

# SUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVES ON THE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

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**Abstract:** The effective action research requests and involves innovative and sturdy strategies to discover and to understand social life. Visual methodologies (as Photovoice) can provide the novelty and the engagement to support the effectiveness of the research, to support the interpretative phenomenological analysis and to enable it for deeper understanding and a foundation for appropriate interventions also. As a participatory method, Photovoice is considered an innovative approach and its use in Republic of Moldova is unique, as it is the context: a community development and educational reform project happened in rural communities with various socioeconomic profiles, with different degrees and on different levels of marginality, vulnerability, social and economic under-development. We have chosen individuals from four of the communities involved to find out how they see their role and the collective participation to support education. As the projects which is related to, the study gives insights on the functions of education and about how the things can be done. In all cases, for all the communities, the education (and the school also) seems to value the bond with the community, with its past (in terms of elders, customs and the habitat: nature, wildlife etc.), with the local identity. The emergence of community mechanisms to rediscover local identity creates the premises for a more consistent support from the community in future community development efforts or educational reforms.

**Keywords:** Photovoice, community engagement, community development, cohesion, identity, Republic of Moldova

#### Introduction

The use of visual methodologies in the field of education research is a novelty that can contribute to innovative approaches. The methodological foundation of photovoice is closely linked to Caroline Wang and her collaborators (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997; Wang, Yuan, & Feng, 1996).

Photovoice is described by relevant literature as a participatory action research method in which subjects use cameras to photograph individuals, contexts or situations they consider representative for peculiar aspects of their individual and/or social lives

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(Harley, 2012; Sutton-Brown, 2014). The term VOICE is in fact an acronym that designates *Voicing Our Individual and Collective Experience*, which synthesizes the nature and purpose of the method, i.e. to communicate individual and collective experiences.

The key feature of photovoice is that participants can select and capture on site, with no external interventions, life experiences, actions or emotional states. Applying this methodology gives access to objective (activities, acts, persons) and subjective (thoughts, emotional reactions) data regarding study participants, thus contributing to an in-depth understanding of human behavior.

The epistemological foundation of photovoice consists of three theoretical perspectives: (a) feminist theories; (b) education for critical consciousness and (c) documentary photography. Each of these conceptual models emphasizes the role of the individual in the process of producing change and driving community development. The "education for critical consciousness" model emphasizes that the individual-community dyad can contribute to social equity. Critical dialogue, as a structural element of this model, enables the community to identify, discuss and design remedial activities for issues that affect individual and collective well-being. Feminist theories that postulate the role of women in restoring gender equality are also consistent with this concept. Documentary photography supports vulnerable populations or groups in capturing and subjectively expressing personal and community life histories. In doing so, individual stories can become instruments with significant psychological and political-administrative impact (Kuo, 2007).

Traditionally, photovoice has been applied to investigate disadvantaged populations (marginalized, stigmatized, with a low educational status) (Hernandez, Shabazian, & McGrath, 2014). Following the developments proposed by Wang and Burris, the method started being used in the medical field (Allen & Hutchinson, 2009; Burke & Evans, 2011; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, Nieuwendyk, 2011; Shea, Poudrier, Thomas, Jeffery & Kiskotagan, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997). Graziano (2004) states that the method's growing popularity is due to the accuracy of the collected data. Consequently, we are witnessing an extensive use of photovoice in sociology (Barlow & Hurlock, 2013), anthropology, economics and human geography (Guell & Ogilvie, 2015, Power, Norman & Dupré, 2014).

Simmonds, Roux, and Ter Avest (2015, p. 35) emphasize that photovoice promoters have significantly contributed to the development of methodological features that support subjects in documenting their own life experiences, strengths or weaknesses of the communities they live in, which are then transferred to an informational repository that stimulates reflection and can influence political decisions. Although the method's utility is visible, Sutton-Brown (2014) sets out a series of arguments to highlight the lack of methodological coherence in applying photovoice. Ciolan and Manasia (2017) propose a photovoice adaptation for educational context-based use.

Starting from the methodological framework originally proposed by Wang and Burris (1990), we highlight the following series of phases in applying photovoice: (1) selection of the research topic; (2) recruitment of participants; (3) informational group meetings; (4) data collection (taking photos); (5) photography analysis; (6) photo exposure. We

propose a discussion of the outlined phases, each one consisting of two sections: a general approach and a part focused on the study conducted within context (The EDUrabil+ project). This mixed approach allows us to summarize relevant literature recommendations and to seamlessly introduce them in the study covered further.

Setting the Stage for Community Participation: The EDUrabil+ Project. EDUrabil is a seria of socio-educational projects ran in Republic of Moldova by CATALACTICA Association for Socio-Economic Development and Promotion from Spring of 2014 to the late Fall of 2017. The main goal of the first one was to support nationwide the educational reforms in Moldova. The following (branded as EDUrabil +) aimed to empower various communities to identify and to enable strategies to mitigate the local issues, engaging parents and local resources using innovative and sustainable approaches. This study has been enclosed into the last project, "Engaging the Community to Support Education".

# Methodology

#### Participants

Subjects belonging to a specific population are selected to contribute to the data collection and analysis process (Ciolan and Manasia, 2017). Participants in a photovoice research have the responsibility to take photos that will be the subject of further discussion and analysis. Increasing awareness about the project is the first step in recruiting participants. Thus, it is important that the opportunity to participate in such a project be known to community members. The relevant literature operates with two categories of methods that can be used in the consultation process, i.e. (a) conventional methods and (b) unconventional methods (Wang & Burris, 1997).

While conventional methods feature posters, flyers, e-mail marketing campaigns, unconventional methods can involve so-called "snowball" selection processes (researchers can identify a group of people interested in participating, who, in turn, recruit other people). Sutton-Brown (2014) states that, regarding the selection criteria, various techniques can be used.

Given the particularities of the communities in which the project was implemented, the author employed a "purposive sampling" selection process. The aim was to select a heterogeneous group of subjects, in terms of gender, age and place of residence. Thus, 13 subjects ( $M_{age} = 33,4,SD = 15,8$ ) were selected and actively participated in all stages of the study. Participation in the study was voluntary, and subjects were able to withdraw from the group at any time. At first, participants filled an informed consent form, which guaranteed participants that the photographs would be used solely for the purpose stated in the project. The 10 women and 3 men belong to 4 communities (6 from Lupa Recea, 3 from Sireți, 2 from Bădragii Vechi and 2 in Fîrlădeni).

#### Data collection procedure

Related to the longitudinal design of the study, data collection is a process characterized by a certain duration. The time frame set for taking photos allows participants to represent a vast array of situations and experiences via images. The duration of the data collection process depends on the research topic and on the nature of the implemented project. The completion of this stage leads to the collection of a significant amount of visual and narrative data.

For the present study, participants took photos reflecting the community's involvement as an educational factor over the course of four weeks. We believe that the optimal duration of the data collection process would have been between six and eight weeks, which is why we consider this to be one of the limitations of the present study. Participants continuously built a collection of images and added descriptions that were subsequently analyzed. Thus, a total of 78 images and descriptions were collected.

#### Data analysis

Given the participatory nature of the photovoice methodology, the data collection and analysis phases overlap, and the subjects become co-researchers. After the collection of the photographs, a preliminary analysis was carried out in order to create an interview guide that would support the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

During the interview, the subjects were exposed to all the photographs. The subject selected 5 photos based on the criterion of personal and collective relevance. The selected photos were discussed based on the SHOWeD technique (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang, 1999), widely associated with PV use. Thus, participants answered questions meant to guide the discussion towards the assessment of learning patterns: "What do you see in this photo?" / "What do you think is actually happening in this photo?" / "What does this photo tell us about the community in which the picture was taken?" / "Why do you think this (positive or negative) situation exists?" / "Do you think something could be done in this regard (to improve or change things)?"

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The analysis of the interviews was carried out by means of IPA. The first step was to read and re-read photo descriptions and interview transcripts. Relevant quotes were selected and noted during the second phase of the IPA. Descriptive, interrogative and reflective comments were associated with each quote. Each text sequence was synthesized in a single text item. Items were then grouped into clusters via a polarization process (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The results of the analysis are presented and discussed in the results section.

Following the completion of group interviews, four photos were selected from each community to be displayed in a caravan. Short descriptions, selected from the texts written by the subjects who had taken the photos, accompanied each picture. Figures show examples of photographs taken during this study. The photo caravan's purpose was two-fold. On the one hand, it aimed to raise awareness on the need for active participation of the community in the educational process for children, adolescents and young people, and, on the other hand, it aimed to raise awareness among a wider audience on the needs of the study subjects' communities.



Figure 1<sup>1</sup>. One of the photographs displayed in the caravan



Figure 2<sup>2</sup>. Instance of photograph reflecting community engagement in the value transmission process

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "Arduous road". Through mud and puddles the people go, you can't overcome. I think authorities may have to something to solve this problem.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> "A business card from the ancestors. A business card from the ancestors is reflected by promoting the community folk costume".

## Results

#### Bădragii Vechi

The project developed in the Bădragii Vechi community (Courage, Enthusiasm, Health, Wellbeing – Bădragii Vechi Sports and Educational Center) aimed to involve the community to support educational activities for and via exercise. The project's secondary objective was to promote a healthy lifestyle.

According to the participants who took pictures, the project acted as a binder and managed to create a "sports family", as one of the subjects put it:

At the end of a sports competition, everyone, regardless of age, feels they are part of a family."



Figure 3. Photos taken in the Bădragii Vechi community

The photos capture situations that converge towards the idea of *community cohesion* and the need to find activities that enhance intergenerational collaboration. Thus, education restores one of its traditional functions, i.e. the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next.

"We needed to do this... to do things together... grownups and children. After all, school is not only one that can provide an education."

Involvement in a project that promotes physical activity and exercise as vectors of a healthy lifestyle manages to add a bit of dynamism to the community's daily activities:

"Both children and grownups have become interested in having healthy lifestyles. [...] I think everyone is happy to be part of the project. It's something else ..."

Another photo supports the ideas of novelty and change that the project manages to instill in the Bădragii Vechi community.



Figure 41. Photo that suggests the project has triggered engagement in beneficial activities

The photos strengthen the idea that the implementation of the project, on the one hand, creates opportunities for establishing intergenerational relationships and, on the other hand, supports the use of certain community resources:

"It's been a while since I've seen children on the sports ground. They spend a lot of time on their computers. They don't play together that much anymore."

We believe that our project does face certain challenges in terms of sustainability. The role of the local facilitator can be expanded by planning non-formal activities that use the available sports equipment. Also, developing the curriculum (e.g. optional classes) may target designing learning experiences that focus on and develop intergenerational cohesion.

<sup>1 &</sup>quot;The spare time... booked with sport. The youth from the village, in their spare time, do games even on the schoolground. "

#### Fîrlădeni

The project implemented by the Fîrlădeni community (Promoting aesthetic education and harnessing the value of the local culture) aimed to discover and promote certain aspects that define the local cultural identity.

Some of the photos focus on community issues with which the public administration or locals have trouble dealing. One such issue consists of stray dogs.

"I took this photo because I liked majestic gaze. I don't know if it has an owner. There were many around these parts. People would come and just leave them here."



Figure 5. Photos taken in the Fîrlădeni community

The transfer of experiences and values appears to be one of the main functions that education acquires, and the community enhances it. In fact, identifying significant goals from a socio-historical perspective can contribute to the reconstruction of a community's identity. The history of the place is brought forward to present day and strengthens the collective consciousness and the sense of belonging.

"I photographed this well (see Figure 6) on a very hot day because it needs to be repaired. People who pass by quench their thirst with cold water from this holy spring that was once dug by villagers. Over time, it can become a local historical monument. It is a traditional draw well. You don't see these anymore."



Figure 6. The well – image suggesting the community's need to reiterate and establish local symbols

The nostalgic vision of the traditional village is also complemented by the possibility to train children and adolescents in making traditional clothes. For the community, they are like a "visiting card from our ancestors", as one of the study participants, C.A., puts it. Therefore, the role of education is to create and develop a connection to one's ancestors, and traditional wear is an important part of the process (see Figure 7).



Figure 71. Three-point handkerchief – image that suggests the need to pass on intergenerational values and local identity elements

The explanations and stories accompanying the handkerchief and shirt-making process complete the cultural heritage picture.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "The three-point handkerchief. Nothing is more beautiful than a three-point handkerchief embroidered with ornaments collected from our elders in the community."

"Yes, I told them where these motifs come from. Someone from the ethnographic center came here and told them about it. We explained why and how we sew them."

According to participants, these activities manage to bring the old village back to life:

"I was watching them work and I could see myself when I was a kid. It was as if time stood still."

Beneficiaries assuming a new cultural identity appears to be a consequence of the project's implementation. Thus, adolescents who were actively involved in traditional wear-making activities proposed introducing the traditional Romanian shirt (ii) as a school uniform, which would contribute to creating an organizational identity of the school, consistent with the local culture. We consider this to be a promising proposal that has the potential to ensure the project's sustainability. To the same end, students could start getting involved in digital marketing activities, e.g. promoting traditional wear in virtual environments (social networks, virtual stores etc.).

#### Lupa Recea

The Lupa Recea community aims to revitalizing its former school, which was closed down following school network optimizations. Educational afterschool activities were planned and carried out here, and students could enjoy a multidisciplinary approach to interesting topics.



Figure 8. Photos taken in the Lupa Recea community

The approach the project proposes is based on the principle of reciprocity: redirecting an intellectual capital (e.g. skills, know-how, abilities), acquired as a result of active participation in education, towards community members.

Some of the photos discussed by participants highlight the "root metaphor", explained by the need to bring back to the community what it, in turn, provided some of its members (see Figure 9):

"This is where we spent our childhood, where we can now share beautiful memories, where we can smell flowers, ripe grapes and forest acacia flowers... up the hill you can see an old lady who tends to her garden and a child who carries water from the spring. Childhood is and will certainly remain our most precious time spent here on Earth."



Figure 9. Childhood land – image that suggests community attachment

Remembering childhood as a "magical time" motivates the community to create authentic life experiences for the children and adolescents in Lupa Recea. Consequently, another study participant states:

"My native village is small, but full of hardworking people. We are surrounded by forests, orchards and vineyards... I value the village, so, whenever I leave, I happily come back because this is where I've had and I'm still having wonderful moments with the people I love."

Moreover, one of the personal development activities aimed to cultivate attachment and respect for the participants' native village (Figure 10), validating the aforementioned reciprocity principle.



Figure 10. Personal development activity "Let's love our village"

The village theme is also represented via projective-imaginative activities (see Figure 11). For those involved in the planned non-formal education activities, the relevance of this topic (native village) is capital and apparent: "they must take this village further!"



Figure 11<sup>1</sup>. Image that illustrates the concern to build a shared local identity

Developing a daytime education center was a shared motivational mechanism that inspired locals to support the "school after school" idea (see Figure 12). According to the opinions expressed during the group analysis, the project managed to make the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Development activity "My village in the future!"

community more aware of the children commuting to the communal school (Codreanca). The village lacked both a school and the rituals of walking to and from the school, i.e. the life rhythm a school timetable sets, and the sense and direction that educational activities give to generations of students.

There is a wide range of intellectual, social and personal development activities, which is also reflected by the photographs collected during the study.



Figure 12<sup>1</sup>. Image that suggests community member engagement in developing the Education Center

## Sireti

The photos taken and analyzed in the Sireti community converge towards the idea of a project that has brought together various topics: developing environmental beliefs and behaviors, nature-oriented education, attachment to one's native village, and issues related to the intellectual education of the younger generation (e.g. fun math).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Parents from Lupa Recea are preparing the working spaces, making voluntarily restorations.

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As we noticed when presenting photos from other communities, the idea that the village is a space rich in symbols and meanings also appears in the photographs taken in Sireţi:

"Cultivating the love for one's native village, for peaceful nature, for transcendental places with rich history... the connection between generations... These emotions strengthen the idea that as long as people come together... all is not lost!!!"

Photograph descriptions present the village as a "piece of heaven" and associate it with a source of positive emotions: "Anyone can find peace of mind here... freedom... happiness... joy...".



Figure 13. Photographs taken in the Sireti community

Another photo set complements the romanticized vision of the village with an idealized view of the child, invariably associated with innocence (see Figure 14).



Figure 14<sup>1</sup>. Suggestive photo for a child's image in the community

The village and childhood picture are complemented by nature, which is a fundamental element. The unanimous opinion is that the role of education is also materialized by cultivating the interest of children and adolescents for the beauty of nature. The motivation is expressed firmly by the phrase: "We are nothing without nature."

We deem it necessary and relevant to center the project around a theme that can generate a visible impact on the community that consists of genuine learning experiences for project beneficiaries. This multidimensional approach can affect the indepth examination of the themes and hamper the project's sustainability.

#### Limitations

One of the main limitations we identified is the time frame allocated to the data collection process. We previously stated that the optimal duration for a study based on the photovoice methodology was 6-8 weeks, given the project's objectives.

Photo analysis group meetings were held during networking meetings, which limited analysis time. A part of the subjects who attended group discussions were also involved in other activities (planned to be held simultaneously). We believe this interfered with the in-depth analysis of the experiences captured in the photographs.

Additionally, the location where the analysis meetings were held favoured interference by other people or activities and interrupted the analytical process.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "Innocence and purity."

The last possibly hindering element consists of the distance between communities and the difficulty in planning frequent meetings to facilitate the photograph creation and analysis process. In general, information sessions are complemented by facilitation sessions that are held simultaneously with data collection.

#### Conclusions

All he EDUrabil projects aimed (among other issues) to enable or reenable the bonds in the community and the community tissue. We considered a prerequisite for any intervention, action or measure related to the social life and to increase the social development before the economic development. Based on the previous research and interventions (Cace, Preotesi, 2016, p. 18), we considered Republic of Moldova being in the second of the five stages of growth: preconditions of take-off (Rostow, 1971). One of the key elements is the change of the structure and social mobility through the national identity and shared interests' development.

The research has revealed every community has its own model of bonding. The structure of community, the agents of change and the specific of change explain the differences but there are also elements which made us think about a pattern exposed through the photovoice methodology.

At Bădragii Vechi are people doing things together in the project because of tradition of sport contests or simply activities taken places in the recent history (a "sports family"). The community cohesion could be observed at the football matches (when it happened) and in the preparing activities which preceded the Center existence. These activities enhance intergenerational collaboration, highlighting the knowledge transfer from one generation to the next.

At Fîrlădeni, the local cultural identity issue become stronger than the public management issues dealing. The collective consciousness relies on the traditions, the handicrafts and cultural products. They provide are consistent with the sense of belonging and the vehicle which link the history of the place to the present, making it significant.

For the Lupa Recea locals the fortune is the intellectual capital, managed as a part of the active participation in education of the community members. This capital supposes exchange and reciprocity, supervision and maintenance (even on the level or property, the former school being an asset which need maintenance). The revitalized school (a devaluated place after being previously closed) and the nature are landmarks are part of an inextricable attachment.

Sireți is the closest community to the new and dynamic environment, Chisinău. As the most recent involved in the EDUrabil projects, mixes various and wide expectations related to the societal trends. Next to the urban, the richness of symbols and meanings unveils nature as a fundamental and never-ending element, subject of community interest and bonds.

Here occur some general reflections, valid for all the communities studied. We may say about socio-historical approach, a nostalgic vision of the traditional village or the old village, as it has been perceived and represented by the locals. To bring it back to life seems to be a core for all the communities and for all the subjects involved in the process. The new is the old or it is built on the old, at least. This perspective is common, despite the variations of the socio-educational projects developed in the communities. Some are more applied (as Fîrlădeni, targeting also skills and market opportunities), some focuses on leisure and socialization (as Bădragii Vechi), some are recovering the community demand for education for children and even adult training (as Lupa Recea).

The process of the community development begins with the reconstruction of the community identity. In all our cases (as it results from the Photovoice data) is it still a cultural identity discovery and a cultural assuming process. Or it may be the need or the search for the comfort, for safety or for the functioning resources (Bauman, 2001, p. 111). But these are only premises for a more consistent support from the community for future development efforts.

Although we cannot expect a substantial evolution of the community-based educational paradigm, the carried-out experience reveals an increased consistency of actions that respond to that identity issue, then changing needs and local vulnerabilities regarding the way the education act is done, its purpose and content.

For instance, it seems the educational reforms and the community development have to overcome, in a way or another, this community identity issue. And then step further to face and deal with the nowadays society educational challenges.

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