Empowering Belizean Youth through Photovoice

Daniel Chase

Bridgewater State University, daniel.chase@bridgew.edu

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In each of the past 11 years, a dozen Bridgewater State University students have travelled to St John’s Anglican Primary School in Belize City, Belize during January break to complete a service project. Their efforts have been squarely focused on Belizean youth. Belize is a young country (70% of the population is below the age of 29), and the National Youth Development Policy of Belize (2012) indicates that Belizean youth are doing well. However, like youth everywhere, young people in Belize crave empowerment—a greater public voice, a sense of safety and structure, self-worth and an ability to contribute. They want to connect with the people in positions of power. In a modest way, BSU students have helped them to do that. In addition to painting a newly constructed school building at St John’s in spring 2016, our students helped implement a Photovoice project, a visual method for the expression of young people’s views and voices.

Photovoice was a novel and effective method for studying Belizean youths’ perceptions of community strengths and weaknesses. The Photovoice process revealed ways in which social change could occur.
St John’s students was partnered with at least one BSU student. They used the SHOWeD method to categorize their photos (Wang, Journal of Community Practice [2006]). Commonly used in photovoice projects, the SHOWeD method is a means of getting at the root causes of identified problems through guided discussion. The SHOWeD process includes the following questions: What do you See here? What is really Happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this problem or strength Exist? What can we Do about it? to facilitate discussion. As part of the SHOWeD process, the St John’s students and the BSU students systematically coded all 128 photos. Initial codes were based on key words from the photo captions. Above all others, there were two themes that stood out to Belizean youth: responsibility and support.

Dramatic pictures of compulsive littering and ramshackle houses and buildings were represented in many of the photos. However, the theme that emerged from these photos for the St John’s students was responsibility. While garbage and litter were included in the original codes and categories, the theme responsibility expressed the notion that garbage and litter were more problematic than simply being unsightly. In fact, students were concerned about “who” should be responsible for managing the trash problem. Students were baffled as to why more work was not being done to remedy the trash problem.

The crux of the trash matter was responsibility. For instance, looking at Hughlet’s photo, title and caption, she, like others, believed that trash was a problem, but the responsibility should be put on the government (as opposed to taking personal responsibility). As noted by Hughlet, others in the community should be keeping their area clean. However, not one student accepted personal responsibility for keeping the community cleaner.

Similar to Hughlet’s photo, Delffin’s photo, title, and caption lend evidence to the idea that rather than taking personal responsibility for the litter problem and helping to keep the environment clean (including the sea), “others” were identified as those being responsible for putting up more “no littering” signs around the city.

Wasan’s photo, title, and caption expresses the students’ idea that the government should be responsible for not only keeping the community clean, but also keeping the community safe. Wasan was the first to note personal responsibility as a solution to a community issue. Not only were the police recognized and applauded for taking on the responsibility of keeping the school children and other community members safe, but he noted that he and other schoolmates can take on the responsibility of keeping the community safe by becoming future police officers.

Also stopping short of taking personal responsibility for the litter problem in the city, Kelis’ photo, title, and caption show that it is the community’s responsibility to make recreation areas safe for play and watching others play. Specifically, Kelis’ concern was that people in the community were being disrespectful for allowing play areas to get run down. Again, personal responsibility for making positive change was not evident, but desiring others to do the work was obvious.
While Wasan’s photo “Protection” was described as a strength, not all students believed the police officers were doing their job of protecting community members. Others, like Keron, noted that some of the police were rude and bossy and it was the government’s responsibility to change the officers’ attitudes. In group discussions, many St John’s school students remarked that they felt the same way as Keron and believed that the government should “change” the police from harming others to helping others.

While students believed that it was the police officers’ responsibility to provide a safe community, others believed that support needs to come from others. The second theme highlights a number of support systems youth have available to them. For instance, the photo “Garden Girls” and Ajahn’s caption make clear one way in which these girls can help their fellow students and community. It is also true that this photo and caption could fit into the responsibility theme. This was the first instance in which youth felt responsibility to care for others. But it bears repeating: even though they were willing to perform gardening, these girls did not find it their responsibility to clean up litter.

St John’s students also viewed BSU students as part of their support system. For instance, looking at the “Kindness” photo, Timothy and Jaylon expressed their gratitude towards BSU for assisting them with their school work. Again, this photo could also fall under the responsibility theme; that is, the photographers and other students felt as if it was everyone’s responsibility to help make one another smile.
The final photo, titled “Classmates,” depicts how the St John’s students felt about one another as part of the support system at school. A lengthy conversation about how students supported one another ensued. Students took great pride in being part of this school community and many noted that it would be up to all of them to support one another throughout the school year. They noted that when they are all together, especially in their school green, they were a stronger group.

Similar to the “Kindness” photo this picture could have been included in the responsibility theme. Although students recognized that they could be part of a solution, they fell short of articulating specific ways to take responsibility for themselves and others.

Photovoice was a novel and effective method for studying Belizean youths’ perceptions of community strengths and weaknesses. The Photovoice process revealed ways in which social change could occur. Interestingly, students did not see themselves as agents of change as related to the trash and litter problem in their neighborhood. In fact, overwhelmingly so, students believed it was the responsibility of the government and others to keep the community clean and safe. Still, the project planted an important seed; it pushed St John’s students to ask questions about their own roles as stewards of their community. And it revealed to Bridgewater State students the value of community service work, a key element in the mission of their own university.

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Daniel Chase is Assistant Professor in the Department of Movement Arts, Health Promotion and Leisure Studies.