Crop, zoom, delete: experiments with children as classroom photographers

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Keywords: children, experimentation, ethnographic research, classrooms, photography

Recommended Citation:

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Crop, zoom, delete: experimenting with children as classroom photographers

Paulina Semenec

Abstract:
What happens when children become ‘classroom photographers’? This paper traces the often strange encounters that photo-making practices with children invites. Drawing on data from a year-long ethnographic study, I suggest that becoming attuned to encounters and processes of image-making (as opposed to the image itself) can provide researchers with new ways of engaging with children; ones in which the traditional binaries between the ‘child’ and ‘researcher’ are always in the process of being re-imagined.
This récit is informed by many encounters with children as photographers during my year-long ethnographic study in a grade 3 classroom in Vancouver, BC. The focus of my research was on the everyday practices of social and emotional learning programs (such as mindfulness education). As part of my fieldwork, I was engaged in taking photographs both for my own documentation purposes, and for the classroom blog the teacher had organized at the beginning of the school year. While taking photos in the classroom, I quickly realized that the children were fascinated by my camera (both my digital camera and my iPhone), and asked me if they too, could take photos. Intrigued by their keen interest, I decided to bring in an older iPhone I still had so that they could document things that interested them in the classroom and around the school.

The children set up the parameters around how the classroom photographers’ activity would work. They decided for example, to draw a name each day from a plastic cup, and that would determine who the photographer was for that day. It became customary for children to ask me every morning: “Who is the photographer today?” They were happy to produce the content for the classroom blog, but apart from this, there were no rules or guidelines for what they should take photographs of.¹ In this way, the “classroom photographer’s” activity emerged out of the children’s own interest in image-making, rather than from my own desire to have them produce images as part of my study. However, I was also curious about the photos that each child had taken, so I met with the classroom photographer at the end of each day (time permitting) to go over which photos would be posted on the blog. I often also asked questions about why they had taken certain photos, or what the sometimes blurry photos were supposed to ‘show’.

While photo-elicitation can be a useful approach to gleaning meaning about particular photographs taken by children (see for example: Thomson, 2008), the children in my study were less inclined to answer my questions about their photos such as ‘why did you take this photo?’, or ‘can you tell me about this photo you took?’ More often than not, the children responded with a lackluster response: “I don’t know”, or “I liked it”. I must confess that when compared to the children’s own enthusiasm during their time as classroom photographer, our chats about their photos did little to engage the children who seemed uninterested in my questions. Even I felt disengaged at times. What became evident after several photo chats was that the children were more interested in looking at the photos they had taken (and those other students left on the phone) and editing them in various ways. Many children changed the colour settings of particular photos (from colour to black and white, for example), watched (and re-watched) videos they had made, cropped parts of the photo out, or zoomed in on particular items in the photo that may have been difficult to see.

One child for instance, took a photo just outside of the staff kitchen and then zoomed in on the items on top of the refrigerator because he wanted to see what was up there. Knowing that students are not allowed in the kitchen, the zoom effect on the camera allowed him to gain access to a traditionally “adult-only” space. Another child cropped out the heads and legs of her two friends in a photo and zoomed in on their butts while laughing hysterically. As she did this, she showed her friend (the one in the photo), “Look, I zoomed in on your butt!”. Sometimes the children

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experimented with the panorama option on the iPhone by intentionally moving the camera quickly. This produced oddly reconfigured bodies, such as sliced heads, enlarged eyes or stretched out limbs. Fascinated by the new ‘bodies’ they could create, one of the kids yelled out, “I wanna do it to Paulina! I wanna do it to Paulina!” The children also enjoyed taking my photo and giving me things to act out. While in the library during our photo chat, one child asked, “Can I take a photo of you?” After I agreed, he said: “Okay can you go sit in the rocking chair?” After I sat in the rocking chair he asked: “Can you pretend to read this book and put your feet on the stool?”.

Another child instructed me on what my facial expression in a photo should look like. After taking our selfie, he looked at the photo and, with the authority of a film director, proclaimed: “More sadness, that wasn’t sad!” “Oh you want it sad?”, I asked him playfully. “We have to make a sad face?” “Yeaaaaa” “What’s a sad face, like this?” I asked him. (I make a stereotypical sad face). “Yeaaaaa but do the ‘meh’ emoji”, he tells me. “You first,” I say, and so using the camera as a mirror, he illustrates to me what a “meh” face looks like. I do the same. He retakes our selfie and this time, he seems pleased.

As researchers and adults in school spaces, we might be tempted to read this encounter with performing sadness in a way that positions the child as depressed or troubled in some way. However, by engaging in his interest in ‘looking sad’, he and I were able to carve out an exploratory space where sadness did not result in intervention or concern, but rather a space in which it was acceptable and even enjoyable to express emotion through photography.
These spontaneous encounters were fascinating, but they also made me feel a bit uneasy at first. Would I get in trouble for causing so much commotion with the kids? The iPhones often drew a lot of attention, laughter and playfulness. Clearly, by the looks of some of the adults who saw us, we were having more fun than is allowable in a library or hallway. Also, I often worried that I wasn’t getting what I thought I might be getting, mainly what I thought might be ‘good’ data — photographs that could tell me something ‘more’ than what I was observing in the classroom. However, after a few disappointing photo chats, where I felt the need to ‘act like a researcher’ by asking (what I deemed to be) important questions, I began to just be with the kids (see: Myers, 2015). By this I mean temporarily suspending any expectations or desires about my encounters with the kids and their photos. I often just sat with them (often in silence) while they looked through photos they had taken, or watched the videos they or their friends had made. I began to appreciate this time with the children, not for the data it might generate but because it allowed us to dwell in a space in which something else could happen: silence, laughter, surprise, silliness, and even boredom. Gallagher and Gallagher (2008) have termed this approach ‘methodological immaturity’: that is, an attitude to doing research with children that embraces (rather than minimizes) the complexity, unpredictability, and ‘mess’ that is characteristic of qualitative research in the social sciences (see also: Law, 2004).
Although visual research and techniques such as photo elicitation have the potential to bring forth more creative ways of engaging with the world, at times they may also hinder the messy and unpredictable encounters that often emerge out of the image-making process. I worry that in becoming overly preoccupied with content and representations we might miss other opportunities to engage with children in ways that are a little less constraining and more open-ended and exploratory. I would argue that as adults, we can learn a lot by observing how children engage with the photos they have taken. For one, their desire to alter their photos resists the temptation to see images as static representations that can never change—by zooming in, cropping, and deleting images, children and the images are in a constant flux of becoming. And while some children asked me to print out certain photos, most of the children were unconcerned about the afterlife of their photos, which to me, says a lot about our need as researchers to hold on to certain things produced by children so that we can, in turn, collect ‘data’.

In the classroom where I did my fieldwork, children’s daily activities were often highly structured - even art projects came with a set of guidelines and examples of what the final product should look like. Yet, if we embrace a kind of ‘methodological immaturity’ we become open to experimentation and to the unknown. What will happen can never be determined ahead of time, and this of course means that we may fail to do what we may have set out to do as researchers (and this, I suggest, is actually a good thing). Given that there is not enough time in the school day to engage with children off-script and without an intentional, pedagogical ‘goal’, I suggest that being open to the strangeness of photo-making encounters allows us to be differently in relation to children — not as expert adults, but as collaborators in a creative and open process that seriously engages with children’s (and our own) curiosities about bodies, spaces, materials, emotions, hanging out, and other things we have yet to discover.
Notes
[1] We did however discuss the importance of asking for permission before taking someone’s photograph. We also agreed that while the children could take photos of their friends in other classes, these photos would not be posted on the classroom blog.

References


Paulina Semenec is a PhD candidate in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Her research interests include educational policies in K-12 schools, particularly current programmes related to children’s social and emotional well-being. She is also fascinated by the mundane and ordinary moments in ethnographic research, and finds much inspiration in post-qualitative and posthuman theories and approaches.
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