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"You're not…just one single flower":
A Youth-Centered Photovoice Study Investigating the Impacts of a University Assisted Community School

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Abstract

Within the community schools framework, children are recognized as important stakeholders in their educational experiences and are often given opportunities for shared leadership and collaboration with other school-community members (Community Schools Forward, 2023). Youth perspectives are invaluable and can enhance community school initiatives, including aspects such as programmatic structure and the provision of youth and family support services. This study utilized Photovoice to investigate the impacts of a University Assisted Community School (UACS) located in the southeast portion of the United States. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to better understand how six children in fourth and fifth grade perceive their full-service UACS program and the impacts it has had on them over time. The findings from the analysis highlight two themes and four sub-themes. *Learning to be in a community* is the first main theme. It entails two sub-themes described as *leadership* and *promoting a positive environment.* The second main theme generated from the analysis is *community isn't limited to something physical.* This theme is also comprised of two sub-themes: *community as memory* and *community as symbolic*. Results from this study have implications for youth care practitioners, researchers, program evaluators, teachers, and other community school stakeholders.

Keywords: photovoice, community, youth voice, university assisted community schools, leadership

Synergistic school-community partnerships are a foundational component of successful community schools (Walsh & Backe, 2013) and have also been shown to be effective in school reform (Kronick et al., 2013; Quartz et al., 2020). When partnerships are mutually beneficial, schools become spatial assets (Green, 2015) to all stakeholders within the school and larger community. Since the 1930's community schools have operated in the United States as a means for bridging communities with schools for the purpose of better serving students, families, and the larger community (Decker, 1999). Community schools are designed to be mutually beneficial for all stakeholders (Gross et al., 2015; Maier et al., 2017). Frank Manley conceptualized community schools as places that moved beyond the confines of academic content area instruction (Decker, 1999; Procunier, 1991). He believed public schools belonged to the community and further argued that limiting public schools to solely being places of academic instruction fell short of the rich possibilities school-community spaces could become (Procunier, 1991). Ultimately, Manley's ideas led to the formation of reciprocal school-community partnerships built on an exchange of resources and services that support children but are also beneficial for families and the larger community.

Until recently, the framework for community schools has been grounded in four pillars designed to support children, promote collaborative practices, and develop ongoing family and community engagement (Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2018). Currently, the community school strategy is shaped by six essentials: shared governance structures, continuous improvement, data systems, professional learning opportunities, strategic partnerships, and sustainable resources (Community Schools Forward, 2023). The essentials overlap with the four pillars but also expand the framework to better support transformative practices. Supporting the development and well-being of all children is at the heart of the framework and is guided by a whole-child approach that recognizes the impact a thriving community can have on every child (Maier et al., 2017; Newton et al., 2017).

Community Schools Forward (2023) has outlined six key practices for community school transformation (a) collaborative leadership, shared power and voice, (b) expanded, enriched learning opportunities, (c) rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction, (d) culture of belonging, safety, and care, (e) integrated systems of support, and (f) powerful student and family engagement. The practices and essentials are at once distinguishable yet function integrally and simultaneously much like an orchestra in which various instruments unite to form a song. While the "instruments" (i.e., essential practices) remain the same, each "song" (i.e., community school) is different and will depend on the needs, assets, goals, leadership, partners, and school location.

University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) are one type of strategy within the larger community school framework. The UACS strategy focuses on the school becoming a hub for community engagement and works to develop and maintain partnerships for the interchange of resources and the provision of enrichment opportunities for the academic and social-emotional development of children (Coalition for Community Schools, n.d.). The current study focuses on youth perspectives and experiences within a full-service UACS program. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to better understand how six children in fourth and fifth grade perceive their full-service UACS program and the impacts it has had on them over time. Here, *full-service* indicates participation in both the regular school day and after-school programming. It also serves as a pseudonym for the name used on site.

In order to better understand the impacts a UACS program has had on the children, this study implemented a visual research methodology known as Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is frequently used in community-based and participatory action research because it lends itself well to highlighting less dominant voices and diverse perspectives (Grbich, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997). Research has shown that it is an effective method when working with youth (Charmaraman et al., 2021; Leung et al., 2017; Rose et al., 2016; Wright & Collings, 2023) and can be utilized to better understand children's perceptions about an issue or relevant topic (Rose et al., 2016; Wright & Collings, 2023). The Photovoice methodology can be easily adapted to fit a variety of community and youth-based research (Leung et al., 2017; Walther et al., 2018). Walther et al. (2018) used an adapted version of Photovoice called the Healthy Plate Photo (HPP) method as a means for assessing youth's nutrition knowledge before and after a 12-week intervention curriculum taught in a community learning center. Results from the study showed that children ages nine to eleven were easily able to use the HPP method as a way to communicate their knowledge and understanding of the nutrition curriculum. Their findings also suggest that HPP can be an effective intervention and research tool in out-of-school settings. These findings coincide with other studies that have implemented photo-based methods in intervention studies (e.g., Burns, 2002) and as a means for evaluating youth care programs (e.g., Charmaraman et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2022).

Photovoice has also been used as a creative tool for bringing awareness to issues such as systemic barriers that prevent children and families with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds from accessing educational programs, services, and resources (Fakhari et al., 2023). Capous-Desyllas and Mountz (2019) implemented Photovoice with LGBTQ foster youth (n=18) to better understand the experiences, barriers, and stigmas they faced because of their identity and life circumstances. The study brings light to the value of mental health care and underscores the need for ongoing social-emotional support and guidance throughout the transitional phase of foster care.

In a recent study, Wright and Collings (2023) worked with 11 young people (ages 16-25) who had experienced out-of-home care to better understand their lived experiences and perspectives of *permanency*. The Photovoice methodology was implemented as a way for the participants to conceptually and metaphorically express their ideas and experiences. The findings of this study showed the various ways young people related permanency to being an internal state that required care and active cultivation. Results from this study also emphasized the way in which youth perspectives can add depth to understanding tangible and intangible aspects of multifaceted issues.

Much like the research conducted by Wright and Collings (2023), the current study was grounded in the recognition that the perspectives of young people are invaluable and can help propel the blossoming of communities and youth care programs. Photovoice is an effective strategy in collaborative research practices committed to sharing diverse and dynamic youth perspectives of topics relevant to their lives (Leung et al., 2017; Rose et al., 2016; Wright & Collings, 2023). Allowing children to express their experiences and ideas through pictures and spoken words enhanced the current study's overall goal of understanding the impacts of the community school through a youth-centered lens.

The central question guiding this study was: *What types of experiences do upper elementary school students describe as impactful in their long-term participation in a full-service UACS program?* Two sub-questions were also designed for the purpose of better understanding the role the after-school portion of the program played in the children's full-service schooling experiences. The sub-questions supporting this study were:

(a) *How do students with long-term participation in a UACS program describe their perception of and experiences in the after-school portion of the program?*

(b) *In what ways do students represent their ideas and experiences in pictures and words?*

Research Design and Methods

Setting

The study took place in a UACS after school program at an urban Title I elementary school in the Southeast portion of the United States. The school serves children in grades Pre-Kindergarten through fifth, however, only children in grades K-5 are eligible to participate in the after-school (i.e., full-service) UACS program. Rosewood Elementary (pseudonym) serves a large minority population (more than 70%). Less than 25% of students performed at or above proficiency in recent standardized reading and math assessments. For students in the full-service program, literacy and math are explicitly taught via grade-level tutoring after school for a minimum of 50 minutes three times a week (i.e., n=150 minutes). Additionally, literacy and numeracy skills are embedded into the design and activities in many of the student choice clubs (e.g., book club, boardgame club, cooking club, etc.).

The term full-service is a pseudonym for the school's given name to the UACS program. It is a term used by one of the participants in her description of the after-school program. Full-service will therefore be used to indicate participation in both the regular school hours and the extended learning time through the UACS after-school program (2:50 p.m.-6:00 p.m.). The full-service program has been in operation for more than 10 years and typically serves between 75 and 100 children each school year. Staff members of the full-service program come from a variety of backgrounds and offer diverse areas of expertise such as physical education, musical and theatrical performance, art, biology, engineering, etc. A few certified teachers from the regular school day hours also teach within the full-service program during weekly grade-level tutoring sessions. Children in the full-service UACS program participate in a total of five choice-based clubs, three tutoring sessions, and one community-building meeting per week. Snacks and dinner are provided daily. Although dismissal times vary, most children stay for dinner from 5:30 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Participants

Youth perspectives of community school programs are invaluable (Community Schools Forward, 2023; Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2018; Roberts et al., 2022) and can enhance the overall understanding of a program's assets and needs (Call-Cummings & Hauber-Özer, 2021; Chase, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2021). Purposeful sampling in qualitative research is a sampling technique often used for the exploration of a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Báez, 2021). Purposeful sampling of young people in this study included identifying and inviting a diverse range of children from various ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds who have participated in the full-service program for three or more years. Young people who have attended the program for multiple years have a long-term perspective of how the program has impacted their life and overall growth—academically, socially, and emotionally. The recruitment process began after IRB approval was received.

During the recruitment process, one member of the research team met with the site coordinator of the full-service program to request family contact information for fourth and fifth grade students who have been a part of the program for three or more years. Eleven young people matched these criteria. Family names and phone numbers were then given to the researcher. Phone calls were made to families of the 11 young people. Seven families responded to the phone call, but only six guardians gave written consent for their child to participate in the study. Following the consent process, the children gave their written assent to voluntarily participate in the Photovoice study.

Three of the six children were in fourth grade and the other half were in fifth grade and ranged in age from 9 to 11 years old. Four of the children self-identified as boys and two self-identified as girls. Additionally, the children identified as African-American (n=3), Bi-racial (n=1), Hispanic (n=1), and White (n=1). All children spoke English; however, one child was bilingual (Spanish-English). The six participating young people had between three and six years of experience in the full-service program with an average attendance of five years

Procedures

The study took place during the full-service program which runs from 2:50p.m.-6:00p.m. Monday through Friday. For this research, we worked with the children during the extended club days (i.e., days without tutoring). The routine on extended club days begins with snack and recess and is followed by a 30-minute community-building meeting and an hour and a half of choice-based clubs. The structure of the clubs allows for "downtime," a time where children are taking a longer break from the activity or are completing other tasks as they wait for their turn to participate in a project (e.g., completing a word puzzle or coloring sheet). Due to the structure of extended club days, we did not anticipate any significant instructional loss for youth participants, nor did we believe their participation in the study would prevent them from attending their club Photovoice.

From its earliest inception, Photovoice has been used as a tool for community-based projects (Grbich, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997). Wang and Burris (1997) articulated Photovoice as a "process by which participants identify, represent, and enhance their community" (p. 369). Quigley et al. (2014) described Photovoice as an effective method for "[facilitating] conversations, storytelling, and reflections" (pp. 7-8). Photovoice has been used in a wide array of research ranging from community development (Chase, 2017; Roberts et al., 2022) to education (Fakhari et al., 2023; Kroeger et al., 2004; Miller & Kurth, 2021; Rania et al., 2017), youth care program evaluation (Charmaraman et al., 2021), physical and mental health (Cooper & Yarbrough, 2016; Jackson et al., 2022; Walther et al., 2018), foster care (Aparicio et al., 2023; Capous-Desyllas & Mountz, 2019), and immigration (Cooper & Yarbrough; Rania et al., 2015). Although Photovoice is typically conducted in person, virtual implementation has also been facilitated (Call-Cummings & Hauber-Özer, 2021).

The current study used Photovoice methods with youth in upper elementary school to better understand the meaningful experiences and perceived impacts of a UACS program. The study took place one day a week for the duration of four weeks. A total of three focus group sessions were held (weeks one, two, and four), lasting 30, 40, and 68 minutes respectively. No focus group session was held during the third week as this was the children's time to take photographs in and around the school. During the first focus group session (week one), the children introduced themselves and were asked questions about their favorite memories and experiences in the full-service program (e.g., "What special memories do you have about full-service?" "What part of full-service is important to you?"). The second focus group session (week two) entailed reviewing the stories shared in the first session, introducing the Kodak Printomatic camera, discussing various ways to creatively put their memories and feelings into a picture without including people, and then practicing taking pictures. One child had to attend a doctor's appointment during the first week but was able to transition into the second focus group session without a

problem. This child was allotted time at the beginning of the second focus group to share his experiences and favorite memories of the full-service program.

Week three was our "picture session." The choice was made to pair the children into three groups and allow two children at a time to take pictures rather than working with the entire group at once because (a) our materials were limited to two Kodak camera and one specialized cord needed for charging the battery, (b) the cameras only remain charged for about 25 photos, (c) the children had staggered dismissal times (e.g., 4:30 p.m., 5:30 p.m., 6 p.m.), and (d) not all children wanted to take photos in the same places. Thus, small groups helped eliminate potential "wasted time" of not having anything to do. With the exception of one child's request to be partnered with a specific peer, the pairs of children were chosen by a member of the research based on the last two factors outlined above (i.e., *c* and *d*). Following the picture session, all photographs were scanned and electronically stored in a university secured shared drive.

The third focus group session occurred during the final (fourth) week. Children were asked to share at least one of their photos by explaining what the picture represented for them and how it connected to what they wanted to convey about their time and experiences in the full-service program. Example questions asked during this session include the following: "Tell me about your picture." "What made you choose this picture?" "What does your picture represent?" At the end of the focus group session, the children chose their own pseudonym to be used in the study.

Analysis

Data was collected over the course of four weeks. Each of the three focus group sessions were recorded via Zoom and transcribed for analysis purposes. The picture session (week three) was not audio or video recorded due to the need for mobility as the pairs of children traveled around the school to take pictures. All youth photographs were digitally scanned and stored in a shared university drive for later analysis. The pictures were returned to the children on the final focus group session.

Within 48 hours of conducting the focus group sessions, I met with two research team members to debrief about the content shared during each session. Additionally, we discussed our observations of the group dynamics and the patterns they held (e.g., building on each other's ideas, memories triggered through conversation). The debriefing meetings also allowed us to compare across the four weeks. This process was helpful in seeing how the children's ideas took shape throughout the month (Quigley et al., 2014).

Following the final youth focus group session (week four), our research team met to review each child's chosen photograph(s) and explanation of their photo(s). Notes were outlined on a large white board and helped guide our discussion, specifically when it came to the repetition and development of stories from week one to week four. We verbally negotiated themes by looking at the commonalities within the youth narratives and photos (Riessman, 2007) as well as how these narratives were constructed (Barone, 2007). Much like Thorne et al.'s (2004) concept of interpretive description that "acknowledges the constructed and contextual nature of human experience" (p. 3), we chose a process of identifying themes that would maintain the integrity of each story (Riessman, 2007). Once we agreed on the themes, select student vignettes corresponding to these themes were chosen to highlight in the findings section (Lawton & Cain, 2022) because they best illustrate our findings.

Findings

The findings from the analysis of this study present two main themes and four sub-themes. *Learning to be in a community* is the first main theme. It entails two sub-themes described as *leadership* and *promoting a positive environment*. For this study, the definition of leadership comes directly from one of the participating children who described being a leader as "helping others" much "like a superhero" helps people in need so that "people can depend on you and ask you the most questions." The sub-theme, *promoting a positive environment* includes learning how to follow and promote school-wide rules and expectations, social-emotional learning, and opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration, or as it was referred to by a young person in the study, "teamwork." In summation, *Learning to be in a community* is a multifaceted theme that is intended to paint a picture of the children's dynamic conception of a community and the role they play in the establishment and maintenance of a— to use one child's words— "responsible and respectful" community.

The second main theme is *Community isn't limited to something physical*. It is comprised of two sub-themes categorized as *community as symbolic* and *community as memory*. The sub-theme *community as symbolic* emphasizes the use of symbolism and the children's preference of analogy to describe their feelings and experiences in the full-service program. *Community as memory* is about the power people and events can have on others long after they are gone or have ended. At the root of every memory and story told was an impactful feeling (e.g., pride, love, being understood, helpful). The theme *Community isn't limited to something physical* highlights the importance the young people gave to relationships in their overall sense of belonging to a community.

To better illustrate the findings of this study, youth photographs and corresponding vignettes representative of the core meaning of the themes and sub-themes are shared below. As was previously noted, the selection of the vignettes was discussed and negotiated with the research team. The chosen vignettes are exemplary in that they highlight salient findings yet also demonstrate the children's profound reflexivity and ability to communicate abstract thinking.

Learning to be in a community

Leadership.

The first vignette comes from a child in 5th grade named Ceo (pseudonym). Ceo had just turned 11 years old at the time of the study. He has participated in the full-service program for six years and often spoke about his experiences and role in helping younger or "bullied" peers. During the initial focus group session, he described fifth grade as his favorite time in the full-service program because he has "a lot of privileges" that give him the opportunity to be a leader so that he can help "teach second, first, third graders how to play the games and how to understand." Ceo expressed confidence in his ability to help others because he recognized that he too faced many challenges when he was younger. This vignette was chosen as an exemplary representation of sub-theme *leadership* within the overarching theme of *Learning to be in a community*.

> I chose this one because there's a little bit of dark in the picture, but in the top left, there's still light coming through the darkness. The darkness represents the people that get upset and the lightness protects the darkness from getting any light dark. There was a kid who got very easily mad in full-service, like other kids who would try to help him play and play with him instead of leaving him alone. He was nervous. Like people were bullying him because he had glasses. I showed him the bright side about Rosewood and all the kids. It [helping others] makes me feel like a superhero. Like how some people or somebody who would depend on you and ask you the most questions. [In kindergarten,] I entered some places um in my–that kind of scared me. [I was] nervous. I didn't want to go. It was a large community.

Figure 1
Light and Dark

Note. Ceo used the contrast between light and dark in this photograph to express the ways in which he has been able to help others. Throughout the study, he noted the importance of being a role model and friend to his younger peers.

The image that corresponds with Ceo's vignette was not pre-planned. As the sun was setting, the contrast of light and dark caught his eye and he quickly snapped a photo so that the sun did not disappear from his sight.

Promoting a positive environment

This next vignette comes from a child in fourth-grade named Ashton. At the time of the study, Ashton was nine years old and had been in the full-service UACS program for three years. From the initial focus group session to the final week, Ashton consistently discussed the concept of teamwork in tandem with his most memorable and meaningful experiences in the program. During the first week of the study, he described how he used to do things in kindergarten and first grade "that would get inappropriate" but over time he had learned how to listen, follow the rules, and be a good friend.

From week to week, Ashton connected these new skills to his favorite after school club in which he learned about working collaboratively and positively with others. Activities within the club are designed for peer-to-peer collaboration that "makes [him] feel excited for what [they] will do" each week.

> The reason I took this picture is because I love Explorer [pseudonym] Club. I was climbing, I was climbing on like mountains. I was getting supplies from one place to another, and I was using teamwork…In kindergarten, no, in first grade, Jabril officially became my classmate, and he got mad easily. Tripp, do you remember when Jabril got mad a lot? [Tripp nods her head in agreement.] He lost the game, like some sort of game, he got mad. At one time…I was trying to help him…It connects to teamwork. Okay, so Jabril got mad a lot and I helped him a lot with stuff, in regular school day and full-service.

Figure 2

Teamwork in Explorer Club
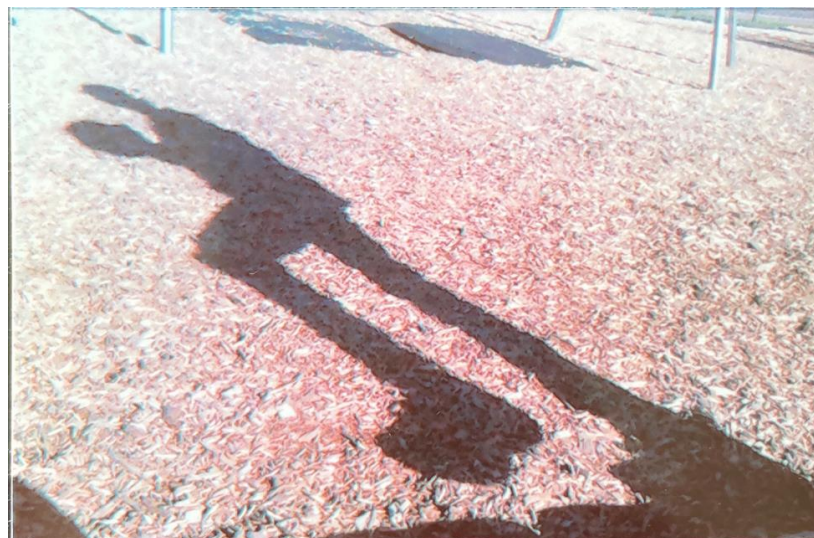
Note. In this photograph, Ashton was reenacting a team-building game that he learned during his favorite club.

Community isn't limited to something physical
Community as symbolic

The following vignette is a stand-out example of how the children used analogies to describe their feelings and experiences. It was categorized within the sub-theme of *community as symbolic.* In this vignette, notice how Ceasar (age 10, grade 4), a fifth-year tenure in the full-service program, described the symbolic meaning behind his photograph of flowers blooming on a tree in the school garden.

> [This photo is about] Ms. Nathalie. Because, um, she helped to plant. She planted the tree. People kept on making more, like they kept putting water in it, and kept treating it good. You have friends, you're not lonely because there's a lot of flowers. You're not, there's not just one single flower. You get to play with a lot of people. You can see a lot of cool plants, not just the one single flower and in the inside [points to all of the parts on the inside of the flower]. There's a lot of groups like right here [in full-service]. And there is still flowers growing over here.

Ja'Morant, a child in fifth-grade with six years in the program, offered another suggestion for the symbolic meaning of the flowers blooming in groups on the tree as he stated, "There is still people getting helped." In this sense, the full-service program was viewed as a learning community that nurtures the growth of all young people.

Figure 3
Flowers

Note. In his description of this photograph, Ceasar paralleled the vast number of flowers on the tree to the many young people in the full-service UACS program.

Community as memory

The final vignette comes from a child in fourth-grade named Tripp. From the initial meeting, Tripp expressed love and gratitude for the genuine care and positive disposition one teacher consistently showed her. Although the teacher no longer works at Rosewood, Tripp articulated how her presence is still felt and remembered.

> I picked this one [photo of a peach tree label, Figure 4] because, it represents that one day you're younger, but the next day you get older as time goes by. And I picked this one [colorful tree photo, Figure 5] because it represents that you're getting older on the inside and out. This one [the tree] is uh, has been here a long time. And um a couple of the garden teachers try their hardest, and it's outside, so it'll get older and younger at the same time. [*Researcher: That's wonderful. So how, so tell me how these pictures connect to your experience, your time in full-service*.] That no matter what, you'll still be here, no matter if you're old or young… you'll still be in life. They've been here a long time and they're still alive. So, Ms.

Nathalie used to be our garden worker in our garden out there. And she planted a lot of stuff. She put up signs of what that is [a peach tree]. And she helped us understand what they all are, and like how she made it and stuff. You could see that purplish pink and white are blending together [Figure 5]. And in the background it looks like it is connected together to make it combined…to make it make a different color. So it [the colorful flowers on the tree] stays there and it goes away just like people stay here and go away. Like Ms. Nathalie was here for a long time and she went away, but she's still with us because she made the garden.

Figure 4

Peach Tree Label

Note. Tripp's photograph represented human development through the passage of time, much like a seed grows into a mature tree. She then connected the photo to an important teacher in her life.

Figure 5

The Colors of the Tree

Note. Like the peach tree label in Figure 4, Tripp connected this photograph to the same influential teacher.

The statements made by Tripp beautifully illustrate the significance of relationships in what she values in her community school. In fact, her "favorite part about all the years that [she's] been in full-service" is "spending time with teachers and friends."

Tripp consistently spoke about the role teachers and peers played in helping her understand not only the rules and expectations but also how to regulate her emotions and how to believe in herself. In third grade she became "really sad" when two of her "school sisters" transferred schools. Ms. Nathalie was pivotal in Tripp's ability to cope with the sudden change and to know that the friendship could exist even without being physically present. Tripp's vignette demonstrates how she applied what she learned from Ms. Nathalie in this situation to how she is now processing Ms. Nathalie's transition to another school.

Dynamic conversations

Sharing memories was a communal process. Often, the children would engage one another in their telling a story (e.g., "Aly, you still remember Evan, right?"). Thus, the sharing of memories went beyond simple statements about an experience and took on more of a dynamic conversational format where children felt free to correct their peers, add new information to the conversation, express words of encouragement, and even prompt their peers to clarify a statement or elaborate on their thinking.

Building on each other's ideas was not limited to the focus group meetings. In fact, it was prominent throughout the picture session (week three) in which pairs of children went around the school to take pictures. Ja'Morant and Ceo were an exemplary pair and consistently demonstrated collaboration in the setup of staged photographs for conveying a message, giving suggestions based on their perspective of the same event, and problem-solving challenges presented by taking pictures. Ja'Morant and Ceo's interactions exhibited the themes *Learning to be in a community* and *Community isn't limited to something physical.* In other words, the themes were displayed through their actions.

Discussion

Children are important stakeholders in community schools and offer valuable insights into educational programs, schools, and communities (Community Schools Forward, 2023; Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2018). Research has shown photography can be an effective tool for inviting youth to share their perspectives of their community (Roberts et al., 2022) and youth care programs (Capous-Desyllas & Mountz, 2019). As the results of this study demonstrated, the impact of a UACS community school program expands beyond a single event, a geographical space, or a memorable lesson. The six children in this study reiterated a sense of appreciation and pride for the process they experienced in learning how to be in and create a positive and loving community.

Previous research has shown Photovoice to be an effective method for engaging in community-based work (Quigley et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Wang & Burris, 1997) and has served as a means for highlighting new and overlooked perspectives (Chase, 2017; Grbich, 2013; Kroeger et al., 2004). Leung et al. (2017) have even suggested Photovoice as an avenue for civic engagement. Their research on food justice further emphasized young people's ability to creatively and collaboratively problem-solve to address needs within their community. This finding is in alignment with a recent study by Wright and Collings (2023) who also underscored the nuanced understandings of youth about topics and situations relevant to their lives.

The fourth and fifth grade children in this study engaged in reflexive, critical, and creative thinking as they articulated their experiences, developed their ideas, and represented meaningful memories and feelings through photographs. In a study conducted by Rodriguez et al. (2021), Photovoice was implemented as a way for Latinx youth to authentically share their definitions and conceptualization of *excellence* in their community, at home, and at school. Although the study was designed for youth in ninth grade, the children in the current study (4th and 5th grade) also proved to be more than capable of sharing multifaceted conceptualizations of themselves and their community school.

The focus group sessions also played an important role in the sharing of youth experiences and perceptions of the full-service UACS program. Each group session took on a conversational and communal format. Although there were times where the children raised their hand to speak, the majority of the sessions were filled with listening to and building on each other's statements. Other researchers working with children from diverse backgrounds have also observed conversational and collaborative interactions in student focus groups (Van Viegen, 2020).

The findings of this study illuminate the long-lasting impacts of social-emotional learning and coincide with other community school research supportive of a "whole child" perspective (Maier et al., 2017; Newton et al., 2017). Approaching teaching and learning as more than a set of academic skills gives children the opportunity to develop vitally important social-emotional skills necessary to flourish in school and beyond. As the six young people in this study reported, learning how to express their feelings, manage their emotions, and help others have

all been pivotal lessons in their development as leaders in their community school. The children expressed gratitude for the opportunity to learn and grow as people.

Limitations

This study was not without limitations. Having only six participants does not lend itself well to the generalization of the results, however, the study was not designed with the intention of generalizing outside of the context of this group or full-service youth program. In fact, working with a small group of children was purposeful in the goal of in-depth exploration of how a small group of children perceives the impacts of their community school.

Another limitation of this study was the camera itself. Despite its name, the Kodak Printomatic does not print automatically. There is a significant delay between taking the photo and when the picture begins to print. For this reason, it was important to explicitly teach and demonstrate this to the children during the second focus group. The Kodak camera is designed to hold up to 10 sheets of film and its battery life equates about 25 printed photos. During the picture session (week three), we had to be strategic about charging the cameras in between each pair of children while also making sure to carry multiple packs of film. It must also be stated that this group of children adapted well to the camera, were very patient with the process, and also took pleasure in having the option to turn their picture into a sticker by peeling off the back of the photo.

Since we only had two cameras, the children were put in pairs for the picture session (week three). Ja'Morant specifically asked to be with Ceo, but all other pairs were decided by the lead researcher, a decision that was made based on each child's staggered dismissal time. As we reflected on the dynamics of the pairs and how it influenced their photographs, we couldn't help but wonder what might have come from allowing all children to have a choice in their pairing. We consider this a limitation because some pairs were more collaborative than others and this shaped the pictures they took and the stories they told.

The first two focus groups (weeks one and two) were 30 and 40 minutes respectively. However, the final focus group (week four) was 68 minutes. This is not an ideal length of time to do a focus group with children, but to get through all of the pictures and stories they wanted to share, the session needed to last longer. Stopping before the hour mark would not have allowed everyone time to share and could have limited the overall collaborative communication in the conversational process.

Other limitations included aspects of daily life and school events that were out of our control such as Ja'Morant's doctor's appointment during the initial focus group, an all-day field trip that left the children more tired than normal, and the timing of the after-school clubs. Communicating with the daily and after-school staff about their upcoming plans could have mitigated some of the distractions. With this said, we still believe the children put forth their best effort, had fun, and shared the ideas and stories that were meaningful to them.

Implications

As other research has shown, Photovoice can be an engaging and effective methodology for youth-centered research (Chase, 2017; Kroeger et al., 2004; Rania et al., 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Rose et al., 2016), youth care program development and evaluation (Walther et al., 2018), and as an activity to support the social-emotional development of young people (Charmaraman et al., 2021). Although Photovoice is more commonly used with teenagers and young adults (e.g., Halliday et al, 2019; Jackson et al., 2022; Rania et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2021), the current study has demonstrated that Photovoice can also be successful with children ages nine to eleven. Furthermore, researchers, youth care providers, youth, teachers, or schools who want to conduct Photovoice do not need to have a large budget or an overflow of resources. Cameras such as the Kodak Printomatic are relatively inexpensive tools that can be utilized during and after a study; however, they are not the only means of taking pictures. Photovoice has been implemented with technology such as cell phones (Cooper &Yarbrough, 2016) and even youth artwork (Call-Cummings & Hauber-Özer, 2021). Technological resources such as the iPad or other types of tablets with built-in cameras are generally found in most public schools and in the United States. University departments, individual researchers, community programs, and other youth care providers might already own or have access to a variety of technology capable of taking pictures.

The findings from the current study illustrate that working with limited resources does not limit young people's ideas. In fact, the children in this study demonstrated a high level of creativity and abstract thinking that might have been decreased had they had access to an abundance of technology or the "latest gadget." The additional requirement of only taking photographs without people challenged the children to represent their ideas,

memories, and stories in an abstract way. Not only were the children capable of abstract thinking, but they liked the challenge and creativity brought about by the requirements of the process.

As this study has shown, Photovoice is an engaging strategy that allows children to share their perspectives and ideas through non-verbal forms of communication. The non-verbal aspect of Photovoice is part of what makes it a powerful tool for working with a diverse range of youth. Photovoice can be used by child and youth care workers as a means for supporting the developmental strengths and needs of children. In this sense, it can be an educational or therapeutic activity. Youth workers can use Photovoice with young people to help bring awareness to issues and injustices faced in communities or as groups of individuals (e.g., Capous-Desyllas & Mountz, 2019; Fakhari et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2017). It can also be used a means for problem-solving and civic engagement (Leung et al., 2017).

Community schools recognize children of all ages as invaluable stakeholders in the educational process and overall school-community environment (Community Schools Forward, 2023). In community school models such as UACS, it is a common practice to intentionally provide opportunities for young people to participate in program evaluation and development. The results of this study highlight young people's ability to critically reflect on their experience within the full-service UACS program and creatively express their insights, ideas, and memories through photographs. These findings have important implications for program development and evaluation. In this sense, Photovoice could be used as a means for both research and program evaluation in which children of various ages are sharing their perspectives and helping to plan during and after-school programming such as clubs or services. The participating children in this study shared more fond memories of social-emotional and communal learning than they did with any other aspect of the program, including program facets such as the highly sought after fun, engaging, and active clubs. Even when academic disciplines such as math and reading were mentioned in two children's shared memories, the root of each story pertained to the child's self-confidence and some form of emotional support (e.g., from teachers, peers, youth workers, or positive self-talk). These findings were reiterated through the children's fond memories of relationships and circumstances that allowed them to enhance their social-emotional skills and nurture positive ways of communicating and interacting in a community environment. As other research has stated, incorporating social-emotional learning throughout all parts of the school day can be beneficial for students (Durlak et al., 2022; Maier et al., 2017).

Findings from this study also have implications for instructional approaches to teaching and learning. Instructional methodologies that emphasize the learning process rather than an end product (e.g., project and inquiry-based learning) could create space for young people to show their thinking and development over time. During the study, children's reflections about their experience in the full-service program were still emerging in the first two focus groups (weeks one and two). It was the act of taking photographs in and around the school that sparked other memories or gave form to their earlier ideas. Including more process-based learning could help facilitate dynamic collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity.

Conclusion

As was previously stated, children are capable of engaging in critical thinking, abstract, and reflexive work. In fact, the children in this study expressed their enjoyment of the process, pride in their creativity, and interest in helping their peers learn how to do Photovoice. Recommendations based on the children's reported preferences include the provision of increased collaborative and leadership opportunities for young people in and beyond schools. Incorporating leadership opportunities can be as simple as having older children help younger peers in academic or extracurricular activities.

The children in this study remembered many fun activities, but it was the loving interactions that were the highlight of their stories that they wanted to tell and retell and invite in others to participate. My experience with these six children was a friendly reminder that activities begin and end, but positive, loving interactions last forever.

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