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**Participatory visual methods: exploring young people's identities, hopes and feelings**

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## **Abstract**

Using visual ethnography as a participatory method that places children's and young people's everyday experiences at the centre of research is discussed in this paper. The strengths and challenges of using participatory visual methods as a way of eliciting the thoughts, feelings and identities of young people within various education and training contexts in England are presented through the reflection of two ethnographies' that encouraged the use of participatory visual techniques to facilitate the gathering of data. Participatory visual approaches capture meaningful child-centred and child-generated perspectives of their everyday lives in situ (Oh 2012). The participatory visual method is a powerful instrument within the plethora of methods available to the ethnographer. By offering reflexive accounts of doing ethnography in an unobtrusive and child respectful way the power of ethnography is revealed via its versatility.

## **Keywords**

Visual ethnography, participatory research, children, young people, education,

## **Introduction**

Participatory visual methods are becoming a prevalent feature of ethnography, especially when undertaking research with children and young people (Clark and Moss 2001; Coates 2004; Oh 2012). Like ethnography, participatory visual methods may encompass an array of creative practices which include still and moving images in the format of photographs, drawings, models, video and maps (Lomax 2012). Including children and young people within these participatory methods is frequently presented as a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of children from passive participants to active, knowledgeable social agents able to contribute to the production of knowledge that is not solely reliant on the verbal (James, Jenks and Prout 2008). These methods are not without critique as some researchers have condemned an over reliance on young people's voice, troubling the idea that the child always knows best and is able to manifest the most credible source of information (Buckingham 1991). Despite this, different types of data emerge when participatory visual research methods are used in ethnography. Through using fieldwork examples, this paper reveals how nuanced grass-root data surfaces in unexpected ways while in situ, adding to the validity and complexity of doing visual ethnography across different contexts alongside the use of the ethnographic fieldnote.

There are continual debates about how educational ethnographies should be conducted and presented (Walford 2008). For some these debates have led to confusion and a dampening down of the relevance of educational ethnographies in a quantitative driven era (Hammersley 2017). Despite this, one key consensus is that fieldwork takes time (Jeffery and Troman 2004). The value placed on spending time in the field and keeping up-to-date detailed fieldnote logs is paramount (Wolcott 1999). Whilst we agree that

ethnography is a contested concept and should be problematised for the sake of its future development, we argue that ethnography's versatile and inclusive nature are essential to its survival. Consequently, its remarkable ability to adapt will ensure its continuation. By discussing how participatory visual research methods have been used in our own ethnographies we demonstrate the careful balance ethnographers must embrace when adapting and including new visual approaches within ethnography, while simultaneously trying to retain the core essence of what makes ethnography unique from other qualitative approaches.

Two ethnographies are introduced to reveal a reflective account of how participatory visual research methods can work alongside the ethnographic fieldnote to produce nuanced findings and gain valid in-depth data that may otherwise remain hidden. The visual, when understood within the context of its own production, is seen as being a multimodal tool to access participants' voices and gauge their realities. Questions of representation, including how visual data can aid representation, are explored before concluding that further understanding is needed regarding how other research methods can assist, but not replace, observational fieldnote data within ethnography.

### **Using Participatory Visual Methods in Educational Ethnographies**

Visual anthropology, and in particular the use of ethnographic photographs and film, has been widely criticised for its tendency to 'other' and objectify participants at times creating trivialising taxonomies. As Mannay (2016:18) contends, 'early photography in the social sciences was often filtered, censored and shaped through a propagandist manipulation of images and their accompanying texts within an Imperialist tradition.' Despite, and perhaps because of, this critique the way in which the visual has been used

within ethnography has been under scrutiny with new ways of incorporating the visual within ethnography's flexible methodology have and continue to be explored (for example Pink 2006; Gauntlett 2007; Spencer 2010 and Pauwels 2015). When doing this, Spencer (2010) argues that ethnographers also need to re-address past assumptions that have viewed visual data as being second rate to verbal and textual data. These wider reflections have further resulted in a resurgence in the use of participatory visual methods within educational ethnographies (such as Russell 2007; Barley 2014 and Degerbøl & Nielsen 2015).

When collaboratively produced, visual data can be an important way of empowering individuals within the research process through having direct control over the artefacts that are used to represent themselves and/or aspects of their culture (Banks 1995; Morphy and Banks 1997). As Gauntlett (2007:3) contends, participatory visual methods that ask participants to reflect on the research process provide the ethnographer with an insight into 'how individuals present themselves, understand their own life story, and connect with the social world'. Consequently, as educational ethnographers we need to reflect on how visual methods can be used to enhance the quality of ethnographic data that is collected. In doing this, the voice of (the) participant(s) can be preserved reducing power differentials between ethnographer and participant(s) (Russell 2007).

Jenks (1995:2) argues that 'looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined... rendering our world as primarily a 'seen' phenomenon.' Our 'ways of seeing' are linked with ideas of knowledge, evidence and truth, therefore 'to see is to believe.' Building on this, Banks (2001) makes a useful distinction between a visual artefact's 'internal' narratives, i.e. the content of an artefact, and its 'external

narratives', i.e. the context in which the artefact is interpreted. Visual data, therefore, need to be regarded as both socially constructed and polysemic (Banks 2001; Pink 2006). Buckingham (2009) cautions though against the view that visual methods can produce, what some may describe as, more authentic representations of voice and argues that the context of production is key to interpreting visual data.

Given this, when using visual research methods, a distinction needs to be made between images as data in and of themselves and images as a tool to construct or elicit further data (Russell 2007). In line with Banks' (2001) and Pink's (2006) arguments that visual methods should be used to elicit other forms of data, such as interview data, we stress that in doing this the quality of emic perspectives that are produced are nuanced in rich and complex ways. Due to this, we argue that visual methods should only be used as a means to elicit other forms of data as when images are used as data in and of themselves polysemic meanings are lost. In line with this, we agree with Schäfer (2012:149) that 'visual methods are not used simply to generate visual data, but also as a tool for reflection, engagement and representation of and by participants in the research process'.

While visual methods have historically been considered within anthropology as being inferior to verbal and textual methods (Spencer 2010), the use of visual methods with children and young people has been widely discussed as a useful tool, when reflexively implemented, to unearth children's 'voice' (Clark and Moss 2001; Punch 2002; Coates 2004; Johnson 2008, Sime 2008). Starting from the principle that children are competent and capable social actors whose voices need to be heard and valued, Clark and Moss (2001) developed the Mosaic Approach to co-construct data with children.

The Mosaic Approach is a mixed methods research tool that is designed to gain children's perspectives on their own social lives through talking, walking and making visual artefacts that the researcher jointly reviews with the children involved. This seminal work views children's emic perspectives as central to the research process in conjunction with the researcher's etic interpretations (Loughlin 2013). While the benefits of using participatory visual techniques with children and young people has been widely discussed (Clark and Moss 2001; Coates 2004; Johnson 2008) it is important to note here Punch's (2002) contention that the use of visual methods with children and young people is not unproblematic and that visual approaches need to be used reflexively. In the sections below, we present a critical reflection on how we used visual approaches reflexively with participants in our respective studies. By actively including our participants in the interpretation of their own visual data we centred participants' emic perspectives in our analyses.

It has been argued elsewhere that 'creative' visual methods are often regarded as more 'appropriate' and 'engaging' for children and young people in the research process than so-called 'adult-centric' approaches (Punch, 2002). This argument often implies that children (and in particular young children) are not capable of engaging with 'adult-centric' research methods. This is not the argument that we are making here as our work clearly shows that young people (including young children) can actively engage with these methods of data collection and offer sophisticated commentary on the research process and their representation within it (Barley 2014).

In contrast, we argue that when ethnography comes into contact with other disciplines, such as educational research, it continues to be exposed to new ways of collecting data



which call for continual debates about how educational ethnographies should be conducted and presented (Walford 2008). This inter-disciplinary working also opens up new and innovative methodological opportunities. As seen so far, recent debates encourage the use of visual research methods, participatory techniques and creative means of gathering data.

While the importance of the written fieldnote remains key as a means of gathering, interpreting and presenting ethnographic data (Wolcott 1999), other methods offer exciting additions to the absolute need to ‘hang around’ and ‘spend time’ (Jeffrey and Troman 2004) in the field to inductively explore the everyday life of participants in one or more spheres. The two ethnographies are now outlined before discussing how incorporating the visual into an educational ethnography, alongside the essential criteria to ‘hang around’ for long periods of time (Jeffrey and Troman 2004) and take detailed fieldnote logs (Wolcott 1999), can allow for different types of data to emerge by encouraging a shift in focus and reduction in power differentials.

### **Ethnography 1: Uncovering identity in a multi-ethnic classroom**

Data is drawn from two ethnographies. As the children and young people in our two respective ethnographies called us by our first names we have chosen to use these throughout.

The first draws on the first fieldwork stage of a longitudinal ethnography with a multi-ethnic school in the north of England with the same group of children. The fieldwork data that this paper draws upon was collected when the children were in their Reception year aged 4 to 5 years old (Barley 2014).

Observation was the key method of data collection in all stages of Ruth's study and was captured in her fieldnotes. Ruth's fieldnotes also became a research tool in their own right as the children in the class wanted to directly contribute to these notes via mark makings, writing and drawings.

INSERT Figure 1: Examples of children's fieldnote contributions from Ruth's first period of fieldwork

In addition to making these fieldnote contributions the children also suggested other ways that Ruth could find out about themselves and their friends. In these discussions the children suggested a number of visual ways that they could participate in the study. Ruth and the children collaboratively turned these ideas into research activities which were used to initiate research conversations. These data were then collaboratively analysed alongside hand-written fieldnotes produced both by Ruth and the children.

Involving children in the research process, in this way, as co-researchers in the design of research activities and in the analysis of data can help to reduce power differentials between an adult ethnographer and child participant. Further, using children's ideas for visual research activities allows them to express their voice in a medium of their choice. This helps to ensure that they are comfortable with and have experience of using the required research tool (Johnson 2008).

The six research activities that Ruth included in her study were:

- Children's tours – individual children led Ruth round the activity stations in the classroom that they liked to play at and described what they liked to do at each stop (child inspired activity)
- Children's learning journeys – review with the children their Foundation Stage learning journeys and asking them to select aspects that they would like Ruth to include in her study (child inspired activity)

- ‘My friends are’ picture – textual and visual depiction of friends at school (child inspired activity) with accompanying unstructured informal interview
- ‘Where I am from: Scotland’ book – story book about Author’s home country and culture that was designed to outline Author’s positionality as an ‘outsider’. This book was also used to prompt an unstructured informal interview about different cultural practices
- ‘Where I am from...’ digital books – creation of a book about children’s own cultural background (child inspired activity) and unstructured informal interview
- Model Identities – building activity depicting places that are important to the children and unstructured informal interview

Each of these activities emerged during the fieldwork period and are discussed in more detail in Barley (2014).

In line with ethnographic principles, analysis was conducted as an ongoing process alongside data collection (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Practitioners and children alike were involved in the ongoing process of analysis and interpretation through helping Author to check and, where appropriate, revise initial interpretations. Involving participants in the analysis process helps to reduce potential power differentials between participant and researcher (Flewitt 2005). Additionally, as Emond (2005) highlights, when working with children the researcher needs to be careful not to filter data through an adult lens as this can distort the stories and experiences that children have shared. Consequently, as an ongoing part of the study, Ruth asked children to explain their meanings and interpretations of a specific action or game either during or as soon after the activity as possible through asking questions such as ‘why did you choose to play that game’ or ‘why did you decide to play with...?’

At the end of fieldwork Author designed a ‘Participatory Analysis Tool’ (PAT) to use when conducting collaborative analysis with children. PATs are designed to be a child-directed form of analysis where the child and ethnographer can both take part in analysis through reviewing extracts from the data together. The ethnographer can then ‘check’ the child’s emic understanding and compare this with the ethnographer’s own etic interpretation. PATs can be completed using a range of mediums (e.g. writing, pictures, drawings, mark-making etc) of the child’s choice and, while some guidance is given to help children understand the nature of the exercise, children are encouraged to direct the activity as they choose. In the current study two key activities were used to create PATs. The first focused on collaboratively mapping children’s identities while the second centred on collaboratively analysing data relating to children’s peer friendships.

#### **INSERT Figure 2: Example of Daud’s anonymised PAT**

This paper will highlight how the last visual research activity mentioned above ‘Model identities’ was used by the children as both a representational and symbolic means of taking part in the research. The ‘Model Identities’ activity was inspired by Gauntlett’s (2007) approach to exploring identities with adults through the use of Lego. Author designed a hands-on activity to explore children’s identities via the places that are important to them. Using Lego pieces and other materials (e.g. wooden bricks) from the construction activity station, Author asked children to firstly make or find a person to represent themselves; and secondly build the different places that are important to them. While they were building their models, as well as at the end of the session, Author and the child talked about the different places that they were building, why they were important to them, what things they did there and who they went with/liked to play with there.

## **Ethnography 2: Exploring the lives of NEET young people**

The second study draws on a Leverhulme Trust Funded 3-year ethnography that explored the experiences of 24 NEET (Not in Employment, Education and Training) young people in Northern England (Simmons, Thompson and Russell 2014). Gaining and maintaining access with NEET young people can be problematic, especially over a longitudinal basis (Russell 2013). Thus, participants were accessed via a variety of means including the Youth Offending Team (YOT), parent groups, a housing charity, Connexions<sup>1</sup> and via word-of-mouth. The ethnography was based in two metropolitan neighbouring local authorities located in the north of England. The main corpus of data included over 340 hours of participant observations conducted in education, training, work, social and home settings. The research was participant led, they dictated when and where fieldwork took place, with some giving more time than others. This adopted positionality acted to reduce power differentials between the ethnographer and young people. Seventy-nine semi-structured interviews with practitioners, employers, parents, family members and young people were also conducted and transcribed. Each young person completed a life-story map to exemplify life events and relationships that were important to them. As used by Shildrick et al (2010) when looking at young people who were not in work, life-story maps are drawings and text developed by young people to indicate important milestones in their life in a way and order of preference of their choosing. Photographs taken by the researcher and young people portrayed participants' daily routines, special activities and feelings of inclusion and exclusion. Life story maps and photographs taken by young people were used as a form of

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<sup>1</sup> Connexions was formerly The Careers Service, a UK governmental information, advice, guidance and support service for young people aged thirteen to nineteen (up to 25 for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities), created in 2000 following the Learning and Skills Act. Its organisation altered throughout the Conservative government's privatisation process in the mid-1990s.

interview probing in subsequent interviews. The map was reintroduced and developed in subsequent interviews as a way of validating data and revealing greater understandings about young people's transitions and relationships. All young people were interviewed at least once, with some being interviewed up to five times depending upon their circumstances and preferences for data collection methods. Observation notes and minutes of meeting documents from the local NEET strategy group, copies of qualifications and certificates; minutes of practitioner meetings; national and local NEET statistics and course information literature were analysed. All data was hand-coded and triangulated. Analytical themes included; feelings of exclusion and inclusion, trajectory decisions and destinations, effectiveness of support structures, home, residence, education and training provision, employment patterns, family and peer influences and individual pathways.

In both studies, all participants and their associated institutions are given pseudonyms to protect their identity. In the sections below, examples from Ethnography 1 are discussed before moving onto examples from Ethnography 2.

### **Representational or symbolic?**

In ethnography 1, the different ways that the children in Ruth's study interpreted her request that they build a model of the places that are important to them highlights the importance of viewing visual data as polysemic and when doing so highlights the richness of data that can be produced.

Two cousins Nasra and Dekka took part in this visual research activity. Nasra's and Dekka's fathers are siblings who fled Somalia and sought refuge in England where both girls were born. Dekka's mother, who is also a Somali refugee, was close to Nasra's mother, a white English convert to Islam. Both mothers regularly picked up each

other's children from school. Nasra, Deka and their siblings regularly spend time together outside school, particularly at their paternal grandmother's, *Ayeeyo's*, house. Both girls regularly wore hijab *to*, but not necessarily *at*, school. 'Being Somali' habitually featured in Nasra's peer conversations though this was at times challenged by the other children as Nasra has light brown hair, hazel eyes and olive coloured skin. Deka regularly talked about 'being Muslim' to her peers. During the school year Nasra started to attend Koranic school, at the local mosque. Deka did not go to Koranic school but proudly told her peers that she was learning how to pray at her Ayeeyo's house. The two cousins regularly played together at school and discussed with their peers the activities that they did together outside of school. While building their Model Identities the two girls interpreted the task in very distinct ways.

In her model, Deka chose to represent the places that are important to her in England and as can be seen from the fieldnote extract below, Nasra and her family feature strongly in Deka's model.

### **Family links**

Ruth's fieldnotes 21/4/11 (Ethnography 1)

*On the left-hand side of her model, Deka builds two houses and places two female Lego pieces outside them. As Deka sits back on her heels and looks at her model she points to the Lego figure near the middle of the model and tells me that this is herself. She then points to the other figure and tells me that this is her cousin Nasra, 'who lives in the house next door.' She then goes on to tell me that while they live close to each other (in real life) and often see each other, they are not actual neighbours.*

Adding to this fieldnote data the picture of Deka's model (below), which has been annotated with data from the connected unstructured informal interview, presents a clearer image of the places and people that are important to Deka.

INSERT Figure 3: Deka's Model Identity with annotations from the unstructured informal interview

Not only did Deka interpret this activity as an opportunity to represent places in England that were important to her Deka chose to represent her close relationship with her cousin by the use of space in her model. Deka also depicted Nasra in the other visual research activities (i.e. the 'My Friends are...' picture and the Digital Book: Where I am from...') that she took part in.

In contrast while Nasra depicted Deka in other research activities and regularly played with her at school she chose to depict her imagined impressions of Somalia, where her father was born, in her Model Identity. In doing this she produced a model of a symbolic place that was important to her in contrast to her cousin Deka's representational model of where she currently lives.

INSERT Figure 4: Nasra's Model Identity with annotations from the unstructured informal interview

In response to peer questioning of her self-defined Somali identity due to her skin colour, Nasra developed a discourse that equated 'being Somali' with adopting a specific socio-political position rather than a specific ethnic identity. Consequently, in Nasra's terms 'being Somali' means wanting Somalia to be a unified and stable country which exiled Somalis can return to and live in in safety. A desire to visit this 'new Somalia' strongly featured in Nasra's peer conversations as did her explanation of how she can be Somali, 'because Somalis can be white'.

An extract from Ruth's fieldnotes while making Nasra's PAT and undertaking the first stage of data analysis using this tool sheds further light on the importance of dual heritage for Nasra:

**Navigating identity**



Ruth's fieldnotes 16/6/11 (Ethnography 1)

*As Nasra is drawing the Somali flag on her PAT she tells me 'I'm Somali and a little bit English.' I prompt her by asking 'So you're a little bit English?' 'I'm half an' half in that I am full Somali but half English' she replies and again explains that as her mother is English she is also 'a little bit English.' She goes onto tell me 'But my mum said only when I am grown up she said I am Somali. When I am a little girl I am a Muslim.'*

As well as articulating her self-definition of her identity Nasra also draws upon the ascribed identity that her mother has given her. Throughout our research conversations and in Nasra's peer conversations this was a recurrent theme, particularly in relation to her cousin Dekka's identity.

When Nasra's Model Identity of her imagined Somalia is analysed alongside this conversation prompted by the visual analysis activity and participant observations a fuller understanding of the importance of 'being Somali', and what this means, for Nasra becomes clearer. During the unstructured interview that was conducted while Nasra was making her Model Identity Nasra repeats phrases that feature in other conversations, such as 'being Muslim' and 'being Somali', 'speaking some Somali and a lot of English'. During the Model Identity interview, Nasra reveals an understanding of Somalia's cultural, socio-political and topographical features (see Figure 4) that did not come up in other conversations. This visual activity with accompanying interview elicited data about Nasra's knowledge of Somalia that non-visual research activities had not been able to do and in doing so uncovered this aspect of Nasra's voice.

### **Multimodal ways of accessing voice**

The kinaesthetic nature of Ruth's 'Model Identities' activity (Ethnography 1) was clearly welcomed by some of the children as they got visibly excited when they realised that they could physically and verbally explain to Ruth the places that were important to them. This was particularly pertinent for one boy, Kareem, who was able to use his ever-increasing English language skills alongside physical actions to communicate with Ruth.

Kareem had no English when he first arrived at Sunnyside from Libya a few weeks after the start of the new school year. He struggled at first with the language barrier and got frustrated and upset when he couldn't communicate effectively with his peers. As he started school a few weeks after the other children, staff also noticed that he struggled to make friends with other children in the class (even with the other Arabic speakers) as they had begun to form their own friendship groups before Kareem arrived. To help Kareem integrate into the classroom, staff encouraged the other Arabic-speaking children to speak to him in Arabic and act as peer interpreters when bilingual support staff were not available. By the February half term Kareem's English vocabulary had grown considerably and he was able to communicate effectively with staff and children.

At the start of the year Ruth worked with Kareem via interpreters, both staff and peer. During a previous research activity, a few weeks before doing the Model Identity task, Kareem had told Ruth that he no longer wanted to use an interpreter to take part in her study instead saying that he wanted to work with Ruth on his own and talk to her in English. While Kareem's English improved dramatically during the school year, his decision to take part in the study in English meant that he was not as able to fully engage with all of the research activities as the other children could. While continuing

to work across languages would have resulted in Kareem's more in-depth involvement in the study as well as the collection of more detailed data, Kareem's right to work in his language of choice (which in this case was not his home language) needed to be, and therefore was, respected.

**INSERT Figure 6: Kareem's Model Identity with annotations from the unstructured informal interview**

During the 'Model Identity' activity when Kareem was unsure of a word he would show Author, using his model and/or an action, what he wanted to say. This combination of verbal and physical communication proved to be a useful tool allowing Ruth to access Kareem's voice adding depth to the observations that Ruth conducted. If Kareem's Model Identity had been analysed as data in and of itself rather than as a tool to elicit further data, Kareem's emic perspectives would not have been fully understood and the polysemic meanings of this data would have been lost. Additionally, for Kareem taking part in Ruth's study via visual methods allowed for rich data and a thick description to be produced that verbal methods were not able to capture due to his decision to take part in latter stages of the fieldwork in his second (emerging) language of English.

### **Gauging reality and family photographs**

Much work has been done already in the area of visual arts, art history and family photographs; these mainly involve researchers exploring other people's photographs or family images (Kuhn 1995). During these activities, a process of reconfiguration occurs whereby realities are edited, shifted and developed according to the audience at any one particular point in time (Russell 2007).

Many of the young people who took part in Lisa's study (Ethnography 2) had spent at least some time in the care system. Indeed, nine were care-leavers when the fieldwork began. One of these was Cayden, a NEET 19-year-old who engaged with no paid employment throughout the duration of the project. Cayden had never met his father and went into foster care when he was young. Cayden had learning difficulties and said his mother 'couldn't cope' with him. At age four Cayden went to live with his uncle and his wife remaining in their care until he was 16. Cayden's aunt and uncle then relocated to Scotland and he moved into a supported housing residence. Wanting more freedom, he later moved out and lived alone in a local flat. Coping with his mother's death and his uncle and aunt's departure were key issues that Cayden explicated on his life story map during his first meeting with Lisa. He spoke a lot about needing time to deal with these upheavals before feeling able to go out and find work. His Looked After Care team advisor explained to Lisa that 'he would never work' due to his learning difficulties, he did however spend a spell doing volunteer work for a charity. While use of the life story map (see description of Ethnography 2 above) enabled Cayden to discuss these sensitive issues during his very first meeting with Lisa and have his voice heard, the additional benefit of spending nearly three years observing him in his home, employment programme and volunteer work placement enabled a rich understanding of how these events affected Cayden's mental wellbeing and sense of independence and loneliness to be uncovered. These longitudinal observations also highlighted the distinction between Cayden's desire for family and the reality he lived in day to day.

### **Cayden's Flat**

Lisa's fieldnotes 17/12/10 (Ethnography 2)

*There is a Christmas tree up, with a handful of cards and presents under the tree, he explains that the presents are for him and his brother. He says he will spend Christmas with his older brother – who also has little family. He continues by explicating that he is very lucky and has all he needs. He says he is getting a bigger TV for himself over Christmas and that he will then give his old one to his brother.*

*He has photographs of himself and people important to him scattered around in a cabinet that was his mums and on the wall. He shows me a photo of him, his sister and his brother, taken on the day of his mum's funeral – he says this is very special. He explains how hard it has been, being so young and watching his mum die. He still goes to counselling on a Monday.*

*He talks about wanting 'to get my life back', he says he is getting ready about thinking about work.*

For the most part Cayden seemed quite lonely and welcomed Lisa's regular contact. Family was something that was clearly important to him but also something that visibly lacked in his life. His display of family photographs was Cayden's most valuable possession and he talked about one day having his own family. The reality of these fieldnotes when analysed in isolation do not reflect the full picture of Cayden's complex relationship with family. Only 4 of the 11 photographs that Cayden took included family members, with the remainder including family pets, rooms in his uncle's house, the garden, a soft toy, scenery captured on a family walk to include some cows in a field and a caravan he stayed in with his brother. Upon reflection and further discussions with Cayden it became apparent that what was missing in the majority of the photographs, i.e. his family members, was something pertinent to his own feelings of loneliness and isolation. The visual in this sense helped facilitate a discussion between Cayden and Lisa about his fondness for his remaining family while also

expressing his feelings that many (including his mum) were missing from the photographs and from his life. All these are experiences Lisa could draw upon and expand on during the photo-elicitation interview, data that Lisa otherwise might not have been privy to.

Below are some examples of the photographs Cayden took along with his own notes scribbled on the side. He knew his aunt and uncle's likes and dislikes and appreciated the 'nice big garden' – all things that were in stark contrast to his everyday life living alone in a block of flats.

INSERT [Figure 5: Cayden's photographs](#)

The use of photo-elicitation in this way gave Cayden another means of communication and allowed his voice to be clearly heard. Given his learning difficulty, the use of photographs and a life story map alongside the interview and observation data enabled Cayden to lead the research, point to issues pertinent to him that helped explain his life path, as well as highlighting the importance of fieldnote data and the 'hanging around' to add or counteract the validity of the visual research methods. However, it is important to note that this 'thick description' of Cayden's family experiences would not have been gained by purely engaging in non-visual ethnographic methods.

Extra valid data was gathered via the use of photographs taken by the NEET young people that gave access to their social lives that may have otherwise remained hidden.

The young people certainly displayed different parts of themselves via different research methods. When amalgamating and triangulating these different data sources Lisa was able to develop a more nuanced understanding of the young people's day-to-day in the formal and informal spheres that they occupied. Additionally, she was able to gain access to their not so day-to-day activities, i.e. family holidays or friend(s)' parties.

By using visual methods in this way participants voices were captured in a way that verbal approaches may not have been able to capture.

### **Contextualising the visual**

There are multiple ways of accessing data and multiple ways of analysing and interpreting data. These multiple approaches and interpretations become especially pertinent when considering the visual and written word as displayed. Questions such as what is the content of the display, who is it for and under what means was it produced all bare meaning on the creation, presentation and analysis of data. The ethnographer is opportunistic and embraces many means of gathering data. In Lisa's ethnography (Ethnography 2) she recorded, analysed and used certain displays produced by young mothers-to-be as a way of understanding some of the NEET young parent's experiences. Hailey was one of these young mothers. She was 16 years old and pregnant when Lisa first met her. She completed her mainstream education with 10 GCSEs but left her 6<sup>th</sup> form college to complete a ten-week programme aimed at providing basic information on pregnancy to young mothers-to-be. During this programme, the young mothers-to-be created a display depicting plain white baby-grows with their scan pictures all displayed along a washing line alongside some very personal and emotional letters that each mother-to-be wrote to their in-utero baby.

#### **INSERT Figure 7: Hailey's baby grow display**

This was a public display open to all people passing through the education institute to view. However, they were also produced with the intent of preparing the young mother for motherhood, coming to terms and realising the life inside of them and the implications this may have for them, their family and new born child. Producing something for an audience has implications for the production, analysis and

dissemination of such data, and although these were analysed and used by Lisa to shed light on a different, perhaps more private, side of the young NEET participants, the context in which they were produced needed to be considered. Hailey's letter below (that featured on her baby grow display) revealed a lot about what she desired for her child and the love she felt for her unborn daughter. Indeed, her pregnancy was planned following an abortion she had experienced earlier with a different young man. The letter is written for her daughter yet exhibits many of the concerns she was experiencing herself as a pregnant NEET teenager. For example, she describes not minding if her daughter was to have a child young or old – a concern she voiced in relation to telling her own parents about the pregnancy. She also discusses her hopes for her daughter to gain an apprenticeship and repeats her own employability discourse in the letter revealing what she values as an important pathway into paid employment (at that time).

**INSERT Figure 8: Hailey's letter to her daughter**

Hailey wrote this letter for her daughter yet knew it was being displayed in this context. This letter depicts her thoughts and feelings before giving birth and serves as an interesting document in comparison to some of her experiences after the birth of her daughter. After giving birth her feelings for love and wanting the best for her daughter remained, yet her focus on the father, mother and child dynamic was challenged during her turbulent relationship with the baby's father's that eventually ended. The visual image and display that included this letter depicts Hailey's hopes and feelings at one point in time, exposed in a public arena where she is open to scrutiny as a new teenage mum. The letter reveals a complex mixture of her reality at that time, her thoughts about what a good mum should look like, while also depicting some of her own fears as a NEET teenage mum.



If this data was to be looked at as data in and of itself rather than as a tool to elicit further data Hailey's emic perspectives would not have been fully understood and the polysemic meanings of this data would have been lost. It is only upon contextualising these data sets, using photo-elicitation and life story maps in the framework of the ethnography, that these different layers of understanding and interpretation become evident allowing Hailey's voice to be heard. Doing this, nuances the data in rich and complex ways and reduces the power differentials between ethnographer and participant by giving Hailey control over how she shared this aspect of her story.

### **Concluding thoughts**

As we have shown, when ethnographers open their minds to the plethora of participatory visual research methods available to them, rich and valid data ensues in the most unexpected and delightful ways. Both Ruth and Lisa contend that if they had only used non-visual ethnographic methods they would not have gained as rich an understanding of the lives of Deka, Nasra, Cayden, Kareem and Hailey (as well as the other children and young people in their studies) as they did when reflexively combining visual methods with the fieldnote that remains central to ethnographic research (Wolcott 1999). As has been seen in these narratives, using this visual data to elicit other forms of data resulted in nuanced understandings of participants' emic perspectives allowing their voices to be heard in ways that other methods were not able to do.

Ethnography is becoming ever more inclusive of different research methods within varying contexts and across multiple sites, yet the very essence of spending time to understand another person's day-to-day remains paramount. The fieldnote is a fundamental element required to record, explore and understand the everyday and

reliance on this separates an ethnography from research that adopts ethnographic methods (Wolcott 1999).

Nevertheless, how the visual works within the plethora of ethnographic tools requires continual reflection alongside the essential need to spend time in the field (Jeffrey and Troman 2004) and produce detailed ethnographic fieldnotes (Wolcott 1999). Alongside previous scholars, we argue that the *context of production* is key to interpreting visual data. As a result of this, we contend that visual data should not be treated as data in and of itself but that images should *only* be used as a tool *to construct or elicit further data* allowing the ethnographer to reflect on the *polysemic* meanings that are produced.

We argue that using visual and participatory methods as a way of eliciting data can when analysed alongside ethnographic fieldnotes produce rich and nuanced data that allows ethnographers to access children's and young people's voices in unprecedented ways. By creating participatory visual data, in this way, participants are able to influence the course of a study as their position within the research project shifts reducing power differentials between the ethnographer and participants.

Ethnography is a flexible methodology that can be enhanced by the reflexive inclusion of the visual. The use of participatory visual methods as part of ethnography can uncover children and young people's voice in ways that non-visual ethnographic methods may not be able to do.

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