Photovoice: an opportunity and challenge for students’ genuine participation

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SUMMARY
It has been highlighted that youth empowerment and participation are important principles for school health promotion. Despite this fact, children and youth are rarely given instruments to participate or to influence their situations and the environments in their schools. Photovoice is a method to increased empowerment and participation. Originally it was created as a community action research method based on Freire’s critical pedagogy and feminist theory. The purpose of this study was to explore challenges and opportunities for applying photovoice in a school setting to support genuine participation. Together with teachers and students in an upper secondary school in Östersund’s municipality in the north of Sweden, the photovoice method was field tested and modified to a classroom situation. The teachers and the students were interviewed about their experiences with the method. The results were interpreted by content analysis and showed that the teachers’ capability to be facilitators and the students’ possibility to make a difference for the school or the municipality were the most important factors to succeed with photovoice. The conclusions were that photovoice challenges schools and society to have a better structure for genuine participation if youth participation is seen as valuable.

Key words: health-promoting school; action research; participation; empowerment

INTRODUCTION
The ‘new public health’ paradigm developed from the WHO conferences on health promotion, and in particular the Ottawa Charter, has demonstrated the importance of empowerment for and participation in health promotion (Baum, 2002; WHO, 2009). The definition of health promotion is given in the Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986) ‘...the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health. It moves beyond a focus on individual behaviour towards a wide range of social and environmental interventions’. From this point of view, health is a resource to cope with the environment in everyday life. In addition, empowerment and participation have been found to be salient in developing health promotion within the school setting (St Leger, 1998; WHO, 2001; Tones, 2005).

While research demonstrates that youth participation is common in community change (Checkoway and Guiterrez, 2006), there is little evidence of youth being actively engaged in building healthy schools (Hagquist and Starrin, 1997; Simovska, 2007). Rather, health problems have been primarily defined by adults, who often use a victim-blaming and moralistic approach, which has been criticized by Egumovska (Egumovska, 2005) and O’Dea (O’Dea, 2005). Moreover, little attention has been paid to students’ own capacity and participation, as observed already in the early 1990s (Kalnins et al., 1992) and further criticized by
Pridmore (Pridmore, 2000) and Simovska (Simovska, 2004). It has been argued that students may be active and may want to participate in action for health-promoting projects; also, that they are able to make suggestions for a healthier school environment (Simovska, 2008; Gillander Gådin et al., 2009).

Simovska (Simovska, 2008) differentiates between token and genuine participation in health issues. Token participation focuses on health information and consequences for individuals with the aim of improving students’ health behaviours. Genuine participation focuses on the process of knowing and developing personal meanings for individuals within a context (Simovska, 2008). According to this theory of participation, the learning process for students can be affected by the teacher, depending on the chosen model of participation and the teacher’s pedagogical perspective.

The settings approach to health promotion has been influenced by theories of critical pedagogy (Green et al., 2000). These theories point out that education cannot be neutral and should always take place within a context and a relationship (Vallerand et al., 1997). Youth empowerment, including youth taking action for change and youth giving voice, is in this case linked to theories about critical consciousness and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972; Giroux and Giroux, 2004).

Together, these different approaches to participation suggest that it is important for students to be actively involved in shaping their context, and that each school setting is unique, requiring an orientation to genuine participation if health-promoting learning environments are to be achieved. One way to achieve this may be through the use of photovoice in the classroom. Photovoice is a method used in research and health promotion projects where cameras are given to the participants asking them to document their real-life experiences and reflections. Participants reflect on strengths and concerns by presenting and discussing selected photographs in groups (Wang and Burris, 1997). Photovoice was developed by Wang and Burris (Wang and Burris, 1997) in the late 1990s as a method for increased empowerment and participation. Originally it was created as a community action research method rooted in Freire’s critical pedagogy, feminist theory and community photography (Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001). Wang (Wang, 1999) describes the connection to participatory action research (PAR) as both methods involve the participants in identifying and mapping their needs, and evaluating life circumstances and possibilities. Further, proposals for change are presented to policy-makers, enabling action. Photovoice has been used in several studies with children and adolescents in order to, among other things, shape actions to change health behaviour (Brazg et al., 2011) and shape engagement and community change (Strack, 2004; Wilson et al., 2007) and as a research method to collect data about children’s and youths’ experiences (Fitzgerald et al., 2009). However, photovoice used as a more general method to create participation in the school setting is rare. One of the few studies using photovoice conducted in an American classroom highlighted the positive impact that this method can have in helping students to develop awareness about self and their ability to impact community and policy (Chio and Fandt, 2007).

In this study we were interested in a broader application of photovoice to help students actively participate in shaping healthy school environments.

Photovoice includes three phases with associated goals, which have been found important in achieving a high degree of participation:

1. Enable participants to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns.
2. Promote dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large- or small-group discussions of photographs.
3. Reach policy-makers.

Considered a powerful method to promote critical dialogue and enable disadvantaged, stigmatized or otherwise underrepresented people to make their voice heard (Mamary et al., 2009), photovoice might be useful to increase youths’ possibilities to participate in a genuine way if it could be a part of school education. The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges and opportunities for applying photovoice in a school setting to support genuine participation.

METHODS

PAR (Hughes, 2008) is conducted by a coalition of researchers, community members, professionals and other stakeholders. It includes systematic inquiry, professionals’ practised intervention and participation in decision-making by
stakeholders. In this study, we applied a PAR methodology to field-test photovoice in a classroom situation.

**Participants**

To test photovoice as a method for genuine participation, participants were chosen based on the likelihood that at the time of the study they did not have easy access to genuine participation in their school community. The selection of participants was based on social position and identification of youth at risk. To explain, lower socio-economic status is associated with lower levels of mental wellbeing (Mathieson and Koller, 2008) and lack of social capital has been associated with youths’ inability to be involved in decision-making, among other things (Morrow, 2000).

Hagquist (Hagquist, 2007) indicates that young people with a working-class background and low parental education level are over-represented in vocational programmes, while those with a middle-class background and high educational levels largely choose academic programmes.

The photovoice method was tested in two separate samples of high school students in Östersund municipality, a medium-sized town in the northern part of Sweden. Table 1 gives details on participants and data collection.

The first sample included three classes in the third year of the Child Care and Recreation Programme (CRP). All students field tested photovoice during a course in health pedagogy. After an introduction of the photovoice method and information about the study, the students were invited to participate in the researcher or teacher group. In the researcher group, the first and third author (M.W. and K.G.G.) acted as facilitators. They collected data from 14 students who agreed to participate in photovoice workshops with the researchers. Two groups were selected, one containing only girls and one consisting of three boys and four girls. It was not possible to form a boys’ group because of too few boys. In the teacher group, the two teachers who agreed to participate in the study were facilitators for 35 students divided by their teachers into four groups of boys and girls.

### Table 1: The participants and data collection for field-testing photovoice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRP Sample 1 (October 2009–February 2010)</th>
<th>IP Sample 2 (January–May 2010)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants</strong></td>
<td><strong>CRP teachers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1: 7 girls</td>
<td>2 teachers (1 male and 1 female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2: 3 boys and 4 girls</td>
<td>4 girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 18–20 years</td>
<td>6 boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data collection</strong></td>
<td><strong>IP teachers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 photovoice workshops (120 min each)</td>
<td>2 teachers (1 male and 1 female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 focus group with 2 boys and 1 girl (65 min)</td>
<td>Age: 16–18 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Photographs</strong></td>
<td>Age: 16–20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Text document (posters)</strong></td>
<td>Dialogue during the process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CRP teachers</strong></td>
<td>4 workshops (60 min each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 reflection meetings (20–40 min each)</td>
<td>4 workshops (60 min each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 focus group (60 min)</td>
<td>5 face-to-face interviews (30–90 min each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Photographs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Photographs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 face-to-face interviews (60 min each)</td>
<td><strong>Text document</strong> (notes and e-mail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Text documents (notes, posters and e-mail)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Photographs</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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The second sample included students from the individual programme (IP). The main reason for being in the IP was they had failed to meet requirements in secondary school and not being eligible for any of the national high school programmes. The IP is designed for pupils with special educational needs, including reading and writing difficulties, neuropsychiatric diagnoses and physical disabilities. Students in the IP have the possibility, in 1 or 2 years, to reach the requirements for entering a national programme. The IP students had similar living conditions as the CRP students but some of them were older depending on when they had started the programme. The boys and the girls were separated into single-sex groups, according to the girls’ wishes. After the introduction, 10 students agreed to participate.

Prior to participation, selected participants were given written and oral information about the option to refuse to participate or drop out. All students who agreed to participate signed a consent document.

**Process and procedure**
Photovoice was applied following the (Deming, 1994) ‘plan-do-study-act’ model (see Figure 1). The authors field tested the method with the CRP teachers and students in a classroom situation within the health pedagogy course, and modified and planned the next step with follow-ups after each workshop. Lessons learned during the first field test were used to further develop the method which was then tested in the IP by the first author (M.W.) in a life skills and civics class. Guidelines for the photovoice process were developed in collaboration with teachers of the CRP.

- The first phase: (enable participants to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns). Each student was given a disposable camera (27 pictures) and was asked to take photos during one to 2 weeks based on the question ‘What are important to you in making you feel well and work well in school?’ Students were asked to select five photos each and bring them to the first workshop.
- The second phase: (promote dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large-or small-group discussions of photographs.) Workshops held with students included dialogue and reflection about the photographs. Emerging themes...
about the school environment and leisure time were written on flip cards as a label for a group of photographs. The facilitators (teachers and researchers) led the students through the workshops, and the SHOWeD instrument (Wallerstein and Bernstein, 1988) was used in the CRP for reflection and dialogue. The SHOWeD acronym stands for: What do you See here? What is really Happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this situation, concern or strength exist? What can we Do about it?

In the IP group the facilitators used dialogue inspired by SHOWeD but not the instrument itself, which the IP group thought was difficult and time-consuming to strictly follow. The original SHOWeD instrument was consequently shortened and simplified for that group.

- The third phase: (reach policy-makers). During the final phase, students used computers to research facts to substantiate their proposals. They also researched policy-makers in different organizations, as receivers of their proposals.

  The CRP students invited policy-makers to a forum meeting to present their findings and proposals. The meeting was arranged by their teachers.

  In order to broaden the understanding of the decision-making hierarchy at school and society the facilitator held democracy lessons for the IP students. They were then assisted to contact policy-makers and present their proposals as either e-mails or at personal meetings.

To increase the trustworthiness we strove for confirmability of the study by inviting teachers and students to meetings for presentation of early results.

**Data collection**

We used data and person triangulation to capture different levels of experiences when using the photovoice method in a classroom situation. We collected data from seven photovoice workshops by audio-recording the students’ dialogue, and collected their photos and text messages and the posters produced and presented by the students. After each workshop with the CRP group we had a meeting with the teachers for reflection, modification and development of the method. After completion of the photovoice sessions, students and teachers were interviewed in two focus groups (see Table 1) using semi-structured questions about the participants’ experiences. Examples of questions from the interview with the teachers are: ‘Can you describe your experiences of working in the class with photovoice?’ and ‘Do you think the students reached all three goals of photovoice?’ Examples of questions from the interviews with the students are: ‘Describe your feelings regarding work with photovoice during the introduction, the workshops and the presentation’ and ‘In which way do you think students are interested in participating in influencing the school environment’?

To deepen our understanding of the students’ experiences of photovoice, the students from the IP were invited to face-to-face interviews. Seven students agreed to participate. Each interview opened with the question: ‘What did you think about photovoice?’ This was followed by probing questions in order to clarify and deepen the understanding of the students’ experiences. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min.

All workshops, reflection meetings and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the author or a professional transcriber. A short questionnaire was distributed via e-mail to policy-makers to find out how they had addressed the proposals from the students. Examples of questions asked were: ‘What suggestions did you get from the students? and ‘Have the students’ suggestions led or will they lead to any changes in the organization’?

**Analysis**

Data analysis began with an inductive approach (Patton, 2002) to discover patterns in the data by reading them through several times. Key phrases and categories were marked, labelled with codes and grouped into categories. Following this process, we used deductive analysis with the existing goals of photovoice as a reference point. With help of a matrix, results from the two analyses were combined using logic analysis, as described by Patton (Patton, 2002). Categories showing a weak relation were eliminated. The final results are based on the inductive categories and themes, as well as the second analysis in which the categories and
themes were related to the three goals of photovoice. The categories and themes which emerged from the analysis are illustrated in Figure 2.

Ethical considerations
The study was performed in accordance with ethical standards. Participants were given verbal and written information about the study, including contact information should they need professional support. They were also informed of their right to discontinue participation. Additionally, photovoice ethics were used in preparing the guidelines for student participation (Wang and Redwood-Jones, 2001). The study was approved by the regional ethical committee in Umeå (dnr 09-189M).

RESULTS

Before presenting the results we will give a brief description of the proposals made by the students during the workshops. The students had already been at school for 10–12 years and consequently had long experiences of different situations at school. When they shared these experiences with others, they found similarities and made usable proposals for health-promoting schools. They said that they felt most motivated and satisfied if they could take advantage of the changes themselves but they also saw opportunities for improvements for future students. The students proposed (i) more group work in order to improve classroom relations; (ii) sending teachers on a training course to improve their pedagogic and leadership skills; (iii) getting more computers and having broken ones repaired in order to facilitate learning and reduce stress; (iv) making the new big multipurpose arena (planned by the municipality) available to all inhabitants (and not only to elite sportsmen and women) as a way to encourage physical activity for everybody in the community and (v) more tasty food in the school canteen in order to get energy for schoolwork and wellbeing.

Photovoice in the school setting was a new experience for participating teachers and students alike. The first theme describes the CRP teachers’ experiences and opportunities with regard to their own role in working with photovoice, as well as the conflict of trust in students’ abilities, and teachers’ perceptions about the suitability of using the photovoice method in the school context. The second theme describes opportunities and challenges to reaching policy-makers based on teachers’ and students’ experiences and the researchers’ observations.

The teacher as facilitator

From expert to facilitator

One of the themes that emerged related to the teacher’s changing role in the photovoice
process, from a traditional teacher to the role as facilitator, promoting a dialogue. One teacher from the CRP shared what it was like to be a facilitator:

It is a different approach toward the students than we normally use. In general, our students require answers; I had to take a step back and say that I am not going to give the answer; instead I am going to ask a ‘silly’ question to help the students to think for themselves and find the answer. This I found very stimulating.

This was a new experience for students, and the teachers said the students were sometimes frustrated when their teachers did not answer their questions directly and instead used SHOWeD and asked them to reflect and think further. The teacher quoted above talked about asking students silly questions but said later it was more difficult to ask uninformed and curious questions.

Teachers’ confidence in students’ ability

Teachers in the CRP talked about their trust in their students’ ability. One teacher explained that in order to build the trust they need to ‘take a step back; this is their work, it is the student who has to complete the whole process’. However, when the teachers in the CRP group resumed their traditional roles, they lost confidence in their students. It appeared that trust went hand in hand with the teacher’s role and relationship with the students. At one point in the process, the teachers discussed the best way to develop the presentation for the policy-makers. At this point, they did not continue to include students in the dialogue. Rather, they planned the presentation themselves. Both teachers and students said they were not satisfied with the presentation.

Photovoice fits a theme-based curriculum

According to the teachers, photovoice was adaptable to an individual course curriculum, but it was even more useful when applied to an interdisciplinary curriculum based on themes. In addition, they suggested that the photovoice method would work better if the setting was organized around a full-day workshop instead of being divided into 2–3-h segments. This would make it easier for those students who required start-up time when they worked with the method. As well, it would create better opportunities for teachers to work thematically if they had longer sessions allocated to photovoice. The structuring of courses, as individual units compared with thematic units, created an obstacle for the teachers who were forced to end the photovoice process to fit the teaching plans and allocation of time to particular course content. They indicated a desire to work more thematically so that photovoice could continue over different courses.

A different result was observed in workshops with students from the IP. Following recommendation from the IP teachers the workshops were planned for only 1 h at a time. The students could not concentrate for longer than that; on the other hand, their start-up time was shorter when compared with the CRP group and they could easily remember the previous workshop. Photovoice was therefore adapted to the students’ different needs and possibilities.

Making a difference

Reach policy-makers

There was a strong relationship between the degree to which students came in contact with policy-makers and their positive experience of photovoice as a tool. Results from the questionnaire and interviews showed that students who reached a policy-maker with proposals and received feedback felt proud and respected. Students also indicated a greater willingness to participate if they saw the benefits. One student commented:

If you see the opportunity and know that it will go well, then it is worth it. I do not want to participate in something that is doomed to fail. If it is going to be effective, then I want to have the possibility to be influential.

Asked whether it was hard to be heard another student said:

Yes, I think that’s what’s so damned hard. It’s that you – the adults, get to make the decisions. Even though it’s us youths that are affected by it. We want to be the ones to decide!

It was observed on several occasions that some students had difficulty reaching a policy-maker. In the CRP there was a lack of time because of the simultaneous implementation of a course and previously scheduled meetings, which hindered students from reaching the policy-makers. In general, students were unfamiliar with the
website for the municipality and had difficulty identifying the right person to contact. There were also some instances of a policy-maker not answering a student’s e-mail. Besides, many students found it difficult to make a phone call or schedule a meeting. Some of them preferred to just drop in, for example, at the city hall, searching for someone to ask. Because of the IP students’ low self-esteem, problems with spelling and difficulty in formulating an e-mail, the facilitators assisted the IP students in contacting the responsible policy-maker. Unexpectedly, the facilitators met similar obstacles in finding the responsible policy-maker and scheduling meetings.

Proposals make a difference

A follow-up 6 months after the workshops showed that some steps had been taken in accordance with students’ proposals. The headmaster of the IP was planning to purchase more computers for the IP students, the Ministry of Culture were considering the students’ idea of a planned big multi-purpose arena and the teachers at the CRP decided to introduce more collaboration exercises to promote students’ social interaction. They all appreciated that the students had contacted them with proposals for change.

Unsuccessful contact

Some policy-makers admitted that they had forgotten that they had been contacted. Some had not made an effort to talk with the students. For example, two girls said they had really looked forward to presenting their proposal, but the policy-maker had failed to keep the meeting as scheduled. Six months later, the girls had still not received an invitation to a new meeting. During our last contact with one of the girls, she revealed her disappointment and sense of distrust. Yet despite this, she found the photovoice process to be a good starting point for future decision-making, saying that

...in the future I want to help youth develop a sense of support in their school. Also, I want to help teachers become aware of how youth feel in school and the importance of the teachers’ support.

DISCUSSION

In this study the students were given the possibility of identifying important issues and make proposals. We therefore consider their participation to be genuine when we field tested photovoice. According to Simovska (Simovska, 2008), the photovoice method encourages a process of knowing and developing personal meanings for individuals within a context, in this case the school. The focus in genuine participation is not on changing students’ health behaviour but on developing a healthy setting and increasing the students’ understanding of how health is created. Simovska (Simovska, 2008) reports that students’ genuine participation in developing a healthy setting was more sustainable than results achieved by health information in education. During the workshops the students identified a wide range of health issues. They illustrated and discussed factors important to both learning and health. It emerged that students need support and a good environment, not only for success at school but also for their wellbeing. As well, the results highlighted the importance for the school and community of learning more about what is important to youth, a critical point in health promotion (WHO, 2009).

To involve children and youth is explicitly formulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989); however, children and youth should also be looked upon as resources, certainly when interventions are planned and actions are made for their environment. We agree with Osler (2010) who states that when adults make assumptions about young people’s needs, these may be arbitrary. Our results indicate that the students were interested in participating if they saw benefits in it. This is in line with the previous research of the importance of youth believing in their capacity to make a difference (Wallerstein, 2006). Our findings also show some challenges for youth participation and influence.

Unlike most other studies using photovoice (Necheles et al., 2007; Brazg et al., 2011), this study examined photovoice in an ordinary classroom setting, and not as an extracurricular activity. The challenges of applying photovoice were that teachers did not always trust the students’ ability and took the whole responsibility themselves; also, some teachers were not open-minded and had a dialogue with the students from their point of view. Other challenges were that there was a lack of transparency in the organization or that it was difficult to find the right policy-maker. According to the Convention on
the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), it is important to pay attention to children’s and young people’s possibilities to express themselves and participate, which also is a question of equity. In this study we paid attention to students’ reading and writing difficulties in relation to participation and democracy. This led to the decision to help some of students from the IP to contact policy-makers. We could have paid more attention to this problem by using video cameras and letting the students present their proposals in short video presentations.

In order to adapt photovoice to the two different groups of students, we adjusted the length and the number of workshops as well as the use of SHOWeD. This was necessary as the students’ experiences of critical reflection and dialogue and their ability to concentrate in the workshops differed. The CRP students needed longer time but captured the SHOWeD tool and guidelines. The IP preferred shorter lessons and had more problems to start their dialogue from the SHOWeD questions. From these experiences we agree with Strack (Strack, 2004) that photovoice should be tailored to address the developmental needs and capacities of the students.

The opportunities to use photovoice method for participation were supported by teachers who took the role of facilitators instead of experts. Other important factors were students’ ability to reach a policy-maker, and the possibility for them to be met with respect. It was also important for the students to believe that their work could make a difference for themselves and for others. These opportunities are in accordance with findings reported by Catalani and Minkler (Catalani and Minkler, 2010) and Valaitis and O’Mara (Valaitis and O’Mara, 2005). It is our premise that for young people to be attracted to genuine active participation, there must be environments both within school and in the community that stimulate critical education, regard youth as a real resource and make organizations more transparent for young people. The way adults treat youth is crucial, as we saw when policy-makers handled student contact and proposals with respect, in contrast, to some policy-makers who failed to respond to e-mails or did not turn up for a scheduled meeting.

Critical pedagogy integrates the context with critical thinking about the relationship between people, situations and societies. The concept of health-promoting schools has been developed based on this same approach but it has rarely been used explicitly. In her study, Jacobs (Jacobs, 2011) illustrates health promotion practitioners’ dilemmas in putting empowerment into practice and the difficulties health promotion practitioners had in being ‘non-experts’. This is similar to the findings in this study in which the teachers experienced their role differently when they had to act as facilitators instead of experts. They could see the benefits of this new role as being stimulation of students’ creativity but they did not really come close to what Freire (Freire, 1972) called ‘teacher–student and student–teacher’, when teachers and students learn together and from each other through activity and reflection. For example, when planning for the forum meeting, teachers adopted their common role as experts because they perceived this to be easier and faster.

A key factor in developing a health-promoting school is the teacher’s role, and the teacher’s ability to move from expert to facilitator. Critical pedagogy may be the bridge between health and education in avoiding an expert-driven model and instead building on confidence in students’ ability. Simpson and Freeman (Simpson and Freeman, 2004) support this, arguing that if teachers do not understand the approach of critical pedagogy, trust in students’ ability, or want to serve as facilitators, schools will not succeed in working with the principles of photovoice.

Methodological considerations

This qualitative research using a PAR methodology made it possible to grasp the complexity of developing and examining photovoice in a classroom setting. Multiple methods have been suggested to increase the rigour and trustworthiness of PAR (Lennie, 2006). In this study we involved teachers and students and collected data from different parts of the study and in different ways. This approach enabled us to make a more reflexive analysis of the data (Mays and Pope, 2000) and compensate for weakness in one method with strengths in another method (Patton, 2002; Polit and Beck, 2012).

We planned the study with the headmaster and the teachers but not with the students. Not involving all stakeholders at the planning stage may be one weakness of use of PAR (Lennie, 2006), but this was motivated by the aim of field
testing the method within an ordinary course in high school, which had to be conducted within the allocated time for that particular course.

Credibility in qualitative studies refers to confidence in the truth of data and the interpretations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The data collection process has been described step by step to increase the readers’ understanding and facilitate the trustworthiness of our study. With the use of content analysis and by including quotations from interviews, workshops and face-to-face interviews in the presentation of the results we strove for credibility, in line with Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The two researchers worked closely with teachers and students through observations and dialog and used their input to develop photovoice. We also had lengthy and intensive contact with the students and did follow-ups where we invited the teachers and students to reflect on the results after the first analysis. Member checking is a quality criterion for confirmability in qualitative studies (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and for ongoing meta-evaluation and critical reflection on trustworthiness when using PAR (Lennie, 2006). The PAR approach also enabled us as researchers to continually reflect on our own role and to discuss findings as the study unfolded.

According to Mays and Pope (Mays and Pope, 2000), an important quality aspect of research is its relevance. We argue that the development of a method for increased genuine participation among high school students is relevant, particularly for students at risk for school failure and a low socio-economic position. This is also in line with the principles of health promotion (WHO, 2001) and a prerequisite for increased empowerment among disadvantaged groups.

CONCLUSIONS

The results from this study show that photovoice motivated teachers to move from being an expert to being a facilitator and helped them stimulate students’ critical thinking and knowledge about society. Participating students wanted to have influence and make a difference if possible.

Application of the photovoice method within a school setting has the potential to help schools achieve health-promoting environments more effectively. By giving students tools for empowerment and genuine participation, it gives them greater potential to enact the principles founded in the Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986) about health promotion and in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), and thereby take part in promoting healthy schools. Also, shifting the teacher’s role to that of facilitator enables more trust to be established with students, supporting healthy relationships founded on dialogue.

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