

An Exploratory Research Into the Applications and Difficulties of Teaching Photography in Primary and Secondary Schools: The Perspectives of 12 Teachers

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Summary

As digital technology develops rapidly, the introduction of photography into the elementary and secondary curricula in Taiwan has progressed smoothly. Since 2006, at least 24 teaching cases in this field have been completed. Twenty of the 24 were initiated by individual teachers; in the remaining four cases, photography was introduced through cooperation between nonprofit organizations and rural schools.

However, judging from the existing literature, the author recognizes that a shortage of information and teaching materials, teachers' lack of professional training, and students' superficial image reading levels are among the most common problems. Therefore, the primary aim of this research is to ascertain a general picture of the applications and difficulties of teaching photography in elementary and secondary schools.

This paper first conducts a comprehensive review of the cases, in an attempt to examine the developments and difficulties of photography curricula in the elementary and secondary classrooms. Second, the discussion is supplemented by in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 case teachers concerning the status quo and ensuing issues of teaching photography. Interview transcripts have been analyzed in detail, through which five major themes and 25 subsidiary themes have been developed for the purpose of resolving research questions. Those interviewed were able to review the analysis online and comment on its accuracy to validate these findings. In turn, their responses have been incorporated into this paper, confirming findings and interpretations that add credibility to the study.

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Four major issues arise from the interview. The first is that the motivation for teaching photography is closely related to personal interest or to the readily accessible characteristics of digital photography. Second, in regard to learning, students face difficulties in information technology (IT) skills, such as the use of E-mail and computers, and in understanding the potential multi-layered meanings of a photograph. That is, their reading of an image is at a superficial and subjective level, lacking reflective and critical perspective. Third, the findings also reveal that the integration of the photography curriculum and visual culture involves an additional problem in selecting teaching materials, and discrepancies in learning performance. However, in general, secondary students perform better in image analysis, which may relate to their age, and a step by step course design. Fourth, while teachers' ideas about utilizing composition rules to promote aesthetic sense are at different levels, it is not rare that students tend to imitate the composition of exemplary photographs. Grounded in a belief that this may impose limitations on the observation and creativity of children, interviewee P9 suggests that composition rules should be understood instead of remembered. Students are encouraged to place the subject of a picture in a different position, and then to compare the two images to see which is more appealing. This comparison may help them develop a sense of beauty and understand the artistic expression or the diversity of an image. Lee (2006) encourages her students to observe carefully before taking pictures. She guides them through asking contextual questions so as to appreciate the possible compositions of a photograph. These are practical alternatives that go beyond teaching photographic composition through a set of rules.

To sum up, these difficulties may be overcome by various approaches, such as support from schools, curriculum integration, a two-stage teaching model, or the professional development of teachers in the use of digital technology. Considering the results of the case reviews and in-depth interviews, the researcher offers a few suggestions for further teaching and research.

First, in the digital age the access and sharing of a photograph relies heavily on information technology. Therefore, to overcome existing and potential problems and challenges, photography teachers need to constantly update their IT skills and keep up with the fast pace of technology development.

Second, the rapid development of Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE) which focuses on the criticism of and reflection on an image, matches perfectly the paradigm shift in photography, in which the meaning of a photograph is unstable and may change in different cultural contexts. Thus, further research on the integration of photography curriculum and VCAE is sorely needed.

Third, since the development of elementary and secondary photography curricula is only at

an early stage, a step-by-step systematic approach to teaching photography should be developed as soon as possible. The authors hope that the publication of this paper will contribute to further teaching and research in photographic education.