

Images of Joy: Preservice Teachers' Evolving Reflections on the Actions of Black Children in Early Childhood Classrooms

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Abstract

This article explores the impact of critical, humanizing pedagogies in early childhood education by focusing on the joyful experiences of Black children in PK-2 classrooms. Through the use of photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), a participatory research method, senior-level undergraduate early childhood education teacher candidates documented and analyzed expressions of joy among their students. The research aims to counteract implicit biases and stereotypes that often criminalize Black youth by highlighting joy as an expression of intellect, curiosity, delight, pride, and self-expression. The study's findings demonstrate that engaging future educators in critical reflection and culturally sustaining practices can shift perceptions, challenge assumptions, and foster more inclusive educational environments. By emphasizing the power of joy in learning, the study underscores the importance of adopting humanizing practices in early childhood education to support the holistic development of all children.

Keywords: Black joy, early childhood, humanizing pedagogies, photo voice

Introduction

Early education represents the most critical period of intellectual development and social emotional growth in the life of a child. During the first five years of life, when brain development is most salient, children require support in developing interpersonal skills that affect learning as well as the relationship skills necessary for future success (Morales-Murillo, García-Grau, & Fernández-Valero, 2020). Cultural differences between early childhood educators and their students can influence the style, method, manner, and perceived need for academic or social emotional support offered to children (Swanson, 2015). Researchers have hypothesized that implicit bias and racialized stereotypes can in part account for existing disparities in the discipline and punishment of young Black and White children in early educational settings (Blackson et. al, 2022). Black preschoolers are more frequently disciplined for behaviors identified by subjective judgment (e.g., defiance or disrespect) and are 4 times more likely to be suspended than White children (Gilliam et. al, 2016). Early childhood educators have the power to disrupt widely held notions that stigmatize Black youth and position them as more violent, disruptive, and threatening than their white peers. Centering the joyful and dynamic dispositions of Black children can serve as a humanizing, culturally sustaining practice and heighten awareness of implicit biases that criminalize Black youth.

This study seeks to highlight the joyful experiences of Black children in early childhood classrooms. Specifically, it illustrates how novice educators, grounded in critical, humanizing pedagogies, interpret and document expressions of joy in PK-2 educational settings. Acting as both participants and advocates, teacher candidates take and analyze photographs of Black youth as a means of documenting candidates' developing understanding of joy as an expression of intellect, curiosity, delight, pride and self-expression in young children of color.

Literature Review

Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy highlights education as a catalyst for social change and transformation. It fosters a participatory approach that empowers marginalized communities by encouraging critical thinking, social awareness, and active participation in the world around them. Freire argues that education should not be a process of transferring knowledge from teacher to student but a collaborative effort where both parties learn from each other, fostering critical consciousness. Also central to Freire's pedagogy is the belief that education should be a practice of freedom, empowering individuals to question the status quo and transform their realities. By emphasizing dialogue and critical thinking, Freire's methods aim to cultivate an educational environment where learners become co-creators of knowledge and active participants in their own liberation. His ideas have had a profound impact on educational theory and practice, inspiring numerous educators and activists to integrate principles of equity, justice, and critical reflection into their teaching. Inspired by Freire's critical pedagogy, this study encourages analytical thinking, social consciousness, and active engagement among preservice teachers, thereby advancing fairness, justice, and challenging existing power structures.

Photovoice

Photovoice, a participatory research method, aligns with Freire's principles by using photography to record and reflect the strengths or concerns in a community; promote critical dialogue through photographs; and impart societal change (Wang & Burris, 1997). It is grounded in three fields of study- critical pedagogy, feminism and visual research, and acts as a platform for members of a given community to share their lived experiences as they seek to identify needs and impart relevant change (Malka, 2022). The photovoice process "is designed to document the issues that emerge in its members' daily lives, through photography and narrative writing, which systematically collects and builds a database of knowledge and lived experience" (Malka, 2022, p. 5). As a research methodology, photovoice has garnered successful outcomes related to critical reflection and instructional practice within the fields of education, health and social sciences, and social work (Gutierrez & Wolff, 2017; Malka, 2022; Shelagh, Willows, Nation & Jardine, 2015). It employs photography as a strategy to empower individuals to capture and share their experiences and perspectives. This method facilitates critical reflection and dialogue, making it a powerful tool for promoting social change (Wang & Burris, 1997). By engaging participants in the documentation and analysis of their own lives, photovoice enables them to highlight issues that matter to them and advocate for improvements.

Incorporating photovoice into critical pedagogy provides a visual dimension to Freire's dialogical approach, fostering deeper engagement and understanding. This method not only amplifies marginalized voices but also encourages collective action towards addressing systemic inequalities. By engaging participants in the documentation and analysis of their own lives, photovoice enables them to highlight issues that matter to them and advocate for improvements.

Methodology

This study took place in a mid-sized liberal arts university located in the southeastern United States. The 29 participants were all senior level undergraduate early childhood education teacher candidates ranging in age from 21-36. The participants (22 White, 4 Black, and 1 Latina) were enrolled in a senior level seminar course that I taught during the first semester of their final year in an 8-semester early childhood educator preparation program. As director of the early childhood program, I was familiar with all of the participants and had taught, mentored, and nurtured a foundation and appreciation for humanizing pedagogies during their time in our program. While taking my course, participants were also beginning their yearlong internship placements. In addition to taking classes on campus, the participants spent 2.5 days each week in local classrooms. Their classrooms were located within 18 different schools spread out among 5 different school districts. The schools were diverse ethnically, economically, and geographically; 61% of the schools were classified as Title One and 50% of the schools were located in rural areas. The demographic makeup of students within the classrooms varied according to district as well.

The purpose of this research was to examine the lens through which future teachers view the actions of young Black children within school settings. My positionality is that of a Black woman deeply engaged in and committed to research centering the achievements and positive contributions of African Americans throughout history in education, literature, politics, civil, and community service. As such, I served as a participant researcher within the study. As part of the study, I asked the candidates to capture images depicting joy as expressed by the young children in their corequisite internship (student teaching) placements. The photovoice study was preceded by a series of four class sessions centered on equitable practices in early childhood education which included critical course readings and discussions, video recordings and digital images of children in early childhood settings, and references to current events involving the dehumanizing treatment of children of color engaged in typical, age-appropriate behaviors. Candidates reflected on the content of these sessions through the lens of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies which had been deeply embedded within the curricular content of their early childhood program of study from the previous seven semesters. Given that background, candidates captured their own images of joy and provided brief reflections on the meaning, purpose, and inspiration for the images they captured. The addition of an arts-based instructional task was intended to broaden and extend candidates' conceptualization of the content in a more abstract way. What emerged from the study was a set of photographs displaying varied expressions of joy that debunk the actions of Black and Brown children in educational settings as disruptive, disengaged, or defiant. Rather, the images considered children's perspectives of excitement and engagement in school.

Data Collection

All of the images collected during the study were taken digitally and submitted electronically. Each candidate submitted 3-5 pictures per week forming a collection of 119 images. Using

a categorical content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998), I reviewed and analyzed the collection in four steps (see table 1.)

Table 1
Steps and Corresponding Categories Developed

Step	Categories Developed	Explanation
1. Preliminary Impressions	Wonder, Clarification, Perspective, Candid vs. Posed, Quantity Step	Wonder: Initial reactions or questions about the data. Clarification: Need to clarify observations or data points. Perspective: Different viewpoints or interpretations of the data. Candid vs. Posed: Distinguishing between natural and staged interactions. Quantity: Noting the frequency or number of certain observations.
2. Recurring Themes	Classroom Activities, Student Responses, Teacher-Led Engagements, Self-Selected Activities	Classroom Activities: Activities observed within the classroom setting. Student Responses: Reactions or feedback from students. Teacher-Led Engagements: Interactions initiated by the teacher. Self-Selected Activities: Activities chosen by students themselves.
3. Core Categories	Expressions, Elements, Visual Cues, Materials Use, Collaboration	Expressions: Ways in which joy is expressed. Elements: Key components observed in the activities. Visual Cues: Non-verbal indicators of engagement or joy. Materials Use: How materials are utilized in activities. Collaboration: Instances of working together or cooperative learning.
4. Components of Joy	Intellect, Curiosity, Delight, Pride, Self-Expression	Intellect: Cognitive engagement and learning. Curiosity: Desire to explore and discover. Delight: Visible enjoyment and satisfaction. Pride: Sense of accomplishment and self-worth. Self-Expression: Individual expression of ideas and feelings.

Note. This table shows the development of categories at each step in the research process.

First, I viewed the collection of photographs holistically in order to develop a preliminary impression of the images. Next, I identified and coded recurring themes present within the collection. These themes included: classroom activities, student responses, teacher led engagements, self-selected activities, etc. Following this step, I grouped the various themes into core categories (i.e., expressions, elements, visual cues, material use, etc). In the final step of the analysis process, I synthesized the categories into components of joy. In the class session following the process, I presented the analysis cycle to teacher candidates for clarification and confirmation of their positionality and intent. I made adjustments to the categorization of two photos based on comments and feedback and feedback from the participants.

Joy in the Early Childhood Classroom

The results of the activity are presented below using the five major components of joy that candidates captured in their images: intellect, curiosity, delight, pride, and self-expression. The images and candidate reflections help contextualize the elements of joy as delineated in the activity results.

Intellect

For many of the images presented within the collection, joy was framed as an intellectual undertaking. In these photographs the subjects are seen engaged in cognitive pursuits ranging from informal assessments to floor puzzles and simple experiments at the science center. Figure 1 illustrates two complementary examples of intellectual joy. In the photograph on the left, a child is shown next to a figure she created using materials found in a STEM tub located in the classroom. The candidate who submitted the photograph explained that the joy expressed in the photograph came partially because the element of choice granted children the autonomy to select the center activity, they wish to pursue at specific times of the school day and this freedom typically generates excitement. In this case, the student selected a STEM tub and was joyful about the outcome of her creation, a cognitive and creative expression of her efforts. She found joy in constructing something tangible that both she and others could appreciate and enjoy.

The second picture in Figure 1 depicts a similar scene in which a student has produced a colorful model using materials contained in a math bucket. According to the teacher candidate who submitted this photograph, this student eagerly sought approval and admiration of her creation. She was excited to share it with the teacher candidate and explained how she had decided to arrange the display based on her desired result. The teacher candidate who submitted this photograph felt an overwhelming sense of joy coming from the typically reserved child.

Figure 1: *STEM Tub and Math Bucket Creations*



The photograph in Figure 2 was taken at the end of a lesson on different types of repeating patterns in math. It illustrates the intellectual joy that occurred in connection with an academic assessment of knowledge. The teacher candidate who took the picture had been working with her students on this topic for several days. For their final assessment, the teacher candidate asked students to create beaded bracelets representing a specific pattern type and they were elated to show off their knowledge. The teacher candidate writes:

This is a photo of some of my student's ABB pattern bracelets. This past week I taught a lesson on patterns. I actually used ideas from my workshop Wednesday assignment we did in early childhood math methods! The students absolutely loved it and could not wait to come over to my table to make their ABB pattern bracelet.

Figure 2: *ABB Pattern Assessment*



In the final example of intellectual joy, a young boy is seen wearing headphones and a big, wide grin (Figure 3). The teacher candidate who took this photo reported that this student was especially joyful about the opportunity to work on his school laptop. Laptop time is one of his favorite times of the day. Recalling a discussion that had occurred in the senior seminar course on the misinterpretation of joy as inappropriate classroom behavior, the candidate snapped this photo to show the diverse ways that joy can manifest itself during learning. She wrote, “Today my friend was excited about using his headphones for his laptop to get on Dreambox. I tried to capture this example of joy because it reminded me of the things we talked about in class and the ways that children of color are targeted for unfair reasons.”

Figure 3: *Headphone Heaven*



Curiosity

The second component of joy that appeared in many of the images that were submitted to the collection was curiosity. These photos portray a sense of wonder and intrigue as children explore and experiment with materials and ideas at school. The teacher candidates who took the photos displaying this element suggested that these photos expressed a sincere level of interest in the classroom lessons and school activities.

The first picture displaying the element of curiosity is found in Figure 4. Here, a pre-K student is shown experimenting with bubbles outside on the playground. She has a small wand and a bottle of bubble solution (not seen). She is pulling the bubble wand out of the bottle quickly to see if the bubbles will be the same or different than they were when she pulled the wand out slowly. This inquisitiveness and fascination continued for several minutes as the preschooler and her friend made discoveries about the ways bubbles work. The teacher candidate who took this photo recognized joy in the form of “wonder and excitement about learning.”

Figure 4: *Bubble Fun*



Another example of joy as curiosity occurred during a first-grade lesson on “tricky words.” Tricky words are words that cannot be decoded using traditional phonics rules. Beginning and emergent readers often struggle with these words due to their inconsistent, unpredictable nature. After teaching a lesson on tricky words, the teacher candidate who took this photo described students zealously searching for tricky words in their leveled reading books. Figure 5 shows a young girl curiously searching for tricky words while reading. The candidate noted the child’s “interest and perseverance” while seeking to find examples of the tricky words that had been highlighted during the shared reading mini lesson.

Figure 5: *Hunting down tricky words*



Delight

The third element of joy materialized in the form of delight. Teacher candidates captured examples of students expressing delight while participating in various activities throughout the school day. In the first example of delight shown in Figure 6, a student takes pleasure in enjoying the orange slices served for lunch in the cafeteria that day. According to the teacher candidate who submitted the photo, “orange smiles” served as tangible evidence of the delight young children demonstrated while eating lunch. Rather than viewing this expression as disruptive or off task, the candidate recognized it as a cheerful example of delight and enjoyment.

Figure 6: *Orange Smile*



One teacher candidate was fortunate enough to capture a picture of her students dancing in class as she gave them an opportunity to “get their wiggles out” during her lesson. Recognizing the need for young children to engage in active and multimodal learning, the teacher provided time for students to move freely to a musical video she played as they occupied different spaces in the classroom. The picture captured by the teacher candidate shows evidence of delight as the children used their bodies to express the enthusiasm and exhilaration created by the music.

Figure 7: *Dance Break*



Pride

The fourth element of joy that developed through the review of the candidates’ photographs was pride. Many of the photographs submitted to the collection portrayed students proudly smiling as they relished the joy of a completed assignment or task. In addition to the overall prevalence of pride associated with the accomplishment of an activity, a subtheme or interconnected thread became evident in each of the pictures that fell within the pride element of joy. All of these pictures showed children demonstrating pride in intellectual endeavors that afforded them opportunities to be creative and express individuality. This trend is evident in Figure 8 where we see a young boy proudly displaying a “clever cat” illustration he created while learning about the letter C. The teacher candidate responsible for taking this picture commented about the boy’s sense of satisfaction and joy based on his individualized rendition of clever cat. The student chose to create his particular model and had the flexibility to create it based on his preference. Likewise, in Figure 9 a different student is shown with a pencil drawing. The teacher candidate taking the photo described the student as “really proud and smiley” as he “happily display[ed] a picture he drew of Mr. Hat.” In both images, like the many others that were submitted and fell within this category, we see joy expressed as an amalgamation of pride and autonomy.

Figure 8: *Clever Cat*

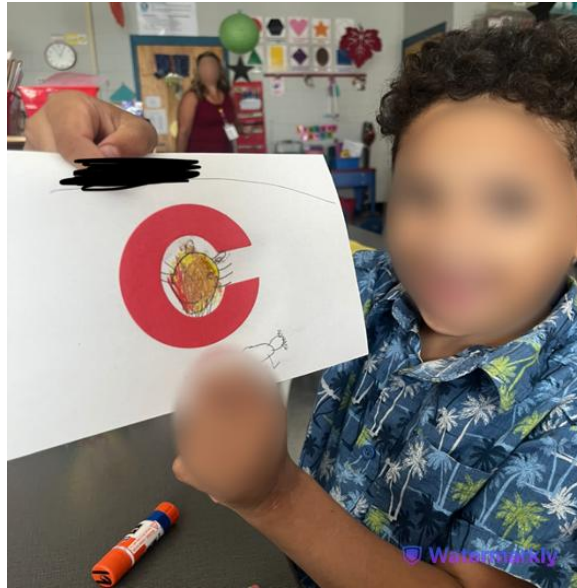
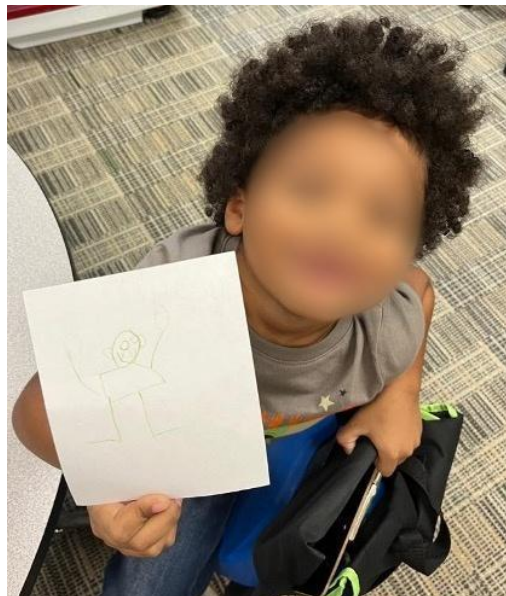


Figure 9: *Mr. Hat*



Self-Expression

The final element of joy illustrated in the images was self-expression. In these photographs, young children show off their unique personalities including likes and dislikes, hobbies, clothing preferences, and friendships. In many of the examples submitted to the collection, children were able to bring funds of cultural and personal knowledge in the classroom as part of learning. Teacher candidates described examples of joy in which children used self-expression to teach others about themselves and take on leadership roles. Figure 10 shows two girls dressed in superhero clothes

expressing their “strength as the characters Owlette and Wonder Woman.” In her reflection on the experience and the choice to include this photo as evidence of joy, the teacher candidate taking the photo explained how excited the girls were to wear their outfits on Superhero Day, embody characteristics of their selected superhero, and tell others about why they chose to be a specific superhero.

Figure 11: *Superheroes*



Figure 12 displays another young girl expressing herself through playdough as she shows off a model she made to match her outfit. The teacher candidate in this classroom recalled how “excited the student had been to wear her pumpkin shirt to school” as she “made several references to it throughout the day.” During free choice centers, she took advantage of the opportunity to create her own pumpkin patch as a personal expression of her style, artistry, and interest in pumpkins.

Figure 12: *Pumpkin Pairs*



Discussion

As evidenced in the examples included above, using photovoice as a critical contemplative curricular innovation can serve as both a literal and figurative tool for reframing students in powerful ways. As a literal reframing, photovoice places the power of observation and documentation in the hands of participants allowing them to capture their own perspectives and experiences visually. Photographs can challenge existing narratives and highlight aspects that might otherwise be overlooked or misunderstood. Likewise, photovoice develops visual literacy as participants learn to communicate and interpret meaning through images- a critical skill in a media-rich world where visual communication is prevalent. It encourages personal reflection and as participants are encouraged to examine identities and experiences in critical contemplative ways.

More broadly speaking, photovoice serves to challenge stereotypes and allow participants to present their realities in ways that question assumptions and misconceptions. By sharing their own visual narratives, students can figuratively reframe how they are seen by teachers, peers, and the broader community. Moreover, photovoice highlights strengths rather than deficits and stimulates dialogue that builds empathy and fosters inclusivity. In this way, critical contemplative curricular innovations such as photovoice demonstrate the role that art can play in healing, theory and practice. As teacher candidates develop their identities as educators, exposure to critical pedagogies can empower them to dispute false conceptions, shift perceptions, and learn to foster more inclusive and empathetic educational environments within their future classrooms.

Conclusion

The photovoice study described in this article serves as a meaningful strategy for highlighting the joyful experiences of young children of color in early childhood classrooms and reframing perspectives of traditionally marginalized populations for candidates entering the teaching profession. At a time when the criminalization of Black children is rampant, reframing our outlook on what constitutes joy for all children is a necessary practice. Photovoice can be used as a powerful tool to document the experiences of all children as they interact with and engage in cognitive processes that support growth. Moreover, it can transform the perspectives and professional development of teacher candidates as they challenge preconceived notions, fostering a more inclusive and equitable approach to education. Expressions of joy are unique, multifaceted, and abundant in early childhood classrooms. It is our duty to normalize, recognize and respond appropriately to these often-overlooked gems.

As one teacher candidate wrote in her reflection:

I have observed so much joy inside and outside of the classroom. On the playground, I am able to talk to students about their thoughts, interests, families, and questions. This is where I have strengthened my relationships with students. One student included in the picture finds so much joy in telling me jokes every day at recess. Another student is "teaching" me how to tie my shoes in a new way. I have found that children find joy in the smallest and simplest things, which is definitely something to learn from.

For our youngest learners, having educators who are steeped in critical contemplative pedagogy can transform their education experiences both intellectually and intrapersonally. Educators of

young children have an obligation to adopt the humanizing practices that center kindness, compassion, and joy. Using art as a healing practice to identify and document joy in the early childhood classroom can help children experience education in ways that nurture and support their self-worth and identities. In this way, art education can serve as a conduit for change and the implementation of critical contemplative practices for all.

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