Visualizing Inclusion: Employing a Photo-Elicitation Methodology to Explore Views of Inclusive Education

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Abstract

This case study details a research project that explored meanings, perspectives, and understandings of inclusion, using a photo-elicitation methodology. Children and young people were provided with disposable cameras and were invited to take photographs in their school setting that they felt represented inclusion or exclusion. Some of the anonymized images taken were then discussed with a range of groups of adults that included student teachers, serving teachers, teaching assistants, and academics. This case study details the methodological framework and methods employed. Two examples of images are discussed in order to draw out how photo-elicitation worked in action and the reflections that ensued.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Recognize the place of photo-elicitation within visual methodologies
- Understand how to apply visual or photo-elicitation methodology
- Recognize how the interpretation of visual images generates differing perceptions and varied meanings
- Appreciate how the use of photo-elicitation facilitates reflection on values and practices

Project Overview and Context

The case study presented here considers the use of photo-elicitation as a method in a research project about inclusion. Following the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994) that pressed for international moves toward inclusion based on rights and entitlement for all children, inclusive education is now part of the discourse and practice of schooling in countries across the world. However, inclusion remains a disputable concept that is wide open to interpretation, and the term appears to mean different things to different people (Allan, 2010; UNESCO, 2015).

As educationalists, we have been working in the area of inclusive education and investigating conceptualisations of inclusion that incorporate community, social capital, equality, and respect (Thomas & Loxley, 2014). This case study reports on research which aimed to find out what children, young people, and adults “saw” as inclusion or exclusion. To do this, we carried out research using a photo-elicitation methodology (Boxall & Ralph, 2009; Prosser & Loxley, 2007). Özlem Sensoy (2011) points out that photographs and photo essays are frequently used in research in which people want to tell a story with pictures as it is a way to access life experiences. We adapted the photo-elicitation method in two research phases.
In Phase 1, children and young people in primary, secondary, and special schools were provided with disposable cameras and asked to take images that represented, for them, inclusion or exclusion, and to provide a brief reason for their image selection. Some of the images taken by the children become the primary research data. Phase 2 involved presenting the images to groups of adults working or training in the field of education or education research, via one off-group workshops over the course of 2 years. The groups consisted of teaching assistants, trainee teachers, teachers, and university academics. They were shown particular images that had been taken by the children in Phase 1 and were asked whether they thought the images represented inclusion or exclusion, to provide a reason for their choice and to discuss their responses. It is Phase 2 of the project—the adult interpretation of the photographs taken by the children—that forms the main focus for this case study.

Research Practicalities

Following institutional ethical approval, the fieldwork for the research began in 2012 and has two phases which are described in the following subsections.

Phase 1

Phase 1 began with the research team providing detailed, age-appropriate explanations of the research project aims and establishing written parental, child, and staff permissions with four schools—one primary special, one primary mainstream, one secondary mainstream, and one secondary mainstream with specialist provision—who were part of an existing university–school network partnership. The research aim of exploring different experiences, views, and opinions about inclusion and exclusion was explained to them, and a contact person was designated in each school. The research aims and the concepts of inclusion and exclusion were explained verbally using age-appropriate language to children in one class in each school. Following their verbal and written consent, the children were provided with disposable cameras and asked to take images that represented, for them, inclusion or exclusion and to provide a brief reason for taking the image. They were asked to explain (verbally and/or in writing) what these images meant to them and to provide basic demographic information (gender, age, type of school they attended, and whether they identified as having a particular learning need or disability). An example of how this was recorded is shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Information provided by photographer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
12-year-old girl without SEN in mainstream secondary school.

“Exclusion—using your mobile phone to leave other people out. Secrets.”

SEN: special education needs.

We acknowledged that in some circumstances, children may not be able to take their own photographs, so we provided guidance on how adults could take the photographs if directed. Kathy Boxall and Sue Ralph (2009, p. 48) called such adult facilitators “proxy respondents,” who can be asked to act on behalf of those who are unable to do so for themselves; for example, if they had difficulties with motor skills or co-ordination. We felt that proxy respondents were essential for this stage of the data collection so that no child was excluded because of a disability, particularly given that the topic of the research was inclusion.

At the end of this part of the research, we created an archive of 63 photographs which consisted of the photographs and comments offered by the children and young people. The images that formed this archive created an innovative data resource which was valuable in itself. Dissemination of these data became a focal point for exploring concepts of inclusion and exclusion with a range of stakeholders, teachers, school staff, and academics.

We felt that it would be impractical in terms of time to try to use all 63 photographs in Phase 2, so we edited the archive to 30 images. In some cases, similar images were taken by two or three different children, or in two or three different settings, so we selected an “exemplar.” In trying to edit the collection further, all four of us reviewed each photograph and tried to select the ones that we felt to be powerful, provocative, or troubling in some way, in that they invited us to rethink our own views of what constituted inclusive or exclusive practices. While this eliminated some of the photographs taken by the children, the aim of the project was not to find the right or best way to “do” inclusion, but to explore the differing perspectives, experiences, and complexities in understanding inclusive practice that would emerge from adults discussing photographs taken by children and young people.

The majority of the 30 selected images depicted environmental landscapes, children, young
people, teachers, and other members of school staff. When negotiating access with schools for Phase 1, some schools were wary that children, teachers, or their school might be identifiable and therefore open to judgments from peers. To ensure that no individual or school setting could be identified when the photographs were shared, each photograph was cartoonized using a software package, to protect identities and ensure anonymity for those in the images and those who took them.

Phase 2

In Phase 2 of the research process, photograph discussion workshops of 12-25 individuals took place with adults working in the field of education and/or education research over a 2-year duration. These were as follows: two groups of Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) secondary students, two groups of PGCE primary students, three groups of teaching assistants undertaking undergraduate professional development in the area of inclusion, one group of students training to be Education Psychologists, one group of qualified teachers and special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) undertaking an MA in Inclusive Education, four groups of education academics at a UK conference, and one group of education academics at a European conference. Participants were informed of the project aims in verbal and written form and signed consent forms for their comments to be used as data.

Following an introduction to the research and some background discussion of literature surrounding photo-elicitation methods, the cartoonized photographs were supplied on-screen and as color handouts to small groups of 4-8 people within each workshop. The small groups were asked to discuss the questions:

- Do you think the images represent inclusion or exclusion? Why?
- Has anything been left out of the photograph? What would you add?
- What questions do the images encourage you to ask?
- Having talked in small groups about the images, have you changed your mind about inclusion, and if so, why?

Space was provided on the handouts so that the groups could provide written comments which could be included as a further data set. The groups were also given the opportunity to share their responses with the other groups in their workshop.

In taking this approach to data collection, we attempted to create non-judgmental arenas within which those commenting on the photographs could explore contrasting perspectives and reflect upon their own interpretations of inclusion. The information gathered from Phase 2 was added to the expanded data set alongside key points from the researcher discussions, as shown in...
Table 2.

Table 2. Expanded data set.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Child photographer</th>
<th>Initial analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image_url" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>12-year-old girl without SEN in mainstream secondary school.</td>
<td><strong>Isolation, emotive rationale for taking the photograph.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Exclusion—using your mobile phone to leave other people out. Secrets.”</td>
<td><strong>Feel that there is a personal story behind why the photographer has taken this image.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isolation, emotive rationale for taking the photograph.</td>
<td><strong>Interaction between body-language, use of space, social-identity, and power. Proximity between students and the space that this creates around the students.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses for PGCE secondary group: December 19, 2014:

- Inclusion as both activity engaged in activity/excluding others as only 2 involved in small, close, activity.
- Exclusion: girls together sharing something on-screen of the mobile. Looks to me like they are finding amusement in something not particularly nice on the phone. Perhaps a bit of cyber-bullying going on.
- Exclusion? Bullying? Do they have any other friends?
- Exclusion—excluded from the class or disengagement.
- Inclusion—friends interacting with each other. Don’t know what they are doing on phone, could be bullying could be asking more friends to come out.
- Inclusion—girl with phone is including her “friend” or peer in the message on her phone. Both girls appear relaxed and happy in each other’s company.
- Here, the act of sharing is portrayed. This, therefore, is

Do we measure inclusion via scale/nos involved?

Place and space.

Assumption of bullying—popular media? Body language. Girls are amused—why the assumption that this is linked to bullying?

Gendered?

Whilst the positive aspect of friendship has been identified, the possibility of bullying is also
an image of inclusion. An alternative view is taking the
image as the viewpoint from pupils every day on the
playground. Pupils sharing things on a phone inherently
exclude those who they do not share the information
with.

- Neither inclusion nor exclusion; just an image of
friendship.
- Dependent upon surroundings—inclusion between the
two but if surrounded by other people, this would be
exclusion as it is an intimate moment between the two.
- There are not enough people or students in the picture
to show what is going on with a whole group. Although
use of electronic devices may be useful for some
students rather than traditional methods.
- Mobile phones—exclusion for poorer children.
- Inclusive—they are friends. Exclusive to the person they
are messaging—are they being “cyber” bullied?

Why are intimate moments
between two people seen as
exclusion or bullying others?

Space and secrecy seem to be
emerging as themes.

View may depend on people’s
own experiences—subjective
positioning.

Why is this related to economic
status?

SEN: special education needs; nos: numbers; PGCE: Post Graduate Certificate in Education.

Research Design

Using photographs and/or images to research school culture and inclusion has become more
prevalent in the past decade (e.g., Moss, Deppeler, Astley, & Pattison, 2007; Prosser & Loxley,
2007; Stockall, 2013). As the focus of our research was the exploration of differing
interpretations of inclusion and exclusion as situated in educational settings, it followed to
adopt a qualitative methodological approach to data collection that comfortably operates within
a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, whereby meaning is individually constructed and
interpreted according to personal experience (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2012).

We felt that a visual methodology was a suitable choice as members of the research team had
previous experience with this approach (Collinson et al., 2011), but primarily because it
provided a means by which to access different types of data, such as emotional responses to
situations and experiences that might “evoke a different kind of information” and “connect an
individual to experiences even if the images do not reflect the research subject’s actual lives”
(Harper, 2002, p. 13). The visual methodology we deployed in this project was a broad
adaptation of photo-elicitation, which is an established vein of visual methodology research
(Boxall & Ralph, 2009; Prosser & Loxley, 2007). Put simply, photo-elicitation means making meaning from photographs. As a research method, it is often used as an adjunct to other methods, such as interviews, to create a comfortable space for discussion between researcher and respondents in an interview situation. In other perhaps less common cases, as in the one presented here, it forms the core activity of the research design.

In the case of our research, photo-elicitation helped to build a more complex picture of views of inclusion and exclusion from “inclusion” recipients and stakeholders. It invited people working or training in the field of education to think deeply about what they believe about inclusion, and how this influences their practice. Our aim was to stimulate interesting and thought-provoking, even controversial, discussion utilizing photographs produced by children who are subject to the inclusion policies enacted within schools.

“Method” in Action

As stated from the photographs taken by the children, we selected several to use as data for the second phase of the project that involved gaining the views and perspectives of adults. To make choices about which images to select, we utilized Roland Barthes’ (1984, p. 49) exploration of image—*studium* (the element that creates interest in a photographic image) and *punctum* (the element that jumps out at the viewer from within a photograph). The four of us spent many hours looking at the images and discussing them and removed from the main data set those that were similar. For example, we had several landscape photographs of empty playgrounds with swings, climbing frames, and so on, so we included only one of these in the final selection. Some photographs elicited little discussion between us, whereas others evoked strong feelings or led to lengthy discussion, and these more evocative photos became those we selected to share in the workshops with adults.

As explained in the previous section, respondents had time to make notes and to then discuss their initial responses to the images in a small and then larger group within the workshops. The comments provided by the child photographer of each image were revealed after the discussion had taken place so as not to influence responses. The data gathered during the group workshops (both verbal and written) were coded and analyzed by all four members of the research team for emergent themes (see Table 2).

To date, the key themes that are emerging relate to space, place, and positioning. We use the term *place* to refer to physical place—the architecture, the environment, the room, and so on. *Positioning* within a place refers to a person’s individual identity, role, and proximity to others. Finally, the term *perspectives* refers to the ways in which people articulate their understanding
of place and positioning; their philosophy and experiences. These intersecting concepts are foregrounded in an understanding that there is no aspatial or apolitical space (Hemingway & Armstrong, 2013; Prosser & Loxley, 2007). How these themes are applied in the analysis can be demonstrated by considering two examples more closely.

The image in Figure 1 prompted some emotive responses which centered on inclusion as being about belonging and participation. The photographer was an 8-year-old girl who identified as having an autistic spectrum condition and was based in a primary-aged special school. She said, “If we were at a mainstream school he would not be able to do this. It’s better to come to this school because they help you talk and move.”

**Figure 1. Boy on carpet.**

Examples of the workshop responses to this photograph included the following:

* Why is he wearing a bib? Is he meant to be eating?

* A bib is not a normal part of uniform so it stands out in some way.

* A bib isn’t normal so it’s segregating.
He has special equipment to cater for his SEN [special education needs].

He is playing on his own and is lonely so this is not inclusion.

Responses were divided as to whether this image represented independence or isolation, with much focus being on the “aloneness” of the boy. The punctum of this image appeared to be the bib, and there were many questions around this item as a social signifier of “specialness.” Respondents appeared to be troubled by the dislocation of the bib and its perceived incongruity with the task at hand.

The image in Figure 2 also elicited interesting responses and debate which tended to focus on the singularity of the figures and around the notion of “helping.” The photographer was a 15-year-old boy who identified as having a particular learning need and attended a mainstream school. He said, “This is inclusion. This boy is working with the Head of Art.”

Figure 2. Teacher and boy.

Examples of workshop responses to this photograph included the following:
Treating the young boy as a child and overdoing the help?

I’ve warmed to the idea that it is inclusive because of my personal experience of a boys only special school.

What are they doing? Where are the other staff/children?

Why are they working outside the classroom?

The reason we have selected this image is because of the reaction we received when sharing it with a group of academics at a European conference. Before sharing any images, we explained punctum and stated our intention to discuss what “pricks” the viewer (Barthes, 1984, p. 49). The first response from an academic in the audience was a challenge to our stated aim, questioning the value of selecting troubling images and inviting emotional responses. However, upon looking at this (the first image presented on that occasion), the same person responded emotionally, drawing immediately upon personal experience relating to their own child. We provide this example to demonstrate that focusing on the punctum of an image can jolt people to reflect upon how their own experiences inform their subjective positioning and perspective. While inclusion may be the subject of government and school policies, what individuals understand about inclusion and the ways in which these policies are enacted in local settings differs and are informed by personal experiences and commitments. Therefore, as individuals who train professionals working with children, we feel it is essential for us to reflect on what “pricks” us about images and share what may trouble or disturb us with others.

Practical Lessons Learned

We would urge those interested in adopting visual methodologies, or photo-elicitation methods, to do some reading around how and why it is done. We were looking at representations and interpretations of inclusion, and this methodology was compatible with our particular purpose. We learned several things during the course of our two-phased project:

1. Simplify questions. During the course of sharing the photographs taken by children with different groups of adults and inviting their responses, as the project evolved, we learned that questions provided to the groups needed to be clearly expressed and concise. As coordinators of the research project, we had assumptions or expectations that respondents would provide their comments in a general sense upon viewing the photographs. We found that respondents needed some direction as to what they were “looking for” and seemed to appreciate very clear, non-complex questions, such as “Does this image suggest inclusion or exclusion? Why?”
2. **Provide theoretical background.** It also helped, when doing the workshops, to provide a clear explanation of the aims of the project and to also explain some of the theoretical underpinnings. The notions of *studium* and *punctum* were explained to participants, which appeared to assist respondents in their comments around the photographic images and also to consolidate the nature and aims of the project. Douglas Harper (2002, p. 19) suggests that visual methods cannot be an end in themselves, but must call for "a greater theoretical and substantive significance," and we tend to agree with this.

3. **Reassure respondents there is no right or wrong response.** Sometimes in qualitative research, respondents may seek to find what they believe to be the “correct” response. When using photo-elicitation approaches, it is important to facilitate the expression of differing and contrasting points of view in order to maximize the richness of your data.

4. **Time.** Although using photo-elicitation as a method can be time-consuming, it provides a very accessible and engaging platform for participant involvement, which can result in much more detailed and reflective data for analysis.

5. **Ethics.** It is essential to consider the wide-ranging ethical implications of engaging individuals in research. We needed to ensure that the aims of the project and concepts such as inclusion were clear and understandable for children of different ages so that informed consent could be gained. We had to ensure that any child with a physical and/or visual impairment could engage, hence the use of proxy respondents as necessary. In sharing images of people, but particularly when those depicted are young children or identify as having a learning need or disability, consideration has to be given as to how you will anonymize and store participants’ images securely.

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**Conclusion**

As researchers in the field of inclusion, we embrace what may be termed “non-traditional” or creative research methodologies. We wanted to investigate perceptions, understandings, meanings, and experiences of inclusion and exclusion. The use of photographs as a form of data collection, and as a stimulus for discussion, enabled us to do this as an alternative to using, for example, interviews or questionnaires. We chose a methodology that matched our research aims and questions and also engaged participants in an “opening up” of experiences, ideas, and interpretations. The creation of a safe, non-judgmental space, where there is no right or wrong response, was an essential prerequisite to gathering rich, meaningful, and illuminating qualitative data.

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**Exercises and Discussion Questions**

1. What do you think might be the advantages and disadvantages of photo-elicitation?
2. How might you employ this method for a research question that you are interested in?

3. Look at the two images below and answer the following questions:
   - What do you think about the images?
   - Do the images represent inclusion or exclusion? Why?
   - What do you think those in the photo might be saying/thinking?
   - Has anything been left out of the photograph? What would you add?
   - What questions do the images encourage you to ask?
   - Having talked about the image, have you changed your mind about inclusion, and, if so, why?
4. How do visual images generate differing perceptions and varied meanings?
5. How does the use of photo-elicitation encourage and facilitate reflection on our own values and practices?

Further Reading


References


