

# “The Photographer of the Day”: Using a Digital Camera in Preschool Classroom

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## Abstract

*Children use digital cameras from very early age as the progress of technology provides accessible tools such as smartphones and tablets in everyday life. Children use the photographic medium to create their own photos, take photos to represent and explore their environment, to communicate with others, etc. By designing and implementing a visual literacy program focused on the impact of using the photographic medium from preschoolers, the researcher examines how children behave when they use the camera or are photographed in the class environment. The dimensions examined are the role of the child as a photographer and the role as the subject of the photograph and how the medium affects children's behavior. The results highlight the impact of the medium in preschoolers' behaviors when using a digital camera, and the importance of the observation in children's' reactions for the adults.*

**Keywords:** digital photography, interactions, social development, preschool age

## Theoretical Framework

The New School Curriculum for Early Childhood Education in Greece defines Information Communication Technology (ICT) as one of the eight learning areas for kindergarten. Using ICT, children are encouraged to develop skills such as critical thinking, cooperation, communication, and problem-solving, while ICT is closely linked to all the thematic units of the curriculum. Toddlers using ICT work in groups to gather information and photographs on their interests, develop autonomy and collaboration skills, share experiences, and interact (Pedagogical Institute, 2011). Digital camera is one of the tools of ICT used in the classroom for several reasons and used to promote visual literacy, as a tool of taking pictures with the children for educational activities and talk about them.

Scholars have recognized children as photographers in different circumstances. Children use digital cameras to support their learning in school (Abu Bakar et al., 2020) or take pictures of a particular learning area (Britsch, 2019). In Varvantakis and Nolas's 2020 study, children participated in photography competitions run by charities, newspapers, and educational institutions. Wong (2020) has studied the practical issues of using a digital camera in a preschool environment, investigating how children learn about photography through action.

Sociological studies of childhood, primarily of school-age children, have been used to study children's use of the photographic medium and/or participatory video (Lomax et al., 2011). These studies focus on aspects of children's lives from children's perspectives and recognize children as competent and active social subjects with knowledge of the social world (James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2002). For these researchers, photography is both a "text" through which children "read" social life and a "context" that illustrates childhood landscapes that may contrast those of the adult researcher (Orellana, 1999). Varvantakis, Nolas, and Aruldoss (2019) also focus on the politics of childhood, as well as how the social sciences use photography as a research method.

In addition, Rayna and Garnier (2017) have conducted very interesting research on the use of cameras by preschoolers, studying the range and diversity of children's methods of camera handling and the roles they adopt as photographers. Another small-scale qualitative study by Magnusson (2018) with three-year-olds and digital cameras illustrated that children changed power relations depending on who was looking at whom through the camera.

### The Program "The Photographer of the Day"

This research focuses on the use of the digital camera by preschool children in the classroom. The focus is on the social aspect of the use of the camera, and especially on the reactions and behaviors children express as users of the medium and the effect of the camera on children's behavior. As children take over the role of the photographer of the day, they observe and explore their class environment and their peers. At the same time, they may be the theme of the photographer. How do children perform in those two roles and how does the presence of the camera affect their reactions? The research does not focus on the photographic result or on the content of the photos.

The idea for the program "The Photographer of the Day" came while observing children during free-play activities in the classroom. The researcher, also the teacher of the class, noticed that some children were imitating adults, pretending that they used imaginary mobile phones -toys and objects from the class environment - to "photograph" their classmates and their activities. This moment was the original stimulus to observe and study how children behave and interact with each other when they use a real photographic camera to capture moments of their daily activities in the class.

The research questions were the following:

- How do children behave when they use a digital camera to capture moments in their class environment?
- What are the main types of behavior they adopt as photographers?
- What are the children's main reactions when others try to photograph them?

The researcher decided on qualitative research for their methodology in light of two factors: first, due to the character of the research, which took place in the class environment, and second, by the dual role of the researcher as the preschool teacher of the group and at the same time as an active participant of the class. The methodological approach was dual: educational research in combination with participatory observation.

The researcher implemented the project in an Early Childhood Educational Center in Athens, Greece, where they also work as a preschool teacher. Seventeen preschool children aged 4 to 4.5 years from families of average socio-economic status participated. The project's duration was one month long. During the project, children engaged as photographers and used a digital camera to capture elements of the class environment. Children had previous experience using digital cameras, as they had been involved in other projects using cameras throughout the school year (Dermata, 2021). For the program's needs, "the photographer of the day" did not just pretend to play - like the original stimulus - but an experimental situation in which children used a real digital camera.

Before implementing the project, the researcher made some important decisions to guarantee that every child could participate equally. The major decisions were:

- *Who would be the photographer:* Every day, the teacher selected one child to be the photographer, following the alphabetical order of the class. At the end of the day, the researcher placed the selected child's name in a box, so the children that had already been photographers were excluded from the next day. If a child was absent on a particular day, their name remained available for another day. Every child took over the role of "the photographer" for one day during the project. This procedure was essential, as every child had the same possibility of becoming "the photographer of the day." By the end of the project, all the children participated equally.
- *Where would the photographer use the camera:* Since the project took place during the school's morning program, the researcher chose to proceed in the class environment. Places like toilets, music labs, and sleeping rooms were excluded.
- *When and for how long would the photographer use the camera:* each child could use the camera for 30 minutes per day during free-time activities. The researcher chose this allotment of time

because it gave the teacher adequate time to observe the photographer while the rest of the children played freely.

All the above decisions were taken from the researcher in order to achieve equal participation of every child and to make sure that the context of the program would be the same for every one concerning time, place, and duration of participation.

Another crucial decision concerned the tools used to observe and monitor children’s attitudes and behavior toward other children. The researcher collected data through participatory observation. As camera recording procedures require a different approach (e.g., written consent of parents, technological equipment, more participants as researchers, etc.), the researchers decided to use a written observation protocol as the data collection tool. The researcher developed a simple observation protocol for better observation, where the researcher wrote down field notes about the interactions and behaviors of the photographer and the team.

While preschoolers were using the camera, the researcher observed and noted aspects of their behavior in practice. This follows what other researchers have found, for example, changes in the physical approach, physical posture, verbal interactions, frequency of interactions, duration of acting, etc. (Cohen et al., 1991). Observation of children’s behavior, as depicted in the observation protocol (Figure 1), concerned two categories: a) observation of the children as users of the photographic medium and b) observation of children’s reactions when "the photographer of the day" approached.

Before the project’s implementation, a trial phase took place, during which children took the role of the photographer so the researcher could notice and make improvements to the observation protocol. During the pilot phase, the teacher had the assistance of the student Eleni Nikolaidou, whose contribution was invaluable to the implementation of the pilot phase of the project. The researchers developed the categories of behavior during the trial phase.

Practically, the implementation of the program took place in two parallel phases. Phase one included the preschoolers using the camera, while the second phase involved the researchers observing the children’s behavior. The parents consented to the children’s participation, as the project took place during the daily program. The researcher did not use any of children’s personal data, such as names, faces, details, gender, family information, etc.

Figure 1  
*Observation Protocol*

NAME:		DATE:	
PHOTOGRAPH ALONE	CONSTRUCT SYNTHESIS AND THEN PHOTOGRAPH	AGREE TO BE PHOTOGRAPHED	DENY TO BE PHOTOGRAPHED
TALK TO ANOTHER CHILD	STOP THE USE OF THE CAMERA	TALK TO THE PHOTOGRAPHER	IGNORE THE PHOTOGRAPHER
SHOW THE RESULT TO OTHERS	GIVE THE CAMERA TO OTHER	FOLLOW THE PHOTOGRAPHER	OBSERVE THE PHOTOGRAPHER
OTHER REACTIONS:			
OTHER REACTIONS:			

### Preschoolers' camera use

Children were familiar with using a camera from participating in similar programs in the past. Thus, the researchers only provided a few instructions for using the camera to the children in advance. During the project, some children asked them to explain related issues again (e.g., using zoom) for better results.

During phase one (use of the camera by preschoolers), an experimental process followed specific parameters. Each child could use the camera for one day. The "photographers of the day" had the camera from 10.30 a.m.-11.00 a.m. The photographers could use the camera as many times as they wanted, continuously or in parts, during their day. The photographers could photograph whatever they wanted during free-play activities.

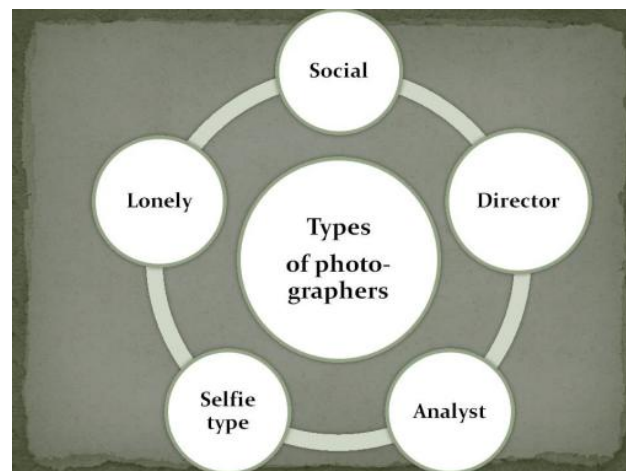
Additionally, children could leave the camera in a particular place (e.g., in a box) and use it again within their 30-minute allotment. The photos taken by each child were collected daily and transferred to a folder with the photographer's name on the computer. Researchers studied the photos afterward, alongside the data collected. In summary, the project aimed to construct a better overview of the children's behavior.

### Results of observations - Children as users of the photographic medium

Children used the photographic medium to perform various roles and behaviors. Observation revealed several categories using the criterion of social interactions (or absence of social interaction) and verbal communication (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Types of Photographers*



- *The lonely photographer*: The photographer moves alone around the classroom and photographs persons and objects without verbal interactions with the rest of the peer group. After photographing, the lonely photographer stops and observes the result. The researcher describes this type as "lonely" because the child's central concern is the photographic capture of the subjects they choose and observing the result (Figure 3) rather than communication and interchange with others. Very often, the theme of the photographic attempt is the other children from whom the photographer keeps distance and takes photos. In those photos, the children often capture a distant frame, which implies the distance of the lonely photographer from the group.

**Figure 3***The Lonely Type of Photographer Observing the Result*

• *The social photographer*: the social type is the photographer who photographs objects or people while interacting intensely with peers verbally. The social photographer is constantly talking to their friends while photographing – asking or notifying them to photograph, laughing, talking, showing the result of their action to others, or allowing the group to influence them through suggestions to photograph a subject (Figure 4). On a smaller scale, the social photographer invited friends in advance to show them what they would photograph (e.g., "Come, let me show you what I will take"), showing their intention to communicate their activities to the group. The social photographer was the center of the attention of the class.

**Figure 4***The Social Type of Photographer*

- *The director photographer*: the director can be either the lonely or the social type.
  - As a lonely photographer, the director does not capture with the photographic lens the objects as they are or as they saw them the moment they chose to photograph. Intentionally, the director photographer places, adds, and removes elements of the composition to create a new personal composition (Figure 5). Often, this action of directing proceeds gradually and evolves, following a pattern: creating a composition → photographic capture → recreating a composition (adding, subtracting, moving) → new photographic capture → reconstructing a composition, etc., into an action that can be

rendered with three or more consecutive photos.

- As a social photographer, the director communicates with the group they wish to photograph and instructs the participating peers. These verbal interactions involve prompting (e.g., "Look at me!", "Smile!") as well as compositional advice (e.g., "You come here", "sit down", "go next to Kostas"). The director actively shapes the composition of the faces they capture, erasing the event's spontaneity in front of the photographic lens.

**Figure 5**

*The Director Type of Photographer*



- *The analyst photographer*: in this type, the researcher classified the social photographer who, after capturing a photograph, shows the team the result while explaining what is depicted in the photo. In this category, the dominant pattern of behavior was the dual photographer-interlocutor relationship. For a long time, the photographer and a friend photograph and observe the photos together, talk about them, laugh or experiment while they discuss about the photos. To a lesser extent, the analyst photographer tried to discuss their efforts with the researcher, showing and explaining the visual material (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*The Analyst Type of Photographer*



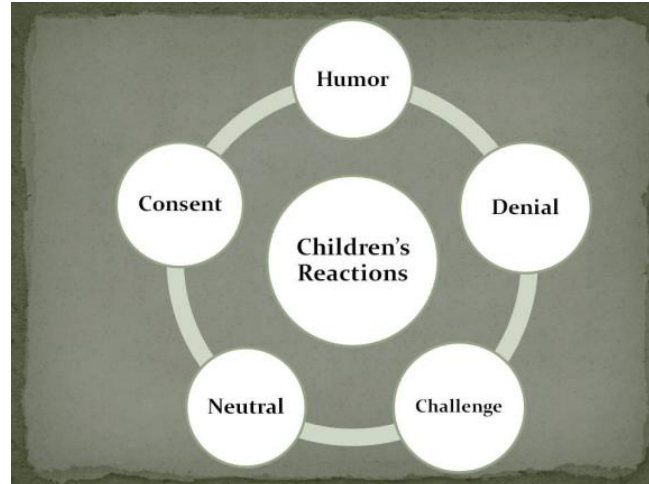
- *The photographer as the subject of photography*: in fewer cases, the photographer used the camera, posing alone or with their friends (selfie or group selfie), imitating the typical practices and behaviors of adults today.

### Results of observations – Children's reactions to the presence of the camera

The primary types of children's reactions when "the photographer of the day" approached them and tried to photograph them were the following (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Children's Reactions*



- *Consent*: many of the children were very happy to be photographed. Consent was expressed in practice, with children spontaneously posing and smiling to the lens when "the photographer of the day" approached them. Some children first agreed verbally when the photographer asked permission to photograph an element of their appearance (e.g., "Shall I take a photo of your shoes?") or themselves. Children often approached "the photographer of the day" first, inviting them to photograph them (Figure 8).

**Figure 8**

*Consent to be Photographed*



- *Neutral reaction*: a small number of children did not seem to be affected by the photographer's presence but continued to work even when the photographer tried to photograph them. The photographer's presence seemed to affect the children less and less every day as the team became accustomed to the active presence of the photographer in the classroom.
- *Denial*: a significant issue highlighted by the project was the free will of persons who wished to be, or refused to be, the object of the photography. This issue arose when some children reacted to the photographer's intention to photograph them or asked the teacher/researcher to solve the issue. This reaction led to the debate about the right of every person to say no and the need to ask for people's

consent when one takes photos of them, especially at this sensitive age.

- *Humor*: the camera's presence stimulated the team to express themselves by making funny faces, inviting the photographer to capture them, and sharing the result with the team. Children reacted daily with funny faces and spontaneously posed when the photographer urged them to look at the camera or when the photographer asked to immortalize them. Funny faces gave rise to artistic interventions in photography, combining the two arts and visual arts.
- *Challenge*: a unique challenge, however, was the photographer's invitation to photograph parts of the body that usually are covered under clothes, such as the area of the underwear. Although for preschoolers, this reaction was a game that mainly caused laughter, as evoked by using words that caught the adult's attention (e.g., ash and kaka), the researcher intervened, provoking a need to discuss the issue of capturing body parts "off limits" to the photographer.

### Limitations

The researchers conducted this study in a preschool education context. This condition evoked limitations, like the freedom the children had, limited by the degree of their autonomy, the limitations of space, and the time they had to use the camera. The researchers captured their observations using a simple written protocol. They limited their use of digital media for ethical reasons and practical issues (e.g., signed video license, etc.); therefore, they may have missed some limited-scale interactions that digital media may have captured.

### Discussion of the results

As photographers, some children focused on working alone, experimenting with the medium, and exploring the environment through photography. In those cases, children practiced observation skills as they slowly observed their environment, acted, and afterward examined their photos. From a general observation of the photos taken by the children, the main categories of themes were objects, especially toys, or small details of the environment, such as icons on their cupboards or logos on their t-shirts, etc. Another notification was the very close frames on objects children chose in their photos, which may express their mood to experiment with the medium and explore their environment. The analyses of the content of the photos could be the subject of another research in the future.

Other children shared their ideas, efforts, and results with one or more classmates and the teacher. The photographers of that category performed social interactions before taking pictures (inviting a friend to take pictures together) or after taking their photos, as they showed their results to their peers. It is not entirely clear if the children's main interest transferred from the photo shooting action to the social interaction, but sharing the experience or the results was present in their behavior. Those observations on the use of the photographic medium as a lonely or social activity in the class are interesting because they portray two aspects of a learning process: learning alone through individual activity person and learning in a social environment.

Children, as the theme of the photographic medium, also performed a variety of behaviors. From denial to challenge, the peer group showed different degrees of interest in the photo-shoot activity. More children were interested in following the photographer of the day, observing, making fun of the situation, or actively participating. From observing the children's reactions, the stimulus of a digital camera seems to attract the other preschoolers to talk and interact more. This study can serve as a foundation for a broader study to investigate how the use of the camera affects the way children interact with each other in a class environment, if the camera works as a tool to support more shy children to connect with the group, and whether interactions during the use of the medium are in some degree associated with the general social interactions of the children in a group.



### Conclusions

Photography, as experimentation, documentation, and presentation of activity, is an integral part of modern pedagogical curricula at all levels of education and part of the daily life of children today. This paper attempts to document the behavior and reactions of children in a classroom, as expressed when a camera is present. As photographers, children displayed attitudes and behaviors based on group work and moved to the level of individual action, binary action, or action in larger groups. Depending on the type of interaction, the photographers acted essentially as directors and analysts, playing a dominant role in the interaction. Often, the team or some of its members took the initiative to invite the photographer to act as the subject of a photograph. As the subject of photographic capture, children's behaviors ranged from neutrality and denial to consent, humor, and provocation.

Suppose visual literacy is something we do as active participants (Stafford, 2011). These observations highlight the need for effective audiovisual education from an early age and the emergence of ethical issues related to using the medium by children and photographing children among themselves. Such research could partially answer questions about the extent to which the medium influences the development of new social relationships, the expansion of existing relationships, or the degree of detachment/isolation of children from the social life of the classroom.

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**APA citation format (7<sup>th</sup> edition) for this publication:**

Dermata, K. (2023). "The Photographer of the Day": Using a Digital Camera in Preschool Classroom. In J. Lee, W. Huang, X. Chen, F. Rodrigues, L. Okan, S. Beene, C. Huilcapi-Collantes (Eds.), *Connecting & Sharing: The Book of Selected Readings 2023* (pp. 78-87). International Visual Literacy Association. <https://doi.org/10.52917/ivlatbsr.2023.015>