

Engaging, empowering, and evaluating farm-to-school projects with photovoice

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Abstract

This case study describes how we used photovoice as an engagement, empowerment, and evaluation tool in a farm-to-school project with food service staff in rural Ohio. We explain why we chose the

visual narrative approach, working in a school setting, addressing institutional review board protocols, training, building trust with participants, and the outcomes. We provide lessons learned and suggestions for how other farm-to-school projects can use this tool for broader engagement, empowerment, and evaluation, especially when working with hard-to-reach or vulnerable populations.

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Introduction

The farm-to-school (F2S) movement encompasses a diverse set of projects, goals, and approaches. However, fundamentally, most projects involve the integration of local food into school meals. F2S research and best practices literature examining project implementation, engagement, and evaluation tends to focus on farmers, food service directors, and students (Conner et al., 2011a; Conner et al., 2011b; Janssen, 2014; Prescott et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2015; Taylor & Johnson, 2013; Vogt & Kaiser, 2008;). Little research or evaluation has been done on the lived experiences of the food service staff who actually carry out the F2S cafeteria initiatives, which are critical to long term success and project sustainability (Izumi et al., 2010; Stokes & Arendt, 2017). While surveys and assessments can determine if learning objectives have been met (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013), they are an extractive form of data collection, especially when used with vulnerable populations such as food service staff. As an alternative to conventional quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, photovoice has become a popular and effective tool for engagement, empowerment, and evaluation in active research, extension, community, and economic development, and is an effective strategy for expanding the ways in which professionals can better connect with their communities (Budig et al., 2018; Keller & Mott, 2020). However, using photovoice in schools where minors are present can present unique challenges. In this case study, we provide an overview of how we used photovoice as a community-based participatory research, engagement, and evaluation tool in a F2S project with food service staff in two school districts in a rural Ohio county.

Setting the Stage: Objectives of the Wayne County, Farm to School Project

Wayne County is a rural agricultural county in northeast Ohio with 116,038 residents. While FFA and 4-H are active in the county, there had been no formally coordinated F2S programming until 2018. The “Cultivating a Farm-to-School Community in Wayne County, Ohio” initiative was designed as a holistic project built around local food purchasing, nutrition education, and rural economic develop-

ment, and providing new partnerships between schools, farms, local non-profits, Ohio State University (OSU) Wayne County Extension, and OSU’s College of Food, Agriculture, and Environmental Sciences Wooster campus, which houses both the Ohio Agriculture Research and Development Center (OARDC) and OSU’s Agriculture Technical Institute (ATI).

Agriculturally rich, Wayne County ranks third in the state for total value of agricultural products sold and ranks in the top ten for production of fruits and berries, cattle and calves, milk, and poultry and eggs (U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agriculture Statistics Service [USDA NASS], 2017). Wayne and neighboring Holmes County are home to one of the largest Amish settlements in the country; two Amish produce auctions aggregate fresh high-quality produce in bulk for buyers throughout the state from April through November. While agriculture is the backbone of Wayne County’s economy, many members of the community face high rates of food insecurity and obesity. Wayne County’s youth obesity rates are higher than the state averages. Additionally, the county has an overall child food insecurity rate of 22.6%, and food insecurity was ranked as one of the top four areas of concern in the 2014 Wayne County Community Health Assessment (Wayne County Health Department, 2014). This project worked with two school districts, and four schools within them, with the highest poverty and highest free and reduced meal rates in the county. The schools participating in the project had a total of 2,181 students enrolled and have free and reduced meal rates ranging between 45.8% to 75.5%

The collaborating faculty, extension educators, nonprofits, and schools provided topical and scholarly expertise on F2S, community and economic development, rural sociology, social work, agriculture communication, family and consumer sciences, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) education, sustainable agriculture, and soil science. Funded through a U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm to School Grant and an OSU Connect and Collaborate Grant, the goals of the project involved each school developing an individualized farm-to-school plan and

increasing the variety of local fruits and vegetables in school meals.

Early on, the team recognized that the majority of food service staff do not have a culinary background and are unsure of how to prepare fresh fruits and vegetables into meals that children will eat. Part of the grant funding supported repeated hands-on training for food service staff. In this paper, we describe how we used photovoice to engage and empower food service staff, while also evaluating their experience and satisfaction with knife training workshops, local produce quality, introduction to new recipes, meal preparation, and overall project activities. This project was intended to last 20 months between 2019 and 2021, however the project was cut short due to COVID-19 in March of 2020, and the final community photo exhibit scheduled for spring 2020 did not occur. We describe all activities leading up to the cancelled event.

Why Use Photovoice as a Tool for Engaging with Food Service Staff?

There is little research or evaluation of the lived experience of food service staff who implement the F2S cafeteria initiatives that are critical to long term success and project sustainability (Izumi et al., 2010; Stokes & Arendt, 2017). The structure of school food service positions can create a stress point that fractures and limits F2S initiatives. Many school districts' food service staff, not including food service directors, are outsourced, work part-time hours, are paid low wages ranging from US\$4 to US\$6 an hour less than those employed directly by the school district, and rarely receive benefits like paid sick leave or health insurance (Jacobs & Graham-Squire, 2010). Additionally, food service staff have relatively little power or authority and are often excluded from decisions that impact their work (Stokes & Arendt, 2017). Recognizing these structural conditions, we chose photovoice because of its function as a tool for empowerment (Budig et al., 2018; Bugos et al., 2014) and as a tool to tangibly connect food service staff to the project, amplify their experiences, and provide them with a voice and ownership over the project.

Photovoice is a participatory and emancipatory visual narrative approach wherein participants

themselves both illuminate and work to solve aspects of their lives and challenges that are generally ignored by society and literature (Sutton-Brown, 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997). As such, photovoice provides opportunities to broaden food systems and farm-to-school projects by asking food service staff to tell us about their realities; giving these individuals a space to interact and reflect with peers in similar situations and involving them as active developers of recommendations both realistic and acceptable to them.

There already exists extensive guidance on photovoice, including step-by-step planning of a photovoice activity, debriefing picture taking, ensuring participants' privacy and physical safety, and ensuring photo rights (Evans et al., 2022; Jongeling et al., 2016; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Still, scholars have noted that practical guidance is needed to help researchers develop a photovoice project, particularly to allow researchers' adherence with the principles of both photovoice and human subject reviews (Lenette et al., 2018; Teti, 2019; Yanar et al., 2016; Becot et al., 2023). Furthermore, every photovoice project generates a unique set of situational ethical and methodological dilemmas for both the participants and those initiating the activity (Lenette et al., 2018; McDonald & Capous-Desyllas, 2021).

In photovoice, participants perform the role of researchers and knowledge creators by taking pictures and debriefing them. Participants then often take on the role of educators and advocates by curating a photography exhibit targeted at their communities and decision makers, calling attention to their realities and asking for solutions (Sutton-Brown, 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997). Despite the broad appeal among academics and community-based organizations, both logistics and navigating risks to participants can make photovoice challenging to implement. In turn, these limitations can inhibit the emancipatory nature of photovoice. Unique considerations associated with picture taking and sharing must be made. Organizers of a photovoice project need to consider, among many things, the safety of participants when taking pictures, the consent process to take pictures of other people, especially if minors are involved; picture rights and ownership; and possible negative judg-

ments made about participants or their community (Sutton-Brown, 2014; Becot et al. 2023). In designing and implementing this project, we found that there are unique challenges particular to the school setting, where minors are present, that are not described in existing published photovoice resources. We present how we used photovoice as a tool for engagement, empowerment, and evaluation in a vulnerable school setting.

Training and Implementing Photovoice with School Food Service Staff

Prior to launching the project in fall of 2019, we worked with school administrators to hold a spot on the agenda for their summer, district wide, professional development day that would introduce the project to all food service staff. During the morning portion of the meeting, we introduced the project, explained Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols, and practiced photography through an active learning approach. In the afternoon, staff attended the first cooking professional development workshop. By utilizing a pre-scheduled meeting day and time, we were able to overcome travel barriers and ensure that staff were compensated for their time.

To reduce any anxiety associated with photography, we recruited a photographer from OSU's communications department to assist with the training and group discussion of ethical photography guidelines. We ensured there was ample time for all staff to practice handling the cameras, taking pictures, and downloading them. As a group, we discussed the angles, emotions, and stories each picture told. Having a professional photographer not formally affiliated with the project emphasized this as a professional development activity and increased the fun factor associated with the training.

To engage staff and evaluate the project, we asked food service staff to take pictures of their work preparing, cooking, and serving food related to the F2S project, and requested that they include photos of both the joys and the challenges associated with the F2S activities they were a part of. We met with each school's food service staff once a month for approximately 30 minutes during the workday to review photographs and interview the staff as a group. We visited the school a few days

before the meetings to transfer photos from the school's camera to a secure online storage folder and printed the photos for the meeting. We provided each cafeteria with a notebook for staff to record notes and individual reflections. When unable to acquire photos before meetings, photos were downloaded and reviewed via laptop. Staff shared their perspectives and titles for each photo during interviews.

Ethical Photography Guidelines in a School Setting

The literature on photovoice provides varying guidance on exactly what type of camera to use, and many refer to participants using personal cell phones (Bugos et al., 2014; Jongeling et al., 2016). Reflecting on the ease of photo-sharing through cell phones via texts, emails, and social media, we quickly realized IRB confidentiality protocols could not be ensured. To alleviate this issue, we purchased point-and-shoot digital cameras that were easy to use, durable, and water resistant to withstand the school kitchen environment. The cameras were approximately US\$130, available through big-box stores, and were tagged with university labels.

Bugos et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of photovoice training to include project and population-specific strategies that assist participants in navigating the ethical challenges of taking photos of others. Given the focus of our project, we instructed staff to only take pictures of F2S participants over the age of 18 who agreed to be photographed and only of the body parts they agreed to be photographed. All photos needed to be taken on OSU digital cameras. Participants were provided copies of their digital photos on request.

Most significantly, we co-created guidelines for ethical photography within each school kitchen. This process empowered the staff to help set the ground rules for how and when to take pictures, each staff member's comfort level with having their photo taken, and how we debrief about the pictures (e.g., individually or as a group). This approach helped to create a shared sense of ownership of the project. We describe our protocols and include samples of our Approved Human Subject Informed Consent that can be adapted for other projects in the Appendix.

Engagement

As an engagement tool, photovoice allows community members to take on the role of researcher and knowledge creator (Glaw et al., 2017). To minimize anxiety and increase engagement, we asked the same questions for each photograph and printed the list of questions for reference. Specifically, we asked participants to tell us: What is happening in this photo? Why did you take a photo of this? What does this photo tell us about your life and work? How can this photo provide opportunities for us to improve the farm to school project? How would you caption this photo?

Initially, participants were hesitant to share their interpretation and meaning behind each photo and would ask us what we saw. To connect with participants, the lead researcher drew on her experience as a line cook to describe how she saw “uniformly hand diced vegetables” along with observations and affirmations such as “Wow that takes skill and time, tell me about what you were doing.” While Keller and Mott (2020) note that it is important for facilitators to avoid imposing their own words or ideas, we found it was necessary during the first few interviews to share simple observations and respect for the work food service staff was doing, so that we could overcome perceived power imbalances and build relationships based on trust. We consistently implemented active listening and thoughtful questioning, validating thoughts and feelings, and showed respect for the limited time and hard work food service staff do by being flexible and working around their schedules, which varied greatly over the course of the project.

Over time, we found the participants no longer needed our observations and were confident and comfortable explaining their photos. For example, the photograph in Figure 1 shows the staff enthusiastically adding fresh local ingredients to their veggie bags, and the associated quote “*not coming out of a can*” reflects their positive assessment and desire to repeat this F2S recipe. As staff were increasingly encouraged to share their perceptions, both positive and negative, they began to speak openly. Their creativity and

photos improved as they became more invested in communicating their experiences, requiring fewer prompts at interviews.

Evaluation

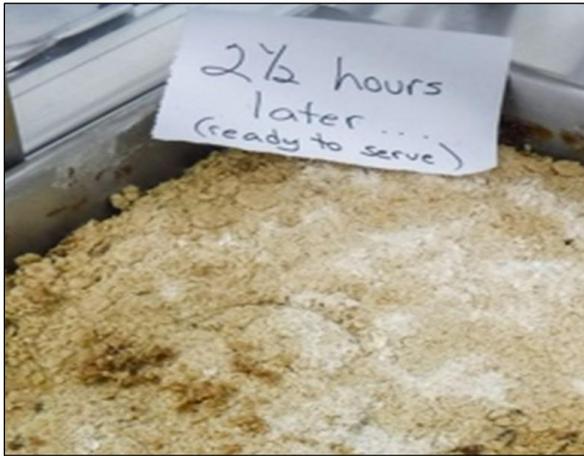
Food service staff communicated messages through their photos that surveys would not detect. For example, Figure 2 shows staff documenting the result of a project recipe by adding in signs showing that the butternut squash (a difficult and time-consuming ingredient) dish took several hours to make, and at the end of the day barely any students had tried it. The project included a recipe evaluation component, including recipe success, student feedback, ease of preparation, recipe feasibility, skills acquired or utilized, time management, and food quality. The two photos in Figure 2 represent a visually dynamic evaluation constructed by the food service staff to demonstrate the substantial time spent cooking the dish and their frustration at having so few students take the dish. In the

Figure 1. “Not coming out of a can”: Photovoice Picture Depicting Food Service Staffs’ Positive Assessment of a Farm-to-School Menu Item



Photo by Wayne County F2S Project Participant #3

Figure 2. “Felt like we only served four servings out of 100”: Photovoice Pictures Enabling Food Service Staff to Share Their Frustration and Feedback with Certain Farm-to-School Project Recipes



Photos by Wayne County F2S Project Participant #3

debrief, staff shared that they would not repeat this recipe due to the challenge of preparing a time-intensive dish that was not well received by students.

Empowerment

Photovoice amplifies voices and cultivates new avenues for problem solving, empowering those involved to recognize their skills for community leadership and scholarship (Budig et al., 2018; Keller & Mott, 2020). Food service staff were encouraged to reflect on and discuss their observations, which empowered them to share insights into the project's practicality. Over the course of the project, staff became more comfortable sharing the structural barriers, such as limited time and limited staff, that contributed to their wariness of the project. As these feelings and issues were acknowledged and validated by the team, staff became more open and honest about which parts of the project were working and which were not. For example, Figure 3 showcases how staff were able to use photography to evaluate and reflect on F2S recipes and school tastes. The staff labeled one of the pictures in Figure 3 as “thumbs down,” explaining that “butternut squash is hard to cut up. Did not have enough time.,” while labeling the second picture “thumbs up” because “Apple and orange slices go well. Thumbs up for fresh fruit.”

These photographs demonstrate the growing

sense of empowerment among the food service staff, as they shifted from passive participants who felt required to participate in the project, to active team members energized by the photovoice process and their new ability to share their likes, dislikes, and preferences for various elements of the F2S project.

To celebrate the project, staff were going to curate a community photography exhibit at the end of the 2019-2020 school year, selecting photographs and quotes to display and turn into photo-books. The intent was to share their experiences and build relationships across the community by inviting school staff, school administrators, school families, teachers, county officials, and local food and agriculture organizations. Unfortunately, we were unable to implement this phase of the project due to COVID-19.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Photovoice and other creative community-based participatory research methods can be utilized to collaborate with communities, engage with community knowledge, and foster relationships (Budig et al., 2018; Glaw et al., 2017). The utilization of photovoice in this F2S project supported engagement by connecting with school food service staff in a unique way, evaluating and analyzing the project from the perspective of those implementing the changes, and empowering and elevating the

voices of those most impacted by the project. Our experience with photovoice suggests that this is an effective strategy for engaging and evaluating F2S projects and for more broadly empowering our communities, especially vulnerable populations, while embracing innovative methods of engagement and evaluation.

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Figure 3. Photo Taken by Food Service Staff to Demonstrate Attitudes Toward Recipes and Ingredient Preparation

The staff member explained in (a) “Thumbs down: Butternut squash is hard to cut up. Did not have enough time.” In (b) “Thumbs up: “Apple and orange slices go well. Thumbs up for fresh fruit.”

(a)



(b)



Photos by Wayne County F2S Project Participant #5.

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Appendix. Example of Farm-to-School Photovoice IRB

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: _____

Researcher: _____

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose: “Growing a Farm to School Community in Wayne County” is a unique collaboration between _____ and Ohio State University.

This research is being done to understand how the unique perspective food service staff have in implementing the farm to school project. Food service staff in this study will take pictures of their work preparing, cooking, and serving food to school children. Participants will take pictures of how they receive and implement the produce, recipes, equipment, and training supplied by _____. Participants will take photos of the assets and benefits they see in participating in farm to school programming, and also document the barriers that make it harder to engage in the farm to school project to help us learn more about how to better support food service staff in promoting farm to school in their cafeterias.

Procedures/Tasks:

We are asking food service staff members of the _____ and _____ to participate in the photovoice study.

Participants will come to the scheduled project monthly meetings. The number of meetings may be adjusted based on participant feedback and project needs. The meetings will take place in your school in a room food service staff feel most comfortable in that will provide confidentiality and privacy. The project will last the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. This time period includes a community photo exhibition.

You will take part in a participatory photography project. You will learn (1) how to take photographs and (2) how to analyze the content of these photographs.

Over the course of the project, you will take pictures of things in your school that you think promote a healthy lifestyle, celebration and awareness of local foods and farmers, and document how your own feelings about cooking with local foods and new recipes. You will also document the things that make these goals harder. Each cafeteria will be provided with a notebook for staff to record notes and individual reflections.

You will be asked to only take pictures of farm to school participants over age 18 who agree to be photographed and only of the body parts they agree to be photographed. Please do not take photos of minors, even your children. If you have children and would like to include them in your pictures, please do not take

pictures of their faces, or of anything that may identify them. Please respect the privacy of those in the community.

As part of this research, we will be audio recording meetings for the photovoice project to help us review the discussion and understand more about why participants took their photos.

These recordings will be used for the purposes of this research and will not be used for any other reason.

At the end of the project, you will select several photos that you are willing to have displayed or placed into a photobook and for an exhibition that will be shared in the community. You will be asked to provide captions and descriptions of the photos. You will be invited to take part in the photo exhibition.

Duration:

The project will last the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school year. This time period includes a community photo exhibition. Monthly meetings will last 30 minutes and occur during the working day.

You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with _____ (Your Institution).

Risks and Benefits:

There are no direct benefits to you by participating in this study. However, you may enjoy participating in this project. There are benefits to society including:

1. This study will provide academics, school administrators, school boards, parents, and the local community with the voice of food service staff on how the farm to school project is being implemented, about the opportunities, challenges, and solutions food service staff identify.
2. This information may also be useful to other community-based organizations, academics, Extension, food service staff, and school districts interested in starting and expanding farm to school projects.

There are minimal risks to you if you decide to participate in the study. There are no right or wrong answers during the discussions of the photos you take. You will not have to discuss anything that you find uncomfortable, and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Although we will tell all participants that our conversations should not be talked about outside of the photovoice meetings, since it is a group project, we cannot guarantee that. To minimize this risk, researchers will explain to all participants why it is important to maintain confidentiality.

All photos will be taken on OSU digital cameras. Only OSU team members will be downloading the pictures onto OSU password protected laptops. If you would like a copy of your photo(s) we are happy to provide you with the digital copy. If there is a staff member other than yourself in the photo, we will first check with them that they are okay having their photo shared.

We will also explain the possibility of a person being identified as a photovoice participant through their choice of photos to display. We will review each participant's photo choices and quotes and confirm that any individual in the photo is comfortable displaying the photos they choose. Also, no personal identifying information will be collected during the activity. If transcripts of the recordings from meetings are made, any personal identifying information that is discussed will be deleted from the transcripts.

Confidentiality:

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. All information collected will be kept on password protected computers and in locked offices on the _____ campus. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency supporting the study.

Will my de-identified information be used or shared for future research?

Yes, it may be used or shared with other researchers without your additional informed consent.

Participant Rights:

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at _____ (this institution) _____, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at _____ reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Contacts and Questions:

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, or if you feel you have been harmed as a result of study participation, you may contact the principle investigator _____ by phone at _____ or by email _____. His/Her/Their mail address is _____.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Office of Responsible Research Practices at _____.

Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

Printed name of participant

Signature of participant

AM/PM

Date and time

Printed name of person authorized to consent for participant
(when applicable)

Signature of person authorized to consent for participant
(when applicable)

AM/PM

Relationship to the participant

Date and time

Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Signature of person obtaining consent

AM/PM

Date and time