“STRATTON PHOTO IMPACT IN/OUT”
ENGAGING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN A
PHOTOGRAPHY-BASED ART PROJECT

BY

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ABSTRACT

This photography-based art project (the “Project”) seeks to reflect on how current art educational practices facilitate learning processes in a multicultural school community. This study explores teaching and learning strategies through a series of photography-based workshops included in the art curriculum of Stratton Academy of the Arts Elementary School (“Stratton School”).

The Project was organized and led by a photographer/artist who was invited not only to be involved in teaching practices but also to contribute her professional experience in furtherance of the educational goals of Stratton School. The students - voluntary participants in choice-based art studios - had the opportunity to participate in the Project outside of regularly scheduled classroom activities.

To understand the Project’s impact in the Stratton School community and specifically in visual arts instruction, I used participatory action research (PAR) as an interpretative method to explore what makes art an effective learning strategy within an elementary school curriculum. Initially, seeking to engage the Stratton School community, thirteen student volunteers were involved, joined by their parents and teachers. Participants involved in the Project were taught several in art photography-based workshops. These workshops aimed to stimulate the participants to make observations, to engage in critical inquiry, and to experiment with photographic media techniques and concepts centered on themes of identity, self-recognition, and inclusion.

Using principles of social justice as a theoretical framework and as a pedagogical tool, I engaged participants in activities such as questioning, connecting, locating, and translating their
personal experiences through learning to the practice of making photographs. These activities contributed to the participants’ recognition of the school community as a site where they interacted among themselves through collaborative artistic practice and where they reached mutual understanding through individual artistic expression. Some of the social justice principles included in the Project contributed to a better school environment by encouraging participants to develop self-confidence, critical thinking, and problem solving. The Project also motivated participants to reflect together through the creation of images within the workshops as active participants in the cultural and artistic enrichment of the Stratton School community.

Equally important, I used the phenomenology theory as a principle to achieve a description of a particular experience (John Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology helped me to analyzes student’s creative ideas, perceptions, and actions inside the workshops and also my personal understanding and teaching procedures during the preparation and implementation of the photography-based workshops. By incorporating the Project into the art curriculum of Stratton School, students’ engagement was meaningful both in participation and in image-making. The photographic media allowed them to produce a great variety of technically and conceptually rich and creative images all of them with their own personal meaning. Also, students learned technical, historical, and creative principals of photography and gained an appreciation of photography as a form of art capable of conveying high artistic and cultural values.

The experience acquired during the Project, the potential contribution of artistic photography to other areas of knowledge, and the level of engagement of the participants clearly show the need to include photography as a class subject in the visual arts curriculum for
elementary students. This research provides an example of a photography-based course that can be included in any school curriculum and urges that this be accomplished.

The Project sets forth a plan to improve elementary visual art curricula, a critical goal in a time when students and citizens passively consume ever more intrusive and polemical images and guided in their interpretation and response to them.

**Key words**: social justice, phenomenology, equity, responsibility, art education, educational experiences, photography, light, darkroom, photogram.
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To my son Santiago, the light of my life,
and
My beloved husband, Gonzalo
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CHAPTER 1: ART AS A CREATIVE PRACTICE

1.1 Preface

Throughout my career as an artist I have worked with diverse communities in the creation of socially engaged art projects. I have created art projects with my students based on the idea that artistic endeavors should be seen as something we do to advocate social change through action promoting community engagement with collaborative art practices. Through my engagement with my students in rural Colombia, I learned that bringing opportunities to less favored communities; i.e., pursuing rigorous high educational goals with a view to inculcating an expectation for equal participation in society, contributes to the present improvement of these peoples’ social conditions. With these experiences in mind, I came to the United States ready to continue my passion for art education and to challenge myself in a different cultural setting.

The Project, styled as *Stratton Photo Impact In/Out* and developed at Stratton School, explores and attempts to reveal an educational model, particularly designed for the American context, in a progressive school that is immersed in an arts-focused magnet program. As a “magnet school,” Stratton School attracts students predisposed to artistic endeavors from the entire city of Champaign. The Project sought to integrate a participatory action research methodology into American pedagogy. In this sense, my arts-based research and practice as an artist incorporate participants’ cultural values and inherited knowledge through a decided focus on social justice.

Socially engaged art practices are usually centered in urban areas or associated with art institutions or academic settings. The Project sought to create opportunities for cultural and
social interactions between members of the Stratton School and the Champaign communities around a progressive magnet model of education, artifacts, crafts, and themes of societal concern. Because of this, the pedagogical model the Project presents requires social action in which participants’ experiences become a central element of the artwork. This pedagogical model is invested in the students’ shared experience, interaction, collaboration, and participation within a larger community. It demands negotiation between the conditions and expectations set by the community members. Additionally, the Project aims to blend aesthetic experience, social justice, and education (Ranciere, 2008: Ruïternberg, 2011).

1.2 Introduction

Different authors agree that many school curricula in a standardized system of education focus on test preparation, with the unfortunate result of limiting student creativity and suppressing their ability to think critically, (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Kozol, 2005). Despite these restrictions, a significant number of scholars, teachers, and parents recognize the relationship that exists in American public schools between the academic curriculum and art practices. They understand and acknowledge the significant role of art in traditional education as empowering young people to assume responsibility, as participants in their community and the larger world (Chavez & Soep, 2005; Heath & Roach, 1999). By reflecting on the American history of traditional education, this research seeks to demonstrate the importance of the arts in public schooling. It also seeks to examine how contemporary art practices have developed diverse and transformative artistic learning approaches that consider the connection between artistic practices and the art education curriculum. Specifically, the Project examines contemporary art practices centered on elementary education by presenting a
concrete implementation at Stratton School. The results at Stratton School enables us to understand more generally the practical contribution of the arts to students’ academic success and to the way they value their social experiences.

1.3 Background Living Between Art and Education

Many years ago, I embarked on an artistic and pedagogical journey looking for teaching experiences through a consideration of art conceptually in its intersection with the physical production of works. As a photography teacher, I was inspired by my students and my art projects’ participants outside of the academic setting. Reflection on my personal educational art experiences and in my practice as an artist has motivated me to question what is a meaningful and more effective way to engage my students or art project participants in activities to motivate self-reflection or to inspire them to take action.

As an art educator, I am constantly reflecting on how my art practice and teaching methods have had to adapt to meet differing social contexts and educational approaches. For example, working as a university professor in Colombia my practice was to provide my students with basic conceptual tools, such as thinking about how they generate creative ideas instead of focusing primarily on material instruction. By contrast, working on an art project with women from many nations in Urbana, Illinois, my goal was to motivate the project participants to talk and write about gender-related issues rather than to produce artifacts. Finally, my experiences at Stratton School made me question the need for students to establish connections between their learning experiences in school and the reality of the community in which they live.
In 2015, I created the *Invisible Faces* project, an art project executed with and by the Latino community in Iowa City sponsored by the Iowa State Arts Council, the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture (NALAC), and the University of Iowa. This project aimed to promote basic artistic skills and conceptual strategies to the participants for the creation of artworks and exhibitions on themes of cultural identity and migration with families from different Latin American countries. In working with these culturally diverse communities, I placed my artistic skills, and teaching strategies at the service of people that otherwise would have little access to art education. I provided them with methodologies, concepts, and technical knowledge that they could then employ to develop their own individual creative projects.
Similarly, after my move to Illinois in 2015, I developed the project *Sharing Memories; the Mirror* (2016-2017). That project engaged the Urbana-Champaign Latino community in art-based free workshops centered around the idea of promoting a shared creative articulation of the lived experience of recent immigrants. Participatory workshops focused on technical skills, critical thinking, collaboration, and coproduction. By creating collaborative venues for expression, this project helped to revitalize the public role of art as a site of community building.

![Figure 5. Sharing Memories the Mirror art project participants and artworks](image)

A year later and in a different community setting, I brought a new project focused on painting (2017-2018) to Dr. Preston L. Williams Elementary School in Urbana. The students created a mural based on principles of diversity, equity, and cooperation. That mural is now permanently displayed in the school foyer. This project incorporated the children’s reflections on identity while living in a diverse cultural community. I encouraged them to collaborate in the process of artistic creation, which provided space and time to strengthen human relationships in their community.
Subsequently, I mediated and guided a project styled *The Face is Only a Location (2018-2019)*, which involved international women of the city of Urbana in a photography-based, creative art and conceptual experiment. This project aimed to promote self-recognition among these women at both personal and collective levels. The collaborative nature of the project provided an opportunity to explore participants’ cultural identity through revelations about the concerns of their everyday lives’ as they integrated into American cultural and social life.

These three projects were developed with the artist collaborator Luis Gonzalo Pinilla.
These projects were part of a journey that began with my own personal history as an empirical teacher in my native country, Colombia. During this time, I relied on my own extra-academic professional experiences and my class observations rather than approaching my teaching strategies through theories or formal teaching methodologies. Today, this journey has driven me beyond the limitation of my experiential approach to teaching. Now, I am aware of new progressive educational possibilities and have acquired a new understanding of the function of art in both academic and social contexts.

As a UIUC graduate student coming from a university in the rural Andean region of Bogotá, Colombia, I arrived in Urbana-Champaign in 2015 with many motivations and expectations arising from my twelve years’ experience teaching professional photography. I also came with trepidation. My intellectual journey commenced with the educational approach of William F. Pinar’s *Currere* method (1975). Pinar’s method constituted for me an effective means to understand the relationship between my own identity, my personal life histories, and my academic experiences. It also enabled me to consider how past experience can generate personal and social good, at the same time transforming my notion of art and its place in education. Pinar’s idea of a curricular relationship between “academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction” (p. 35) provided me the opportunity to reflect on an aspect of my personal history I had never before regarded as relevant, namely the relationship between my process of making art and teaching. The awareness of this relationship contributes to my present ideas and understanding of academic curricula in art. With this autobiographical approach to the *Currere* method, I had a better understanding on how my life experiences contribute to shape and reinforce my present as an art educator.
Figure 8. UIUC Art Education Program students (2018). Photo by ©Jorge Lucero
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Project, *Stratton Photo Impact In/Out*, develops a theoretical and practical framework to art education in the multicultural context of Stratton School. According to authors Marit Dewhurst (2011), Vincent Lanier (1969), and Amelia M. Kraehe (2017), social justice in art education supports the idea of community involvement centered on equity and responsibility. The role of social justice in art is to create a better society by encouraging people to become active participants in the world by motivating students to critical thinking, creative problem solving and the development of self-confidence. The driving impetus is to motivate participants to reflect on their particular social niche with a view to having a positive effect on the larger society. As a pedagogical tool, I tried to engage not just students but also teachers and parents. They actively engaged in activities such as questioning, connecting, locating, and translating their personal experiences through the photographic process. These activities contributed to the recognition of the social scenario in which students, parents, and teachers were able to share communal processes of interaction and mutual understanding as they strove for freedom of expression. These types of practices around photography led participants to construct knowledge, to be critical about ideas, to establish connections, and to take action within Stratton School and the community by practicing basic principles of social justice through art making and thinking. This idea is rooted in peoples’ experiences, and constant reflections and actions aiming to affect or impact systems of inequality.

A determinant factor in an educational setting looking for social justice is the relationship between students and teachers. This relationship is centered on making students aware of their fundamental role in society. This was accomplished at Stratton School by inviting the students -
through the photography learning processes to consider photographic art not as a separate or isolated field of study but as a strategic tool in which responsibility, collaboration, and reciprocity impact social structures. As an art educator, one of my responsibilities is to develop effective and trusted teaching practices. Consequently, I think that it is important to recognize the type of communal practices with diverse forms of educational approaches in our community. Also, understanding the importance of dynamics of student-teacher interactions, I consider it essential for me as a teacher to observe how teachers related to students and vice versa. Additionally, it is important to recognize different norms for classroom interaction and how these norms impact students’ participation, their opinions, and their way of thinking and acting.

Ultimately, a determinant factor of the research process of the Project is the recognition of how particular characteristics of local communal life determine who students are, their cultural and social values. The Project aimed to consider these characteristics through the lens of identity by promoting different ways of self-recognition through image rendering.

Through the Project, I sought to create a safe and creative classroom environment in which students were free to share or express themselves, fostering open debates, self-discovery, and new ideas. A key feature of social justice theory is constant reflexivity: participants and facilitators build, learn and grow together. Here, critical reflective practice is understood as a continuous process of self-questioning (Brookfield, 1995). It is a process involving all participants, immediate and remote, such as students, parents or teachers. Through reflexivity, the Project’s participants shared their voices in a free space for exchanging ideas using the photographic media. They immersed themselves in a collaborative creative experience.

A no less significant aspect of social justice theory is a re-examination of orthodox ideas of objectivity and neutrality. The art educator’s role is to identify privileged or hegemonic
viewpoints and to highlight viewpoints that are suppressed or not represented. Therefore, as a visiting teaching-artist I recognize the value of implementing educational art practices based on social justice theory because of the highly moral and ethical values, implicit in this theory, that are fundamental in any type of educational process. Finally, social justice theory improved the daily life experiences and social relations within the Stratton School community. A project based on social justice, motivates opportunities for learning teaching strategies and opens multiple possibilities responsibly to understand my role as a teacher and as an artist and the role participants play in the Stratton School community.

2.1 Foundations of Phenomenology: Art Education Project Practice

The Project incorporates basic principles of phenomenological theory. Among these principles, according to John Creswell, are descriptions of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology is an interpretative theory used to analyze the way humans seek to understand the essence of a phenomenon by exploring their personal experiences. Through the Project, I use this theory to analyze the way in which I seek to interpret my own personal experiences, coming from a different sociocultural context, as an artist developing a temporary teaching practice at an American elementary school. Useful for my project is the way phenomenology allows me to differentiate what I experienced from how I experienced it. Part of this phenomenological interpretation of our reality is an analysis of our interactions with objects and the way they affect our environment. Author Tyson Lewis provides further explanation of the idea of perception and how this idea relates to what he called “perceptual education.” Additionally, in his conceptualization of phenomenology, Lewis asks questions about the “kind of phenomenological education [that] is needed for the cultivation of a thing-sensitive perceptual
One way to implement Lewis’s ideas is for example, by focusing on both the technical photographic process (interaction with the space, the materials, the equipment, and the workshop dynamics) and the type of interaction this technical process motivates among project participants.

Through the conduct of photography classes, I developed and simultaneously observed the reactions and comments of participants - students, parents, and teachers - in how they described their lived experiences. The participants’ emotional narratives revealed to me how they perceive, react, interact, interpret, analyze, and symbolize forms of mediation between materials. These actions and beliefs can affect the research or transform it by subjective experiences. In this specific example, the mediation occurs through collaborative sharing exercises as a form of pedagogy. The photography medium as a narrative allowed me and the participants to express ideas, dilemmas, suggestions, questions, and so on, that would otherwise be random and disconnected experiences. This suggests the utility of an intersection between narrative and processes and a more re-conceptualized “art education of place” that reinterprets and resituates our identities within our lived worlds and sociocultural landscapes” (Rolling, 2011a, p. 123). As a teaching artist I can build or reconstruct the meaning of a situation during workshops to arrive at a better understanding of a phenomenon by reliving and rethinking participant experiences in light of my own experience.


2.2 Foundations of Social Justice Art Education Project Practice

The Brazilian author Paulo Freire’s understanding of the importance of critical reflection for personal and social change is fundamental to my research. Developed in the context of the colonial and post-colonial developing world, Freire’s critical pedagogy theory is based on the idea of building critical tools for the oppressed to change their societies and transform them into more democratic, free, and egalitarian spaces. In Freire’s view, historically the institution of education and the predominant form of education have functioned as instruments to perpetuate oppression and the existing conditions under which oppressed people live. Freire argues that the predominant form of education ‘attempts to control thinking and action, leading women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power” (Freire, 2000). The role of critical pedagogy is to spark a transformation in society by offering students the opportunity to consider the ethical implications of their beliefs and actions. In addition, Freire advocates for a dialogical, or problem-posing method of education in which students have the capacity to problematize the world around them instead of uncritically accumulating information as empty receptacles. This understanding of education is defined by Freire as the ‘banking’ method of education. Freire’s critical pedagogy offered my research a refreshing lens with which to examine the struggles students face for a more just and free society. With a similar approach, the multidisciplinary nature of social justice from the educational perspective brings together different areas of study including feminist studies, race and multicultural studies, environmentalism, community based, visual culture, and critical pedagogy. Implementing these diverse theories and approaches creates an opportunity to envision the world as a more livable and affable place in which there might exist a balance between human society and the environment. Suzi Gablik (1991), has pointed out
the increasing interest, for contemporary artists, in promoting the idea of socially responsive art practices with the ambition of building meaningful community ties.

In his book *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986), American art critic Arthur Danto argues for art practices to be at the service of improving people’s lives rather than directed to the art market and the hermetic institutional art world system. Kevin Tavin (2003) suggests the analysis and interpretation of different manifestations of visual culture, and author, should critically engage students in approaching specific and substantial historical, social, economic or political issues. Students then will become politically engaged in real issues affecting their daily lives. From this perspective, the purpose and goals of art education become a strategic instrument that bring its theoretical and pedagogical approaches into the realm of socially responsible art and social justice education (Duncum, 2002, Freedman, 2003). In the Social Justice Education series, Quinn (2000) defines social justice education as “a kind of popular education . . . something that lies at the heart of education in a democracy, education toward a more vital . . . democratic society [which] can compel us toward action, away from complacency.” Social justice education is a method and a process to guide students to know themselves as embedded in a social context and a living environment. Students may then live and act as part of their own community and become critical citizens capable of employing the principles of justice, liberty, and equality and create an inclusive democratic society (Giroux, 1991).

2.3 Conceptual Framework Photography as a Narrative

Through the Project, images serve as a narrative to describe participants experiences and to provide visibility to students’ interests and voices. The medium of photography allows
students to tell stories by describing an object, an event, a moment, a space or an idea. In this sense the photographer freezes the time or the moment, and the camera renders the specific moment by recording the action. The photographic process establishes a transition between the medium and the subject. Consequently, the image emerges from a conception of how the reality transforms into a representation of a lived experience. Taking into account how photography is a tool of representation and knowledge construction, participants in the Project expressed their ideas from individual points of view (through the photographic production) as well as cumulatively through dialogue with teachers, parents and other students. Additionally, by adopting the role of photographers, students integrated the experimental photographic processes to re-create their abstract ideas by making and creating photograms in the darkroom.

Finally, image as a narrative language can contribute to a social justice environment inside the classroom and lead to reflection on how today students’ exposure to global and mass media outside the classroom affects their own cultural identity and shapes how they respond to the role that these media present to them. A strategy I implemented was considering the experiential nature of photography to promote an analytical approach to teach students to be critical and open to some possibilities of the visual language. For example, during the photography workshops, specially through the portrait sessions, students were encouraged to reflect on their ideas about context or environment. Whoever is involved in the photo, both the photographer and the subject are asked to think about their pose, their choice of compositional elements and if they have to omit or change the scene settings. In this way, students were encouraged to find meaning and communicate their ideas through images.
By teaching photography inside the classroom my hope was to provide students with learning opportunities and in-depth art experiences that connected them in a meaningful way with their particular social environment.

![Students during workshop taking photos](image)

**Figure 9. Students during workshop taking photos**

I focused on creating learning experiences for the students with the use of the photographic media. I developed photography-based workshops to incorporate this media into Stratton School’s art curriculum. The photography art studio classes constituted a different learning opportunity from the traditional art studio classes in the school. This is because photography is not part of the visual arts standards for elementary schools in the state of Illinois. I centered the photography workshops on themes of identity, and self-recognition. I used some concepts of social justice as an educational tool to enhance the art curriculum by providing contextual and personal connections to the students’ learning. The Project contemplated concepts such as developmental and artistic stages depending on the age of the participants. It also considered approaches of elementary school art practices emphasizing meaning-making, creative problem solving, and social justice approaches to art education. The project aimed to give voices to the children by focusing on free expression, and opportunities to think critically about some of
the photographic media’s technical and conceptual possibilities. I engaged student participants in activities to enhance innate skills by questioning, practicing, and connecting the photographic practice to the context inside and outside the school, expanding their imagination, creativity and providing tools to analyze why image-making is important to communicate an idea. These approaches envision the purpose of the Project as redefining how teaching a photography art project impacts the environment of a Magnet elementary school.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participatory Action Research

This study is premised on Participatory Action Research (PAR). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a qualitative research methodology that integrates methods such as observing, documenting, analyzing, and interpreting characteristics, patterns, attributes, and meanings of human phenomena under study (Gillis & Jackson, 2002; Leininger, 1985). This method focuses on the human experience and the meanings attributed by students living the experience; this research valorizes subjectivity, individualism, and interpretation. It also facilitates the sharing of information between researcher and participants in a co-learning process. In participatory research, both participants and researcher are active throughout all the steps of the research process with the primary objective of imparting social change. In this sense, social change is the result of common goals resulting from meaningful interaction and specific actions since “there is not a single, objective reality, there are multiple or shared realities based on subjective experience and circumstance” (Wuest, 1995, p.30). The Project engaged the students actively to participate and to share their experiences through the photography workshops, thereby opening a space to provide opportunities to reflect on values centered on image creation, sharing experiences, critical thinking, problem solving, and self-confidence. This process encouraged children to share their reality by respecting their individual interpretations, voices, and creativity.

PAR has two main objectives: to improve the capacity and practices of the researcher and to provide practical research goals fostering social transformation. Additionally, PAR seeks to create an environment and a process to develop theory that is centered around specific social, cultural or politic conditions. In this sense, the Project provides a template for adding photography as a tool to foster socio-cultural understanding and to promote shared creative
articulations of the lived experiences of each participant. By creating collaborative venues for means of expression, the Project revitalized the social role of photographic art as a site of community-building. The Project aimed to suggest an alternative educational experience supplemental to existing institutional curricula. In this way, it provided a novel learning process in photography-based creative practice as a positive learning exploration. PAR and critical pedagogy centered on basic principles of social justice are fundamentally similar as they enable the participation of the students and community with equity. They are both liberating in that they promote creative freedom. And finally, they both motivate life betterment by enabling students to express their full human potential. These methodological approaches allowed me and the participants actively to engage in social practices in which participation, critical reflection, and collaboration were central.
CHAPTER 4: STRATTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COMMUNITY

4.1 Magnet Program in Champaign Illinois

Magnet school programs originated in the United States in the late 1960s with the stated intention of decreasing segregation and creating new opportunities for students with certain talents or proclivities. They are thus distinguished from non-magnet schools in that they offer an open and voluntary educational program centered around a special focus, a “distinctive program of study.” This distinctive focus is planned to attract voluntary cross sections of students of all races and as a result, eliminate segregation (Charles B. McMillan, 1980). This aspect of magnet schools is especially significant when we consider the potential benefits of equal access to educational programs (Rossell, 1990). In that sense, parents can enroll their children in the school of their choice, so long as they reside within the district’s boundaries.

Stratton School is a public magnet school which provides a choice for parents to send their children to a distinct specialized art program.

4.2 Inside the Art Classroom at Stratton Elementary School

Over the past year, my experience as a visiting teaching-artist during the art classes at Stratton School was extremely significant. Initially, this challenging opportunity made me reflect on my own experiences as an elementary school teacher a long time ago before becoming a university professor in Colombia. I found myself immersed in a different school system and in a multicultural context. My active participation in the art classroom offered me an opportunity to understand the school’s dynamics, its daily routines and procedures but, most importantly, the relationship between teachers and students. Additionally, being part of the school allowed me the
space and time to have a sense of the type of interactions taking place between the school as an institution and the larger school community.

Assisting the art teacher allowed me to focus on forging connections with the children, teachers, and staff and on incorporating myself into the school environment. I was especially focused on the children’s experiences inside the art classroom. Through these regular interactions with the school community and my experience as a spectator at some of the performances and art projects displays, I noticed that the school community is held in high regard for its achievements in visual and performing arts.

There is a great variety of themes in Stratton School’s art classes and the art produced in them. On my first day in the art classroom, I was moved by the smell of the fresh paintings, the sound of the water, and the colored hand-built spheres of paper hanging from the ceiling. These spheres were arranged to classify the students’ space. The color of the spheres determined at which table students were asked to sit and they matched the color of the sketchbooks, the containers for watercolors or the baskets for pencils, markers, and other types of materials.

Figure 10. Art classroom, photo by a student participant in the Project
Seeing the children’s hands covered with paint and their voices reminded me of when I was an art student. It was a safe and clean environment. At the beginning of that first class, the art teacher engaged the students by asking them to focus on the various materials on their tables for the first week’s art project. The art teacher is an American woman who received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in art education from an American University in the last ten years. She displays a deep knowledge and understanding of the content of the Champaign Unit 4 School District curriculum. The art teacher is skilled at guiding her students in terms of technical processes and artistic ideas and also in inspiring them to use a wide range of art techniques and skills. As part of her pedagogical strategy, she promotes art projects aiming to connect the art curriculum through American national day festivities, or national holidays.

![Photo taken by a student](image)

**Figure 11.** Photo taken by a student

Observing the art teacher provided me with insights into how students engage with her teaching approaches, with the art materials, and art processes. I particularly noted the high level of student engagement in art activities and how these activities contributed to an inclusive environment. In her classes, she always provides students with diverse materials which encourages them to practice different techniques and to explore different art concepts. For example, before the Halloween celebration, she prepared an art activity for children consisting of
painting and designing a drawing on a pumpkin. During this activity, the art teacher encouraged children to focus on re-creating the volume of the pumpkin figure using the watercolor technique as a medium. Students had a high level of engagement during this activity. Anticipating Cinco de Mayo, the art teacher showed her students a video about the process of painting a skull for this special day. She encouraged students to think about this celebration from different perspectives, for example by recreating the Cinco de Mayo environment with Mexican music while encouraging students to paint a traced skull with molds that she had prepared in advance. These type of flexible and innovative approaches to teaching art not only require having at hand materials, but also instructions on how to use them. They also require the art teacher to devote extra-academic time to class-planning and to nurture students by sharing her knowledge during the art practice.

During the art classes throughout academic year 2018-2019, I assisted the art teacher by preparing tools and class materials. During this time, I observed a linear art class routine, that inspired ideas for the structure of my photography-based art project. For example, in this photographic model that I have developed I accentuated the students’ cultural diversity giving opportunities to talk about their identity and have a dialogue immersed in the school’s academic environment. My intention through this study is to examine the challenge confronting art educators when they attempt to implement and place their pedagogical practices at the service of multicultural education.

The implementation of multicultural education is a subject that authors including Grant & Sleeter (1998), and Nieto (2000) have examined. For them, a comprehensive school reform is not an easy process because small changes in the traditional classroom setting and the school system are not enough for a lasting and radical transformation. In their view, multicultural education is
broad based (Nieto, 2000), calling “for the reform of the entire classroom and the school itself” (Grant & Sleeter, 1998, p. 163). Additionally, Nieto states (2000) states that “multicultural education must permeate school climate, culture, and practice.” Moreover, in Nieto’s view, this structural reform “must be visible everywhere, including decision-making processes such as textbook adoption, behavior policies, and program assessment.” Clearly, this radical reform requires consensus among teachers, students, and institutions about the significant role of multicultural education in a democratic society.

![Figure 12. Art classroom, photo by a student participant in the Project](image)

**Reflecting on Art Materials**

Stratton School’s art classroom is filled with diverse materials that daily enrich educational practice by providing opportunities for exploration and experimentation. This environment enhances the students’ perceptions. The relationship between materials and learners imposes its own possibilities and limitations on the learning experience because students experimenting with different art materials are required simultaneously to consider different ideas, concepts, and skills (Eisner, 2002). The inclusion of material objects as pedagogical tools and as
a form of knowledge motivates creativity and enhances the possibility of collaborative art practices between students and art teachers. This relationship at Stratton School augmented children’s capacity to be affected by materiality. The idea of materiality also informs students’ bodily interaction with the surrounding material real world. Consequently, the curriculum will promote spaces for dialogue by integrating a renovated educational practice around the perspective of the real world. This dialogue can greatly contribute to the construction of creative art with transformational potential, realized through productive interactions between the material world and the students.

Seen from this perspective, a more insightful and meaningful exploration of the material world creates connections between objects and real-life experiences, allowing students and teachers to build new forms of artistic expressions with a sense of belonging or self-identity. The connections that students may establish with the real-life context provide them with opportunities to expand their minds and creativity inside the educational setting as they build personal or communal artistic interests in a dynamic world. As suggested by Greene and Eisner, creativity is a fundamental right to imagine and question the nature of reality through the process of making art (Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1995). As such, creativity is a deeper process of engagement with the world learning through technical processes and applications of different art materials. Creative interaction with materials constituted a learning mechanism that can be used to cultivate diversity and empower identity in a multicultural and socially diverse community such as Stratton School.

My understanding of the relationship between the material and real-world experiences is closely related to the contemporary perspectives in the arts, humanities, and social sciences including new materialism. Advocates of the cultural interdisciplinary, theoretical, and
politically engaged field of inquiry known as new materialism consider fundamental this variety of transverse connections between living experiences and diverse materials or things. As suggested by authors such as Mariana Pérez Bobadilla (2018), Emily Jean Hood & Amelia M. Kraehe (2017), and Jane Bennet (2004), the material world and its contents are not fixed and stable entities. Instead, this material world is relational, plural, open, and uneven, and it is determined by unpredictable actions and events. This fluidity illustrates how the world is conceived as a place full of material things which humans perceive and use not as external to themselves, but rather as fundamentally intertwined. The state of intertwining can contribute to further knowledge about these material things. In my view, the types of relations that students during the photography art class establish with the materials develop in unpredictable ways and motivate different actions, events, and individual creative expressions.
CHAPTER 5: STRATTON PHOTO IMPACT IN/OUT

PHOTOGRAPHY ART PROJECT

Figure 13. Stratton Photo Impact In/Out Project Logo

“We have to understand the significance of what we see, hear, and touch.”

- John Dewey (1938, p. 68)

For this school community photography-based art project, I called upon my classroom practice as a teaching artist to open opportunities for students to engage in learning experiences through image-making.

The action of arriving at school every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday seemed to me almost like a photographic event - as it is a performance. The day before class, I prepared all the materials such as backgrounds, lighting equipment, papers, albums, magazines, photocopies, and supplies in advance. I am accustomed to carrying these materials in a cardboard box in my car, which served as my connection between the city community, the university and the school. I feel like always connecting spaces where we share not only supplies, but also learning experiences. But sometimes, also, I had to go to the School of Art + Design and check-out some cameras. There were days in which the type of classroom practice required me to bring 7 to 13 different
style of cameras. Individuals who saw me carrying all this equipment commonly asked me if I was going on a trip. Metaphorically, the question is not far from the truth. On this trip, I became a multi-faceted person, researching, teaching, and even transporting necessary equipment. During my travels, I was thinking about my students and the type of activities that we might experience at our next meeting.

The studio classroom is situated on the second floor of Stratton School. It is close to the stairs and located to the right, in the middle of the hallway. This hallway houses the art, fifth grade, fourth grade, third grade, second grade classrooms, and the photographic darkroom. The parking area is about a quarter mile from the studio classroom. Carrying all the materials to the classroom was exhausting but I knew that kids were waiting for me. When we saw each other all the previous effort was rewarded by their smiles and warm greetings. It was always a good day when I entered the room and my class began with a student’s question: “What are we going to do today, Ms. León?”

Figure 14. Student film 35 mm negative proof
Stratton entrance

Figure 15. Stratton view from the parking/street during winter
The fourth-grade classroom is a unique space. This room positively contributed to our studio classes, as it represented a unique learning environment at the school. This space was specially designed and set up by fourth-grade teacher, the room is big, it has some umbrellas placed in the center of round tables and a relaxing beach hut. It presents like a paradise setting where students may imagine themselves on a beach by the sea. We had our photography classes in this setting, immersed in a room of imagination where students were motivated to learn through diverse photographic media.

5.1 Project significance

By engaging the Stratton School community and parents in an artistic and creative environment, the project promoted shared creative articulations of the lived experiences of each participant. By creating collaborative venues for means of expression, the Project revitalized the role of photographic art media as a site of community building.

This study contributes to our understanding of the potential effectiveness of social justice theory in a multicultural environment to help students become more sensitive to their surrounding world. The purpose of the Project was to integrate and examine the role
photography could play in the visual art curriculum of Stratton School. Through an alternative educational strategy to the regular school curriculum, the Project integrated a photographer/artist into the classroom in order to develop and explore the use of photography as visual communication and as a learning tool to enhance students’ connectivity with the world and to enable them to find their own means of expression.

The Project focused on personal sense of belonging and social responsibility through active participation by students and community. It aimed to suggest alternative pedagogical experiences as supplemental goals beyond the existing institutional curriculum. In this way, it helped students to engage with a different learning process in photography-based creative practice as a positive learning exploration.

The project facilitated intercultural practices in which children/participants can speak, embody, and express themselves through images, exploring the photographic medium and enhancing their critical thinking skills. Additionally, participants in the project learned some approaches to the history of photography, various photographic techniques, and the use of materials, professional equipment, and tools. These include analog and digital cameras, and a darkroom space in which to practice with film developing techniques and photographic paper.

The exploration of the photographic media by community school and students helps to shape and contextualize their space, time, and skills. Through this media they have an opportunity to express their own cultural, environmental, and personal authenticity, and to reflect on their own identity. For example, when the camera is in a student’s hands, they become a photographer/explorer who is curious and seeking to discover.

Consequently, this process encourages the students to become more perceptive and sensitive citizens that can record and articulate their own life experiences. The role of the visual
arts in Stratton School is significant as it is the central subject of the academic curriculum. Educating in the school’s environment requires teachers to be effective in providing appropriate tools and resources for students to understand the process of visual arts creation. The students’ recognition of the important role of our social life and culture of image circulation is significant—not only in the form of printing materials, but also in social media, wikis, blogs, digital media, 3-D technologies, and other emerging technologies (Barker, 2010, p.133). The immediacy of the photographic media in producing images in an area of exploration might activate other pedagogical resources at the school. Engaging critically in a discussion about the responsibility of the use of images in Western contemporary society is vital as these material artifacts are constant in our social interactions across a diverse visual culture. In our visually charged environment, people gain access to the world through mass media; through images they observe others just as others observe them. Consequently, the integration of the Project into the curriculum can contribute and influence student, parent and community awareness of the meaningful ways in which photography shapes today’s visual culture. Photography is also beneficial as an avenue for students to voice social justice issues. The Project empowered participants to tell their own stories, to articulate their individual points of view, and to create personal documentation, all by means of photographic media. Through these actions, students developed the capability to approach issues of race, gender, class, location or school inequities.

Finally, the Project re-examined teaching and learning visual practices, orientations prioritizing visual literacy. Because contemporary Western culture is heavily invested in the circulation of information through visual media, developing these literacies is urgent.

Students need to be prepared to face the emergent visual stream of information to understand the consequences of the unceasing proliferation, constant and easily accessible stream
of emergent visual media. For instance, digital spaces such as social media apps like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter are becoming more popular among younger demographics at a rapid pace, exposing children to massive amounts of raw (and sometimes unmonitored) content. Consequently, there is a need to better prepare children to decode and contextualize these images of mass consumption. As author Bill Ivey points out, “If children don’t shape images, images will shape them” (Ivey, 2002) or both could happen. Ivey’s statement reminds us of the risks of a school context that neglects the critical use of images and building analytical awareness amongst student populations. Through the Project, I considered “what we can see”, or in other words “what students at Stratton School see” and the need to critically understand or interpret both through the process of image-making and image uses. Wikipedia says that “Visual Literacy” is “[t]he ability to interpret, negotiate and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image”, and that’s a popular means by which students get information. Aligning with that conception of visual literacy, the appreciation of images is then vital in a school curriculum, where the core of the arts is the ability to interpret an image.

5.2 Project Parameters and Stages

The Project began with a concerted outreach effort to recruit participants for the workshops inside Stratton School (students and teachers), then bringing in students’ families for community event workshops. Beyond in-school efforts, the principal method of public outreach was the distribution of flyers. Collaborators in the development and vision of the Project included the University of Illinois Art Education Program, Stratton School, and Marketplace Shopping Center.
A general meeting introduced Stratton School’s population to the Project. Workshops were held in the elementary school; thus, I began the Project immersed in the current curriculum of studio classes. Initial stages focused on introducing participants to basic camera usage, darkroom techniques, lighting effects, portrait aesthetics, and diverse possibilities within experimental photography. We used the resulting images as a basis for printed portraiture and experimental photography.

I envisioned a public exhibition of workshop pieces as the final stage of the Project. The exhibition was initially planned to be displayed in the Marketplace Shopping Center in Champaign. The original idea was that at the opening reception, students, parents and teacher-participants had the opportunity to speak about their experiences with the Project—opening a public dialogue about the cultural influences, affects, and products of identity-based pieces. Throughout the workshops and the preparation of the final exhibition, as event organizer I expected to document the event visually - using the same technologies (which created the displayed products) to create a record of the event. However, the complete documentation was not possible because of the unexpected cancelation of all the public activities in the State of Illinois due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The materials collected not only from the final showcase’s documentation, but also from the entire process of the project, will comprise an archive that will be reproduced, published and distributed in a printed catalogue.

5.3 Project Participants

I invited student/participants to be part of Project voluntarily as a free choice-based art photography studio. Students signed-up for the classes and workshops because they wanted to learn photography, although some surely did so with the encouragement of their parents. The
students who participated in this photography-based art project, range in age from 7 to 10 years old-enrolled in second to fifth grade from different cultural backgrounds.

5.4 Creative Photography Workshops

I met the project participants in the fourth-grade classroom every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for almost six months. Each class session was fifty minutes in length.

Stratton School does not offer photography art classes for its students. I designed the Project to last from October 16 to April 21 at the Stratton School as part of my thesis research. I invited student/participants to experience photography with the idea of exploring it through diverse creative practices. The learning process and practices started with 35 mm film, then proceeded to the use of digital cameras and darkroom printing techniques. Students were in contact with diverse types of cameras and other photography materials. The equipment consisted of digital Canon Eos 70D semi-professional cameras, Canon G12 cameras for amateurs, Canon Power shot ELPH 180 compact cameras and disposable of 35 mm. film cameras, and EOS 1000
analog 35mm. film cameras for the amateur. Additional materials were lighting equipment, a kodak slice projector, and tripods. I built an on-site darkroom to teach photographic developing processes with paper and 35mm film., which created an opportunity for students to engage in photographic experimentation. Due to space limitations, I situated the darkroom in a small storage room previously utilized to store cleaning materials. Establishing the darkroom was very frustrating largely because the school administration spent almost three months identifying an appropriate space. The materials such as the enlarger, safety light, trays, darkroom timer, and tongs were provided by me; the photographic materials, such as paper, chemicals, and disposable cameras were provided by UIUC.

As a teaching artist who loves the photographic medium as a means of contemplating and sharing the world, observing the spontaneous and sustained excitement of the participating students provided me the energy I needed to keep teaching diverse photography approaches with different learning techniques. I designed the photography workshops to strengthen the participants’ innate artistic abilities, to enhance their skills, and to foster learning and intercultural understanding. Every day that we met, the students’ interests, questions and their imaginations challenged me to create a dynamic art project where they could develop and express new ideas, skills, and abilities. Their participation fostered creativity by valuing their voices and by permitting them to speak through their images as active participants in their society.
The accessibility of photography made the Project feasible both by creating conditions amenable to its expression as an artistic vision by allowing the project to connect to the world not only within the classroom, but also to the society at large in the city of Champaign. The photographic medium carries the democratic potential to empower and represent the experiences of everyday life (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). Documentary photography as a tool of social justice in North America is founded on the work of early twentieth century photographers like as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, whose images of urban New York City changed public perceptions of immigrant poverty and instigated political and legal reforms pointed toward the amelioration of those conditions. Photographers like Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Gordon Parks, and Arthur Rothstein built on this foundation to document the traumatic economic and socio-political situations that attended the economic depression of the 1930s, and the continuing racial discrimination throughout the nation. Teaching photography provides me as a Latin American woman a tremendous opportunity to connect myself and my students in a learning
process where image tradition has been contextualized in their documentary image-making practices over the years.

I combined photography instruction with the students’ life experiences and the school curriculum. Students enjoyed working in photography and experimenting with the medium. During the photography classes, I provided students a space for experimentation, exploration, discovery, and reflection.

Figure 21. Student taking a photo  
Figure 22. Photograph taken by a student

This class setting allowed them to use their imagination and their voices as a springboard for their photographic art making. The creative processes varied depending on the medium. For example, working with chemicals inside the darkroom opened a new world to students. The darkroom processes provided students opportunities to experience diverse experimental possibilities. It generated excitement and interest, reflected in their questions, and their attentiveness during every meeting. I introduced them to analogue photography, and they responded with energy and excitement to the processes such as developing films or making experimental photograms and enlarging images on paper. Students’ fascination inside the darkroom seemed to grow organically. The diverse photographic processes and interactions
allowed children to develop original works enhancing their imagination, combining understanding, problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication as they learned the aesthetic of making photography.

**Figure 23.** Photograph taken by a student

**Figure 24.** Photograph taken by a student

**Figure 25.** Photograph taken by a student

**Figure 26.** Photograph taken by a student
5.5 The Panoramic Camera.

In this phase of the Project, the workshops focused on the early history of photography, invented in the 1820s in Europe. One workshop was focused on Joseph Nicéphore Niépce’s portable camera obscura invention, his experimental chemical methods on a plate coated with a light-sensitive solution, and the world's first photograph.
Figure 31. Students’ art display at school

Figure 32. Students’ art display

Figure 33. Students’ art display

Figure 34. Students’ art display

Figure 35. Students’ art display
At the beginning of the photography art studio, our classes focused on science while learning photography. Building the panoramic camera was very relevant for the fourth grade class: in this part of the project the fourth teacher and I shared the theme for the students. In this sense the photography class supported the science class into the school curriculum. The science class were working on the theme ‘the eye.’ Students were researching the morphology of the eye, its functions and its characteristics. The Project helped them to clarify concepts and gain a deeper understanding of the mechanics of sight and why they are able to “see.” In one session I posed a very significant question for the students: what is photography? From the perspective of their answers, I knew that I had to connect, identify and explain their interests through photographic experiences, showing them elements that they could observe and relate to their context. Learning and teaching through evidence and practice opened opportunities for bodily experiences and processes that were evident during the studio classes.

We traveled back into the history of photography to learn how old cameras worked. We explored questions such as how light travels across a dark space; who made the first photograph and when; who invented antique photographic processes such as the daguerreotype or the calotype and how the processes worked. Integrating all this information in different sessions enabled us to build a panoramic camera.

Figure 36. Students working together building the panoramic camera
The panoramic camera is a box similar to a pinhole camera. Students placed a screen in the back of the box, a semi-transparent paper in order to observe scenes in front of them by covering their heads with a big black fabric. Understanding how light travels, children had the opportunity to experiment, think and conceptualize through hands-on work and observation, i.e., through active living experience.

Art teaching focuses on flexibility. Furthermore, in order to strengthen the students’ creativity and expand their imagination, it is necessary to involve and motivate them to participate, to provide them with opportunities to play while learning and generating ideas by motivating actions and provoking emotions. It is important to create spaces for collaboration between them and with their classroom teacher and their community. During the classes, students used the word “fun” to describe their studio class. I sensed the children were engaged, energetic, positive, and focused on an enjoyable activity. “If the arts are about anything, they are about how they make you feel in their presence” Eisner (2002, 89).

Figure 37. Teacher helping students to wear the black fabric for practicing with the panoramic camera
Building the panoramic camera allowed me to demonstrate the connection with the science class into the school curriculum and the photography studio class. There was a strong relationship between the craft of building the box with the principles of the photography medium (technique), decorating it (expressive), and the embody of actions (movement), three features of learning processes. Some students expressed their learning process as an opportunity to escape from the classroom ‘routine’ to a ‘fun’ activity, because of the possibility to (play) practice with the panoramic camera in a different space (playground) and connected it with the school curriculum in a dynamic participation.

*Light and Shadows*

![Figure 38. Students working together in a workshop](image)

The next phase of the photography workshop utilized light. In these sessions, I used a Kodak carousel slide projector. As soon as I turned it on, the children began to play with the light and create shadows in the background. Students had the opportunity to interact with the space surrounded by cast shadows, creating an environment similar to a dance class. These workshops
were designed to focus on learning through body expression, action, interaction, collaboration and respect for personal space. The Kodak projector provided students a medium for playing with the light, moving their hands and understanding how the light travels and how it is projected. Children observed and engaged in sensory experience. According to Eisner (2003, 343) “The senses feed imagination, and imagination provides content for representation… the arts, when well taught, are fundamental in refining sensibility and cultivating the capacity to think imaginatively”. Through these sessions, students were invited to create a written narrative, integrating paper characters that I had designed and prepared for them in advance. I divided the class into two groups with the idea that each group of children would create a short video. After the students wrote the story, they chose a classmate to represent them and to read the story, while the rest of the participants were acting and moving their paper characters.

The students practiced many times before recording. When they were ready, I recorded each group’s video. It is wonderful when students are motivated and participate in an activity where they can immediately apply their knowledge as they acquire it. It is a meaningful practice of exploration and imagination.

The creation of stories opened up opportunities for students to interact, develop, and share their ideas in collaboration among themselves. As a result, these workshops created a dynamic learning environment where creativity, respect, collaboration, and exploration benefitted students. Teamwork is fundamental to our society and it is necessary to provide spaces to develop projects focused on collaboration, solidarity and respect.
Figure 39. Students’ narrative text for a video

Figure 40. Students’ narrative text for a video

Figure 41. Workshop of a photographic narrative, children creating a story by shadows for a video
Before the students take film pictures, I gave another demonstration about camera techniques, specifically how the aperture and shutter affect the look of an image. I explained the characteristics of diverse 35 mm. films, such as negative color films, including slide colored films, and black and white films. Through these films we continued reflecting on the history of photography. In these sessions, I tried to expand students’ imagination, talking about ancient photography techniques such as the daguerreotype and the calotype process and how the technology has developed new resources. We compared the technological past of photography with the present. As students participated in conversation, they developed their ideas and learned to appreciate technological advances and scientific discoveries in photography and communication. For example, I made the connection between the old Kodak carousel slide projector and the film appropriate to it. The projector allowed me to introduce students to the Kodak products and the research made by Kodak company to develop black and white roll film. Also, we talked about the brownie camera, and how these advances helped to made photography accessible to millions of amateurs without professional training. We discussed how this historical development culminated in the mass proliferation of photography activity. In our reflection, students understood how photographic technology evolved over time to the digital era, not
merely through mechanical advances, but also as a transformational means of communication. Additionally, they had the opportunity to touch and see different photographic cameras and films. I brought different kinds of photographic films and cameras to the class to show students and to teach them the differences between film materials and cameras, how everything depends on the purpose of the photographer. For example, we analyzed why a good quality image resolution is important to produce printer materials like in magazines and I established what kind of films or digital cameras are ideal for this purpose. Finally, we talked about black and white artistic photography that requires another type of films and cameras for artistic purposes.

This approach was an engaging way to introduce basic vocabulary and principles about the camera and films through the history of photography, such as the operation of the shutter button, aperture, focus, exposure, and film speed. It took several sessions for all of the students to understand all of the concepts. Accordingly, I presented simple puzzles and games to the class in each session. For example, I prepared a big camera illustration without the names of the parts.
on it. I cut out the names so the students could play with them while remembering and guessing which word matched with which specific part of the camera. This practice was very useful because they learned together through active participation, sharing the same illustration and helping each other.

Figure 45. Students playing with camera illustration

Figure 46. Students during workshop
Using cameras

Through the workshop sessions, each student had the opportunity to work with diverse types of cameras. At the beginning of each session, I familiarized the students with the devices that we were going to use according to the session’s theme. Instructions and guides were shared with them every meeting and I repeated the information periodically throughout classes. Also, before each session we ensured that all devices were charged and ready to be used. For example, when students practiced with a heavy canon 70D, 35 mm. digital camera, they learned how to hold it and practiced some of the camera operations that we had discussed before. It took time for students to adjust to a viewfinder since they usually take photos from I-pads or cellphones; only a few of them had taken photos with a compact camera. We looked for ways to steady the camera such as becoming a human tripod by holding the camera with the elbows tight against the body. I demonstrated how to rest the camera on a flat surface when taking photos, such as a table, chair, fence or wall. During these meetings, students learned by playing with the cameras.
Using the viewfinder, they practiced taking photos of each other and I encouraged them to communicate their ideas. “Ultimately all works of art are about communicating thoughts and feelings through image, sound or movement” Eisner (2002, 89). During this activity, students came to me and asked questions about operating the camera. While they were working, students helped each other, learning in collaboration, creating a student-driven environment during each class activity.

We used diverse types of cameras for the Project: Canon Eos 70D semi-professional cameras, Canon G12 cameras for amateurs, Canon Power shot ELPH 180 compact cameras, disposable 35 mm. film cameras, and EOS 1000 analog 35mm. film cameras.

The integration of diverse types of cameras and tools in the photography workshops and into the art curriculum contributed positively to students’ learning. The photographic practices embedded in the Project generated new opportunities for students to construct their own knowledge in and around photography and to experience how their artistic skills were promoted by opening an alternative learning space attached to their other existing art classes in the school. Furthermore,
my teaching aimed to support them as they interpreted of their own assignments, to push them out of their regular class experience, understanding and knowing that they had different experiences through their creative photography sessions as active children freely expressing their emotions and imagination.

**Figure 51.** Photo taken by a student

**Figure 52.** Photo taken by a student

**Figure 53.** Photo taken by a student

**Figure 54.** Photo taken by a student
The darkroom is located on the second floor of Stratton School, in the middle of the hallway between classrooms. There is no signage on the door. It is like a small, mysterious space not only for students but also for teachers and parents. Only the student/participants were allowed to enter and only under my supervision. The open door impedes traffic in the hallway. An enlarger and timer are set on a table on the right side of the room. There are electrical cables next to a wall. To the left, another table holds a set of trays, the paper cutter and the amber safelight. Also, on the floor there are some chemicals bottles for developing processes, and three boxes to store materials, a tripod, a Kodak carousel slide projector, and more trays of different sizes. There is no water faucet in the darkroom, so I brought water from bathroom located two classrooms away. The space only allowed three students to work shoulder to shoulder and they had to slide past each other to move from printing to the developing process.
Students’ encounter with the darkroom was a novel experience for them. They had never worked with darkroom materials, developed film, made a photogram or enlarged a photograph. The first step was to learn the processes of chemical preparation, and to appreciate the importance to keeping all chemicals well prepared in order to achieve good results. Additionally, students learned how to monitor temperatures and mix water and chemicals in the proper proportions. We decided together to do this in their classroom before attempting these processes in the darkroom. It was much easier for everyone for me to demonstrate the procedures for preparing chemicals and making negative prints for the creation of photograms.

Typically, each darkroom session began with the introduction of basic concepts. I usually gave a brief overview of the day’s topic. We then initiated the project assignment together by practicing with the photographic materials. For example, in one class I demonstrated the steps for making and processing a photogram. I reminded the students how much time the paper had to be exposed by the enlarger, then passed to each tray to activate the chemicals. I also demonstrated the proper technique for removing photographic paper from the trays. Each student practiced all
the processes inside the darkroom. Students were so excited to start printing; they were keenly focused on following correct techniques.

**Figure 59.** The darkroom

![Students practicing how to develop a photogram](image)

**Figure 60.** Students practicing how to develop a photogram

![Students’ photograms](image)

**Figure 61.** Students’ photograms
A photogram is a photographic image made by placing objects upon photosensitized paper. No camera is used: the image is obtained during exposure to light. This process is the legacy of the Hungarian artist and researcher László Moholy-Nagy. He conducted photographic research from 1920 to 1943. In his 1946 book, ‘*New Vision,*’ he described darkroom photogram procedures. I introduced students for the first time to the darkroom through making photograms to illustrate basic principles and procedures for understanding the developing process. Photogram processes allowed children to experience the darkroom with all the materials such as the diverse types of papers, the enlarger, the basic chemicals, the trays and tongs. Most important, students learned how significant it is to control time, light and temperature when working in the darkroom.
The printing days were very demanding and exhausting for me, since all the students needed individual help. I divided the class into four or five groups, so students worked in the darkroom in groups of three. As soon as one group finished their printing process, the next group immediately entered to the darkroom and the process was repeated until the thirteen children had printed their photograms. While I was with three students in the darkroom, the fourth-grade teacher helped me with the rest of the participants, who were working on tasks relevant to the session’s theme. Some of the tasks were coloring their image logo of the Project, playing with the camera illustration while placing the names of the camera parts, writing a photographic story or creating and taking photographs. At the end of each darkroom class, students assembled to see what they had done. Sometimes we opened the door to the hallway so other students could view the darkroom. The student/participants were excited and proud to show what they had created.

We usually examined the prints and we discussed the experimental images during our next class. It took time to train the students on darkroom techniques before they were prepared to practice them in an individual learning space. Being immersed in flexible group meetings, sometimes with all students in the classroom for demonstrations and analysis or in the darkroom in groups.
of three, became our class dynamic. We also dealt with time limitations in almost all of our darkroom sessions because we only had one enlarger for all the students and the space was too small to accommodate more students, which was unfortunate because students were so interested and sometimes wanted to develop more photographs. One advantage of our small darkroom is that it let us work together, truly focused on our class subjects.

Figure 65. Students during photogram workshop

Figure 66. Students during workshop

Figure 67. Students preparing materials for Photograms
Figure 68. Photogram by a student

Figure 69. Photogram by a student

Figure 70. Photogram by a student
The clean-up usually began five to seven minutes before the end of the class. I reminded the students to start cleaning up; when the bell rang, it is a very hurried moment. If a student accidentally turned on the light or opened the door while he/she was using the photographic paper to enlarge, peers reprimanded him/her for fogging the paper. In that sense students learned to respect the short time that each student had to finish the photographic process and to be patient in giving her/him enough time to finish the process. Each group of three decided when it was time to turn on the light or open the door. If the children had worked with me in the darkroom, I usually cleaned the dark room, but in classroom they always collaborated in returning all materials to the correct places.
In these class sessions, light was the principal component. Understanding light was complex for the children until they began to play with it. Painting with light is a photographic technique using lights of different colors such as flashlights, glow sticks, and light brushes while taking the photograph in a long exposure setting camera or bulb mode exposure. The long exposure demanded adjusting the exposure time to least 30 seconds, so the camera captures the motion of
the light source becoming the photographic subject. The mode of the camera could be in manual
or bulb setting, the speed can be set from 10 to 30 seconds depending of the photo qualities and
the F-stop number or aperture could be between 8 and 11, and finally, the ISO could be set
between 100 and 400. Considering the environment is very important because the photographer
must determine if he/she wants to include it in the image. It is also important to focus the image
subject before shooting and painting with light. A tripod is important for holding the camera, to
allow shooting without image-shaking, so that the blurring results solely from the light and from
the camera shaking but also for the movement of the light source. In addition, it is a good idea to
use a remote shutter release for the camera in order to control shaking. Finally, painting with
light for children was a fun activity that allowed them to understand the direction of the light
source, the effects that the light can create, and most important, why light alters reality not only
creatively but also by introducing unusual designs and artistic qualities to photographs. In
addition, the direction of the light combining natural or artificial lights can affect the subject
adding texture and unpredictable details, creating shadows and highlight shapes, capturing
contours, and producing more interesting, creative and dramatic images.

Painting with light sessions motivated students to move their bodies, dancing, jumping
and discovering a new experimental photographic topic. The children enhanced their creative
skills by moving the lights in alternative ways and combining them in different ways, such as
placing diverse types of light sources in just one group (pasting them with tape) or hanging one
light attached to other and selecting various colors. For example, they discovered that mixing
different colors of light can produce white light with a few traces of color. A very different result
was produced when they mixed water-color paints when creating a drawing, because combining
paints yields a brown or dark colored hue. These workshops were one of the most interesting for
the children because of their photographic light discoveries, the collaboration among them, as well as motivating bodily activity and having fun during the sessions.

Figure 75. Student painting with light

Figure 76. Two students’ experimenting with lights

5.8 Portraits.

Analyzing images made by children requires understanding what they did and if they considered the rules of composition. Through these workshops, I presented the basic principles of composition to show them that considering certain rules could determine a more effective, compelling and better image communication. By using an emphasis on a specific point of the photography, it becomes the key component of the composition, it is the subject of the image that is central to its message. Students practices some compositional rules. They used the rule of the thirds as the main principle to produce their images. This law of the thirds refers to dividing an image into an imaginary grid, using two horizontal and two vertical lines to create nine equal parts. The principal subject of the image is placed at one of the four intersections points of those dividing lines, creating well balanced image. Another concept, students practiced was the framing, that consist of using natural frames such us mountains, trees, branches, archways,
furniture or holes to help isolate the main subject from the surrounding things, focusing in the main point of interest. Also, the viewpoint allowed students to consider shooting not only from eye level, instead photographing from down at ground level, from the side, from the high above, from the back, from very close or far away; the viewpoint usually impact the photo composition.

Photo Story

In these sessions, I tried to include all the elements of composition that students learned during our photography classes. They explored the connection between children, their families, and the school community. Students began to see and use the disposable camera as a tool for expression and applied previously discussed of the elements of design evident in a compelling photograph. This included analyzing the subject in terms of composition and point of view, the light, the pose, texture, rhythm, gray tones. I tried to inspire them to create their own stories and to view their photographs connected to their surrounding environment or social context.

In these workshops, I created a specific guide for the students to take home with the idea of sharing it with their parents, family or relatives.

The idea was to integrate them into the Project and to participate and assist with the photography homework assignment.
Stratton Photography Art Project

Activity to Develop a photography film.

Your kid is going to bring a camera to your home as a part of an art project that He or She is doing in the photography studio. The film will be developed at the school’s darkroom. Please this camera needs to be returned to the school once your kid has taken the photos for the project.

What Am I going to do with my camera at home?

You have two options:

1. Option: With your camera you can create a photographic story, but you need to write down the story before taking the photographs, so in this case your story will say something important and organized. For this project you need to bring your writing story and your camera to your photography studio class to develop the film and to print the photos for a show.

2. Option: With your camera you can describe how is your home and your family. But you need to write down why your family is important, before taking the photographs. In this case your description will say something important and organized. For example, you can show your favorite place at home, your favorite toy, or if you have a pet, make portraits of your family, and have fun. For this project you need to bring your writing to your photography studio class, and your camera to develop the film and to print the photos for a show.

Example of photographs:

Figure 78. Homework flyer for a disposable camera practice

For this assignment, students brought disposables cameras to their homes, loaded with black and white 35 mm film with a capacity of 27 exposures. Children were given two options: either they create a photographic story, or they describe their home and their family. Both options required them to create a writing before shooting photographs. Under the first option, the student had to write an original short story; under the second, they could describe a favorite place in their home, a favorite toy, or a pet, and then take portraits of their relatives or friends. Also, they had to bring their written product and camera to the photography studio class to develop the films and to print enlargements for an exhibition. This project took more time that I expected - we spent almost
four weeks on this assignment. During this time, I showed them how to create a test strip to find the correct exposure time and how to control the exposure through the lens and timer to create a good contrasting photograph. The children returned all the disposable cameras before spring break. On that day, we developed and enlarged two prints from one of the students. We planned to develop all the rolls of film after spring break, but we did not return to school due to the outbreak of Covid-19.

Figure 79. Student film 35 mm negative proof

Figure 80. Student film 35 mm negative proof
I wake up and smell the morning air and I see if my siblings are awake and thankfully they are not. And I just got a new dog; we still haven't decided her name. And I let her out to then I take her out side and then I attempt to fix our environment. Then I make breakfast and then I take a shower. And sometimes we might go somewhere. Sometimes we might not depend on the weather. And then we go to and keep our parents for breakfast and the

**Figure 81.** Student narrative for photographs

**Figure 82.** Student photograph enlarge.

**Figure 83.** Student film 35 mm negative proof
Figure 84. Student narrative for photographs

I took a photo of inside the bus like the window, because it was peaceful, lovely, and kinda good, but it was quiet in the bus. But I think that was the best way to take a photo. I took a photo of my sister, because she sweet, like a plum, or sweet.

Figure 85. Student film 35 mm negative proof
Figure 86. Student narrative

Figure 87. Student film 35 mm negative proof

Figure 88. Student film 35 mm negative proof

Figure 89. Student film 35 mm negative proof
CHAPTER 6: WORKSHOPS FOR STRATTON SCHOOL COMMUNITY AND PARENTS

One of the primary goals of the Project was to involve students, teachers, and parents from the school community. Integrating them was not an easy task, it took a lot of time, effort and, above all, coordination with school staff to be able to negotiate the time and space for the workshops and have a specific schedule for the school community and for parents. The publicity and initial communication strategies regarding the workshops included the production of flyers. I designed three different prototypes of flyers with the information for each workshop activity. The aim of distributing these flyers was to motivate parents, teachers and other students from different area study classes. The primary goal, however, was to consolidate the base group for the whole project which included thirteen students originally from grades ranging from second to fifth grade and their friends, parents or relatives.

Figure 90. Flyer workshops general information

Figure 91. Flyer screen printing workshop information
6.1 Hands on Action with T-Shirt Screen Printing.

I scheduled the first workshop on February 22. One week before, I prepared a flyer for the school community to share this activity for the parents of the thirteen student/participants. In that flyer, I asked for help to support my students in printing T-shirts and helping them with the process:

“Come, support our students, and have fun while printing a T-shirt with the *Stratton Photo Impact In/Out* logo. These T-shirts are for the students participating in the Project. Parents and teachers will help students to print and can bring your own T-shirts to print them as well (preferred color black).”
The screen-printing workshop was an integral part of the Project and constituted an important highly collaborative creative experience in which parents, students, and teachers participated. For this workshop I invited Gonzalo Pinilla Artist to develop the printing practice at the school. This workshop focused on exploring printing techniques of transferring a previously prepared logo design image unto materials such as different types of fabrics, including T-shirts, posters and cards. Also, the workshop allowed participants and the school community to acquire and learn a technique of reproduction as a process and as an example that they may use with their own photographic images or designs to create their own artwork in the future.

Before the workshop, six screens were prepared, four of them with larger images of the Project logo for printing on T-shirts. Two additional screens were used for smaller images of the logo intended as a proof. These smaller images were easier to print for children, but they were also part of other printing forms and other materials and sizes such as postcards or smaller pieces of different colors and textures of fabric. With this variety of options, participants were encouraged to get involved with the type size and material with which they felt most comfortable so that they could become confident with the process. Gradually, the children were encouraged to engage with other materials and to experiment with bigger image sizes. In the end, participants
ended up interacting with the whole printing process, understanding its dynamics, and using a variety of surfaces and printing approaches.

**Figure 95.** Screen-printing workshop leading by Gonzalo Pinilla artist with teachers and student participants

The screen-printing process is one of the most exciting printing methods because it offers the widest range of possibilities for different image renderings and uses of color. For example, it makes possible the printing of fine line drawings, diverse types of lettering techniques, the printing of logos, as well as photographic half-tone positives. Additionally, as a form of stencil printing, the screen-printing technique gives participants the opportunity to enhance their innovation, their opportunities of image making, and their creativity by interacting with a process that be highly flexible both in image rendering and printing process.

This workshop led participants to consider certain essential factors regarding the use of images to convey a message, such as subject matter, arrangement of motifs and style of rendering combined with the use of color, as well as the implementation of design principles such as pattern, proportion, rhythm, balance, contrast, etc. Participants were able to see how a design is transferred onto fabric through a step-by-step printing process which makes it possible to duplicate and reproduce an image many times.
Before beginning the actual printing, participants in the workshop received a brief introduction regarding the preparation of the screen. After selecting the image, a transparent film is printed on an inkjet printer. The image is then exposed by to a high-powered light source. This part of the process was done at the School of Art + Design because it required a more sophisticated darkroom. In this step, [a photomechanical process] the film is projected creating a stencil by exposing a previously prepared screen with a light photosensitive emulsion semi-liquid material. This photosensitive material serves as opaque sections of the screen, preventing the water-based ink to penetrate through the negative areas of the image. The areas of the stencil with the design, which are open for ink penetration, are put on the fabric and ink forced through the tine holes of the stretched silk mesh by a spatula or squeegee. It was challenging to print those areas of the design which had tiny lines and sharp edges. However, this experience provided participants with a space and time to learn about a creative process and identify challenges involved in reproducible hand printing techniques.

Figure 96. Screen-printed t-shirts made by workshop’s participants
Some of the problems they identified were loss of small details in the original design, fast drying of the water-based ink, and the inconvenience of using coarse fabric textures. These challenges made the workshop more interesting because they gave participants an opportunity to reflect on their own artmaking and to expand their creative thinking.

6.2 Dancing and Painting with Lights

For the March 7th workshop, I introduced the underlying photography principles and procedures we would need to apply. The workshop utilized two DSLR cameras 35mm. each one charged with a SD card to record the images, two tripods and several lights sources such as flashlights, glow sticks, lanterns, and led lights. A very important part was to set the background for which I placed a big black fabric as a backdrop hanging on the wall.

Figure 97. Student’s experimental light creation

Figure 98. Student’s experimental light creation
Painting with light as an experimental photographic technique is an exciting experimental method because it offers photographic possibilities that are not completely under the control of the photographer. This technique gave participants an opportunity to play with light, to create their own images, and to expand their creativity, realizing for enhanced effects the photographic image offered to them.
Students, parents, and teachers used the camera as an instrument for recording the abstract expressions that playing with lights in a dark space provided. This workshop motivated students to become open to new photographic possibilities and to make discoveries through the movement of diverse light sources. The process allowed them to create images through camera manipulation, even where their attempts appeared to fail. Participants were engaged in thinking on diverse creative possibilities and figuring out how to move the lights in order to create what they imagined. Light painting for them constituted an opportunity for image rendering and self-discoveries, a magical approach to an uncertain image maker.

**Figure 102.** Three Student’s experimental light creation

**Figure 103.** Student and parent’s experimental light creation
In one hour, workshop participants’ discovered and understood how photographic light painting works, yet the light seemed to discover the participants, because as soon as each participant took a photo he/she immediately shared the image with others in order to understand how the light and the movement created the design. This workshop produced well-created light designs. All of the parents and students interacted and shared their experiences, the common space, and the materials. They had having fun while they were learning. Experimenting with the lights and creating their images were essential part of exploring diverse approaches to the photographic process.

6.3 Hands on Experiment in the Darkroom.

I designed the flyer inviting the school community, teachers and parents for an experimental workshop in the darkroom as part of the Project on April 4th. Unfortunately, the workshop session never took place because of the restriction of public gathering due to the health situation in Illinois and around the world concerning Covid-19. Stratton School was closed on this date and for the balance of the school year. This situation substantially altered all the activities in our community. For example, I had planned that participants in this workshop would create and experiment in a photography darkroom using materials such as the photographic enlarger, different types of photographic paper, trays, tongues, chemicals, and timer. Also, each participant would have had an opportunity to create and design his/her own and unique photogram. I have collected and prepared ahead some materials for the participants such as analog cameras, transparent body covers from the disposable cameras, plastic and metal developing reels, diverse type of fabrics, silk ribbons, buttons, little glass and plastic containers, scrap papers, cardboard, tapes, diverse little wood figures, paper flowers, cut paper shapes, and
little plastic bags. Additionally, I had hoped to have an opportunity to share the darkroom space with parents, teachers and students, and to sharing the practices and routines that the students followed to create photograms and to enlarge photographs. I also wanted to give one of the photograms prints for each workshop’s participant to take home in order to provide them with a memory of the moment and the experience with their children and teachers. A second print would be part of a public exhibition at the conclusion of which, I planned to return all the photograms done by participants during the workshop.
CHAPTER 7: PROJECT FINAL PRESENTATION

7.1 Exhibition

Figure 104. Flyer for the Exhibition

One of the Project’s goals was the possibility of sharing some of the Project’s outcomes with the school community, parents, relatives and the general public through an exhibition. The public exhibition would promote not only cross-cultural experiences in Champaign and inside Stratton School and would compellingly insert the students’ experiences into public consciousness.

Preparing the exhibition took a lot of time and effort. Locating a public space for displaying the Project was very demanding. I started this part of the process from early October 2019, when I contacted K–12 Visual Arts Coordinator for Champaign Unit 4 School District. One of the functions of the coordinator is to program Unit 4 teachers’ involvement in public spaces around the city and the work they develop as curators for Champaign city cultural
activities, including art shows. Additionally, the coordinator serves as the Fine Arts Department Content Area Chair. My aim was to establish this contact and to integrate my project into the Art Connection initiative and present it in partnership with the Champaign Unit 4 School District. However, this was not possible because they had already scheduled all the school activities for almost a full year ahead. I then sought exhibition space in the Champaign Public Library, but all exhibition spaces for activities had already been reserved. Finally, the management of the Market Place Mall, a regional shopping center serving Champaign and Urbana provided us the space for a big exhibition that took place from April 14th to 21st, in the area marked in yellow on the map.

![Figure 105. Mall space location for the Stratton Photo Impact In/Out exhibition](image)

The Mall also provided us with nine 44x91 inch black wood bulletin boards to display the photographs created in the students’, parents’ and teacher’s workshops. Additionally, it provided a space on the Mall’s website and Facebook page that described the Project and extended an invitation to the general city public.

The exhibition consisted of approximately 113 photographs on the bulletin boards, three large installations specially created for the exhibition that included the exhibition logo, a puzzle
game for visitors, a tent to project two short videos made by students and an interactive hopscotch game.

The exhibition of the Project was cancelled due to the Covid-19 public health crisis, yet all the materials for the exhibition are ready to be presented at a future time. I created an alternative blog in which I presented some of the images that were initially planned to be physically displayed. The blog is an alternative to the Market Place Mall exhibition because it makes accessible some of the materials that we originally intended to incorporate into the exhibition display.

https://strattonphotoimpactinout.tumblr.com/
CONCLUSION

Through the *Stratton Photo Impact In/Out* project, I have experienced that collaborative art practices can create learning opportunities for teachers, students, and parents to promote social ties to their community motivating other forms of knowledge production and social interaction.

Over the stages of the Project, the students and I explored and experienced diverse technical and conceptual photography-based practices and themes. During the photography-based workshops series, my goal was to provide my students with learning alternatives that would supplement the school’s visual art curriculum. The photography-based art studio classes provided an open learning opportunity for students inside their art studio classes at the school by focusing on exploratory artistic practices. These practices allowed them to experience other forms of knowledge production by using photographic media ideas, techniques, concepts, and procedures and creating their own photographs. Additionally, the project’s openness to experimentation, self-reflection, and decision-making offered students the opportunity to think critically and actively to engage in problem-solving by implementing some of the photographic media’s language and technical and conceptual possibilities.

As a participant and observer, I collected writings, drawings, sketches, and photographs produced by the students, parents, and teachers during the series of workshops. The idea of collecting all these materials and data was an essential part of the curatorial process intended to culminate in a public exhibition sharing some of these extraordinary artworks to the school community and to involve the larger Champaign city public. My role as a teaching-artist allowed me to understand and consider the students’ different perspectives, ideas, writings, emotions, expressions, and various forms of image-making as a form of using and taking advantage of the
photographic media at a deeper level. We shared a precious time when creative free expressions and discussions around the students’ experiences were at the center of our art practices.

As a participant and observer using phenomenology theory, I was aware of implicit group and individual dynamics taking place during the workshops. At the same time, by implementing this theory I was able to monitor my objectiveness as a teaching artist. This process was fundamental to gaining a clear perception of potential positive and/or negative aspects of the Project. In addition, I implemented Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a methodological approach to define the level of engagement of each of the Project participants. By considering the level of engagement, this methodology helped me consider and value how the Project could be part of an integrated system of art education at Stratton School. In addition, PAR’s methodological approach allowed me to examine how students’ different abilities and dispositions benefited from having living experiences as participants in an art project outside their regular class curriculum.

Working with children sometimes is challenging, especially because of the combined role I was playing in the Project as teaching artist. Some days I felt the power to engage students in the photography activities and the time was sufficient to realize our goals, but other days the pressure to accomplish all the project objectives in a timely manner was a determinant factor. During some workshops children really focused on the theme but the proper use of time was a big concern and very stressful for me. For example, there were lab sessions in which students wanted to experiment more and have more time in the darkroom or to engage in photographic practices with all sorts of professional equipment. For this reason, much of the time I felt frustrated due to the limitations of time – I felt as if I were in a running competition. There was a lot of energy, engagement, and fun during all the activities that we developed during the Project
and the children’s active curiosity and motivation pushed me to prepare playful, meaningful, and interesting activities for each of our sessions.

The Panoramic Camera

The panoramic camera was compelling and attractive to the students because of the opportunity it afforded them creating, manipulating, and experimenting with this extremely simple idea of photography. I centered this practice on hands-on action and exploration with a secondary emphasis on observation. Some evidence of students learning outcomes was that they were able to talk about the process of building the camera, but they were also able to understand how the camera worked. In addition, through this experience, students were able to provide comments, responses, and reflections about the history of photography in relation to the camera obscura and the technical historical development of the photographic camera. The students expressed that they enjoyed learning while building, observing, and playing with the panoramic camera. Through this practice, students learned while at the same time had a playful way to discovering their own learning experiences.

Photograms

The darkroom experience began with the process of creating and developing photograms. This process is a basic form of photographic experimental production by the use of different cut-out cardboard or soft material shapes and textures exposed in the enlarger. I was amazed at the level of engagement students had while participating in all the activities related to the darkroom. From the beginning, they were curious to learn how to prepare chemicals and the procedures for developing photographic paper by creating photograms. Students learned the practices and routines within the darkroom, gradually nurturing their talents and abilities in a responsible environment. Making photograms gave children the power to control their ideas by
experimenting. They were proud of their creations and acquired a basic level of control over their compositions to the point that they could project a desired meaning to their final photograms. It was important that students began to combine ideas and facts from the history of photography with the process of experimentation. At the technical level, they understood how to use the enlarger. At the critical level, they were able to interpret their ideas and to consider them in relation to their peers’ images in a productive dialogue. Furthermore, use of various materials and forms creating abstract impressions led to possible aesthetic compositional solutions and meaningful conceptual associations.

An important part of the darkroom experience was the way students established active dialogues at the end of each session about the way they had created their artworks as a form of reflection of their particular processes to produce their images. They connected their ideas during darkroom processes beyond technical skills to deeper levels of thought, demonstrating more a complex engagement with concepts and communicative needs. An example was when one of the students reflected on his religious practice, establishing a deeper personal connection between his own beliefs and the way he could express them through an artistic medium. For his photogram, the student chose a rosary and other shapes and materials that in some way had a relationship with his beliefs to show the important role religion has in his daily life experiences. This photogram generated comments and dialogue in the group. This experience was highly significant for beginning students exploring the uncountable possibilities of the photographic media. Through this experience, other students were encouraged to begin examining personal topics, demonstrating more interesting and complex association with their personal experiences and connecting them with the artistic practices resulting from the lab sessions. This practice integrated many art concepts and aesthetic possibilities. It is one of the art practices that should
be considered for integration into a photography-based learning practice. It clearly has the potential to contribute to the arts curriculum. 

*Painting with Light*

Painting with light workshops gave students different possibilities to explore the function of light in photography. This practice promoted new creative perspectives, and in a way, students were able to respond to this practice with ingenious ideas. They also learned how to prepare the camera in any environment where there is a black back-drop background. Children collaborated in preparing the materials and followed the procedures. They helped each other and were enthusiastic about sharing their ideas with the group. For example, some students created interesting organic abstract forms by making unique shapes and creative effects with glow sticks. I noted how students were empowered when they collaborated during the workshops with their parents and school community. They were so proud of interactions but also of helping others by explaining and showing them what to do. They did brief demonstrations for their relatives and friends to create stunning images. Students captured amazing light patterns, they worked together in community, and they had a meaningful learning experience. As a constant concern, during the last workshop with the school community, we experimented time constraints because the participants wanted to take more experimental photographs and wanted to stay longer in the classroom. Consequently, we worked half an hour more than the scheduled time. Other significant aspect of this experience was the use of music to motivate body movement. Students and parents incorporated choreographic movements while other participants were captured the interaction of the bodies’ shapes with the light strokes. The more the participants became familiar with the tools, the space, and the equipment at their disposal, the more the exchange between movements and photographic explorations improved.
Portraits

Observing images created during the photography workshops, I concluded that students’ works became stronger not only in composition but also in concept. From the first meeting, their portraits were displayed as an initial visual exploration of the possibilities of expressive language through images of themselves. Gradually their images became more intricate as students thought about the elements of composition and eliminated unnecessary objects or expressions that detracted from the final result. In this way, the visual exercises became more compelling and with strong focal points that called attention to main formal elements in the composition. For example, at the beginning students tend to put their principal subject in the middle of the photograph with empty space around it. The students slowly applied their knowledge about unusual angles and alternative points of view. Important for this practice was the way in which students tried to capture something engaging by moving from general ideas to specific points or meaningful perspectives within their environment. Additionally, students learned the function of light, its conceptual use in photography. The elements of composition permitted them to generate more ideas, pointing toward the creation of narratives. They also were able to write descriptions in a highly creative way, sometimes wondering “What if I put…” or “What can I do with…” as open-ended questions with a view to achieving effective image results. Other times students just shuttered a photograph by freezing an interesting moment or they simply stopped, reflected, waited, captured and preserved a moment. Students always tended to share their images, making comments and having a playful time, sharing ideas, gaining a better understanding of each theme that we considered, especially when we reflected upon their own particular form of image-making. In the last part of the Project, students’ photographs aimed to be critical explorations of each student’s close context or spaces at the school to which they felt most connected. Students
incorporated themselves into their photographs through positioning, thereby connecting thoughts and feelings. As a teaching artist, I was able to see how each of the children’s photographs evokes questions related to identity and personal desire, but also validates those involved in the photographic event. Students recorded their reality in the relationship between their understanding, what they saw, and what they wanted to represent. Additionally, children used photography as a location and as a social tool for establishing relationships, a bridge between their school context and their community by integrating their family, their neighborhood and their city.

In my opinion, the combination of experiences in the traditional and extracurricular educational settings through the *Stratton Photo Impact In/Out* photography-based art project, contributed to creating new learning environments beyond the classroom environment, such as in the workshops or the darkroom, not traditional spaces created for parents, teachers and other students.

Even if not taken to final completion, the outcomes from this photographic art project are evidence of potential possibilities for integrating the photography art subject into the elementary school curriculum and diverse forms of social justice engaged art practices. Integrating or adding photography into the curriculum of the basic visual art program has the potential to center learning practices on life experiences, and to continue expanding students’ imagination and creativity. In addition, students can produce their own learning tools to analyze the consequences of image consumption and the importance of image-making to communicate or concretize ideas. In this sense, the photographic experience function as a meaningful tool for student engagement and for the responsible creation of inclusive opportunities for students within their school community and social context. Finally, the type of interactions between the Project and
curriculum content, classroom subject knowledge, and socio-cultural context of the school facilitates students’ active engagement and collaboration.

The Stratton Photo Impact In/Out project presented here supports the idea that it functions as a pedagogical tool for the voices and expressions of students and participants invested in photography as a tool for knowledge production and self-reflection but most importantly fully to experience a meaningful individual and communal life.

Significant is the way that during the Project, I worked on building a personal relationship with each child by providing one-on-one teaching time and space with each student as well as by familiarizing myself with their personal interests in photography. Every meeting with the students I promoted a safe and open environment to listen their voices, to take into account their comments, and to value their expressions and ideas. We worked together in a class comprised of four different grades and a mix of personalities and different skill levels and abilities. Furthermore, using the photography medium opened up process of reflection that led to a deeper self-awareness as the students improved their communication capabilities through the creation of photographic images. Sharing time with the students and connecting them one to another helped me to design activities that reinforced connections and our sense of community. Working side by side in the classroom and in the darkroom created a space for collaboration between us. Also, sharing spaces and equipment helped to build a relationship within a constructive environment in which students were able to share their thoughts and photos in a creative, positive, and inclusive learning space.

A socially significant form of interaction that must be reflected throughout this type of projects and the entire school community within pedagogical processes is inclusion. During the teaching process, we as art educators must recognize the limitations on relating one-on-one with
our students. Efficient use of time was a determinant factor in conducting the Project. It would be beneficial for art classes to allocate more time to dialogue with students, and to reflect more and know their points of view, their opinions, and concerns. Through this project I consider that the practice and mastery of some photography techniques require extending the classes for longer or for more sessions, but the most important thing is to incorporate time for criticism, interaction and dialogue. Expanding the possibilities for dialogue gives students a voice and opens opportunities for empowering children and the school community in an inclusive environment.
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