

Using visual research methods

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Introduction

This case study reflects on the use of visual research methods in a study that sought to explore the experiences of street working children in Peru (Bromley and Mackie, 2009). The increasing use of visual research methods by Geographers has been led in many ways by researchers working with children. We have found that traditional research methods such as interviews and questionnaires are not always appropriate or preferable when working with children, particularly, as in my experience, if they have low literacy and verbal skills.

“For some street children, particularly those who have had limited or no access to education, visual methods provide a forum for free expression.” (Young & Barrett 2001: 389)

Whilst undertaking research with street working children in Peru I employed two visual research methods: a mapping task and a card selection game. The aim of the research was to

evaluate the effectiveness of these two visual methods.

Findings

Mapping task

The mapping task sought to determine, firstly, the specific locations where the children liked and disliked working. It also aimed to investigate why children have such preferences.

A basic map of the city centre was drawn and a copy was given to the children. Each child was given two coloured pencils and they were asked to colour in red the locations where they like to trade and in blue the locations where they do not like to trade. Once the child was happy with their map they were asked to explain why they had used specific colours in particular locations and these explanations were recorded on the map.

This first stage of the mapping task required no literacy or verbal skills and therefore enabled all children to express



themselves fully. The second phase of the task did demand some oral skills in giving reasons for the patterns, so explanations varied in detail.

Comparing the maps produced by the children revealed areas that were commonly avoided, often for very astute reasons – for example one alley led directly to the police headquarters and was always avoided. Equally, it revealed that young children avoided particular places because they were dominated by older children who might steal their goods.

The mapping task was considered to be fun as many of the children have limited access to resources such as colouring pencils and paper. Therefore, the task prompted children to participate. Unlike an interview, the mapping task gave the children time to think, rather than give a spontaneous response - so the finished product was a more accurate representation of the child's opinions. For example, many children asked for an eraser to change the colour they had used for a particular location. The mapping task was also a useful prompt for further discussion and it maintained the children's interest until the end of the interview.

Card selection game

The card selection game was devised to establish the importance of street work in relation to other parts of the children's lives. Nine cards were drawn to represent important parts of the children's lives. On each card there were very simple pictures and one word indicating a particular facet of life. The nine cards were laid out in front of the children and they were asked to pick the three cards that represented the things most important in their lives. After the child had picked three cards they were asked to rank the cards in order of importance.

The card selection game does not rely on children's literacy or verbal skills so all children who participated were equally able to express themselves. The task also simplified a relatively complex task as even the most capable of children might not have been able to rank important facets of life orally. In addition to being a useful research tool, the task appeared to offer a welcome distraction from the children's everyday working lives, with some of the children wanting to play with the cards after the interview had been completed. Furthermore, when it became widely known amongst children that they could play a card game many children inquired about taking part.

Recommendations

Two key recommendations emerge from this research:

1. All researchers must carefully consider the appropriateness of their research methods in relation to their research participants. Using traditional research methods, such as questionnaires and interviews, can restrict the type of information gathered during a study.
2. Researchers undertaking research with children and young people should consider using visual methods such as card and mapping games. This study has proven how effective the two methods are in gathering complex information in an engaging manner.

Conclusions

- Traditional research methods such as interviews and questionnaires are not always the most appropriate methods for conducting Geographical research, particularly with vulnerable groups, such as young people.
- Visual methods, such as mapping tasks and card games, can have significant advantages as a research tool when working with vulnerable groups. In this case study the methods were more engaging and they enabled children with low literacy and oral skills to contribute their views.
- Far from being simplistic, in this case study visual methods enabled children to express some fairly complex thoughts which would probably not have been revealed during a traditional interview or questionnaire.
- Researchers must carefully consider the methods they use and they should consider using visual methods where appropriate.

References

- Bromley, R.D.F. and Mackie, P.K. (2009) Child experiences as street traders in Peru: contributing to a reappraisal for working children. *Children's Geographies* 7(2): 141-158
- Young, L. and Barrett, H. (2001) Adapting visual methods: action research with Kampala street children. *Area* 33(2):141-152

Further information

- For further information on visual methods visit: <http://about.brighton.ac.uk/visualllearning/visual-research-methods/>