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Investigating Learning Space with Photography in Early Childhood Education: A Participatory Research Approach

Nicoleta Laura POPA¹, Liliana STAN²

Abstract

Contemporary research in early childhood education turned from adult-centered orientations to investigations based on children's views, involved in data collection as competent research informants. Within this context, a variety of creative methodological frames and tools infused specific research. The present contribution discusses and exemplifies one of the innovative research tools in early education research, namely photography, through a small-scale qualitative study conducted with preschoolers as main data collectors. The study focuses on children's perceptions of their learning space, in its very material understanding, in an attempt to challenge at the same time anthropocentric tendencies in early education research. Data are discussed mainly against the methodological framework, but discussions also emphasize materiality and material surroundings as sources and determinants of early learning experiences. Photographs produced by preschoolers as research participants illustrate their balanced orientation towards human and material determinants of their learning processes: although instructed to take photos of their learning space, final data included a large percentage of photos with human figures as central points of interest (either early education professionals or peers). These results are consistent with findings of similar studies, as well as participants' preference for outdoor settings and indoor objects with aesthetic value.

Keywords: early childhood research; child-centeredness; participatory approach; photography; learning space; materiality

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Methodological trends in early childhood research: empowering children as research participants

Adult-centeredness in early childhood research was constantly criticized in recent comprehensive reviews of the field. For decades, children have been perceived and treated as less competent informants for social and educational research, if compared with adults. As a result, research methodology employed in early childhood research entrusted almost exclusively adults' views of children's experiences, and left limited space of expression for young voices. However, in the last decade early childhood researchers turned to more child-oriented research designs, promoting children's involvement in data collection, as competent participants. Harcourt and Einarsdottir (2011: 303) refer to this approach as a *new paradigm* in early childhood studies and propose several lenses for analyzing children's participation in research: shifting adults' views on children as competent research participants as opposed to perceiving children as subjects; reflecting on children rights of participation together to their right of protection and privacy; and analyzing critically this new paradigm, in order to avoid over-simplification of the generous idea of generating research data based on children's reports of their experiences. Listening to children's voice in research may be argued based on theories about social construction of childhood, but should not exclude relevant adult influences and interventions on children's life. In other words, caution, balanced approaches and multiple sources of information are actively supported by both early childhood researchers and professionals.

Recent studies in early childhood education rely on child-centered methodologies, arguing for fairness in relationships between adults and children: adults may exert their social (symbolic) power over children, but this may not lead to accurate research data (Clark, 2005a). On the contrary, both ethical grounds of educational research and data quality would be violated whenever researchers (mis)use their power as informed adults. Empowering children as informants about their learning and living experiences, as well as decision-makers is therefore at the center of current debates on early childhood education, illustrated by researchers and practitioners' interest in the issue (Schiller and Einarsdottir, 2009). The opposite view – over- interpreting young voices – may also lead to distortions, as researchers may use information provided by young children for legitimizing in a convenient way their own preconceptions or misconceptions (Harcourt and Einarsdottir, 2011).

Children's involvement in decision-making, both in educational research and practice, should represent a permanent concern in early childhood education. Based on extensive reviews of ethnography methodology, Levey (2009: 314-322) discussed roles of children in research, relying on her own efforts invested into fieldwork, but also on methodological reviews. She concluded that times when children were considered either objects or subjects in social research have

eventually ended, along with the flourishing childhood studies, but children as collaborators are still avoided by social researchers, especially in data collection. The ethnographer stresses the importance of involving children in the process of data collection, as this approach improves data quality and optimizes researchers' chances to interpret them correctly.

Some early childhood researchers (Gray & Winter, 2011) argue that young children may be involved in all research stages, from establishing the aim and scope of the investigation to data gathering and interpretation. If this type of approach is embraced, children express or develop a sense of ownerships and tend to be more active, engaging in direct support for less able peers.

Beyond stimulating debates among early childhood professionals, the turn to listening young voices determined the use of innovative research methodologies. Methodological approaches to early education and childhood and its specific issues enriched and enlarged by participatory research frames, such as the *mosaic approach* proposed by Clark and Moss (2001). The model was developed within two research studies: one focusing on evaluating a multiagency network of services for children and their families, while the other targets children's views of their outdoor playing environment. In a later work, Clark (2005b) describes the process of developing the mosaic approach, but also details its main features – usage of multiple data collection methods (observation, interviews, children's photographs and books, map making, tours); increased children's participation, based on the fact that children are experts in their own lives and provide the most accurate information about their perceptions and needs; encouragement of reflection based by including all research informants (children, parents, professionals etc.) in subsequent analysis of data collected; high flexibility derived from adaptation of the research approach to specific institutional conditions; emphasis on children's real experiences as sources of information for research; close inter-connection with early education practices and practitioners.

This trend in designing early childhood research does not ignore traditional methods and techniques. For example, participatory observation as well as collective and informal interviews with young children are especially encouraged, as friendly atmosphere may stimulate better communication between researchers and participants, as well as improvements in the process of data gathering (Mukherji & Albon, 2010).

Despite the growing interests in participatory research designs with young children, some researchers caution about certain traps, sometimes unavoidable (e.g., Waller & Bitou, 2011). Designing studies with creative participatory techniques may not determine automatically real engagement of children, while data are still interpreted by adults employing their own mindsets when looking to research data. Therefore, familiarization with participatory techniques in early childhood research cannot substitute ethnographic training. Visual ethnography and multi-modal ethnography address participatory designs in childhood studies which

employ photographs, videos and other types of multimedia (Brooks, 2006; Clark, 2011). These terminological choices emphasize the need to create ties between traditional and non-traditional research designs, methods and techniques and to ground innovative research approaches on well-established paradigms (Stan, 2007).

Using photography in early childhood research

A number of studies in early childhood education used children's photographs and/or videos for documenting participants' views of their learning experiences (Einarsdottir, 2005; Clark, 2005a; Jorgenson & Sullivan, 2009). Visual data are collected either by researchers, other adults (teachers and other early childhood professionals) or by children themselves, the latest approach corresponding to studies centered on participants' views and perceptions of the surrounding world. Einarsdottir (2005) proposed two different methodological lines in using children's photographs: in her study, one group of preschoolers photographed aspects of their kindergarten settings while presenting to the researcher their institution, while a different group of children used cameras for picturing relevant places, experiences, persons etc. in a limited period of time, unsupervised by adults. Both approaches proved to be fruitful and resulted in a rather high number of photographs, which have been later analyzed by preschoolers and the researcher in informal interviews. Based on this study, the author concluded that children's photographs provide important data for researchers interested in early education, and this methodology has the advantage of child-centeredness, as it reveals participants' experiences and values children's voices, experiences, views. However, the author also underlines certain limitations: photographs may be easily manipulated and arbitrarily selected by adults, and they offer an incomplete or fragmented image of children's world, if no accompanying story is provided by participants themselves.

Clark (2005a) reviews a set of international studies designed for listening children's voices, and in this context also comments on photographs taken either by young children or by adults as a tool in early childhood research. She indicates research themes covered with photographs as research tool (especially learning environment) and mentions as main advantages the opportunity to elicit more authentic communication with young children and to reflect participants' views on realities which are difficult to capture with different research techniques. She also suggests combining photographs with drawings, tours or map-making, for ensuring more complex tasks for young research participants. This methodological framework is also illustrated in more a recent study reported by Clark (2011), which focuses on participatory visual designs and multiple sources of research data – young children and adults.

The use of photography may increase children's authority in educational research, as they have to make choices independently, as competent individuals when reporting on their own preferences (Barker & Weller, 2003; Jorgenson & Sullivan, 2009). Young children are thus encouraged to behave responsibly and to become more autonomous in performing tasks. When children are entrusted the role of data collectors, researchers gain access to a world of perceptions rarely touched in traditional educational research at young ages. Moreover, photography represent a nonverbal tool for expressing young children's perceptions, and therefore advisable for usage in early education research, as developmental characteristics may prevent accurate verbal reports. Activism and enjoyment are equally important advantages of photography as research tool in early education research: children's motivation to remain involved and engaged may be higher than in studies using traditional research methodology. Early education researchers also appreciate the opportunity to analyze and reanalyze research data, with limited resources and costs. Photography has been use not only as a research frame for studying issues in early childhood education, but also as a didactic tool with multiple functions: a meaningful way to get preschoolers closer to technology and to encourage the usage of digital learning resources (Pastor & Kerns, 1997; Carter Ching *et al.*, 2006). Participatory visual ethnography may be thus related with action research in childhood studies, and photography perceived both as a research and pedagogical tool.

Learning spaces and materiality in early childhood education

The choice of learning space as the center of our research interest has its roots in recent poststructuralist approaches, actively supported by feminist educational researchers (Hultman & Taguchi, 2010). They challenge not only certain research traditions in education, but also anthropocentric tendencies in analyzing visual data: when facing the task of interpreting visual data, researchers habitually turn to the children, as they would act, behave, perform independently from their non-human surroundings. More attention should be oriented towards understanding children's behaviors in a relational context, not only with the social world around them, but also with the material instances producing educational and developmental effects. Hultman and Taguchi (2010) attempt to pursuit this interpretation goal in a study based on photographs taken by a professional in a Swedish kindergarten, and conclude that children are inevitably linked in their action with material forces, as all human beings emerge in a „co-existence with the world” (p. 534). This affirmation has deeper implications for educational researchers and their ways of analyzing and interpreting data, especially visual data, with ethical implication which go beyond the scope of the present contribution. Importantly, we have to note that it does not deny the importance of children as central interests

in educational research, but underlines (potential) influences of material reality on learning and becoming. The materiality with which early-aged children interact represents an aspect that can have the value of an object of scientific investigation of genuine epistemological dignity and, at the same time, it can generate special methodological challenges. The metamorphosis of materiality into a topic of investigation in early childhood research may be supported by numerous arguments, such as: the constitution of children's external "world" based on material objects; the institution of formative intervention itself for early-aged children; the generation of all psychological acquisitions, from simple to complex ones, or the determination of children's psychological development. In the following, we envisage especially the first two arguments.

The constitution of children's external "world" and materiality

The world of early-aged children undergoes a process of gradual and continuous extension, both in its human dimension (because apart from parents, it begins to comprise other children, relatives from the enlarged family, friends, some acquaintances etc.), and in its material dimension. Inevitably, early-aged children are required to adjust ceaselessly, within a relation of ineffable complementarity between themselves and people who are close (Stan, 2007: 235-236), as well as with the new things that structure their proximate physical environment (Schulman Kolumbus, 1998: 9).

For young children, things in the immediate environment represent something absolutely unknown, which is fascinating for at least two reasons: on the one hand, they are new things in themselves, and on the other hand, during children's early childhood, objects are inevitably inaccessible to them because "all things are made for adults", starting from the height of door handles, tables, chairs (Schulman Kolumbus, 1998: 10). As Farget notices, little children, with no exception, have the "need to interact with the environment", and the satisfaction of this need induces in them a state of permanent unrest: "they do not quiet down for a single moment, be they turning toy-truck wheels or pushing a switch, or handling a key" (Farget, 2008: 87). Moreover, even contents of the adult's ideal (the adult that the child will grow into, at a given moment) – argues the same analyst – is closely connected to the child's relations with the entire environment in which the respective person lived (Farget, 2008: 78).

For the scope of our analysis, the term *materiality* designates the infrastructural elements in the socio-human framework of one's existence, as well as the universe of physical, concrete, material objects, or of things within whose context a child's life is lived. The materiality of the life framework which is characteristic to the residential environment of the child's family constitutes the macro-materiality which is completed and complemented through / in the materiality of the objects

to which children have access and which we shall designate as micro-materiality (Stan, 2013: 74).

Macro-materiality consists in the proximate physical environment, as well as in the “close” physical environment, which is less or not at all familiar to children in whom the experiences of the first years in one’s existence are structured (the home, the street/ road, buildings of various purposes etc. all situated in the child’s natural environment). It is received directly by children, as well as indirectly, via miniature substitutes created deliberately for them, *i.e.* through a minute object adapted to small children. The minute object re-creates macro-materiality and it becomes the indispensable instrument for access to children’s world. The consciousness of adults integrates the conviction that shaping or modeling children’s personality is impossible in the absence of material support, both in the family and, especially, in specialized institutions meant to provide assistance for raising, caring and educating early-aged children. Some educational institutions for early-aged children (Spectrum in the USA, Suzuki in Japan, Reggio/ Reggio Emilia approach in Italia, the experience of engravings in China among primary school pupils and so on) have gained prominence as valuable educational practices, after revolutionizing transformations which valued, in specific ways, precisely the material resources. With reference to Spectrum – the American experience – Gardner pointed out the “faith in the importance of matters and technology, because children must be given a lot of objects to play with and, the greater their variety, the better” (Gardner, 2005: 112).

Micro-materiality consists in the group of objects explicitly addressed to early-aged children; we refer here to the goods which are indispensable for their care, as well as to other categories of products integrated to the process of their education (teaching materials/ material means used for educational purposes).

The institution of formative intervention for early-aged children and materiality

Activities to mould early children’s personality (which is in a process of becoming) are consubstantially connected to materiality. Material elements are used when accomplishing the fundamental generic goals of early childhood education, especially in the configuration of discipline/ in disciplining, through the inclusion of material elements in the structure of the educational strategies, through their valorization as educational/teaching material, as a source of contents, as a landmark of didactic planning etc. If we consider one of the significant aspects which highlight the relationship between materiality and disciplining (a recurrent priority during the first years in a person’s life), we can note that early-aged children’s encounters with objects constitute experiences which mainly supplies information on their identity, as well as precise means about how to use them (Stan, 2013). In parallel with this contact, children have the opportunity to

notice that things cannot always be used, that those who raise/ supervise/ look after them do not accept certain ways of using objects and that how one handles things leads to different effects on their own person or on those who are around them. The relation with objects in children's living environment provides limits, interdictions and rules. The skills and attitudes shaped within the minuscule material universe can then be transferred towards other systems of reference, including the system of interpersonal relations in the socio-human universe. The order of things, suggests Gardner, will be extended in the order of the human groups to which children belong; "the first lessons come from the environment, which one enjoys thanks to its beauty. Subsequent lessons come from the human factor, namely from the people interested in the success of this activity" (Gardner, 2005: 97). In our opinion, for small children, the minuscule found in macro-materiality, as well as and in micro-materiality, holds full disciplining power if it is assimilated to a fundamental disciplining instrument. Thus the material minuscule enriches its functions in a person's life; it is simultaneously an element which satisfies various needs, and a concrete and intuitive support of the process of knowing; yet the minuscule can also have an instrumental value during the troublesome disciplining process. The interest for the macro-materiality of children's immediate life is expressed (also) in vast searches for the most appropriate architectural form of the spaces meant for the supervision, care and education of early-aged children in Europe, America and Asia after the 1970s. Preoccupations for this issue are configured against an older background, which was equally sensitive to the quality of spaces built for educational purposes in general, and for the education of small children in particular (Păun, 1981).

The integration of small children in care, protection and educational institutions (such as nurseries and kindergartens) represents an essential service provided to them since, from the perspective of the material universe with whom they interact, the above-mentioned structures ensure a micro-cosmos of objects meant exclusively for children and appropriately correlated with the categories of contents offered to small children (Stolberg & Daniels, 2001), as well as with their main manifestation – play (Păun, 1981). The number of objects (never predetermined, but established contextually in relation with children's needs, with their rhythms, at the level of extant acquisitions at a certain moment in their evolution etc.), characteristic features connected to size, length, width, thickness, weight, color, shape and so on – they all are considered exclusively from the perspective of supporting and stimulating the development of small children.

Certain types of activities are indicated by resorting to the matter or material objects without which they could not be performed; for instance, water, sand, mud, wood, twigs, pebble, shells, toys (dolls, car-toys, animals, people), cubes, plasticine, various boxes, empty tubes etc. have a denominative capacity that is similar to the terms which designate distinct fields of knowledge, of the kind of artistic activities (music, drawing, painting, eurhythmy and so on) or activities for

the assimilation of aspects circumscribed to sciences (native tongue, mathematics).

The presence of the material object which is metamorphosed into a didactic physical and auxiliary material or an educational means/ learning means, which is a physical object in nature, is also consigned in relation with the planning of formative activity performed with young children. E. Schulman Kolumbus (1998: 106) suggested an anticipatory approach whose landmark and point of reference would be the materials used in the pedagogical relation, obviously, set in relation with the type of activity proposed to children.

Also, development itself during early ages can be monitored and highlighted, among other means, through the analysis of the universe of accepted, liked, preferred, kept or abandoned things, which are thus integrated into activities and, especially, by delineating the characteristic features of the reports established between small children and the material instruments which are accessible for them. The respect for objects and the respect for their order constitute an index that can be grasped only through a comprehensive effort oriented distinctly towards the proximate materiality of early-aged children.

A study based on photographs as a research tool

Participants

The research was conducted in urban settings, with twenty Romanian pre-schoolers aged between 5 and 6 years, in an early education institution which offers a whole-day educational program (*“grădiniță cu program prelungit”*)³. Informed consent was obtained from children’s parents, after presenting the aim and the scope of the research, as well as research methods and tools in the context of a parents’ conference organized by teachers. Additionally, participants were informed that they can withdraw from specific research activities at any time, without supplementary explanations.

Data collection and analysis

Based on recent methodological suggestions discussed in the literature devoted to early education, the researchers organized the process of data collection using a child-centered methodology. More precisely, preschoolers had the role of data

³ According to their program, mainstream Romanian preschools fall into some major categories: kindergartens with normal or short program (*grădinițe cu program normal*), kindergartens with full-day or long program (*grădinițe cu program prelungit*), kindergartens with weekly program (*grădinițe cu program săptămânal*). Kindergartens with whole-day program integrate educational and social activities from 7.30 to 16.30.

collectors: they were given digital cameras and asked to take photographs of the most important aspects of the learning space in their kindergarten. Having in mind alternatives proposed by other researchers (Einarsdottir, 2005; Clark, 2011), we introduced the data collection process through a task for preschoolers: participants had to guide the researcher in their kindergarten, present the most important places and objects, and take photographs which picture the reality described. No further selection of photographs was operated when analyzing research data, but additional information was obtained in informal interviews with preschoolers, who have been asked to describe what they photographed and briefly explain their choices. Resulted qualitative data have been analyzed with descriptive statistics, and selected accompanying statements provided by preschoolers in informal interviews are also presented, whenever may have a contribution in understanding participants' views.

Procedure

Participants were organized in groups of four members and were introduced to the task – organizing a guided tour of their kindergarten and taking photographs of the most important places and objects. Each preschooler received a digital camera and instructed in using the device; few trial photographs were suggested and encouraged before the official start of the tour. The researcher did not indicate the path to be followed during the tour, and supported each group to follow its own choices of places and objects. The average time of each tour was thirty minutes. The week after the tours, researchers have met the five groups of children for informal collective interviews in which participants briefly presented and commented the photographs taken in their kindergarten.

Results and discussion

In two of the groups organizing and delivering the tour of the kindergarten, one preschooler decided to take no photograph. Despite his fact, preschoolers engaged rather enthusiastic in solving the task, and produced an impressive volume of photographs of their learning environment. After excluding images with poor technical quality (unclear, blurred photographs) 927 photographs taken by participants were analyzed. According to their contents, photographs have been grouped as illustrated in the *Table 1* below.

Table 1. Contents in participants' photographs: frequency

Contents of photographs	Frequency	Percent
Learning and playing spaces	152	16.40
Instructional resources (including toys)	61	6.58
Decorative elements in the classroom	208	22.44
Additional spaces for social activities (dining room, kitchen, dressing room)	16	1.73
Products of preschoolers' activities	59	6.36
Photographs oriented towards persons (teachers and/or classmates)	431	46.49
TOTAL	927	100.00

Although participants' task was to take photographs of relevant places and objects in their kindergarten a large percentage of pictures have as central elements either teachers or peers (46.49%), while several photographs were taken of the child him or herself. However, photographs illustrating relevant places and objects in the kindergarten represent a large proportion of the total amount of images (53.51%). Preschoolers' choices underline the fact that material surroundings and social ties with both adults and peers are equally relevant in early childhood education (Hultman & Taguchi, 2010).

Deeper analysis of each category of photographs produced by children indicate high interest for indoor and outdoor learning and playing environments, with a clear preference for the outdoor playing ground (see Table 2 below). During informal interviews, participants stressed that most interesting activities take place outdoors, including formal learning experiences such as those organized within science lessons. Indoor spaces photographed by preschoolers include the classroom and the hallways, as well additional spaces as the dining room, the kitchen and dressing room (1.73%) grouped in the present analysis in a different category. The interest in spaces designated for daily social activities, as well as the emphasis on outdoor settings and playing devices may be interpreted as natural characteristics of preschoolers, but may also illustrate a specific need among children attending whole-day educational programs.

Table 2. Learning and playing spaces: indoor vs. outdoor

Contents of photographs	Frequency	Percent
Outdoor learning and playing spaces	101	66.44
Indoor learning and playing spaces	51	33.56
Total	152	100

Despite their preference for outdoor settings, participants provided numerous images of details of the indoor learning and playing environment – either *instructional resources* (computers in the classrooms, construction games and toys, and teachers' desk – 6.58%) or *decorative elements* (paintings on the classroom's and hallways' walls, exhibitions with children's works – 22.44%). Preschoolers' attention was evidently captured by decorations in the kindergarten, which may be considered an evidence of high aesthetic sensitivity at early ages, but also a need

to be in direct contact with the beauty and the beautiful in the material reality with which they interact frequently. The role of the classroom's place understood as a transformative driving force for learning experiences, especially in early childhood education, may be particularly discussed in relation with aesthetics and aesthetic education. Thus, some researchers (Apps & McDonald, 2012) emphasize the role of classroom design and arrangement in facilitating easy flows, improved understanding of learning tasks in accordance with main didactic goals, but mainly addresses the classroom as a holistic, living space. In its very material sense, the classroom may be interpreted as a tacit source of early childhood curriculum, while aesthetic views have the potential to promote diverse learning experiences among young learners.

Preschoolers also photographed their desks and works in progress (6.36%), in an attempt to present their own learning and more private corners in the classroom. Generally, children taking photographs of private items in the classrooms also took pictures of themselves. They explained these choices either describing themselves as important parts of the class or by mentioning a certain need for privacy and private spots in the room.

Besides the content of the photographs, the process of taking the pictures deserves some additional comments: children perceived the task of photographing as challenging, but also empowering. Generally, participants proved themselves as responsible data collectors, and enjoyed their involvement in presenting the learning space. The volume of research data also stands for the fact that preschoolers approached seriously their role as research participants.

Final considerations and methodological concerns

Collecting research data and generating pertinent interpretations of participatory research with young children challenge educational researchers and determines higher openness and creativity in applying various research designs and tools. The present study introduces main trends in planning and conducting research in early childhood education by discussing participatory designs (Harcourt & Einarisdottir, 2011; Waller & Bitou, 2011; Gray & Winter, 2011) and innovative techniques (Clark & Moss, 2001; Clark, 2005b) as methodological advances supported by both academics and practitioners working with early-aged children.

Two different lines of reasoning in early childhood research are especially followed, in our attempt to indicate important turnovers in recent years: adult-centeredness and anthropocentric tendencies are criticized with arguments selected from the literature of the field (Harcourt & Einarisdottir, 2011; Hultman & Taguchi, 2010). Additionally, child-centeredness and subtle linkages between children's development and materiality are exemplified within a small-scale qualitative study, which employs a participatory research design, with

photography as a method of data collection. Main results of the study may be interpreted in relation with Gardner's (2005) view on environment's role in early development: preschoolers divide almost equally their preferences between material surroundings and human determinants of learning processes, even when instructed to focus on places and objects. Participants' preferences for outdoor settings and for objects in the classroom with aesthetic value are also consistent with previous studies on similar topics (Clark & Moss, 2001; Apps & McDonald, 2012).

Beyond the findings of the study, we have to draw attention that our aim was to highlight recent methodological models and the use of innovative research techniques and tools; therefore, the study itself and concluding remarks are mainly methodologically oriented. Participatory designs as the one introduced in our example have certain undeniable benefits: they actively involve participants in decision-making processes, promote children's views of their learning experiences, and thus empowers them. However, there are also limitations and pitfalls, and the more important remains potential distortions produced by adults in control, either researchers or early education professionals. Combining participatory approaches with complementary and more traditional methodological options (such as interviews and observations) or diversifying groups of participants, as well as careful consideration of ethical implications may be advisable for producing credible research results.

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