



**LaunchPad Photovoice Project: Rundberg Through the Eyes of Middle School Students**

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## LaunchPad Photovoice Project: Rundberg Through the Eyes of Middle School Students

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*Calvin Streeter*

Photovoice is a community-based participatory action research method that combines photography with grassroots mobilization to help members of the community gain a greater understanding of their environment and experiences and to share them with others. The pictures, along with captions or narration by the photographers, can be used to document the reality of life in the community through the eyes of the photographer and can drive home that reality to the public and to policy makers to help spur change and improve conditions in the community.

Photovoice is grounded in the concept of “critical consciousness.” This concept comes from the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who used the term to refer to the process by which those who are oppressed can use critical thinking to gain a deeper understanding of their situation, which he believed was the first step to bringing about change. Photovoice has three primary goals:

1. To help those who are often unheard gain a voice, enabling them to record and reflect on their experiences and their communities’ conditions, both positive and negative.
2. To encourage critical consciousness. Through choosing, discussing, and reflecting on the subjects of their photographs, the photographers can come to a clearer understanding of their circumstances and the economic, social, psychological, and political forces that shape them.
3. To bring about change that will improve conditions and enhance lives by reaching and influencing policy makers (Community Tool Box)

A Photovoice project or program can be an inexpensive and powerful tool for both life

change and social change, but it needs to be planned and executed with a good deal of thought. It involves more than just handing people a camera and telling them to take pictures. In developing a Photovoice project, there are several steps that need to be carefully planned.

### **Recruiting participants.**

Participants usually represent an existing group or set of stakeholders that represent a subgroup within the community. Generally 10-12 participants is a nice size project group. If you recruit minor children, you will need to get permission from their parents before they can participate in the project.

### **Train the participants.**

This includes technical training in the use of the camera equipment and the techniques of photography, training on ethical and safe photography practices, and given the collaborative nature of photovoice project, training on how to work together in a group so that the participants are comfortable sharing their photographs and openly discussing the meaning of the images they capture.

### **Take pictures**

Once the participants have been trained, it is time to take pictures. Because participants are generally not experienced photographers, it’s often useful for the group to review and critique the photos to get a better understanding of what makes a good picture. Typically the picture taking process occurs during a specified time period that could be as short as one week or relatively open-ended.

### **Review/Reflect/Choose**

During the photography phase, the participants should meet regularly to reflect on the pictures they have taken, discuss the meaning of the pictures in the context of their community, and select pictures to become part of the project. These meetings often inform the next round of

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photography as new ideas are developed and interpretations are expressed.

**Exhibit**

At the end of the project there is an exhibition of photographs. The exhibition will accomplish several things:

- It will demonstrate to the participants that their work is important and worth sharing with others.
- It provides a window into the life of the community through the eyes of the participants.
- It can raise public consciousness about conditions and issues in the community and lead to change and improvement
- It can function as a celebration of achievement, learning and increased consciousness of the participants.

**LaunchPad**

Students from The University of Texas School of Social Work partnered with the LaunchPad Center to conduct the photovoice project. The LaunchPad Center offers a range of programs and services to children and youth in the Rundberg area focused on mentoring, character education, leadership, life skills development, drug free living, and educational enhancement. Students were recruited from its summer program, which operates out of Dobie Middle School. All students who participated in the project live in the Rundberg area.

**Project description**

An ongoing goal of the Restore Rundberg project is to learn as much as possible about the neighborhood and to hear from as many stakeholders as possible about life in this area. The primary objective of the Photovoice project was to allow youth to document and share their perspective on life in the community where they live through creative expression.

The project was conducted during the month of July, 2014. In collaboration with staff from LaunchPad, 12-14 middle school age youth were identified a prospective participants for the

project. Members of the project team met with the youth to explain the project and inform them what they would be asked to do if they agreed to be part of the project. Ten youth agreed to participate in the project and consent forms were sent home to be signed by their parents.

Members of the project team met twice each week with youth participating in the project. On Mondays they met to conduct training in digital photography, plan photography excursions, review and critique photos, discuss how the photos reflect life in their community, generate ideas for new photos they wanted to take, and toward the end of the project curate the pictures that would be included in the Photovoice presentation. On Fridays the project team accompanied the youth in small group photography excursions into the neighborhood to document images that reflect their experience living in the Rundberg area. Students were encouraged to focus on images that they thought reflected positively on the community, as well as images that might represent challenges or concerns about living the area.

During the final meeting, team members helped the participating youth curate and compile the images that would become part of the presentation. The youth were asked to write captions for their pictures or to provide a brief narrative that explained the image and how it reflects life in the community. The presentation was created using PowerPoint as the presentation media with narration embedded into the presentation.

When the project was complete, the project team planned an evening of celebration for the participants, their families, friends and community members where the presentation was publically displayed for the first time. During the event, the participants were introduced to those attending and were given an opportunity to talk about their experience with the project and what they had learned about their neighborhood and/or themselves from the project.

The Photovoice project was also presented to various community groups and policy makers to help them understand how youth living in the Rundberg area view their neighborhood. Some of

## **Personal Stress and Organizational Coping Strategies**

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the youth participated in the community presentations and were able to share about their experience living in the Rundberg neighborhood and the experience of documenting life in the community through photographic images. The act of presenting the projects helped communicate to the larger community drawing two television stations. This provides the start of social competency for the youth in detailing their world, communicating it to others and drawing favorable notice from the larger community.

### **References**

The Community Tool Box, Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas .