Cameras in early childhood settings

Preliminary findings from a small-scale study

Maureen Perkins

Over the last two decades, the use of photographs in assessment documentation has accompanied a shift towards Learning Stories in early childhood education (ECE). This was modelled within the assessment exemplars in Kei Tua o te Paí (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2004, 2007, 2009). Many positive changes have been reported as a result of the use of photos and narrative assessment, including greater involvement of whānau and children in centre assessment and planning processes (Hatherly, Ham & Evans, 2009; Stuart, Aitken, Gould, & Meade, 2008).

However, there appears to be a lack of literature available on the use of photos in centres, especially in assessment documentation (see Perkins, 2009). This practice appears to have developed organically without any widespread or research-informed professional debate. It is possible both academics and teachers are assuming that research findings have informed evaluative reports on assessment in e.c.e. (such as Education Review Office, 2008) as well as MoE-funded guidance given on assessment (such as Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007, 2009).

In fact, little evidence exists to support the efficacy of either narrative assessment or the use of photos (Perkins, 2013), with no firm result that these practices improve learning outcomes for children (Blaiklock, 2008).

There is also little research-based information about what might be important pedagogical aspects such as the impact of photography on children's play, and technical choices such as which device is best, the use of close-ups, group photos, and photo curation. Such a lack of information makes it difficult for teachers to meet their professional responsibilities under the Practicing Teachers Criteria to be able to “systematically and critically engage with evidence and professional literature to reflect on and refine practice” (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, n.d.).

The most useful research for NZ ECE teachers to date is the Centre of Innovation work at Roskill South Kindergarten (Ramsay, Breen, Sturm, Lee & Carr, 2010). That research looked at the integration of ICT in teaching and learning and includes work relating to assessment documentation, in particular, to Learning Stories.

This paper aims to provide some baseline information about how cameras – and photos – are used in early childhood services. Hopefully the research will spark some debate.

The research

To find out how cameras – and photographs – are used in early childhood settings, a small scale, anonymous online survey was distributed by email to Auckland ECE teachers’ centres or to their umbrella organisations, as well as through several ECE Facebook pages. A total of 86 teachers responded to the survey although some questions were answered only by 50-60 of the participants. Because the survey was anonymous and several teachers from any one centre may have participated, these numbers could represent a smaller number of centres.

The specific types of services (e.g. Kindergarten, Montessori, corporate, private or community-based) were intentionally not identified by this survey to reduce any potential concerns services may have had about the study making negative comparisons between types of services.

The survey gathered anonymous demographic data about qualifications and approximate ages of respondents. The term ‘teacher’ is deliberately used although some respondents were unqualified, or students in training. Their role in the centre was still that of a teacher.

Figure 1: Qualifications of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NZ ECE Qualification</th>
<th>Student teachers in training</th>
<th>Other teaching qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46 (77%)</td>
<td>11 (18%)</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unqualified</th>
<th>Total # responses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
<td>65 (100%)</td>
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</table>

These findings are very similar to government statistics that show 76% of NZ ECE teachers are ECE qualified or have primary teaching qualifications (MOE, 2015).
Findings and Discussion

The survey asked a range of questions:

1. The number and types of photographic devices available in a centre/room for the use of adults and children

The first choice in photographic tools was overwhelmingly a digital camera (Figure 2) and most of the teachers used a device owned by the centre (Figure 3). The high use of centre-owned digital cameras – rather than phone cameras – could be related to centre guidelines for privacy. For the rest of this paper the term camera will be used to cover all devices that take photos.

Although most teachers had cameras in their centres, there was a wide range of real access to these. The majority reported three or more cameras in a centre or room (Figure 4). This would mean that in most cases there was good access for the adults. For the 15% of teachers with access to only one camera, there could be problems capturing learning events as they occur. In more than 50% of responses, children had no ready access to cameras (Figure 5).

In a study done in New Zealand, Lisa Oldridge (2010) found some EC centres’ reasons for not providing cameras to children included:

- a history of equipment damage,
- a perception that ICT was not an interest for the children, or concerns about the teaching time taken up.

Accessible portfolios can tell children their e.c.e. story
by teaching children safe,

• and effective use of the cameras.

Interestingly, one centre in her study acknowledged that on four of the five occasions they had to replace cameras, the damaging accidents occurred during teacher use (not use by children).

Figure 4: Cameras for Adults

Figure 5: Camera access for children

In some centres, giving cameras to children and allowing them to choose the subjects of their photos has informed both assessment and transition processes. In a major study of ICT use in ECE centres, an example is given of change in how devices are used and understood:

We began to notice how the ICT was becoming more a tool for the children rather than the focus. ... Children have taken more ownership of their work, deciding for themselves what is 'valuable learning', and what learning/interests they want to follow on with. By trusting the children, allowing them to control their own use of ICT equipment [...] children are able to build a sense of worth and pride about themselves.

Barnados Early Learning Centre report (cited by Hatherly, et al., 2009, p.53)

The same study also found that digital cameras were particularly important for children who have difficulty settling into new environments and large groups, but also for children and families who have English as an additional language. The photos “become a way in to shared conversations about things the child knew about or was interested in” (Hatherly, et al, 2009, p.73). In addition, discussion of photos with children was often a stimulus for conversations with children about their play and learning. Such conversations may not only increase opportunities for language and cognitive development but also provide teachers with informal and formal assessment opportunities. Children’s involvement in the selection and analysis of photos, as well as their access to cameras is likely to be a worthwhile self-review topic for centres (Hatherly, et al., 2009).

2. Do teachers feel they need additional knowledge or skills?

Although 56 participants said they had enough skills and knowledge all or most of the time, there were 33 additional comments to this question. The most common need identified was for pedagogical knowledge (36%), followed by a need to know how to take a good photo (23%). Other responses included a desire for pre- and in-service professional learning (PL) on the topic of assessment photos in general.

There appears to be little evidence available on pre-service teaching on this topic. Arizona State University West has a programme for preservice early childhood teachers that has focused on upskilling students, lecturers and practicum mentor teachers in the use of a range of digital tools including the use of digital cameras to document children’s work for assessment purposes (Kelley, Wetzel, Padget, Williams & Odom, 2003). The main focus of the programme, however, was on the use of computers for student teacher learning, online teacher portfolios, and the use of technology with children. Other literature about preservice teacher technological education appears also to be focused on the in-centre use of computers, tablets and software rather than on the specific use of digital cameras for assessment purposes.

Although I am aware of Professional Learning available to ECE centres on topics such as learning stories and general assessment, as well as management, leadership, and curriculum, there does not currently appear to be any specific support offered on a critical pedagogical approach to the use of photos in ECE assessment and documentation.

3. Are centres and teachers covered by cyber safety, privacy and device use policies?

Of the 57 teachers who responded, 17 reported that their centre had a policy or signed agreement on cyber-safety,
as well as the use of cameras and photos, but nine teachers
either indicated that their centre had no policy or they did
not know if there was one.

Although this is a relatively low percentage, the numbers
are still cause for concern, especially since these respondents
were qualified teaching professionals. All of the unqualified
respondents knew about centre policies. A lack of such
documentation or even a lack of awareness of it could be
unsafe for both teachers and centres, as well as families.

These findings appear to align with the ERO (2015)
findings that many ECE centres need to review how well
their staff understood privacy regulations and processes in
the centres.

**Figure 6: Centre policies and agreements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Privacy and/or cybersafety</th>
<th>Camera and Photo use</th>
<th>Use of ICT tools</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17 (30%)</td>
<td>17 (30%)</td>
<td>11 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
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### 4. What do teachers photograph and why?

Most photos were taken of children, activity within the
centre, or children's creations/artwork. These were followed
by photos taken on trips, and photos of whānau. The least
common subject for photos was the teachers themselves.

Forty-eight percent of respondents reported taking
photos:

- when a child was engaged in their activity,
- when there was evidence of a child’s interests, or
- when there was evidence of learning.

Respondents described trigger moments and events as
“magic”, “wow”, “special” “joy”, “significant”, or “memorable”.
Other respondents had no particular recurring reason to
take photos other than to take them ‘as needed’. Some
teachers took photos to fulfil an assignment requirement
(student teachers) or at the request of the intended audience
e.g. for parents.

A small percentage of responses indicated that
photographs were taken mostly for accountability purposes
e.g. to provide evidence of planning. No details were
provided by respondents about how this was done. Of
course many of the other responses about documenting
children’s learning and interests could well have been for the
purposes of accountability as well. Approximately two thirds
of respondents could clearly articulate their rationale for
taking photos.

### 5. How teachers use and curate the photos?

More than half the respondents reported that they took
at least 10 photos per day. This raises issues of what is done
with the photos, how they are curated, how they are stored
as well as how they are interpreted. Effective management
and review of photographs is likely to be a challenging issue
with large numbers of photos being taken in centres.

All respondents use photos in more than one way. Nearly
everyone who responded uses photos for Learning Stories.
In addition, photos are used for online communication, as
well as for display purposes (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7: How assessment photos are used by teachers.**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Learning Stories</th>
<th>Wall displays</th>
<th>Online portfolios</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>58 (98%)</td>
<td>56 (95%)</td>
<td>21 (35%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

In their comments, respondents indicated that photos
were used in in photobooks, centre Facebook pages,
information folders and transition to school portfolios.
Some centres were using photos at group mat times via a
data projector or centre television, in slideshows, in a digital
photo-frame, and in daily journals for infants and toddlers.

When asked whether photos were shared with teaching
teams or whānau for discussion before being published in
documentation, the majority said that this only occurred
sometimes or never. Only 15.5% indicated that they always
discuss photos before they are published. This is cause
for some concern as it suggests that it is easier to take
photographs than to find the time to prioritise thoughtful
and inclusive interpretation of their meaning.

Anne-Li Lindgren (2012) wrote on the ethical aspects
and power relationships involved in photography for
pedagogical documentation. In particular, she wrote
about the importance of considering whether our current
fascination with photos as a tool in ECE documentation
included a view of the child as a participant in the
learning process, or as an object to be viewed, discussed
and displayed. In an English study, Caroline Bath (2012)
reported that children were often confused about why
certain photos had been used. She found that many
children disagreed with interpretations teachers had made –
especially in documentation about group learning or events
where children reported not really being involved or even
not actually enjoying the activity they were reported as
learning in being involved in. Our position as the taker of
photographs is one of power, and we need to consider how
we are viewing the children we photograph.

Time to interpret photographs brings into focus
the working conditions for ECE teachers. How much
non-contact time do teachers have? And is interpreting
photographs the best use of that time? Can interpreting
photographs thoughtfully and reflectively be prioritized
in the context of producing a certain number of pieces of
documentation per child per month? If reflective conversations
about photographs are to occur, it may require changes in the
ways photos are used and documentation is created.
Photos should also be revisited over time to allow for differing perspectives as patterns emerge over time, and the viewer brings new insights and experiences to the memories. Revisiting assessment is important in order to see patterns and trends in children's interests, learning styles, schema etc. which can allow teachers to investigate and implement better evidence-based planning over time (Hatherly et al., 2009).

Being able to revisit photos efficiently requires organised digital storage systems. Of the 55 teachers who responded to a question on how photos were stored, 63% reported that photos were stored on a centre computer with 24% of respondents taking individual responsibility for the photos and 13% keeping them on the device and deleting them after they have been used in documentation or were no longer wanted.

Implications - where to from here?

Cameras have become a tool of early childhood teachers. This small survey has focused on practical aspects of camera use in early childhood centres. It documents how widespread the use of cameras and photographs in early childhood settings and can provide a basis for further research, as well as discussion amongst early childhood teams.

This research has not focused on interpreting photographs for assessment purposes. Such research would require a qualitative study about the thought processes and choices that teachers make when using photography for narrative assessment.

This research suggests that as a tool, the camera – and the photos taken with cameras – has potentials that are not well understood by early childhood teachers. The knowledge that exists about using cameras and photographs appears to be learned in early childhood contexts. So teachers learn from other teachers. Arguably, there is a place for teacher education to include more about photographs and their place in narrative assessment. Meanwhile there are online forums and social media opportunities for teachers to collaborate in this area.

The use of centre policies and agreements on how photos are used and stored is a topic for urgent discussion in centres. It documents how widespread the use in early childhood centres. It documents how widespread the use of cameras and photographs in early childhood settings and can provide a basis for further research, as well as discussion amongst early childhood teams.

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The use of centre policies and agreements on how photos are used and stored is a topic for urgent discussion in centres. The inclusion of families and other teachers in reflective discussion of assessment photos would be an important area for self-review in a centre, as would the issue of children’s access to cameras.

In general there needs to be more critical discussion of this everyday practice, to ensure it is carried out reflectively, in ways which improve learning opportunities for children and partnership with whānau. By reflecting individually, within teaching teams, and with the wider teaching community about how we use photos, we can ensure we are not abusing our power as teachers, while also ensuring the most reliable assessment information possible.

References


