She posits that these differences were related to the different roles and expectations assigned to boys and girls by their parents and families.

The importance of evaluating both what is seen and unseen when analyzing photos is explained by Fischman (2001, p. 29):

In the matrix of the visual are also inscribed what is there that cannot be seen, through what lenses the visible and invisible become intelligible, and the spatial and temporal location of the observable and the observer, all of which constrain what is possible to see and not to see.

Fischman describes the multiple ways in which the significance of a single portrait of a young student is constructed (see Fischman, 2001, p. 30 for image). The photo is a reminder of missed opportunities for the student as he reflects back on his childhood as an adult. At the same time, the photo provides indications of how schools were organized to provide special education services at a certain place and time. Neither of these interpretations of the photo are seen or represented visually, instead they are meanings derived “within specific regimes of truth... offering indications of the relationships of power” (Fischman, 2001. p. 31).

Benefits and Obstacles

There are advantages and disadvantages to using photos as data. On the one hand, photos contain an immense amount of information about the people and places that are important to participants. Conversely, participants may take seemingly irrelevant photos (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006), unusable photos (Packard, 2008), or accidental photos that can confound conclusions drawn from visual analysis. Orrellana (2006) reminds researchers analyzing photos “...not to over-psychologize our interpretations of photographs, and of the importance of listening to the photographers talk about their work” (p. 86) in order to avoid drawing erroneous conclusions based on the researcher’s preconceptions.

Benefits. Across the studies we selected for analysis, researchers describe similar advantages to using PEI. Specifically, PEI can:

1. Empower participants
2. Build trust between researcher and participant
3. Help researchers better see through participants’ eyes
4. Allow participants to manipulate photos
5. Increase validity of participant response

Empowers participants. In any researcher/participant situation, there is a power dynamic that privileges the researcher. Researchers embody the role of the expert, while participants are often objects of study. Studies utilizing PEI, especially when participants and not researchers are taking photos, can shift this power dynamic and empower participants by making them the experts and ceding control of data collection and use to them (Allen, 2009; Luttrell, 2010). Researchers empower participants by privileging participant knowledge and experience throughout the research process.

Like any interview method, the open-ended nature of PEI allows participants to construct meaning unbounded by the confines of the researcher’s preconceptions (Capello, 2005; Clark, 1999). In contrast, surveys, and even a semi-structured interview protocol, can be used to steer the participant in a pre-ordained direction based on what information the researcher decides is important. Steiger (2008, p. 35) describes the benefit of using PEI over traditional interviews:

In the conventional interview, the roles of the participants are clearer: I received the expected answers to my questions and ideas. In the photo-elicitation interview, the informants choose a series of photographs which best illustrated their feelings. In the conventional interview, I defined the topics. Here, photographs defined it [sic].

While empowering participants is often cited as a benefit of PEI, Zartler and Richter (2014) note that, “photo interviews...do not per se decrease power differentials, respect children’s agency, or empower them. Such research methods need to be applied carefully, critically, and conscientiously, instead of being regarded as an ethical panacea” (p. 43).

Helps build trust. Empowering the participant is not only an ethical research practice but also builds trust between researcher and participant. There is a certain unnaturalness in interview situations, if only because the researcher and participant likely do not have a previous relationship. Additionally, Harper (2002, p. 20) points out that “sociological questions are often not meaningful to non-sociologists” creating an interest gap between researcher and participant in studies relying on traditional interviews.

Many authors have noted how using pictures helps ease the tension between the participant and researcher (Harper, 2002; Hurworth, 2004; Meo, 2010). Auto-driven interview participants are usually excited to share their photographs and take on a teaching role during the interview (Clark, 1999). This excitement and role shift reduces participant inhibitions and creates rapport between participant and researcher (Schwartz, 1989). PEI also has the advantage of focusing an interview on a photo, instead of on a participant, which can help participants feel like less of an object of study (Shohel & Mahruf, 2012).

Better see through participants’ eyes. PEI promotes better understanding of participant perspective because the use of photographs encourages more detailed responses and deeper reflection, triggers memories, and allows unobtrusive observation of hidden realms.

Details presented in photographs provide fodder for the researcher to query the participants (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). They provide structure to an interview, giving the researcher something to return to in order to elicit more detailed explanations. The researcher can ask participants to explain what the photo means to them in the current moment, to reflect on their state of mind or the environment they were in at some point in the past, or to talk about people or things that are not represented in the photo but that they nevertheless associate with the photo.

Shohel and Mahruf (2012) used both traditional interviews and PEI in a study of student’s experiences of transitioning from primary to secondary school in order to gauge the differences in responses. What follows is an example of responses from both the PEI and traditional interview:

[Traditional interview] Q: Do you enjoy your school? A: Yes, we do.

[PEI] Q: Do you enjoy your school? A: We do enjoy our school. You see on the image every one is happy. [Referring to image 02] We are so close to each other. We look like a family. Our apa [teacher] is treating us as we’re her own children. (p.9)

The photos helped the participants give richer answers to the researchers’ questions. In addition to providing information about what is visible in the photograph, participants often give information about people or things outside of the photo frame (Fischman, 2001; Zartler & Richter, 2014).

Using photos in the interview process also promotes deeper reflection on the part of the participants (Clark, 1999; Zenkov, Harmon, Bell, Ewaida & Lynch, 2011). Interviews are often

conducted weeks or months after photos are taken. When participants return to their photos, they can bring new understandings to the photos or are reminded of aspects of their experience that they had forgotten. For instance, in their study of women undergoing chemotherapy, Frith and Harcourt (2007) found that some women were shocked at how ill they looked during their treatment and were better able to reflect on the effects of the treatment on their health and convalescence after viewing their photographs. In this case, the photos also allowed participants to see their own reality with new eyes.

Physical photographs help trigger participants' memories (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). In Frith and Harcourt's (2007) study of cancer patients' experiences undergoing chemo-therapy, a participant explains, "I suppose it's made me, especially when the photographs came and I sat and looked at them, it made me go back...and made me remember the good and the bad" (p. 1345).

Because the participant decides what is important and where to elaborate, researchers are often able to access parts of participants' lives that are unknown or not obvious. Orellana (1999) describes her experience conducting a PEI study with children living in an urban environment, writing, "while [the] photos from the children capture only a few aspects of life around Madison, they also contrast with my own photos of the same area. I tended to shoot what I saw as 'visually arresting' scenes that suggested social commentaries to me on children and childhoods in this community" (pp. 75-76). She explains that her positionality as a researcher, adult, and non-community member, influenced the pictures she choose to take and clarifies why her pictures tended to be very different than those taken by the children.

Photos can also illuminate the importance of seemingly ordinary settings. In a study of how teenage Mexican women perceive their neighborhoods, participants took several photos of empty streets or inanimate objects (Richardson & Nuru-Jeter, 2012). Subsequent interviews revealed that these were not ordinary settings, but sites where the women had experienced violence, discrimination, or gang activity.

For some participants, taking photos or using images may be a more acceptable way of representing abstract ideas or engaging with topics that they consider taboo (Allen, 2009; Ganesh, 2010). Allen (2009) found when studying sexual cultures in schools that some students who were unable or unwilling to speak about sexual cultures in a regular interview were able to contribute to the research by taking photos and writing in diaries.

Photos are manipulable. Photos are physical objects that serve as a concrete focal point for both researchers and participants, and can be inspected, returned to, and manipulated during an interview more readily than ideas shared verbally (Frith & Harcourt, 2007). Having physical photos for participants to manipulate can be helpful, especially when interviewing children. In her study, Cappello (2009) discovered that students were very careful about how pictures should be sorted, and that they used the pictures to ground their narrative as they spoke. Oftentimes children are not used to manipulating images and so find photo interviews engaging and fun (Cappello, 2005).

Obstacles. Researchers using PEI must overcome logistical issues as well as address concerns about reliability and validity. Logistical issues include the additional cost of purchasing cameras and developing photos. In the age of digital media, this obstacle might be overcome by allowing participants to use their own camera-enabled cellular phones for data collection instead of purchasing cameras, or by forgoing developing physical prints and cataloguing digital prints instead.

Keeping up with cameras is a frequently cited logistical concern. Often, participants would receive a camera and either not take photographs or not be available for an interview (Allen, 2009). This obstacle increases the price of conducting a PEI and reduces reliability and validity (Clark, 1999).

A more complicated obstacle involves participant use of cameras. In his study of the lived experiences of a homeless population, Packard (2008) found that due to lack of practice with a camera, many photos taken by the participants were unusable because they were unfocused or because the photographers' fingers were occluding the subject (see Packard, 2008, p. 70, for example). When Bunster (1977) conducted a traditional PEI with Peruvian market women, some women had never seen pictures of themselves and so required support in understanding photos.

Other authors report that participants will forget to take pictures at regular intervals and so will either return an incomplete roll or will simply take many pictures of the same subject (Packard, 2008). Alternatively, participants may simply lose the camera and have no pictures to share (Orellana, 2008). Researchers have overcome these issues by providing training and sending reminders to participants to take pictures throughout the course of a study.

Reliability and validity issues in auto-driven interviews may arise because participants control data collection. Participants might take pictures that are socially desirable and hide potentially important parts of their experience or they may take pictures that they later regret and then remove consent for use. This can be especially problematic when researching children in schools. Biag (2014) explains that the children in his study were being graded on their participation, which may have decreased the validity of results. The presence of a camera may make participants or those around them feel uncomfortable, thus making taking pictures difficult.

Another common threat to reliability and validity is the oft-cited constraint about what participants are able to photograph. Children in school may be limited in the areas and people they are allowed to photograph, and all PEI participants are likely to miss opportunities to photograph important images because they do not have their cameras available or they are in socially awkward or vulnerable situations (Clark, 1999; Richardson & Neru-Jeter, 2011). Children may also be limited in what they photograph by their parents or other adults who encourage or forbid them to photograph particular people, places, or objects (Clark-Ibanez, 2004).

Additionally, there are certain conventions of point-and-shoot photography most amateur photographers are familiar with: a central focus on human subjects, people taking up an entire frame, people posing for pictures, etc. (Smith, Steel, & Gidlow, 2010). These conventions may circumscribe the range of data that researchers obtain from participant photographs.

Despite these limitations, some authors argue that PEI increases validity and reliability because data obtained from photographs can be triangulated with data collected in interviews or through observation (Agnenyega, 2008; Harper, 2002). Using photos in interviews provides an objective perspective on certain aspects participants might describe. Steiger (2008) gives the example of a participant describing her house as having a "large room," which without a photo could mean very different things to different people. The photo ensures that the researchers and the participant understand the size of the "large room" in the same way.

Ethical issues also arise when conducting auto-driven interviews, especially when participants come from a marginalized population (Jaonou, 2009). Several authors have expressed concern that 1) participants are not fully aware of how their photographs are going to be used (Shohel & Mahruf, 2012), 2) photographs that clearly identify participants can be exploitative (Orellana, 2008), and 3) photographs may identify non-participants who have not consented to be a part of the research study. Additionally, Zartler and Richter (2014) raise the concern that researchers are in a position to manipulate marginalized participants, such as children, into divulging information about their lives that they might not actually want to reveal or that may result in negative consequences.

In general, researchers have overcome ethical concerns by clearly explaining how photos are

going to be used to participants, having participants sign consent forms, obscuring the identity of people shown in photos, or simply not using photographs in published works (Allen, 2009; Meo, 2010; Orellana, 2008). In spite of these precautions, obtaining clearance from Institutional Review Boards (IRB's) can be difficult and time consuming, slowing down PEI projects. Further, the process of delineating precise plans for photo use can constrain the type of data that participants are allowed to collect or researchers are able to use (Biag, 2014). Allen (2009) explains how in her study of sexuality in schools, the IRB imposed constraints that children only photograph identifiable persons, persons involved in the study, and persons in areas that were publically accessible limited the ability of her participants to fully convey their perceptions of sexuality through pictures. In a different study of adolescent identity, researchers could not use photos where the faces of children under 18 could be identified (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter & Phoenix, 2008). To overcome this obstacle, they simply covered children's faces so they were not recognizable (see Croghan et al., p. 353, for example).

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

PEI as a method has not been widely used by education researchers. Harper (2002) documents only one study specifically related to American schools among all existing PEI studies published in academic journals or books that included an explanation of methodology and this study found that fewer than 40 additional articles have been published since. PEI, however, seems a natural methodological choice for education researchers because it gives voice to the students, teachers, leaders, and others who are directly impacted by policy decisions. Because of this, PEI has real potential to allow policies to be crafted with better fit and staying power. In terms of "fit", we expect research using PEI to suggest policies that are increasingly isomorphic with the needs and interests of school actors, especially students. Better "fit", in turn, means less churn in policy initiatives, i.e. policies with greater "staying power". Since education policy is focused on the allocation of scarce resources in the service of better schooling, we expect better fit and staying power to lead to more effective and more efficient policy actions.

As a research tool, PEI is an especially powerful method for understanding school context through the eyes of students (Lutrell, 2010; Meo, 2010; Zenkov et al., 2011). In school research, children are the clients around which most policy decisions are made; however, researchers frequently leave children out of any discussion of the ways in which policies impact them or might best serve them. Cappello (2005) and Orellana's (2008) articles, among others, are evidence that PEI methodology can alter the angle from which communities are observed and bring new aspects of school and community to light.

One area where PEI methods can be expanded is as a pedagogical tool within a school setting. There are few documented instances of PEI being used in the classroom, and those that exist tend to be in adult learning settings (Bhukhanwala & Alleksaht-Snyder, 2012; Stockall & Davis, 2011). In the K-12 setting, PEI can be used as a way to increase student engagement, promote self-reflection, and encourage dialogue. As teachers empower students to tell their stories and comment on their surroundings, they are showing that they respect and care for students, which facilitates stronger mutual trust and deeper relationships (Murphy & Torre, 2014). In their work using PEI in her middle school ESOL classroom, Zenkov and colleagues (2011; 2012) show how PEI lays the groundwork for authentic and personalized learning experiences. The students in her classroom become engaged when discussing their own stories and the experiences they share with their classmates, and bring that engagement to working on rigorous writing assignments. The

photographs and discussion produced when using PEI as a pedagogical tool creates scaffolding to support students in academic tasks.

While there are several studies of pre-service teachers using PEI methodology, we did not find any of current classroom teachers. PEI can be one tool to shed light on what education researchers often refer to as the “black box” of classroom practice (Cuban, 2013) and strengthen current teacher accountability policies and classroom practice. In an auto-driven PEI scenario, teachers, armed with cameras, can take advantage of PEI’s ability to unobtrusively document private or hidden realms, and illuminate what evaluators and observers do not see during brief encounters. Using traditional PEI methods, a researcher can document classroom settings and activities to uncover more or less productive practices that ultimately can inform policy decisions.

Finally, PEI can be used for evaluation and action research. Teachers and education leaders could capture the moments in their classrooms and schools that cannot be quantified and queried through survey research or standardized assessments for use in their formal evaluations. Photographs and commentary can be used by educators to create a classroom or school portfolio of positive aspects of a school community as well as aspects that need to be improved. In all of these cases, photographs can act as a testament to growth over time that participants can look to as they seek to cultivate a community defined by continuous improvement. As illustrated in Thompson and Gunter’s (2008) study, PEI can help educators and policy makers understand problems that may not be evident to adults and develop policies to address those problems.

One area that has not been studied in the extant PEI literature is the role of parents and community members within the school. Parents could be given cameras to take home in order to document the family educational culture (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010) and the curriculum of the home (Goldenberg, 2004). Such evidence might help school practitioners and policy makers recognize the assets that students and families bring to school that can be tapped in order to implement policies and practices that support a positive community of engagement for parents (Murphy & Torre, 2014). Again PEI can be used unobtrusively to observe the home lives of children, to help teachers understand each child as an individual, and to build personalized relationships.

There are good reasons to suggest that PEI can provide the education profession with a valuable tool for researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to understand and strengthen school structures, policies, and cultures. To begin with, the absence of voice among students, teachers, and other stakeholders is common to narratives about schools. Studies consistently show, for example, that students are generally ignored in efforts to create school policy and understand the dynamics of life in schools (Boworth & Ferreira, 2000; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). In a similar manner they are most often silent in efforts to improve school (Murphy, 2013). PEI offers a viable tool to help researchers, policy makers, and school leaders see how students think and feel about the institutions they attend, as well as to consider and legitimize students’ viewpoints.

There is also a dynamic called the “perception-assessment gap” in schools, a gaps-between-levels phenomenon (Murphy, 2011). That is, when policy makers or education leaders are asked about the state of something in the schools, e.g. the implementation success of a new program or policy, there is generally a significant gap between how they assess success and how teachers or students see implementation. In particular, school leaders consistently view things as more effective than teachers and students. PEI offers potential to address these perceptual-assessment gaps. Researchers employing PEI can help document the gaps as well as help bring coherence to organizational understanding among different groups in the school, especially between children and adults. Such understandings can be used to ground new policies at all levels of the education system.

Finally, evidence is emerging that caring leadership is an essential element of pastoral care for students and communities of learning for teacher (Murphy, 2014) and that community is being reorganized as a driving force in school improvement (Murphy & Torre, 2014). The ability of researchers, educators, and policy makers to understand what caring leadership looks like can be enhanced by the use of PEI methodology. Just as PEI can shed light on perceptual-assessment gaps and indirect effects of leadership and school policy on students and teachers by highlighting multiple perspectives within schools, we believe that PEI can deepen knowledge of the shape and texture of caring leadership for school improvement.

Conclusion

In this article we reviewed a unique research method that puts the voice of the participant front and center. PEI has been used by sociologists and anthropologists to study a wide variety of topics, but its prevalence compared to more traditional qualitative approaches to understanding social contexts and people's lived experiences is minor. We suggest that education scholars, as well as school practitioners, can use PEI methods to better understand school communities and the children, parents, and school staff who inhabit them.

Education research that uses PEI will not provide a panacea for improving schools but can help uncover new perspectives on what ails school communities that can aid policy makers in developing ways to improve schools. Researchers and practitioners using PEI in schools should be careful to ground their work in theoretical or action-oriented frameworks in order for studies using this method to be informative to a wider community and contribute to policy discussions. Additionally, education researchers who seek to utilize PEI to strengthen policy and practice must be aware of the limitations of PEI — which include concerns related to logistics, reliability and validity, and ethics — and proactively address them. If PEI is to aid in the development or evaluation of education policies that better serve students and practitioners, researchers should seek to utilize this method to highlight silenced voices and not reify existing hierarchies that separate diverse stakeholders.

Despite the limitations of PEI as a methodology, we believe that it offers a new tool for investigating the impact of education policies on various school stakeholders. Utilizing this method, the research community will be better positioned to speak on behalf of school stakeholders when contributing to policy discussions and when seeking solutions to improve the culture and productivity of schools.

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