

Students' perspectives on health and safety in schools

Using photography to address issues of health and safety in Indonesian, UK and Zambian schools



Zambian primary school students experimenting with a digital camera

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Introduction

Ian Kaplan works as an educational researcher based at the University of Manchester. Ingrid Lewis works as an editor, researcher and project developer for EENET (Enabling Education Network). Paul Mumba works as a teacher and in-service trainer in Mpika, Zambia has been working with EENET.

Since the year 2001, we have been working with students in schools in the UK, Zambia and Indonesia to consider their perspectives on education, inclusion and school culture. This work has been in connection with a variety of projects including; a DFID (UK Department for International Development) funded action research project in Zambia (2001-2005); IDP (International Development Partners) in connection with Braillo Norway funded work in Indonesia (2005); and University of Manchester funded work in the UK (2001-2005). In all of these different contexts, photography has been a very valuable tool for students to document and share their perspectives on a range of issues relating to their educational experience. This method of photographic enquiry is sometimes referred to as participatory photography, or 'Photovoice' and has a tradition of use in health, development, and social science research.

Although we did not specifically ask students to focus on health and safety, some of the most striking photographs and commentary produced by students have concerned issues of health and safety in schools. The following report details many of the health and safety issues students have brought to our attention.

For members of a school community who must live with and adapt to the reality of daily life in school, sometimes even seemingly obvious hazards to health and safety may go unnoticed. Students' photographs can be helpful in bringing these more obvious issues (as well as the less obvious) back into focus and provide a frame of reference and a record to track future developments.

Issues of health and safety in schools are inexorably linked with the broader concept of educational inclusion. Although there are many aspects of inclusion, meaningful inclusion for all students is not possible without safe, healthy and comfortable learning environments.

The methodology in brief

Students in the schools we have visited have worked together in small groups to take photographs of what is important to them in their schools. The groups have then used photographic prints of their images combined with their written commentary to make displays. We have put an emphasis on students working in groups to negotiate what to photograph and to create displays.

Students have used either 35mm cameras, disposable 35mm cameras, or digital cameras to take their photographs. Prior to taking photographs, students have been given brief instructions on how to use the cameras and encouraged to discuss issues of respect for other people when taking photographs. In most cases students have been encouraged to take photographs on school grounds and without adult supervision, although sometimes we have accompanied younger students.

It is usually easiest for students to take photographs of school infrastructure, rather than attempt to photograph more abstract concepts and relationships. However, images of places and spaces in schools can easily stimulate discussions about the relationships that take place in them. When students consider and discuss their images, they often move between the concrete and the abstract. We have encouraged students to think about the issues that concern them in schools and to be creative in considering how they might represent these in photographs. In some cases, students have set up photographs (such as staging mock fights when they have been concerned about fighting in school) to express their ideas. Photographs do not have to be literal to have value and meaning in this work.

Prints of the images have either been produced professionally and returned to the students, or printed on portable printers on location. In order to provide some structure to the activity, we have given students a loose set of guidelines on what to photograph, including: things they like or dislike about school; welcoming or unwelcoming places; and comfortable and uncomfortable places.



**Indonesian primary school students
examining their photographs**

Whenever possible, we have sat alongside student groups during the process of making their displays, as some of the most interesting discussions about their photographs often occur during this activity. Also, some groups may struggle with the process of organizing their photographs and commentary

into displays, and so some facilitation from adults can be helpful. Students should be encouraged to be creative in their approach to their displays without too much prescription from adults. Skilled and subtle facilitation is important and students should be encouraged to listen to one another and work together as democratically as possible.



An example of a display created by students in a UK secondary school

Students' photographs and commentary have been used to stimulate discussion and debate in and outside of classrooms. This is not always an easy or straightforward process. It can be difficult to engage students in discussions, particularly in schools where teaching and learning tends more towards rote learning than debate. In most schools we have visited, students have been very clear and direct about issues of health and safety that concern them. Sometimes the problems underlying these issues are straightforward and have clear solutions, but often the problems and potential solutions are more complex than they initially seem. One of the challenges of working with students and their photographs/commentary is to encourage them to move beyond simple, good/bad interpretations of what is depicted in their images, towards a more critical and complex understanding of the underlying issues. Our experience has shown us that students have the potential to engage with the issues affecting their education in a meaningful way. The difficulty may be in creating an atmosphere of trust in which students feel able and confident to really express themselves without fear of censure and repercussions. Some of the richest discussions we have witnessed have happened when students were comfortable enough to challenge our interpretations of their images as well as each other's interpretations.

Techniques for eliciting commentary and discussion

Critical thinking about photographic images is an important aspect of participatory photography work. There are a variety of activities which may encourage students to think critically and deeply about the photographs they take and view:

- **‘Spot the difference’**

This activity involves placing students into small groups and giving each group photographs taken by students in different schools. The groups are then asked to ‘spot the difference’ between the school in the photograph(s) and their school. It has been useful to give students small stickers on which they can write ‘same’ or ‘different’ to place as markers on the photographs (which can be protected in clear plastic folders or laminated). This activity can stimulate students to think about the photographs, and the schools they depict and then compare them to their own situations. As well as stimulating critical thinking about what is visible (and what is not visible) in photographs, this activity can prime students to consider what they might photograph in their own schools. It is worth remembering that there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers and that it may be helpful for an adult to help facilitate discussion.



An example of a photograph used for the ‘spot the difference’ activity

- **Printing**

When possible, involving students in the process of printing their photographs (most easily done with digital cameras and portable printers) can yield discussions about what they have chosen to photograph. The process of selecting the photographs and watching them being printed can be interesting and potentially inspiring for the photographers, and allows a facilitator some time to ask questions about the images as they are printed.

- **Talking and writing – ‘photo-elicitation’**

The process of using a photograph to stimulate talk and/or writing is sometimes referred to as photo-elicitation. There can be strong links between photographs, memories and recall. It can be easier to describe a photograph than to be descriptive ‘off the top of one’s head’. Often, a photograph can be

such a powerful stimulus for reflection that it will inspire students to describe experiences which are not directly related to that photograph. Also, students may find it easier to write or talk about a photograph in relation to their experiences than to answer direct questions from adults about those experiences.

We have found that students, even those who usually struggle with writing, are often able to write detailed and creative accounts of their photographs. Some of the richest feedback we have received from students about their educational experiences has come in the form of their writings about their photographs. It may be useful to encourage students to think and write about their photographs before they discuss them. Moving too quickly from taking photographs to discussing them only encourages simplistic interpretations and can be a barrier to in-depth discussion.



Zambian primary school students writing about their photographs

- **Exhibitions**

Exhibitions of the students' photographs and commentary can be set up in or outside of the school in order to engage other members of the school community such as other students, parents and school staff. The students' work can be used as a point of discussion between different groups of stakeholders in the school community (and beyond), although like other activities this will benefit from skilled facilitation.



An exhibition of Zambian students' participatory photography projects

Issues raised by students about health and safety in schools

The following report has been organised to highlight the main issues of health and safety which have emerged from students' participatory photography work, with the exception of the section on HIV/AIDS which was not dealt with directly in students' photography. The issues have been grouped by the writers of the report under the following categories: windows; interior and exterior hazards; toilets; litter and rubbish pits; water; food; and HIV/AIDS education.

Windows



These photographs of Zambian primary school windows were all taken by students

Many students we worked with in both UK and Zambian schools took photographs of windows. When asked to explain why they had focused on windows, students raised a variety of issues:

- **Lack of light**



Many windows have very small openings for light and although such designs can provide an inexpensive way of filtering out harsh sunlight, the result is that classrooms tend to be dark places where students may struggle to see, read and write. In poorly resourced schools artificial lighting may be unavailable or prohibitively expensive and finding a balanced way of naturally lighting classrooms is a challenge, but one in which students could usefully participate in addressing.

- **Safety and security**



In many windows the panes of glass have been broken as a result of vandalism, age or the weather. The panes are not always replaced and there can be a danger to students from the sharp, broken shards of glass. Students also complained of dust blowing into classrooms through broken windows. They explained that the dust gets into their eyes, causes them to cough and generally dirties the classrooms.

Students also commented on the metal bars and grates in windows. Some felt this was prison-like, but others understood these as being necessary to protect the classrooms from thieves and vandals.



Photo taken by students of UK secondary school windows

The reality of having to secure school buildings and property from theft and vandalism is not always reconcilable with the creation of open and stimulating educational environments. Describing the above photo a UK secondary school student said: *'The bars on the windows are to keep people from stealing things from out of the classrooms, but it's not a comfortable environment to work in...it's not something you'd have at home.'*

- **Poor quality and dangerous construction**



In more poorly resourced classrooms, windows are often constructed of interlocking bricks and have no proper frames or glass. In many cases, the bricks are not well sealed together and they often fall out (or in) as a result of rain and wind. Some students told us of being hit on the head from bricks falling from windows. These open gaps in these windows let dust and other flying debris into the classroom.

Interior and exterior hazards



Photo of derelict building on school grounds taken by Indonesian primary school students

The students who took the above photograph said: *'This house has fallen apart. It is ugly and dangerous. Children play in there and can get hurt. There is rubbish inside.'*

Students drew our attention to a variety of hazardous environments both inside and outside of classrooms. Aside from the risk of physical danger caused by these hazards, the negative effect on students' morale of being surrounded by damaged buildings, furniture and neglected grounds should not be underestimated.

- **Damaged buildings and furniture**

Many schools we visited had partially collapsed and derelict buildings and classrooms. It was explained to us that some students injure themselves in these areas and that having damaged and unused buildings on school grounds distracts students from their learning. The presence of these unused (if not unusable) buildings and classrooms is difficult for students to understand, particularly in schools where classroom space is insufficient.



Photo by Zambian primary school students of disused classroom full of bricks and rubbish

In many schools, buildings and classrooms are marred by vandalism and disrepair. The students who took the photograph below explained: *'Ceiling...Mind your head! One of the main problems as you can see.'*



Photo by UK secondary school students of damaged school ceiling



Photo by Zambian primary school students of broken desks stored in library

In some cases, classrooms which are still used for teaching and learning also double as dumps or stores for damaged furniture. The students who took the above photograph of the school library explained: *'We have no books in here anymore, it's become a place to put broken desks.'*

- **Hazardous outdoor areas**

Students encounter a variety of hazards on or near school grounds. In some schools we visited, students pointed out obvious hazards and obstructions such as large logs in their play areas, open rubbish pits (see the section on litter and rubbish pits below), as well as less obvious things such as sand piles (which the wind blows into students' eyes) and areas with dangerous snakes. Sometimes students' play areas are damaged and overgrown, making play on them difficult, dangerous, or impossible.



Photo by Zambian primary school students of logs from a fallen tree in school playground



Photo by Zambian primary school students of open rubbish pit on school grounds



Photo by Zambian primary school students of loose sand on school grounds



Photo by Zambian primary school students of students playing on snake-infested hill next to school



Photo by UK secondary school students of damaged and overgrown play area

- **Personal safety**

In many schools students are at risk from outsiders who come on to school grounds. Overgrown areas and areas bordering school grounds are often cited by students as being places in which they feel unsafe. Despite, or because, these areas can be dangerous some students find these places attractive, particularly as they are often unmonitored by school staff.



Photo by UK secondary school students of overgrown area where students congregate on the border of the school grounds

Students also highlighted the dangers of getting to school. In some cases students (particularly female students) are at risk from rape, abduction and other forms of violence when walking to school as they are often unsupervised and must walk long distances, sometimes in the dark.

Dangerous road crossings and dangerous drivers are also very real threats to student safety. The students who took the photograph below explained to us that the road they must cross to get to school is very dangerous and that motor vehicles (often driven by people from outside the community) drive very fast in front of the school, without care for the safety of students.



Photo by Indonesian primary school students of the road outside of their school

Toilets



Photo taken by Zambian primary school students

Probably the most universally photographed places with the most negative associations for students in schools we visited were toilets. This was true of schools in Indonesia, the UK and Zambia. Issues of sanitation and personal safety were raised by many students in relation to toilets.

- **Dangerous places: unclean/unhygienic**



Photo taken by students of dirty toilet in a Zambian primary school

The students who took the above photo explained: *'The toilets are bad... people 'miss' the hole! The toilets are not clean enough, we could get cholera or dysentery in the rainy season. This toilet has no door...there is nothing to keep the flies away. But the toilets for the staff look better.'*

Unhygienic toilets and a lack of good sanitation affect many schools we visited. As raised in the student's comments above, there is often a disparity between the cleanliness, structure and security of toilet facilities for students and toilet facilities for staff.



Photo taken by Indonesian secondary school students of school toilets

Students were concerned that the stagnant water in unflushed toilets provides a breeding ground for bacteria and mosquitoes. Students also commented on the general poor state of cleanliness of school toilets and the smell which they said can get so bad it distracts them from their lessons. Because the toilets are often unclean and unsafe, many students try to avoid using the school toilets preferring to wait and use toilets outside of school.

Students are aware that in many cases, students themselves were responsible for the poor state of cleanliness in school toilets. An Indonesian secondary school student explained how students and staff could help make the toilets cleaner, safer and more pleasant:

'Steps to make the toilet into a place I like are as follows:

- 1. The toilet must be flushed after each use*
- 2. Clean the water tank in the toilet*
- 3. Mop the floor when it gets dirty*
- 4. Use an air-freshener to eradicate the smell*

Following the steps above will make our school beautiful, and the toilet will be clean from harmful bacteria and smell lovely.'

- **Dangerous places: damaged and inadequate facilities**



Photo taken by students of collapsed toilet in a Zambian primary school

Toilets for students in some schools we visited were broken and in various states of disrepair if not completely fallen down. Students pointed out that many toilets lack doors, an issue of safety and privacy. Some toilets also lack roofs, and hence students have no protection from the rain. Some of the toilets that do have doors are often locked and in many cases it is difficult for students to get the keys.



Photo of locked toilet door taken by students in Zambian primary school



Photo of toilets without doors taken by students in Zambian primary school



Photo of toilets without doors taken by students in UK secondary school

- **Dangerous places: personal safety**



**Photo taken by students of boys posing aggressively in front of girls' toilet in Zambian primary school
(see note on following page)**

Issues of personal safety, particularly for female students, were highlighted by students in many schools. In several schools (such as the one in the above photograph) groups of boys photographed themselves posing aggressively in, or in front of toilets. [# note: in the photograph at the bottom of the previous page the faces of the students have been obscured]

Students recognize threats to safety from both outside and inside of the school community. Students were concerned that people from outside their schools use school toilets and sometimes attack students in or near the toilets. Again, female students are particularly vulnerable to rape and other forms of violence in school toilets. Many students were also concerned about violence, bullying and vandalism in toilets from students and staff within their school communities.



Photo taken by students of vandalised toilets and student smoking in a UK secondary school

Describing the vandalism done by students in their school toilets, the students who took the above photograph said: *'They're just going to do it (vandalism) anyway, day after day, so there's no point stopping them. It's just going to get worse. The toilets are the main part where you just wouldn't want to go whatsoever.'*

Students in many schools described student toilets as being spaces where staff rarely or never visit. In some schools, student toilets are not observed or controlled by staff. Some students felt that school toilets are spaces in which they have a degree of freedom they can find nowhere else on school grounds. However many students recognized that it is most often fellow students who bully and vandalize in school toilets. In many schools the level of discussion stimulated by the students' photographs of toilets suggested to us that students are very willing and able to engage with the challenges and complexities of life in school. In our experience, students themselves often recognize that there are not always easy answers to the problems they face in schools. Many students expressed to us their belief that students have or should have some responsibility for their schools in regards to safety and appearance.

Litter and rubbish pits



Photo of open rubbish pit on school grounds taken by Indonesian primary school students

Litter on school grounds and open rubbish pits are fundamental concerns for students in many schools. This issue of litter was highlighted by students in almost every school we have visited in Indonesia, Zambia and the UK.

- **Unclean/unsafe litter**

The photograph above shows an open rubbish pit located around the side of an Indonesian primary school. The students who took this image explained: *'We don't like this place because there is a lot of bacteria. We're scared to be infected. This rubbish can cause illness and is ugly.'* Students in many schools raised concerns about the health hazards posed by litter being left on school grounds.

The appearance of litter on school grounds also clearly affects the way students feel about their schools. The students who took the photograph below of rubbish on his school's steps said: *'It's not a really nice place to stand. Rubbish, that makes us feel bad. We have a litter problem.'*



Photo of rubbish on school steps taken by UK secondary school students

In some cases students expressed ambivalence about the issue of litter on school grounds. Like other aspects of life in schools, people – over time – can become accustomed to things such as litter which are unpleasant and potentially dangerous. One student in a UK secondary school explained: *(Litter) doesn't really bother the pupils and I don't think it really bothers the teachers either...just the visitors.'*

Students in many schools expressed, through their photographs and commentary, their dislike of litter on school grounds. However, some students pointed out that the issue was a complicated one and that often the same students and staff who complain about litter also contribute to the problem. A student in a UK secondary school explained: *'People just don't like going over to the bins. They just throw it (the litter) down.'*

- **Rubbish pits**

Hazards related to rubbish pits were brought to our attention by students in Zambia and Indonesia, where pits are commonly used for disposal of waste.



Photo of rubbish pit on school grounds taken by Zambian primary school students

The students who took the above photograph told us that most of the rubbish pits in their school are left open and that the wind often blows the rubbish out of the pits and onto the school grounds. In the photograph the students are engaged in the futile task of putting the rubbish back into the open pit. Such is the case in many schools we visited.

Another problem highlighted by students is the potential danger of falling into open rubbish pits. The photo below, taken by Zambian primary school students, shows an open rubbish pit. The students who took this photo explained that one of their classmates had been hurt by falling into the pit during play.



**Photo of open rubbish pit on school grounds taken by
Zambian primary school students**

Aside from being potentially dangerous, open rubbish pits are unappealing, particularly when they are located at the front of schools, in plain view of students, staff and visitors.

Students generally shied away from simplistic answers to the problems posed by open rubbish pits in schools. None of the students we spoke with suggested that it would be possible to get rid of rubbish pits altogether. The students who took the photograph below explained: *'(A rubbish) pit at school is important. But the way we keep it is not the way you have to keep it. That is the badness.'*



**Photo of open rubbish pit on school grounds taken by
Zambian primary school students**

Water



Photo taken by students in Zambian primary school of school's clean water dispenser

The importance of having a clean and ample supply of water was an issue raised by many students.

- **Unclean and inadequate water supplies**

The students who took the above photograph explained that they are proud of the clean water system in place in their school. Many schools we visited do have access to clean and plentiful water, but some schools have poor access to clean water. In these schools students often have little or no water during the school day, which affects their health and ability to concentrate and learn.



Photo taken by students in Zambian primary school of school's water supply

Food



Photo by Zambian primary school students of unclean food sold on school grounds

Food safety was an issue raised by students in some schools.

- **Unsafe/unclean food**

Students were concerned that food sold on, or near, school grounds was often unclean and contaminated with bacteria. In one Zambian school in particular the students explained that local people were setting up makeshift food stalls on school grounds, without permission, and selling contaminated food to students. Students pointed out that the food sellers were often setting up next to the toilets and that flies from the toilets were contaminating the food which subsequently made many students ill. Although these food sellers were repeatedly chased off the school grounds they were persistent and returned regularly. In discussion, students highlighted several linked issues about safety, hygiene, and relations between the school and nearby communities.

HIV/AIDS education



Photo of Zambian primary school student sharing her drawing about HIV/AIDS with her class

Although we did not specifically use photography with students to discuss HIV/AIDS related issues, we encountered schools, such as the one shown in the above photograph, where students were exploring these issues through their own drawings, stories and drama.



Photo of drawing by Zambian primary school student showing healthy foods that should be eaten by people infected with HIV/AIDS

The student's writing on the drawing (proceeding page) reads: *'These are some of the balanced daily foods for a person who has HIV/AIDS. The information I know about AIDS is that he/she who is infected with the disease should take he or she his test results.'*

We believe that photography can be used to usefully explore and debate issues related to HIV/AIDS. Some images may depict the issues directly, such as photographs of people with HIV/AIDS (providing they are open about their HIV status and agree to be photographed). But, as with any topic explored using photographs, a more indirect approach can be just as stimulating (if not more so) without posing the ethical problems involved with photographing people. Images of foods (such as in the student's drawing on the previous page) can usefully stimulate discussions about HIV/AIDS related issues, as we observed in this Zambian primary school classroom.

Regardless of whether students make their own images on the subject, they are often surrounded by images related to HIV/AIDS, its effects, treatment and prevention. These images send sometimes mixed or contradictory messages and it is important for students to be encouraged to think critically about the images they are exposed to in and outside of educational contexts. In some schools, such as the one depicted in the photograph below, students are surrounded by HIV/AIDS imagery even in classrooms.



Photo of HIV/AIDS prevention posters on the wall of a Zambian primary school classroom

Conclusion

Participatory photography can be a powerful tool for students to share their 'voices' about their experiences in and outside of school. Doing this type of work can give students a feeling of empowerment. When asked about having been involved in participatory photography work, a UK secondary school student told us: *'Normally, when you say something, you get people turning it around in your head...with this you've been able to do your own thing instead of someone else's.'*

However, this technique is no 'magic bullet' that ensures students' voices will be listened to and acted upon to affect change. Like other forms of student voice, the words and images produced as part of participatory photography projects are at risk of being ignored or appropriated and misused by those in positions of power.

We are often asked if students' photographs and commentary have directly led to changes in schools. There has been some evidence of this. For example, we visited a Zambian primary school in September 2004, when some of the students engaged in participatory photography work. Several of the students' photographs and comments were critical of the school's open rubbish pits. We visited the same school again in May 2005 and noticed that the rubbish pits had been closed and covered up. We asked the head teacher about this and he explained:

'No matter how you see it to be very small, for us it's big. Last time (when the children took their photographs) I was not around but I found the photos when I returned. I was more interested in the bad pictures because for me it showed the children were able to see where we were lacking, where we need to put more emphasis and resources. For example we had a very big ditch...it was very big and very dangerous to our children, so they picked it up. For us we treated it as a rubbish pit, but for them, it was dangerous that pupils were going to fall in. So, when it appeared on the bad pictures, we moved it and buried it. So we believe whatever the pupils will treat as bad pictures we are going to make up for it and try what we can do, despite the limited resources. We are trying to encourage child participation and for us, as a school, that's one way of child participation.'



Rubbish pit - September 2004



Rubbish pit - May 2005

Perhaps the most significant changes brought about by students' involvement in participatory photography projects are not physical, but mental. We have witnessed staff, parents and students themselves consider their schools in new ways as a result of students' participatory photography work. Recognizing that students have valuable insights into their own educational experiences and taking their perspectives into account are important ways of making school improvements relevant and sustainable.