

My Education:

Students With Disabilities Describe High School in Pictures and Words

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The author of this study utilized a tool that was previously designed for use in the public health sector. “PhotoVoice” is a process whereby individuals use pictures and words to describe their experience. In the initial design of the process, cameras were placed into the hands of people who are considered or feel disenfranchised from the decision making that affect their lives. Using group process, PhotoVoice presents participants with “voicing our individual and collective experience.”

Stages of the original PhotoVoice are as follows: conceptualizing a problem to investigate

1. identifying a potential audience of policy makers
2. learning to use cameras
3. planning themes for taking pictures
4. going into the participant’s environments to take pictures
5. conducting group discussions
6. engaging in critical reflection and dialogue
7. documenting stories in pictures and words
8. evaluating the process
9. sharing findings, pictures, and texts with an audience of policy makers

*see www.photovoice.com for more information.

For educational purposes, the audience of policy makers was not the imperative. However, it certainly could be used in this manner depending on the make-up of students.

How Whitney Used PhotoVoice

Stages of this project were developed a little bit differently than the initial Photovoice process. The main project that she focused on was to allow a group of special education students to focus on their educational experience. Whitney followed the following steps:

Step	What Was Done
<i>Getting to know one another</i>	Interview with her using a suggested list of questions that focused on education
<i>Learning how to take pictures</i>	First, the group used digital cameras and then they each got disposable cameras to take home and practice with. The group then met to look at the pictures and discuss.
<i>Embarking on a mission</i>	Planned “photomissions” to take pictures that related to the project. Using the interview notes, a check list was created for each student. Missions took place in general, special, vocational settings, and common school spaces. Groups discussed images, and processed the meanings. Students wrote a couple of lines describing.
<i>Invitations into classes</i>	Whitney visited the classroom in both classes where the student felt engaged and where he/she felt disengaged. Photos were taken.
<i>Presenting the projects to important people in students’ lives</i>	Projects were put on public display. In some instances, images spoke for themselves. In others, students elected to share their experiences.

Self-determination and self advocacy are two key areas that often get left out in educating students with disabilities. This project allows these students to have a voice to describe what their educational process looks like from day to day. Lessons about engagement vs. disengagement are explored. And, perhaps most importantly, students are given the opportunity to show others what their world looks like in their own words and images. A voice is given to those that often don’t have the opportunity to share their views.

Sample Projects Using the PhotoVoice Technique

Integrate PhotoVoice projects into the curriculum

Incorporate into academic units (e.g. career development) and align with state standards. Personal discovery and IEP writing might also be a part of this project (imagine having your student run the IEP and sharing images about his/her learning.)

Use tools and strategies that are flexible and facilitate universal design

Use technology that spans the spectrum from low tech (e.g. disposable cameras, point and shoot, highlighter pens, various styles of paper and writing tools) to create “collages” to high tech (e.g. digital cameras, scanners, AlphasMarts, Powerpoint, Inspiration, blogs, etc.) to allow for the most students possible to get involved.

Use PhotoVoice to build empowerment and self-advocacy

Have the student open the IEP with their presentation, or share at an open house. Why not use these student voices as a way to share student experience with lawmakers as well?

Check out www.photovoice.org for a variety of projects from around the world that have been created to shed light on other individuals experiences. These examples can certainly be shared with students that you may wish to work with.

You can extend this project by moving into the field of filmmaking. The sky is the limit.

Questions to Facilitate the Interview Process

Discuss with a partner the following education-oriented questions. Feel free to add, or take away, from them.

1. How do you feel about education? About school?
2. What about school do you like? Dislike?
3. What kind of learner do you think you are?
4. What does your favorite kind of class look like?

Your “Photomission:”

Find an image in this room that shows your commitment to education and/or how you feel about why teaching special education is important. Rather than putting written words to the images, we will discuss the images as a class.