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Youth Photography Research Brief

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For this assignment, I decided to study my students. I've always enjoyed teaching photography because all of my students are immediately successful and easily inspired during this unit. I've never really watched them, just taught them! This was an interesting and rewarding experience which I believe has made me a better teacher.

Give a child a camera and he will show you how he sees the world! Kids are easily impressed upon—so providing a handful of photography tips will empower them to demonstrate their view of the world. The fascination of photographing themselves, each other, from various viewpoints and angles, as well as in unusual conditions, children have no fear of digital photography. They are, however, highly curious about the capability of a camera and the magic of fixing an image. Given the choice of using a new digital over an old film camera, my students preferred the older. The disappointment didn't last too long over the lack of film when we began a variety of photography assignments. Through teaching photography, I have found a small portion of their view of the world.

After a class period exploring the history of photography through old film, photos, and a variety of cameras, I instructed my students on how a camera works. They were on the edge of their stools and were very actively involved while playing with the cameras. We used mirrors, flashlights, and revealed the shutter and aperture while comparing the human eye. I think I could have stood by the light switch all hour. Turning the lights on and off while the students examined

their own pupils dilate, as well as their classmates was so exciting for them. I was happily humored by their excitement. It was interesting how this simple activity acquired such an enthusiastic reaction. My students asked me if I had ever taught science. I said yes, everyday! Then I told them to go home and experiment in the mirror!

Another class period involved proper camera etiquette, care, and handling. I shared a handout of photography tips which I developed through my own experience and research. We also critiqued example photos. Hamblen (1984) explains in his article “that aesthetic perception must be taught if we expect students to use it” (p. 21). I discovered if I gave my students less direction in the topic or subject to photography, they were less successful. After much exploration and discussion, I believed everyone was equipped to go to work. Actually, now they were ready to play!

I gave my students a new assignment every day for four days. They were invited to use any digital technology they had as long as they had approval from home, did not share, and refrained from posting photos without permission. Everyone was compliant and excited! Those without their own devices borrowed one of the classroom cameras. Assignments included a self-portrait, emphasis, trick photos, and limited light.

Through my own observation and research, I profoundly learned more than I expected. First of all, things that are old to me were often new to my students. I realized something as simple as a dusty old camera or watching your neighbor’s eyes dilate can be exciting. Children learn valuable information through play. “They learn skills that expand their power, and with that power they can say more both to themselves and to the world” (Eisner, p. 8, 1978).

Also, kids see things adults just don't notice anymore. Things like intricate designs embedded in the sidewalk and a trail of water from a dripping hose that I had walked across several times without notice. I was reminded to slow down. Even my most shy students were willing to try and weren't threatened by the camera. Composition was more creative as kids were not uncomfortable using the *rule of thirds*. I found it easy to encourage interesting viewpoints and angles with my students by allowing them to stand on their desks and lay on the floor.

Even students with moderate to severe disabilities found immediate satisfaction and magical excitement with each shot. John-Steiner & Mahn (1996) discuss Vygotsky's studies of disabilities: "In order to succeed when faced with new learning challenges, these individuals reorganize their cognitive strategies" (p. 194). Many of my disabled students took photographs with more interesting compositions than those without a disability.

Language barriers were broken down as communication was quite simple with a camera. Those with their own devices were pushed to use their technology in a whole different way, which I believe instilled confidence. I have new students from Lybia and Egypt who are just learning English. Through the portraits and self-portraits assignments, students learned more about themselves and each other. Delacruz (1995) discusses multicultural art education as enabling "children to make important connections between themselves and others by tapping into the rich artistic traditions of different cultures" (p. 320). Although this photography unit did not necessarily tap into rich artistic traditions, students were more inspired to get to know each other as well as explore their own value system.

Blunden (2001) addresses building meaning out of collaboration even through different cultures and theories when pursuing a common goal. Many of the trick photos involved

collaboration and nurtured creativity. Collaboration transfers and constructs knowledge, according to John-Steiner & Mahn (1996). While watching the children work together, this transfer of understanding became more apparent to me.

There were some challenges I found with the artistic development of youth through photography. About half of my students had access to personal digital recording devices. Of the half that did not have some sort of digital camera, about one-third did not have a computer at home. The kids with iPod's and smartphones knew how to upload to facebook, but not to email or their computer. As far as editing, those who had experience altering a picture could only do so with a smartphone app. When taking pictures, most students wanted to hold the camera horizontal from their eye level. It didn't take much to get them to try a bug's eye or bird's eye view! Through this youth art research, I have concluded that photography provides a meaningful, rich experience where students grow in more than just their creative expression.

Resources

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