Article by Chris Holmes

The language of photography

Photography is the most accessible and versatile of all the expressive languages. It encompasses a huge variety of genres and is uniquely suited to capture the process of children's learning. Through photography we can document learning, develop a tool for reflection and evaluation and allow children to visually revisit their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Digital photography has an immediacy which makes it the most useful tool in making learning visible. Recent research has proved that memory is constructed from still images, from the visual 'punctum points' of experience not from the moving playback of an event in the mind's eye. This means that by focusing the camera on key happenings we can help reinforce and consolidate children's experiences and learning.

Giving documentation back to the children

The camera is a tool for communication but also for creativity. Even very young children can go beyond documenting what is in front of them to using the camera expressively. Photography is the most perfect medium to enable children to give expression to their personal, unique view of the world. As well as opportunities to experiment with paint, clay, music and dance, children should be offered opportunities to develop photography as another expressive language. The digital camera is a powerful expressive tool in the hands of very young children who have not yet developed spoken language or skills of representation. By equipping them with the skills and tools to photograph their own experiences, we can see what is important to children. Szarkowski (Director MOMA New York) tells us that photography is 'no more than a system of visual editing'. So, in allowing children to distil the essence of their experience through the lens of the camera, we can gain real insights in to their ideas, interests, feelings, schematic behaviours, friendships, preoccupations and more.

In the classroom we can use photography to engage children in the documentation process. When a piece of work is finished, have the author photograph it. To help the children consider composition, ask how we should photograph it. Which side? Which angle? Where should we put it? What should the light be like? A domestic torch can be offered to the children to illuminate their finished piece and create images with different atmospheres and characteristics.

It is never too soon to expose children to good photographic imagery. Every subject has been the object of a fine art photographic enquiry. Google major galleries to find examples of inspiring imagery to form part of the children's lines of enquiry.

The camera as a creative tool

The digital camera and simple software like Adobe Elements or Photoshop allow children to be playful with imagery, to transform themselves, to appear and disappear. The digital darkroom can bring a special kind of magic into the classroom.

Magic spells at Barnes Infants

Hetty decides to make a magic wand. In the classroom she finds everything she needs. 'Draw shape. Now we need to cut all the way around it. Need some of these.' She cuts and tears the paper to attach to the willow wand and colours it. 'I'm doing brown and purple.'

She finds leaves outside to attach to the wand. The wand is finished. What can Hetty do with the magic wand?

'Make everything disappear! The teachers and you! The snail! The computer!' She loves this idea and tries the wand out in the yard, running backwards and forwards at great speed.

'Everything disappeared!' A photograph of Hetty casting her disappearing spell taken at a slow shutter speed shows objects almost vanished. Hetty can even make herself vanish. She loves this tangible expression of her magic powers.

### Digital dressing up at Monkchester Nursery School

When used with other media, children can enhance their photographs and add layers of meaning to simple imagery.

Jodie: 'She's just a baby bird, a princess bird. She's got a bird crown.' She carefully draws bird feet and tiny claws on the photograph of Zara that she is transforming. 'I want to draw something when you flap.' She flaps her arms and thinks how to do this. 'Little circles.'

Making children visible

As society increasingly views photography in the digital age as a medium which endangers children's safety, I believe that we have a duty to reassert children's right to be visible, to have their identity, experiences and achievements brought into the public domain and celebrated. With common sense data-sharing policies, photography used responsibly and effectively can enrich children's lives.

Photo montage
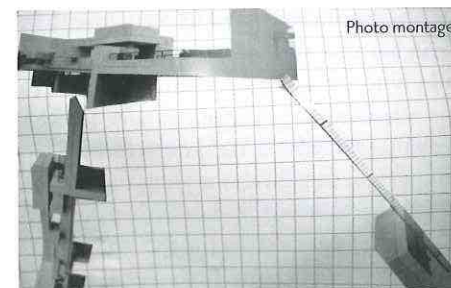
The Photographer's Eye

With digital technology we need fewer technical skills to produce correctly exposed, sharp, colour-balanced images as cameras do much of the work for us. But if we are aware of the basic elements of the photographic image we can improve the quality of the images we produce and do justice to the children's ideas and experiences.

Visual elements within a photograph

Light and shadow: Does the light seem to be natural or artificial, harsh or soft? What direction is the light coming from? Describe the shadows – are they subtle or do they create strong contrasts?

Value: Is there a range of tones from light to dark?

Focus: Which parts of the image are clearly in focus? Are selected parts out of focus? What effect does this have?

Space: Is the space shallow, deep or both?

Shape: Do you see geometric or organic shapes or voids?

Line: Are there thick, thin, curvy, jagged or straight lines?

Scale: Does the scale of the objects appear to be natural?

Texture: Do you see any visual textures? How would you describe them?

Angle: From what vantage point was the photograph taken? How does the angle affect the photo?

Framing: Describe the edges of the view. What is included? What does the framing draw your attention to in the photograph?

Dominance: What is the first thing you notice in the photograph? Why is your attention drawn there?

Contrasts: Are there strong visual contrasts of light and dark, textures, solids and voids?

Repetition: Repetition of visual elements can create unity, a sense of wholeness that holds the work together visually.

Variety: Variety often creates interest. Can you see a variety of visual elements such as values, shapes and textures?

Balance: Is the visual weight on one side of the photograph the same as the other?

Layering photos and acetates

Making images

Think like a film-maker:
- Take an establishing shot of the room.
- Consider the vantage point. Get down and share the children's viewpoint. Don't always look down on the action.
- Get close up. Take shots which show the detail of the work and capture the process. Make a sequence.
- Consider angles. Shooting children from below can lend gravity and make them seem powerful. Tilt or twist the camera to give different viewpoints. All photographs do not have to be rectangles with the subject in the middle.
- Record children's expressions and body language.
- Consider composition and how the elements are situated in the frame.
- Share your skills with the children

Genres of photography

Landscape; Portraiture; Documentary; Fashion; Advertising; Editorial; Social; Photojournalism

Systems and management

As more and more photos are taken, we need to develop and maintain clear systems for filing, retrieving and sharing data.

Preparation
- Camera available and ready
- Battery charged
- Memory card/floppy disc with available space
- Lead available to connect camera to PC or memory card reader

File size
Shoot at largest image size for highest quality. Set camera to AWB (automatic white balance).

Downloading images
Download images as soon as possible after shooting to prevent deletion or corruption of files.

Filing and retrieval
Create a folder per project – e.g. 'Your research question'. Create sub-folders, dated and named – e.g. 'Clay session, 12 May 09', or 'Bird Girls, 14 May 09'.

Printing images
For optimal images, print at 300dpi (dots per inch).

Screen resolution
For digital viewing, resize to 72 dpi.

To view in Picture Manager
Rotate images so that they are correctly aligned (i.e. portrait or landscape) then view as slide show.

Powerpoint
- To create a Powerpoint presentation, compress the pictures as you insert them. This makes the file more manageable as it takes up much less space on the computer.
- Choose slide format with Picture Icon.
- Insert picture.
- Click on picture.
- Click compress.
- Choose screen resolution. This will reduce the size of the images in the Powerpoint file and make it easier to run, copy and download.

Exploring the Language of Photography
- Teach basic skills.
- Create opportunities to use the camera as a documentary and creative tool.
- Make prints. Share them with the children, examine them, make montages, cut them up, draw on them, print onto acetate, layer them.
- Introduce fine art photography.
- Regularly review pictures in Picture Manager.
- Create picture narratives and review them in Powerpoint.
- Spend time looking at photographs, visit galleries and look online.
- Where appropriate, have a photographic element to the children's research.

Chris Holmes is an early years educator and professional photographer. She joined Sightlines Initiative in 2002 as a Project Support officer, and currently organises, mentors, documents and evaluates regional creativity projects.

'Photography helps people to see.'
BERENICE ABBOTT

'To photograph is to confer importance.'
SUSAN SONTAG

'What the human eye observes casually and incuriously, the eye of the camera notes with relentless fidelity.' BERENICE ABBOTT

'Life is not significant details, illuminated by a flash, fixed forever. Photography is.'
SUSAN SONTAG

'Photographing is a way of at least tacitly encouraging whatever is going on to keep happening.' SUSAN SONTAG

'The camera makes real what one is experiencing...it is a way of certifying experience...and of converting experience into an image.' SUSAN SONTAG