

## How Do Young Children Learn about Photography?

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### Abstract

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Photography is increasingly used in research with children and as a learning tool in early childhood classrooms. However, very few studies have examined how young children encounter and experience the use of cameras. This paper describes a project conducted over a three-month period in which a class of 31 five- to six-year-old children in a Hong Kong preschool learned to use digital cameras. The project had three stages: (1) learning to use a camera, (2) practising photography skills, and (3) expression through photography. The children's experiences of learning to use digital cameras throughout the project were documented in field notes, photos taken by the children, and photos and video taken by the researchers. The project demonstrated the potential and possibilities of using photography in research and learning in early childhood education. The substantive steps used in this project to introduce photography to children can be a reference point for both teachers and researchers.

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**Keywords:** photography; children's perspectives; research with children

### 1. Background

Photography is increasingly used in research with children (e.g. Einarsdottir, 2005), and as a learning tool in early childhood classrooms and other venues (e.g. Blagojevic & Thomas, 2008; Byrnes & Wasik, 2009; Schiller & Tillett, 2004; Pappamibieli & Knight, 2016). As a research method, photography allows children's views to be expressed without the limitations of their competencies in language and drawing. Photography is more often used as a data-gathering method. Researchers have used photography in various ways to include children's voices in their studies. In some studies, photos of children or their works have been used to stimulate discussion when interviewing young children (e.g. Lind, 2005; Smith, Duncan & Marshall, 2005). Several researchers have asked children to take photographs based on a particular topic or task (e.g. Britsch, 2019; Einarsdottir, 2005; Keat, Strickland & Marinak, 2009), with the images in the photographs being considered in the analysis and further discussed in interviews. Among these studies, the emphasis has been on how children reveal and express themselves visually. Children's understanding of or views on photography have not been sought.

As a learning tool, photography can motivate children to look more deeply or in different ways at a topic. Some previous studies describe children taking photographs (e.g. Blagojevic & Thomas, 2008; Byrnes & Wasik, 2009) whereas some only refer to using pictures of children in the learning process (e.g. Good, 2006). Some researchers see digital photography as part of information literacy or ICT learning in early childhood settings (e.g. Ching, Wang, Shih & Kedem, 2006; Schiller & Tillett, 2004). Schiller and Tillett (2004) reported the process of teaching seven- and eight-year-old children to use digital images and related ICT software in project work. These studies incorporated the learning process of using the camera, but focused more on the product of photography, i.e., the pictures taken.

Pyle (2013) critically reviewed numerous studies in photo elicitation and generated a multi-step photo elicitation method. From the photo elicitation literature, she found that children might not be familiar with the use of a camera. She therefore began her study by showing children how to use a camera so that they could provide 'more purposeful photographs during the actual photo-taking session' (Pyle, 2013: 1550). Britsch (2019) also let preschool children explore the camera before using the camera in conceptual science investigations.

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It is clear that the potential of photography as a learning and research tool has not been fully exploited. Little research has systematically analysed children's views as photographers or the learning process of using a camera. How do children learn to use a camera, technically and conceptually? How do children perceive photography and being a photographer? This project aimed to understand how young children develop their skills and concepts of using digital cameras. This paper documents the learning experiences of a group young children including how they progressed and perceived photography.

## 2. The project

Thirty-one children aged five to six years (13 boys and 18 girls) from a typical Hong Kong kindergarten participated in this study. The children had been studying in a half-day (3-hour) programme in the same kindergarten since the age of three. Over a three-month period, the research team visited the kindergarten two to three times per week (excluding the school holidays) to conduct the project, a total of 17 visits. To maximise the children's opportunity to use the digital camera, the group was divided into six subgroups of four to six children according to their daily classroom routine throughout the implementation of the project. To standardise the introduction to the basic function and operation of the digital camera, six digital cameras of the same model were used.

The project had three phases: (1) learning to use the camera (2) practising photography skills and (3) expression through photography. The children were taught about the basic operation of the digital camera and then provided with practice time. Afterwards, they were asked to take pictures to make a personal graduation album. Consent was sought from parents and the kindergarten before the project commenced and pseudonyms were assigned to the children at the beginning of the project. The entire project was documented by video, audio-taping, photos and field notes. Photos taken by the children were also used to illustrate their views and learning progress throughout the project.

### 2.1 Implementation

#### 2.1.1 Phase 1 *Learning to use the camera*

Each session had the following three components, implemented in a similar pattern: (1) introduction to new functions and/or concepts; (2) practising the function and/or concepts; and (3) reviewing the photos on a laptop computer. The progression and content of other learning activities were designed based on the children's performances after the introduction of the basic operational functions of the digital camera (on/off and shutter) in the first session.

In the first session, the researchers introduced the project to the children and asked them to share their experiences of using digital cameras. The children spoke more about their experiences of being photographed. Most of them had minimal experiences of being a photographer and using a digital camera. Some children described their experiences of using mobile phones to take photos. Some commented that adults and older children could take better pictures.

Amy: My elder sister can use the camera...but I cannot...

Researcher: Why?

Amy: The photos I took were not in a proper direction ...

Tom: Adults can take photos ... Children's hands shake ...

Then the children were introduced to the basic operational functions of the digital camera (on/off and shutter). They were asked to turn on the camera, take one photo of their friends and turn off the camera. During the practice, some of the children were excited and some were a bit nervous about using cameras. Some of them did not press hard enough on the shutter to take a photo or return the camera to the research team immediately after taking one photo.

Most of the children did not move around to take photos of their friends. Instead, they tried to keep their friends within the frame by instructing them to stand still or move forwards and backwards. As adults, we may find this scenario familiar in our daily experiences as the photographer or subject in a photo, for example, when group photos are taken.

While reviewing the photos taken by the children, it was noted that all pictures were taken in the same direction, horizontally. The children excitedly called out the names of the children who were in the pictures, but showed no interest in who the photographer was. When they saw that there was a child who was not totally in the frame or the picture was out of focus, they blamed the model for not being cooperative (see Plates 1 and 2).



Plate 1 One child is not totally within the frame. Photo taken by Cecil on Day 1.



Plate 2. Out of focus. Photo taken by Charles on Day 1.

The subsequent sessions were developed according to the children's performance in the first session. In the second session, the researcher showed the photos taken in the first session that had children out of frame and discussed how to take photos of others that included their whole body. Then, the children explored ways to take photos of the whole body of their friends. Some children noticed the effect of the distance between themselves as photographers and the models (see Plate 3), and the directions for using the camera (see Plate 4). When the children reviewed the photos, they started talking about who the photographer was and reflected on their discovery.



Plate 3a and b. Exploring the effect of distance between photographer and the model. Photos taken by James on Day 2



Plate 4a and b. Exploring the effect of changing the direction of the camera. Photos taken by Sammi on Day 2.

In the third and fourth session, the children were introduced to other functions of the digital camera, such as zooming in and out. They were also encouraged to move around an object to take photos from different angles (see Plates 5 and 6).



Plate 5a and b. Moving around an object to take photos from different angles. Photos taken by researcher on Day 3.



Plate 6a, b and c. Photos taken by children moving around an object to take photos from different angles. Photos taken by Ken on Day 4.

On Day 4, the children had grasped the skills for using the basic functions of the digital camera. Only a few photos from the fourth session were out of focus. Some children shared that the image would be too dark and blurry when zooming in. They also found that sometimes there was light reflection when taking a photo. While they conceived themselves as competent in taking photos, some children added that younger children might not be able to hold the camera well and might break it. Most of them did not know why people take photos.

### 2.1.2 Phase 2 Practising photography skills

During this stage, the children took photos freely within the kindergarten in groups. Over thirteen days, the children were given a different theme for each practice session. This exercise was designed to help children to develop meaning in the photos. Assistance was provided only when needed. As thirty children were using six digital cameras among the groups, they were asked to take a photo of their photographer ID card (a card with the child's photo and pseudonym given by the research team) before taking photos. Thus, the research team could distinguish the photos taken by each child.

It was observed that the children started to become familiar with the zoom in/out function. They started to notice and become concerned about the quality of the photos they took and the quality of the photos improved (for example fewer photos were taken out of focus). Plates 7 and 8 show photos taken by Icy on Day 5 and Day 10, respectively, to illustrate the improvement in the quality of her images.

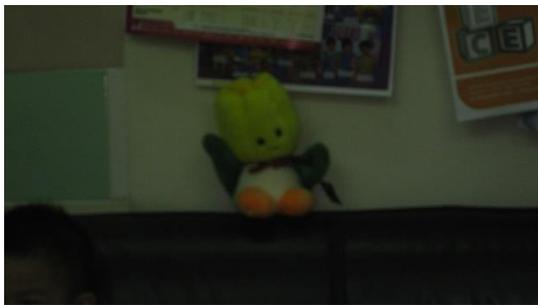


Plate 7a and b. Photos taken by Icy on Day 5.



Plate 8a and b. Photos taken by Icy on Day 10.

As the children became more confident in using the digital camera, they started to explore their surroundings with the camera. They took photos from different angles by changing the direction of the lens and shooting from a different position (Plates 9 and 10).



Plate 9a and b. Taking photos from different angles. Photos taken by researcher.



Plate 10a and b. Taking photos in different positions. Photos taken by researcher.

Some children tried to take photos of themselves (Plates 11 and 12).

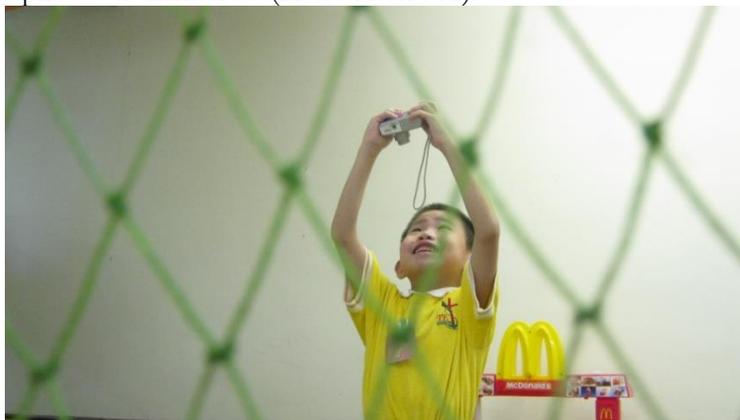


Plate 11. A child taking a selfie. Photo taken by researcher.



Plate 12a and b. Selfies taken by Ken on Day 8 and Day 17.

When the children reviewed the photos they took, they explained how they took pictures of themselves.

Pamela: To take picture of your own ... turn around the camera... turn the head (Researcher: you mean lens, right?) and hold it with both hands... then chi-cha and take the picture...

Ken: Our hands are not long enough, only if you have long hands... (Researcher: Why?) you will look smaller and better then... it is difficult to explain.

Germaine: Take the photo in front of the mirror...you can see yourself in the mirror... put the camera lower.

When the children reviewed the photos they had taken, they started to look at the content and quality of the photos. Their aesthetic senses were observed during the reviewing process. They showed sincere interest in discussing the reasons for blurred pictures and ways to improve. They also expressed much enthusiasm when sharing how they took the photos and what they wanted to tell in their photos. Furthermore, one child asked the researcher to teach them to use other functions of the digital camera in the next session.

Ken was keen to explore and discuss the effect of the photos.

Researcher: Why are things in this photo not clear?

Ken: I know, I know, you have to vertical ...that is ... the direction should be like this [demonstrating] ... then the house ... the roof will be all in[the frame]...

Ken: There is light in the mirror!? [The flash was on] ... you try to stop the flash, I think it is not good with the flash.

### 2.1.3 Phase 3 *Expression through photography*

The children were asked to make their own graduation album. They could take as many pictures as they liked. Then, the children reviewed the photos individually with the research team and selected the photos they wanted to be placed in the graduation album.

At this stage, most of the children handled the basic skills of photo taking well and could zoom in/out and take pictures from different angles and perspectives. The overall quality of their photos had greatly improved. Fewer photos were blurred or had targeted people out of frame. Through their photos and conversations, it was found that the children were concerned about the composition of the photo. They were conscious about what was included in the photos as well as the meaning behind the content. The collection of albums included photos of their displayed artwork and activity around the school, including people and learning areas they liked. The children explained to the research team that the photos recorded things that they wanted to remember. They would look at the album when they were in primary school next year.

To conclude the project, the children were asked about their overall experiences as photographers. They reported that they enjoyed the process. Although they expressed that they were able to use the camera, they commented that they had limited freedom to access the camera. They stressed that the ability to keep the camera safe was the key to deciding if younger children could use it. Heidi and Ken reported their experiences of photography, from photography skills to expression through photography.

Researcher: How do you take a good photo?

Heidi: Walk a bit further.

Researcher: Why?

Heidi: When you go a bit far away, you can see more things [On the screen].

Researcher: Any other way?

Heidi: It takes a long time to take good photos. You have to focus ... make sure the thing is in focus.

Researcher: Why did you take photo of Carmen?

Ken: She will go to AA primary school. I am not... I will go to BB primary school... there is a long stair... it will be hard to see her... I will not see her anymore.

Researcher: How about this photo of a guitar?

Ken: This guitar will be used in our graduation performance... I am not playing [with the guitar] ... I flip the blue flat... the sea... but I love to play guitar. I want to be a guitarist when I grow up.

The teachers of the participating children noted changes in the children throughout the project. They saw the growth of interest in photography among the group. However, they commented that it was not practically possible to let children use digital cameras at school due to classroom discipline.

### 3. Summary

This project acknowledged the competence of children and respected them as agents of learning. The children developed personal meaningfulness regarding photography. The project demonstrated the potential and possibilities of using photography in research and learning in early childhood education. To use photography and/or photos as a medium or springboard for children to learn and express themselves, the children need time to practice and pay attention to fully experience this medium. The substantive steps used in this project to introduce photography to children can be a reference point for both teachers and researchers.

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