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Slowing Down: Documentary Photography in Early Childhood

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Abstract

This study explored the processes of ‘slowing down’ in nursery practitioners use of documentary photography for seeing anew and sensing visual stories and relationships in England. The enquiry brings together insights from the fields of Documentary Photography, Visual Sociology and Early Childhood and entails a novel application of the theoretical concept of ‘presence’ (Senge et al. 2008). Naturalistic data collection techniques included: participant observation of photography practice and allied reflective discussions; field notes; reflexive journaling and semi-structured interviews with practitioners that were analysed thematically. This study’s original application of ‘presence’ supported practitioners’ shared language and discursive resource for visual practice. Documentary photography is simultaneously: an invitation to ask questions; a tool for facilitating children’s sensemaking and an instantiation, and mediator of the setting’s ethos - fostering relationships as a whole as they emerge into the future. This new theorisation and application of presence offers a framework for ‘holding space’ for these activities and articulating the value of: being and connecting through everyday co-authored photography; nuanced slowing down; play and possibility. This creative disruption is significant in broader speeded-up educational contexts.

Key words: Documentary photography; early childhood practitioners; slowing down; visual methods; presence; creative disruption
The significance of EC practitioners slowing down through documentary photography, an original approach

Documentary photography can offer embodied diverse voices and viewpoints through visual storytelling. Contemplative and critical visual methods such as photography are significant for EC practitioners in seeing everyday moments in a new light, in creating alternative meanings and new insights on EC professional connections and experiences. This study's original application of ‘presence’ (Senge et al. 2008) supported practitioners’ shared language and discursive resource for visual practice – disrupting usual patterns of seeing and knowing. However, Senge et al. (2008) highlight that accessing stillness or ‘presence’ in a noisy, unpredictable world is challenging. This is significant given that education is increasingly characterised by speeding up and corporatisation (Berg and Seeber 2016) with funding challenges, competing and conflicting priorities and complexity in this English nursery, in the field, and wider world.

Birger (2015) describes documentary photography as concerning life, how we are with one another and photography that can tell stories through its many layers in individual and collections of photographs. In the nursery a photograph of one of the children sitting on a sofa with a member of each of the five generations of his family in Pakistan started a conversation about documenting everyday human life between me, an Early Childhood lecturer and researcher in the setting and Diana, the nursery manager. How might practitioners slowing down through documentary photography tell new rich visual stories and invite ideas, conversation and sense making? Photographs that illustrated children’s learning in relation to the EYFS curriculum outcomes were ubiquitous whilst those more about everyday moments of human life were largely hidden. There is a parallel in Lange’s (2018) perspective that the world does not need more photographs, rather we need photography that invites questions and tells everyday stories about the human condition.

The aim is thus to explore some of the hitherto unexplained aspects of practitioners’ use of documentary photography for visual storytelling and creative disruption to habitual ways of seeing to support the development of pedagogical practice, ethos, relationships and understanding of children’s perspectives. The study therefore draws on documentary photography, Visual Sociology and a new theorisation and novel application of Senge et al. (2008) concept of ‘presence’. Senge et al. (2008, 13), defines ‘presence’ as more than being in the moment,

‘we began to appreciate presence as deep listening, of being open beyond one’s preconceptions and historical ways of making sense. We came to see the importance of letting go of old identities and the need to control.’

Early childhood practitioner’s practice involves presence in noticing, holding, listening and responding to young children’s experiences and profound sensemaking, advocating for and facilitating children’s participation. In Early Childhood practice and research there has been a positive shift towards participatory ways of working with young children that has included child-led photography (Clark 2017; Dockett et al. 2017; Einarsdottir 2005, 2007). The focus is on practitioners’ photography, seen as being in collaboration and dialogue with children, as competent and capable experts in their own lives (ibid), and children’s photography in the nursery – rather than replacing it.

In critical visual methodology, there are four sites within which meanings of images are made: production; image; circulation; and audience (Rose 2016). This paper focuses on the ‘site of the image’. The examples of photography in the ‘Findings’ section were selected to exemplify both broader patterns in the data and a significant departure from them. We began to sense future possibilities for developing new practice, relevant to the diversity of experiences and the particular context which mediated joint practices and discursive resources. We charted this new terrain
collaboratively in Early Childhood where relatively little is known about the value and role of storytelling in photography for contextualised slowing down and sensing in presence towards an emergent future as a whole setting.

**Participatory photography**

*Documentary photography and critical Visual Sociology*

The photograph acts as a ‘bridge’ (Harper 2016) which supports developing trust and communication of genuine interest in a friendly encounter together. There is a basis for reflexive conversations between researchers and participants as co-constructors of knowledge, participation and generation of new contextual and theoretical insights. In the late 1960’s and 70’s, Harper, Collier, Becker, Grady and others (cited in Harper 2016) were at the forefront of the development of the field of visual sociology bringing significant participant knowledge and experiences together with sociological ideas, theoretical concepts and documentary photography.

Harper’s (2012) reflexive, immersive collaborative approach to co-constructed visual ethnographic studies with participants, over time informed the study’s methodological approach but also made us aware of the challenges of a time limited study. Harper (2012) talked with participants in his studies about their lived experiences, showing respect and appreciation in his photography while checking his interpretations collaboratively. His reflexive practice involves narrative fieldwork descriptions of what he saw and felt to describe the creation of the study in context.

There is ongoing further opportunity to develop a slowed down critical responsibility for how ways of seeing are organised, as images are not ‘innocent’, they are constructed (Rose 2016). A slowed down critical visual methodology questions how and why photographs are made to instigate creative disruption to ways of seeing and experiencing photo stories. There is awareness of the ways images are composed and juxtaposed for non-linear reading differently to words (Tan 2010) which open up new ways of seeing our seeing.

*Participatory photography in Early Childhood, Education and Health*

Together with other studies (Einarsdottir 2005, 2007; Dockett et al. 2017; Canning et al. 2017), the Mosaic Approach (Clark 2017) has been an important influence in critical visual participatory research in listening to young children’s everyday experiences and perspectives in their early childhood contexts. Clark’s (2011) empirical research with early childhood practitioners employed visual participatory methods (for example, photography, video, drawing, map making) to listen to their perspectives and to facilitate hearing and sharing their taken for granted knowledge. Similarly Rix et al. (2020) practitioners’ use of a listening approach included their photography, first person narrative and observation facilitated ‘stepping back’ to engage more closely with children’s interests. One practitioner found it very difficult to step away from preoccupations with formal curricula and outcomes. Rix (ibid) comments having space to do so is complex in contemporary educational contexts.

Clark (2011, 322) questions the notion of ‘child-only approaches’ opening up possibilities for employing innovative ‘research participant-centred’ visual methods (Punch 2002, 337). This is significant here as Punch (2002) explains, ‘child friendly’ visual methodologies are underpinned by approaches with adults derived from ‘Participatory Rural Appraisal’ (PRA) methods. Early PRA methods were developed by Wang and Burris (1994) drawing on empowerment and feminist theory and documentary photography. They gave cameras to rural women, children and grass roots workers to hear their voices about their everyday experiences in ‘photo novella’ for social change.
Clark’s (2011) extension of visual methods to listen to EC practitioners, together with insights from PRA; documentary photography and visual sociology provides a foundation for this study.

Participatory studies in Early Childhood have tended to focus more individually and there are methodological challenges that invite further exploration. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) raise critical methodological issues in participatory research with young children they term ‘methodological immaturity’. They propose a space for an ontological position of ‘emergence’ and new, relational routes of enquiry and knowledge creation. They query the notion of individual holders of expertise, knowledge and agency believing that all human beings, adults and children are ‘emergent becomings’ (ibid). The theme of slowing down and the particular sub themes presented as a new theorisation of presence are presented as new ways of holding the activities of practitioners in the making of photography, as ‘creative disruption’ with and for young children and families. They are significant because they are not foregrounded in Early Childhood literature.

**Theoretical framing**

**Presence**

The theoretical framing of presence (Senge et al. 2008) led our inquiry approach with notions of ‘slowing down’, ‘noticing’ and ‘not knowing’ or ‘methodological immaturity’ (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008). Attentiveness to these notions invite possibilities for ‘creative disruption’ entailing an experimental approach to innovative, open ended, improvised practices and processes. These aims, contribute towards the development of presence (Senge et al. 2008), and openness to emergent potential for transformation, or possible alternative futures, relationships and stories in the nursery.

Senge et al. (2008) theory of ‘Presence’ is underpinned by initially slowing down to observe, notice and see, in the everyday life of the nursery, which is conceptualised as a ‘U’ shown in figure 1 below. The theory of presence draws on wide range of fields, organisations, individual’s stories and experiences and ancient wisdom to support insights and ways of being and acting based on deeper awareness and learning from our interactions. Presence encompasses three major aspects (of seven capacities of the U movement): Sensing, (including observation, emergent seeing and learning, being at one with the world); Presencing (including retreat and reflection, allowing inner emergent knowing); and Realizing (acting from deeper knowledge in the creation of a future in complex social, technological and economic contexts). Senge et al. explain that presence is concerned with ‘living systems’ (2008, 5) as a whole rather than individual parts.
The U theory of presence (Senge et al. 2008, 88)

![Diagram of the U theory of presence]

**Sensing**
‘observe, observe, observe’

**SLOWING DOWN**

**Presencing**
‘Letting go’
‘Letting come’

**Realising**
‘Act.’

‘Retreat and reflect’
-allow inner knowing to emerge

Figure 1. Presence: the theory of the U (Senge et al. 2008, 88)

‘Sensing, slowing down and letting go’

Senge (2008, 234) reflects, ‘we have no idea of our capacity to create the world anew.’ In the nursery the photograph of the young boy sitting on the sofa with his family resonated with Diana and me. It was the beginning of us ‘sensing’ and ‘slowing down’ to think about his lived experiences and possible new visual practices together. Presencing is a subtle process of ‘letting go’ of habitual ways of seeing, knowing and acting to see with fresh eyes. Senge et al. (2008, 96) refer to ancient meditative traditions, including Buddhism, to explain the practice of openness to what is emerging as ‘nonattachment’. In relation to this study, photographer practitioner, Meyerowitz (2019) comments on the richness of social life that does not require chasing but rather openness to what is there already. The processes of engaging with documentary photography invites questions and deeper engagement with ideas and relationships rather than answers. The relational photography that is made emerges from what is revealed and salient in the nursery as a basis for future knowledge, practice and fostering new relationships and ethos.

**New theorisation and application of ‘Presence’**

This study carries forward Senge et al. (2008) theory of presence in a new and distinct way in creatively interweaving our practice of documentary photography to engage with and disrupt habitual ways of seeing in a nursery context as a whole. This initial enquiry has value in exploring the efficacy of this particular visual approach in relation to a new theorisation and application of presence in holding, framing and facilitating children’s sensemaking with practitioners and families. Slowing down facilitates the emergence of a quieter contemplative space for practitioners sensing and discerning through the practice of documentary photography, being open to what is happening in the nursery for children and adults from less speeded up analytical thinking (Senge et al. 2008). The following research question, generated through a process of joint practice and collaborative dialogue, framed the study informed by theory, previous empirical research studies and critical visual methodological insights in different fields:

*Does documentary photography support practitioners slowing down, developing ‘presence’ to sense new ideas and possibilities in practice as a whole?*
Methodology

This collaborative action research inquiry used qualitative methods and was carried out over four-months with three practitioners in a nursery in England. Practitioners, Diana (manager), Rosa and Emma focused on 3 children aged three to four-years-old in their key groups. I shared learning about Documentary Photography from a short six-week professional course, ‘Documentary Photography: Seeing the World’, at the London College of Communication, (LCC, University Arts London) with them.

Insights from the documentary photography course supported a discursive space in the ‘site of the image’ including the design, composition and effects (Rose 2016). We shared and reflected on processes in making and composing photographs, and how these were influenced by our relationships and interactions with children and families, physical positioning and audiences. Slowing down broadened our reading of and use of photography to reflect on the creation of visual stories that evoke emotion and narratives about every-day human life, including planned and spontaneous moments. For example, Diana chose to make documentary photography of the children’s graduation event to celebrate children’s time at the nursery before going to primary school. Celebrations including extended family and friends are really important in the nursery’s ethos and therefore it was usual for practitioners to make photography of these kinds of occasions. I shared the potential of photography involving the event’s audience and Diana explored this idea. Photographs sharing the audience and children’s interactions were shared with children and parents through the nursery’s wall displays and conversations when parents dropped their children off at the nursery and collected them. All of the practitioners were briefed about the research plan and aims. The research journey was shared by the research team with the whole nursery in a group presentation.

Data collection

The research design is outlined in table 1 detailing the research group’s face to face workshop focus group and fieldwork activities. The following data collection methods were used: audio-recorded reflective focus group workshops and semi-structured interviews with practitioners; fieldwork over a 4-month period using cameras belonging to the nursery; participant observation of photography fieldwork practice. Each researcher kept reflective journal field notes and practitioners brought photography they continued to make in fieldwork between workshops for critical discussion in the focus group sessions.

There were 3 audio-recorded and transcribed semi-structured focus group reflective workshops which took place outside of the nursery session with semi structured practitioner interviews. There were 3 practical fieldwork sessions with me and practitioners engaged in making photography inside the nursery and in the garden. The first focus group workshop introduced the aims of the study; existing photography practice; including photography we considered to tell a story; time frame and ethical considerations. In subsequent workshops, we reflected on our fieldwork photography and looked at existing or found photographs (for example ‘Strange and Familiar. Britain as Revealed by International Photographers’ (Pardo and Parr 2016). We discussed documentary photography as making images of life as it is and the use of the medium to ask questions or tell a story rather than a snapshot. The final workshop facilitated critical reflection on joint visual practices as a discursive resource, different interpretations and challenges. We reflected what ‘slowing down’ looked and felt like with possible new pedagogical approaches in a (re)negotiation of new ways of seeing and knowing.
The transcriptions were analysed thematically (Braun and Clark 2006) which were checked with the research group in several iterations as part of conversations in each workshop and fieldwork session. The final column explicitly relates each week’s workshop or fieldwork activity with the literature review, presence theory and aims to the research question. The research question guided active decisions about the research methodology, data collection and thematic analysis to ensure coherence, congruence and systematic rigour in the research process (Braun and Clark 2006).

Table 1 Research timeline and methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Participants, purpose and method</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Relation to Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-6</td>
<td>Researcher short documentary photography course (LCC)</td>
<td>Audio-recorded focus group Practitioners’ photographs Field notes and journal</td>
<td>Research intro documentary photography &amp; short course Relate to current practice using photography and Practitioners photography examples to discuss in relation to RQ, study aims Slowing down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>All research team Introduce research origin, design, purpose Discuss: documentary photography; slowing down, ‘presence’; small digital cameras; data collection and ethical implications</td>
<td>Photographs; field notes and reflections Journal Audio recorded reflective discussion (researcher / manager)</td>
<td>Exploring slowing down (physically, thoughts, action) Aware thoughts, sensing Developing ‘presence’ Open to new perspectives on data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Nursery practitioners made photography at children’s graduation event More focus on photography of the audience for the first time</td>
<td>Photographs; field notes and reflections Journal Audio recorded reflective discussion (researcher / manager)</td>
<td>Critical reflective discussion: ‘Strange and Familiar. Britain as Revealed by International Photographers’ (Pardo and Parr, 2016) Critical reflective discussion: ‘site of the image’ (Rose 2016). Consider: design, composition relationships storytelling, meanings inclusive?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Critical reflection photography from children’s graduation event and display of 6 images storytelling from the event.</td>
<td>Audio-recorded focus group Photo series: Visual storytelling Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Reflect on: different perspectives, reading photography, possibilities for developing practice -slowed down practitioner’s made photography Influences on meaning-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>All team, photography in garden made according to what was noticed (unstructured activity)</td>
<td>Photographs; field notes, reflections observations Journal Audio recorded Semi-structured interviews and reflective discussion</td>
<td>Slowed down researcher and practitioners’ made photography according to what practitioners noticed, and observed, what seemed key or significant. Aware of thoughts observations, what attention and why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### How to frame in photography?

**Photographs; field notes, reflections**

**Semi-structured interviews and reflective discussion**

**Audio-recorded photography according to what practitioners noticed and observed, what seemed key or significant.**

**Aware of thoughts/ observations, what attention and why?**

**How to frame in photography?**

### Ethical considerations

The study adhered to the British Educational Research Association (2018) revised guidelines and was approved by the Open University’s ethics committee. The name of the setting, adults and children have not been identified, instead pseudonyms have been used. Parents and practitioners were provided with full details of the research aims, processes and how it reported in an information leaflet. Their consent to participate based on the information leaflet was sought and obtained through signed permission forms. This included the right to withdraw by a given date. All practitioners, parents and children were made aware of the study. It was identified by practitioners in the first workshop that children’s awareness of photography being made was key and that children were comfortable and not disturbed in their play. Parents were interested in the study and they were happy for them to participate and children were introduced to me. Although children are used to practitioners using photography to document their learning they were asked before the study began if they would like to have their photographs made and if they wished direct adults to what they would like adults to photograph. Practitioners acted as gatekeepers in their knowledge of children in their care, including non-verbal gestures to seek children’s assent through the process (BERA 2018).

### Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of qualitative data in this participatory collaborative study was used as a flexible approach suited to exploratory research questions (Braun and Clark 2006). Rigor is integral to
thematic analysis that draws a coherent thread between research aims and questions, literature, methodology and data collection and analysis that are ‘anchored to’ [presence] theory (Braun and Clark 2006, 97). Initial overarching themes were derived from Rose’s, critical visual methodology focusing on the site of the image. The analytic framework in table 2 focuses on ‘slowing down’ within presence theory with sub themes as key elements of the exploratory method and novel theorisation in this study. The focus group discussions about reflections on existing personal and public examples of photographs and made photographs in the nursery were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Our individual reflective observation notes (notebooks) have been re-read many times together with the focus group transcriptions. The act of transcription is not straightforward and my reflections and observations are constructed, therefore these were checked and developed with practitioners during fieldwork, workshops and semi-structured interviews (Harper 2012).

Coding was applied to the different data sources that represented ‘keyness’ and ‘prevalence’ (Braun and Clark 2006) across the data set. Themes were generated and checked as a group for a ‘patterned response or meaning’ (Braun and Clark 2006, 82). This process aligns with the theory of presence in being immersed in the life of the nursery so that ways of seeing, observation, suspending, sensing, and reflections are co-created in the context. The framework of themes and sub themes with coded data was developed on a password protected spreadsheet that was shared with the nursery. This paper focuses on findings that exemplify the theme of ‘slowing down’ that facilitated presence in practitioner’s use of documentary photography in the nursery.

Table 2 Thematic analysis: Site of the image (Rose 2016): ‘Slowing down’ theme and sub themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub themes (presence, Senge et al. 2008)</th>
<th>Related images/ figures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slowing Down Site of the image (Rose 2016)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design; Composition</td>
<td>Practitioners’ slowing down: observe, sensing, noticing, discerning, play</td>
<td>Figures 2 – 6.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Rose 2016, 25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pre-making images)</td>
<td>(pre-making images – listening, connectedness, affect, ethics, audience and communication)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practitioners’ slowing down: ‘letting go’ (Senge et al. 2008)</td>
<td>Figure 2; 5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(habits, control, identity, ways of thinking, seeing)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practitioners’ slowing down: ‘letting come’ (Senge et al. 2008)</td>
<td>Figure 3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(qualities of medium, seeing anew, connectedness, 3Cs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Rose 2016, 25)</td>
<td>(explore ideas visually, composition, light, relationships, physical positioning)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual meanings and effects</td>
<td>Practitioners’ slowing down: reflecting on found and made images</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Rose 2016, 25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Interpretation

The methodological design allows for non-linear ‘alternative readings’ (Prosser 1998; Tan 2010) of the layers of visual storytelling in and between images. In the ‘Findings’ extracts below, dialogues support the complex process of building relationships in the making of photography and interpretative acts. The ambiguity of the medium is seen as a strength (Franklin 2018) making further, potential stories, voices and futures possible in relation to the theoretical framework of presence; but also in light of photography as constructed (Rose 2016).

Findings

Braun and Clark (2006, 94) suggest the presentation of extracts that exemplify key analytic points relating to patterns that were identified in the data and also any departure. Four key examples are presented underpinned by the concept of ‘slowing down’ in ‘presence’ (Senge et al. 2008) through documentary photography in the site of the image. In examples 1 and 3 there is a sense of being with children in play with no defined outcomes. Children are agentive, following their own lively interests. They are co-authors of photography with practitioners. All of the examples reflect ‘letting go’ in the nursery’s ethos of the 3Cs: ‘Care, Compassion, Commitment’ in play and valuing children and families. Simultaneously, photography can be a surprising, creative and disruptive medium. The physical positioning of the photographer and composition shows a sensibility towards sharing children and adults experiences and also how it felt to be there with possibilities for new meanings.

Example 1: Slowing down: sensing being fully in the moment

Figure 2. ‘They are having fun and letting go but it’s also serious’ (Diana)

Example 1: Figure 2 is a release image that interprets the practitioner’s belief in privileging playful, open-ended sensemaking approaches in their pedagogy. This image relates to sub themes:
Practitioners’ sensing, noticing, discerning, play; letting go; making and reflecting. Compositionally the energy in this image is thoughtfully spread across the photograph (Meyerowitz, 2019). In this photograph children are engaged together in soaking a willing practitioner who was due to attend a training workshop later on but this next commitment was far from her thoughts at this time. There is seriousness to play and connectedness with the children captured in Diana’s comment about letting go that is discerned by the photographer. The water play images were printed and shared between practitioners and the children to talk about together with families and carers at the end of the day. In sensing and noticing drawing on the theory of presence Rosa also reflects on ethical considerations in ways of seeing:

“You don’t want to interrupt their play because I find if I go sticking my nose in their play with a camera their play stops and I think I’ve actually destroyed their play and I shouldn’t be doing that.’

(Rosa, practitioner)

The practitioner’s physical positioning and sensing of the play situation meant that she made images for children to reflect upon later on without disrupting their play but at the same time making them aware that she was there.

Example 2. The nursery ethos, 3Cs: Care, Compassion, Commitment

An overarching aim of the nursery is to settle the family and to include families in events and celebrations such as the children’s graduation. Practitioners noticed the audience, including family members not physically present.

Emma: “The family with the hat, they made those hats. and the family with all the generations, the little boy on his own – waiting they’ve just lost dad. This is mum.”

In the process of slowing down Diana noticed the presence of a parent who quietly took a seat at the back of the audience. She was fasting on a very hot day:

Diana: ‘Rahim’s mum sat back...she was listening, she valued her child... I knew she was fasting, she was talking to me about it. Her lips were dry and I thought you’re a mum and you’re doing all this to
come and watch your son on a hot day, it’s important to her – I valued her... Because you suggested to me to look at the audience it made me look at her, how she was different from a lot of the others because she accepted it.’

Following this there was much debate about the creation of a small series of documentary photography as a visual story of the essence of the childrens’ graduation. The series included: Rahim’s mother sitting down smiling, the packet of crisps she was holding was visible in the bottom corner of the image; her son looking across the celebration wearing the cap and gown; parents looking at one another as they thought about what to write in the celebration book; a child embracing his mother; a mother and father fixing the cap and gown on their smiling son; two parents sitting closely with two children talking together. The visual story was situated in the entrance to the nursery with the book.

Emma felt uncomfortable not having images of everyone in the main display. Some of the children, used to seeing many photographs, asked where their family was although they were also available in nursery communal area. Emma then reflected on the idea of ‘intention’ in making photographs and a connected story.

Overall, Diana reflected:

‘Before I would have cropped out the packet of crisps in the photograph of Rahim’s mother. However she was holding them for him and I thought more about the story and life as it is.’

‘I think to put too many photographs on it would have been too busy and wouldn’t have told a story at all, it just becomes a wall of photographs. Hopefully someone else who comes along understands what we are trying to say. When the photographs are given their own space, I think they are given their own worth, If I I’d covered the board, you’d think they’re nice and walk away.’

The name of the photo series, ‘Care and Appreciation’ came from our reflections on visual practice as a discursive resource. It reflects the ethos of the nursery and what parents wrote in the book. The meanings of ‘Care, Compassion and Commitment’ are integral to the theory of presence (Senge et al. 2008) captured in slowing down at the site of the image.
Example 3: Children as active participant citizens and co-authors

Figure 4. ‘Take my picture’    Figure 5. The last strawberry

Figure 4 was made in response to the child asking me to make a photograph with him. The sub themes include noticing one another, play, curiosity, composition. Portrait images were made fairly close with the child filling the frame but also including the car he was sliding down the funnel guttering the children had made. The image is relational (Azoulay 2008) and agentive with the child directing the images that he wanted through asking and gesture as people often do in research (Pink 2013). The photograph also shows new construction development to the area.

Figure 5. reflects the sub theme of slowing down in observations and noticing a quiet presence. The child had previously been playing in the mud kitchen wearing a hat and long sleeve apron. Rosa had previously noted that he is ‘quiet’. I observed Diana’s interpretation of the image as Rosa made it reflecting that, ‘he felt restricted by the apron.’ Rosa knew that the child was reaching for the last strawberry just prior to another practitioner asking him not to pick it.

Senge et al. (2008, 78) believe that silence is ‘not the absence of words but the presence of understanding.’ The photographs acted as ‘bridge’ to understanding (Harper 2016) in reflective conversations about pedagogical approaches that respond to sometimes quiet powerful voices.

Diana: ‘Using the camera and talking we can slow down to listen. Sometimes all of us need to slow down and listen to children. To see the familiar and unfamiliar to children. As adults, we need to be open to everything the child teaches us – they are our educators as we get to know children and create memories together. Children have different ways of thinking and constructions of the world.’
Example 4: Photography: ideas and asking questions

Figure 6. Standing in one’s own story

At first figure 6 appears to be an unremarkable photograph but on reflection it spoke to the group’s thoughts about stopping, slowing down, noticing and seeing anew. In the sub theme of reflecting on made images, meanings and visual effects and storytelling it connected with the idea of standing in one’s own story and the role of the practitioner in supporting and facilitating children’s journeys and sensemaking. There is room for them to take off in different directions according to the child’s interests and perspectives that entail ‘letting go’ and leaving a ‘footprint’. There are different elements to look closely at including colour, particularly the practitioners bright nail polish, cool water, sunlight, reflections and feet in different directions.

Discussion

In slowing down through documentary photography practitioners perceived the emerging essence of the nursery. The findings represent new joint practices and language for sharing them as a discursive resource with strong connections with explicit presence theory. This is a messier process than depicted in presence theory in figure 1.

Being and connecting: ‘It’s always about life’

In the final focus group, Diana concluded that documentary photography is ‘always about life’, about people, relationships, interactions, emotions and everyday (fleeting) moments. These can be seen differently between people and at different times in the photographs.

Subtleties in children’s sensemaking and the ethos of the setting was seen anew. We broadened our conceptualisation of photography to making rather than taking photographs. We sensed possibilities
for slowing down through photography as co-authored over time. Azoulay (2008, 11) regards photography as,

‘the product of an encounter and the start of a dialogue’ which goes beyond the notion of a single authored image.’

In this study children were regarded as active agents and participant citizens (Azoulay, 2008) with active voices, questions and perspectives rather than the ‘subject’ of photographs with adults. Azoulay (2008, 11) contends that the resulting image is not owned by the photographer, it is co-created, there are ‘traces of the meeting’ and elements that extend beyond the photograph itself, here in what the children wished to convey and their relationship with the person making the image.

DuChemin (2009) terms practitioner’s attentive presence in collaborative photographic practice as ‘receptivity.’ It is based on shared ownership and story creation in documentary photography that speaks to the connected ‘whole’ in presence (Senge et al. 2008) discerned in this study.

Practitioners were very aware of their collective responsibility for addressing the constructedness of the visual context (Rose 2016). The setting’s use of many images, seeing this as inclusive, meant that visual stories and moments of human everyday life were hidden. These continue to be significant methodological challenges and sites of opportunities for further participatory research. For example, Azoulay (2008) cautions that compassion does not sit with the notion of participatory citizenship.

**Slowing down and stillness**

As Diana made photography from a more contemplative, stiller space she was able to see with her heart (Senge et al. 2008). Moments of everyday life were brought more to the fore without concern for analytical thinking, learning outcomes or expectations for ‘big school’. Diana was receptive to the quiet mother who took her place in a busy audience; to the child who picked the floor apart instead of joining in singing; to the child who spent much time working out how to build slides for their toys; the child who was enjoying sensory water play on a day her mother was able to bring her to the nursery. We all became more aware of the nuances in observing and making sensory documentary photography. Rosa made photographs from different angles including from the floor. Diana and me developed sensing through slowing down to connect with children. I noticed a child’s eye contact and gesture to ask me to make photographs, and Emma reflected that focus and ‘intention’ in slowing down was significant. These were initial elements of presence, in not making and making photography and the photographs themselves. The children showed us their knowledge and interests in wholehearted engaged play and true presence.

Adult preoccupations can lead us to ‘transmit’ rather than ‘receive’ (DuChemin, 2009). For example, although the nursery manager, Diana ‘reconnected’ with the children and saw connections in children’s stories across different play scenarios, there were times when the perceived speed and demand for school documentation became a challenge to slowing down for Emma. Established ways of seeing may not be disrupted in a short time frame or sustained in increasingly corporatised contexts such as education (Berg and Seeber 2016) that simultaneously demand slowing down and speeding up (Senge et al. 2008).

Some images were not made, and photographs were created with awareness to respecting private spaces, asking, being careful and attentive to the making of images and reasons. All of the practitioners ‘retreated and reflected’ in ‘presence’ (ibid) on decisions in their photography practice in relation to theory; relationships; equity; inclusion; ethics and agentive voices. These are key in
the development of a critical methodological approach and creative disruption of established ways of seeing.

Creating space for being playful and open to new possibilities

The practices and processes of slowing down through documentary photography have been made more visible as a critical discursive resource about ways of seeing and alternative futures (Senge et al. 2008). In this context of reduced funding and potential closure, reflections on photography strengthened the setting’s ethos of a play based pedagogical approach.

Slowing down through documentary photography facilitated perceiving presence and action towards ‘a heightened sense of awareness’ (Senge et al. 2008, 90) for appreciating and articulating the central place of play for all and non-verbal communication through hearts, minds and bodies. Claxton (2012) proposes that gesture adds subtlety and creativity to children’s thinking processes and that adults who are attuned to pay attention to gesture are more effective in seeing when a child may be on the cusp of grasping new learning. Senge et al. (2008, 97) believe that we are so accustomed to analytic thinking and knowing and less inclined to ‘primary knowing’ which connects to greater awareness and a ‘sense of what is emerging’: possibly before it emerges. Slowing down, ‘letting go’ by being open to what is there, in a different way to focusing on words, opens up possibilities far beyond what we could anticipate or imagine.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a new application and theorisation of ‘presence’ (Senge et al. 2008) which supported practitioners intentional slowing down in their visual practice as a distinct original contribution in early childhood. We developed a shared practice and language about making photography that can, through its layers of storytelling, bring to light subtleties in seeing anew, raise questions, foster relationships, feelings and different interpretations as they emerge - in short, a resource for creative disruption. The implications for visual practice are for developing a ‘holding space’ for these activities with attentiveness to adult’s and children’s sensemaking as connected human beings, in relation to theory and critical responsibility for how ways of seeing are organised (Rose 2016). This is particularly significant as there were tensions in interpretation and representing rich everyday human life in the nursery and more broadly in challenging educational contexts and unpredictable times. Future potential significance lies in broadening out this distinctive theory and practice to wholehearted collaboration with children’s photography for diverse visual storytelling connected to real purpose and emerging possibilities.

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References


