

Photo Essays and Children

1

It's possible this girl is a beautiful princess and a witch put a spell on her and now she's trapped in a poor house of tin and boards next to the garbage dump. Soon her soldiers and her prince will rescue her. She will escape! Her magicians will find that witch and put an end to her evil tricks. Then the princess will throw off her rags. She'll put on an elegant gown. She'll put on wooden shoes that never wear out, and leave forever with her prince. They'll fly to another world, to the United States, or even better, to Holland.

*The Prisoner, by Marta Lopez, Age 10
(Franklin & McGirr, 1995, para. 1)*

The narrative above was written by Marta Lopez, a young girl in Guatemala City, to accompany a photograph she took of a young girl in a concrete-block house in the city dump, looking out a barred window. The hope is apparent in this beautiful narrative, and the project she was involved in expanded her dreams and gave her some control over her environment and the strength and support to dream of becoming a teacher.

In 1991, a photographer by the name of Nancy McGirr involved Guatemalan children in a project that changed their lives. Nancy went into a garbage dump in Guatemala City, where over a thousand people live. Children and their families work hard to collect garbage to resell and for food to eat. It is a hard life, with little hope.

However, Nancy McGirr told the children that she would give them cameras so they could take photographs of their lives and experiences.

6 • Telling Stories With Photo Essays

She would then sell the images and promote the project, with the hope they would make enough money so the children could leave the dump. The book *Out of the Dump* was created from the children's photographs and writings, and their work has been exhibited throughout the world. Profits from the publications, prints, and exhibits are used to educate the children, to keep the project going, and to help support the children's families. Nancy McGirr writes: "From the beginning, I've worked with the children not only to teach them photography and provide for their education, but to show them the power of dreaming. I tell them that photography is difficult and that if they can do this, they can do anything. There are options in life. For these children, photography has become a door to an exciting new world alive with possibilities. It is a door they have opened" (Franklin & McGirr, 1995, "A Note About This Book," para. 9).

PHOTOGRAPHY AND EXPRESSION

Photography is a very powerful medium for expression. Individual photos speak to a reader in ways that words cannot. When a caption or short narrative is added, additional information and the photographer's intent in taking the photo become more available to the reader. In this way, children's photographs are like windows into their experiences and thoughts.

A photo essay is a series of photographs that tells a story. One photographer can take the photographs that make up the essay, or several children can contribute to the collection, as the children did in *Out of the Dump*. Photo essays can document many things, including a historical event, a family's history, science experiments, a day in a career, observations in nature, personal experiences and interests, journeys, and field trips. When children create photo essays, they communicate their experiences and thoughts with readers in an authentic and very personal way. As readers, this personal communication helps us to better understand children, their stories, and their ideas.

In a photo essay, photographs take the place of the extensive writing that makes up a traditional essay. Instead of long, written narratives, photo essays give information and documentation through photographs paired with short captions. Captions, which are discussed in Chapter 2, are an integral part of the photo essay. They provide additional information and can pose interesting questions that build on the images. Together, captions and photographs tell a complete and engaging story that allows for each child to demonstrate learning in a creative, individual way.

Children have a natural ability to use visual media in their expression of ideas. Young children start to realize that talk can be written down through pictures and writing. Before second grade, many children draw

before they write. In this way, the drawing comes from within a child and expresses the idea or experience; then the writing enhances what has been drawn. Children often move in and out of these processes as they adjust the drawings to match the writing and revise the writing to better complement the drawings. Both the art and the writing then work together to create “voice,” and through the combined voice and oral language, adults can appreciate the depth of a child’s understanding and ideas (Thompson, 2005). A photo essay follows this same process in that children are primarily documenting with photography and adding the captions to highlight the photos. They are also thinking about what they are going to portray, both ahead of time and during the process, at times with captions in mind, and looking for what to photograph to highlight the caption.

“By second grade, writing has often surpassed drawing. Although these children may still find it easier to draw than write, many find it easier to embed meaning into a written text than into a drawing” (Calkins, 1994, p. 88). Even though older children may find it easier to write than to create meaning with drawings, some children may want to start with photographs and add captions, while other children may want to write about what they want to photograph and add images to what they have written. Still other children will move in and out of writing and photography just like children move from writing to drawing and back to writing. And just like drawing and writing, none of this happens in a vacuum. A great deal of thinking and many experiences take place before a child can write and draw. This is also true of creating a photo essay.

CHILDREN AS PHOTOGRAPHERS

The multimedia approach of a photo essay gives children an opportunity to be in control of what they want to document and write about. Photography allows children to look at events and objects from a unique perspective that many of them may never have experienced before.

By giving children cameras and telling them, “show me what is important here,” you are allowing them to find meaning in the activity and to demonstrate in a concrete way how they are relating to others and the world around them. Children who have difficulty expressing their ideas and demonstrating their learning through traditional presentations can be very successful with photo essays.

“Here, I will draw a picture for you to show you what I mean,” Esperanza, a young girl who is learning English and is accustomed to communicating through pantomiming and drawings, tells a classmate. Photography is wonderful for Esperanza because she can capture meaningful images and express herself in a way that allows her to show her

8 • Telling Stories With Photo Essays

intelligence and creativity without words coming between her and her expression.

According to Cohen and Gainer (1995):

Children regulate their activities in art to a much greater degree than in other subject areas. Given materials, they proceed at an individual rate and produce according to individual interests and capabilities. External demands such as group levels of instruction are less influential in art than in other curricula. The teacher need not be concerned about assignments that may be too advanced or too limited because each child performs art tasks on his or her own terms and develops them individually. They are able to refine concepts through observation and practice. Art activities are truly self-pacing! (p. 35)

Children who are learning second languages or are nonverbal, autistic, and/or have difficulty writing can be more successful in expressing their ideas and demonstrating their learning with photo essays than they may be through writing and oral language. Adaptations can easily be made for learners with special needs, and photography can be particularly rewarding for a child who struggles with longer written works. Classroom teachers can consult with a special education teacher in their school or district about the various resources that are available for children with physical impairments. For example, there are adaptive camera devices for children with motor impairments and resources for vision-impaired children participating in photography. A special education or English language learner (ELL) teacher can also give classroom teachers ideas about how to support language learners or other children with diverse learning needs. “Children’s responses in art media can provide a much stronger language program for bilingual children than strict adherence to basal readers designed for speakers of English alone” (Cohen & Gainer, 1995, p. 226).

Writing shorter captions with teacher assistance is a much less overwhelming task for a child who is finding writing difficult, and the use of photographic images allows children to vividly express ideas for which they may not yet have the words. Experiencing success in the same way as other children can improve children’s self-esteem and feelings of inclusion. Art, including photography, can be a means for children to represent their individual perceptions of the world. Through photography, children can think through and communicate their thoughts and ideas, allowing them to recognize that they are individuals (Cohen, 1969). Children who are gifted and talented also benefit greatly from communicating through photography. Estee Baldwin (personal communication, October 22, 2008), teacher of gifted and talented children, tells us this about her experiences and the value of photos:

As a person with many years of experience working with gifted children, I have seen a wide variety of gifts through a variety of manifestations. The bulk of my time in gifted education has been spent working directly with students and teachers to meet the students' exceptional needs within regular education settings. Whether the student is at the top of her class or an apparent underachiever, photo essays can be a useful tool in reaching these learners' individual needs.

Take, for example, Michael. He is a fifth grader. On a typical day during reading time, you would find Michael in his seat in the back row of the classroom. While his teacher reads through information and expects the class to follow along in their packets, Michael rolls his packet up into a telescope and gazes around the room. He rocks back in his chair and softly makes rocket noises under his breath. He is in his own world. To most, Michael just looks like a kid who can't stay on task. The trouble is that Michael is identified as gifted.

Michael is a prime example of what happens to many students who are identified as nonverbally gifted, which means that they are visual-spatial learners. Often a nonverbal identification can look much more like a disability than a gift. These learners excel in pictures, puzzles, and movement. Not exactly the areas that we see most often incorporated into a regular education setting, which is exactly why using photo essays can be so impacting for these learners. Just think of Michael being allowed to work independently on a photo essay about space, rather than having to imagine it at his seat. Not only would he be engaged, he would actually be learning something!

Then there is Brad, a third grader. When I met Brad, he had stopped doing his class work. Instead, he spent his time in class bothering others and figuring out ways to leave the classroom. At home, he told his mom he hated school. At school, he confided in the school psychologist that he already knew what the teacher was covering in class and that it made him furious to have to cover it again. Like Michael, Brad is identified as gifted.

Brad is different than Michael, though. He is identified as gifted in verbal and mathematic areas. He scored in the top 99% of many IQ subcategories and works well above grade level in all academic areas. Brad, too, could benefit greatly from the opportunity to work on a photo essay. To begin with, he could pursue a topic of his choosing, allowing him to feel like he is learning something new. What's more, he could work at his own pace, but within his classroom. This way, he could maintain contact with his chronological peers while being allowed to work at an appropriate academic level.

Finally, there is Abby, one of the first graders with whom I have worked. She does all her assignments exactly as her teacher wants her to

10 • Telling Stories With Photo Essays

and completes all of her tasks on time. She is friendly and helpful to others. She never complains and is a role model to others. She is a teacher's dream. Abby, too, is identified as gifted.

Often, the gifted child who doesn't act out is the most overlooked for differentiated curriculum or projects. In Abby's case, her teacher has no reason to believe that Abby needs anything different in class because she is doing everything given to her exactly as expected. That's actually the trouble. She is doing everything with no struggle, with complete ease. Here is where a photo essay could be introduced to safely and gently "up the ante." By giving her the task of developing a photo essay, the teacher can really see how far Abby can go. What kind of research is she capable of? What are her interests? How independent can she be? What caliber project can she produce? By using a photo essay to goal set and assess, Abby's teacher can challenge her while gathering information for future enrichment and acceleration.

Gifted students, just like all students, are entitled to learn something new every day at school. Regardless of what type of learners they are, most gifted children thrive with independent, open-ended projects that allow for personal choice and creativity while promoting higher-order thinking. That is just what photo essays do. Using photo essays allows teachers to tap into the wealth that their gifted learners have to offer in a way that few other products do.

For many children in all populations, photography is an exciting way to express how they are experiencing the world. In order for other children and adults to understand what a child is trying to convey through the essay, there must be times for children to talk about the process they went through, what they hoped to accomplish, and what they think their work says to the reader. This is the only way that adults and children will actually understand the depth of a child's efforts, thoughts, and experiences.