Transcending Written Constraints: Attending to Vitality Through Photography in Pedagogical Documentation

Catalina Baeza Hidalgo

Catalina Baeza Hidalgo is an instructor in the early childhood education program at Capilano University. Drawing on her background in photography as inquiry, she takes an interdisciplinary approach to practice that interweaves art, ecology, and pedagogy while challenging dominant narratives and embracing multiple ways of knowing. She has been engaged in early childhood education as an educator, instructor, and documentarian. Her research focuses on integrating oral storytelling, poetry, drama, and movement as generative modalities that enrich pedagogy through aesthetic experience, reclaiming vital aspects in education. Email: cataece@gmail.com

This paper explores the dissonance between intention and implementation in the practice of pedagogical documentation, where early childhood educators display written, polished, and concluded learning events to meet expectations of completion rather than inquiry. It explores how photography and multimodal approaches can reconceptualize pedagogical documentation as a processual practice that attends to what is not yet formed in learning experiences rather than rushing to categories, interpretation, and conclusion. Pedagogical documentation's meaning making emerges in the act of encounter. When embraced through multimodalities such as visual, performative, oral, and embodied languages, it becomes a generative force rather than a static representation. Through the weaving of photos into this paper, photography is examined as an act of relational mutuality rather than a practice that tends to isolate learning events from their web of relations and then reflect on them disconnected from the very relationships that give them meaning. In this way, the author argues that pedagogical documentation becomes an ethical form of attention that resists reductionist approaches when attending to learning still in nascent form. This paper grapples with conventional pedagogical documentation practices that privilege written narratives and photographs as extractions—as if learning could be captured and held still—and opens toward a relational, emergent approach that keeps pedagogical moments alive and living.

Key words: *pedagogical documentation, inquiry, photography, multimodal documentation, early childhood education, co-becoming, emergence*

It is not uncommon that pedagogical documentation pieces hang on the walls like echoes of old recollections, lingering and displayed for months in an early childhood education centre. Despite the genuine efforts of teachers to engage in reflective practices and take the time to think with pedagogical documentation, the feeling is that it can become a task that needs to be checked off a list. Educators who speak English as a second language might also grapple with the fear of articulating their thoughts in a foreign language, creating a barrier to expression and meaning making. This dissonance is palpable and echoes in my practice as a teacher and a postsecondary instructor in ECE.

The disconnect between intention and implementation highlights the need for new ways of thinking and reconceptualizing pedagogical documentation as an evolving practice. When early childhood educators are asked to engage with pedagogical documentation, the practice itself often limits the very dialogue it aims to foster. The creation of concluded artifacts with polished interpretations is often shaped by an expectation for completion rather than inquiry. The way we tend to practice pedagogical documentation is by centralizing the understanding of a learning process in usually one educator, who, by naming and categorizing the event, closes down dialogue and limits the complexity of a shared space that

could hold multiple perspectives in conversation. In this way, the generative aspects of pedagogical documentation dissipate under the weight of expectations, even when not explicitly acknowledged. In my experience, educators and preservice teachers are asked to engage in a practice that already carries implicit limits, emphasizing the need to translate experiences and insights into words and narratives.

When I encountered the Reggio Emilia pedagogical approach, which emphasizes the child as an active co-creator in their learning and the teacher as a collaborative researcher, my background in photography intersected with my work, igniting a sense of presence in the space in which I was coexisting. Researching and photographing while journeying with children allowed the camera to become an extension of myself, blurring the lines between observer and observed. Each interaction turned into a creative process of co-becoming, what Sylvia Kind (2013) describes as moving *with* the world (p. 429), making documenting not a cognitive task but a lived practice. It widened my gaze and capacity to attune to the whispers and fluxes that existed; it gave me the opportunity to pay attention to my own attention. However, when tasked with articulating these moments in writing, I encountered a sense of stagnation. It felt as though the act of documentation required written validation to be deemed legitimate.

What intrigues me is not photography itself but rather its transformative effect on my interactions with children and colleagues. This approach offers early childhood education a different way of thinking about pedagogical documentation—one that dwells with uncertainty rather than moving quickly toward interpretations. In my practice, photography has unveiled intricate layers of understanding and resonance. It has prompted a reflective examination of my underlying assumptions and biases as an educator. It has raised questions: What is standing under the obvious? What else is there? The knots of conditioning and rigid ways of knowing the world have been gently loosened. Photos have become landing places to lean into a child's world with softness and to share it with them and the community with respect and curiosity. A photo is not a digested product but an artifact that inquires and acts in a relational dimension. It is not an object to be interpreted in isolation but a meeting site that engages and is activated through collective eyes. I situate my photographic practice within a shared space where I am a participant, affected in the world of relations that we co-inhabit.

Pedagogical documentation often attempts to explain that which sparks something in us as educators and children through writing and conceptualizations. I am interested in what Erin Manning (2008) explains as the mode of perception that precedes categorization before we interpret, define, or separate from it. Before meaning is fixed, there is a pedagogical event or something that stirs us, something still in nascent form that requires our consideration and attention as educators. This is where I believe the real work of documentation begins: staying close to what touches us before we rush to interpret it. As David Jardine describes, it is often a student's comment, drawing, or gesture that asks us to think—a spark that carries its own animatedness, a kind of agency that deserves careful attention (personal communication, May 2025). In my practice, photography is crucial in this way. The camera allows me to respond to moments that feel alive, animated, and not yet concluded. It provides a language that resonates with the felt. It helps me care about that spark—not to capture it definitively but to stay with it.

Photo credit: Catalina Baeza Hidalgo

Attuning to and witnessing the many subjectivities at play, I have come to recognize the significance of legitimizing contemplation and stillness, dispositions that were cultivated through photographic engagement. Byung-Chul Han's emphasis on how "being" cannot be reduced to being active resonates deeply with my practice. Acting itself must contain moments of pausing in order not to freeze into mere labour. Han's insight is crucial, as he suggests that within these pauses, within the hesitation before an action, the subject becomes aware of the vast, immeasurable space that resides in the decision to act. The capacity to pause, he argues, is akin to our capacity for reflection (Han, 2017, p. 105). From Han's perspective, pausing with my camera allows me to linger in spaces I might pass through without noticing. Pausing has let me see what is at rest (Han, p. 109). In these pauses, I also find an act of resistance. Resistance to the conditioning we undergo to think, behave, and create according to normative expectations. Resistance to the tendency to gravitate toward the already known, to rush to solutions, and to uphold the expectation of constant output and visible productivity (Akomalafe, 2024). However, the pause before the action resists this tendency, offering an alternative to the mechanical and prescriptive ways in which, at times, we document and engage in early childhood spaces.

This notion of pausing and its connection to acting invites us to rethink how pedagogical documentation is approached. If pausing opens up a space for thinking with moments of rest, reflection, and attentiveness, then it challenges the impulse to produce immediate conclusions or outcomes in the documentation process. Documentation should similarly hold space for emergence and relationality rather than condensing learning into finalized narratives. Han's perspective on rest is an extremely poignant aspect of any creative act, and pedagogical documentation should be considered a creative act, a generative force in learning. Pausing can be understood as action and interruption of the pressure to define, conclude, or represent learning.

Photo credit: Catalina Baeza Hidalgo

Yet, as Jardine and Rinehart (1993) point out, we often assume that children's experiences always need to be explicitly articulated and rendered into writing to be pedagogically valuable. Interestingly, this same construct is often mirrored in my experience with pedagogical documentation practices. Teachers are often asked to dedicate an hour weekly to critically reflect on collected traces and interpret them pedagogically through written language. While pedagogical documentation is often understood to encompass diverse, multimodal, processual approaches, the practice often narrows to linear written narratives. It is a process that often happens behind closed doors, with a tendency to recapitulate past moments. When experiences are neatly written down as concluded events, they fail to reflect the continuous, unfinished nature of learning.

In contrast, multimodal documentation encompasses diverse languages to make meaning, such as storytelling, filmmaking, visual arts, and photography. All these languages can engage with ideas and allow meaning to emerge from relational entanglements. Both educators and children can explore, linger, and pause, free from the neurotypical constraints that might limit our ways of making meaning of learning processes. In my work with educators, I have found that exploring different languages—visual, performative, oral, and embodied—within collective and unfinished processes creates pathways for inclusive, relational, and emergent engagements. These diverse modalities animate aspects of learning that are ready to be ignited, inviting multiple forms of expression that enrich pedagogical encounters rather than imposing a single expectation that requires educators to follow a

one-way approach to documentation. In this context, it is essential to recognize the importance of incorporating more inclusive and responsive methodologies, such as storytelling, performing arts, sketching, and film, as explored by Kind and Argent (2017), to explore, attend to, and reflect on our observations, questions, and learning journeys alongside children. These methodologies acknowledge that learning dynamics are constantly evolving and cannot be fully represented through one medium. Languages that invite and hold space for tentative, multiple narratives and movements allow educators and children to embrace their diverse histories and ways of knowing.

As Manning (2020) reflects, "to write is to focus all the exuberant energy onto one form of subtracted expression, funnelling the excess into a line" (p. 273). When pedagogical documentation is reduced or considered finalized in a written format, it risks leaving behind the very essence of the life it seeks to understand. When photography and writing become extractive practices that dissect the phenomenon observed, they risk reductive outcomes. By isolating a phenomenon and then reducing it into a written line and category, we may lose the vital, generative sources that pulse in pedagogical experiences.

Photography, like writing, cannot grasp the fullness of an event. Alfredo Jaar (2014/2020) states that an image is far from an innocent medium: It inherently contains a conception of the world. Photography, like all languages, carries this inherent limitation. Henri Bortoft (2012) reminds us that language is not an empty form but world filled. The world can be intensively multiple without becoming extensively many. Language becomes a window through which we see the world so that we can only see the world as it is "framed" by language (Bortoft, pp. 149–150). To stay with the tension that writing and photography have limits and are reductive, in essence, suggests that we might approach pedagogical documentation from a relational standpoint, one that draws on multiple languages that open up relationalities and invite ongoing inquiries without limiting us to written words as the predominant language to think and experiment with. To stay with the complexity of learning experiences and invite more languages into these conversations means to honour what no single form of documentation can really contain. In order not to lose the vitality of pedagogical encounters, we need approaches that embrace multiplicity (Land & Frankowski, 2022; Vintimilla et al., 2021).

How we engage with these languages is essential. When I take a photo, I am not "freezing" a moment, I am witnessing the *becoming* of children, educators and myself, trying to capture the subtle, hard-to-put-into-words *spaces in between* that would become static and flattened when articulated in a neurotypical written way. Through this practice, I am able to cultivate what Vea Vecchi (2010) refers to as an empathic attitude toward something we do not investigate indifferently (p. 8). I am willing to be affected, which is intricately connected to paying attention. I observe not only with my eyes but also with the whole of my body. The affects not only run through cognitive domains. For the practice of pedagogical documentation, this means to allow our state of wonder as educators to stay open without always trapping it into meaning (Andreotti, 2021, p. 59). Wonder is the practice of staying present in the space between what is emerging and alive in learning experiences and the multiple understandings of those experiences. The pedagogical intentionality at the heart of any documentation practice has no predetermined direction other than to attend and respond to this generative dynamic. Documentation, in this way, acts as a vehicle that holds the relationship between wondering and curriculum making (Vintimilla & Kind, 2021, as cited in Kind, 2024).

The shift toward an affective documentation practice resonates with Manning (as cited in Bernett, 2023), whose work suggests that the concept of co-becoming embodies an inherent expressive quality that extends beyond mere linguistic expression. Research and inquiry within this framework are characterized by a fusion of cognitive and active engagement, embracing a gestalt approach that incorporates multiple sensory modalities. This inclusive approach allows for the utilization of diverse linguistic practices, known as multilanguaging, to facilitate the

learning process. This encompassing framework of multilanguaging, thinking, and composing includes various practices such as writing, reading, creating, performing, and other modes of engagement.

My intention is to ignite a new way of attending to the world, infusing our practices and pedagogical documentation with aliveness and experimentation to enable a collective learning that embraces subjectivity and diverse ways of knowing. As Richard Lewis (1997, interviewed by Mercogliano & Leue, 1997) suggests, learning is inherently expressive, and expressiveness itself serves as a mode of learning (p. 45). These expressive modalities can unleash vitality in educational spaces—where not knowing is embraced and investigations are vast territories. As Tim Ingold (2023) reminds us, "it is a question not so much of being uncertain of what things are, as of opening to the possibility of what they might be" (p. 26). While rich written descriptions of past events in practices of pedagogical documentation provide valuable insights for educators, they are inherently rooted in the past, already formed, and leave little room for experiences yet "unformed" (Ingold, 2023). This perspective somehow demands vulnerability, a risk of our own subjectivity. To attend to the unformed requires pause, presence, and attunement to what is emerging. It calls for a disposition not to pin down meaning before we sense the generative movements of what is taking place. Speculations are deeply necessary in this work (Vintimilla et al., 2021).

Photo credit: Catalina Baeza Hidalgo

By weaving my photos into this reflection on practices of pedagogical documentation, I am bringing my own traces of rest, stretching toward something I do not yet fully know. The language of photography has invited me to listen to what might be waiting to come to fruition in the learning process. In this way, pedagogical documentation becomes thinking-with, an act of mutuality that is relational rather than a practice in which one might isolate learning events from their web of relations and then reflect on that which has been disconnected from the very relationships that give it meaning. Learning is mutual and transcontextual (Bateson, 2023, p. 59).

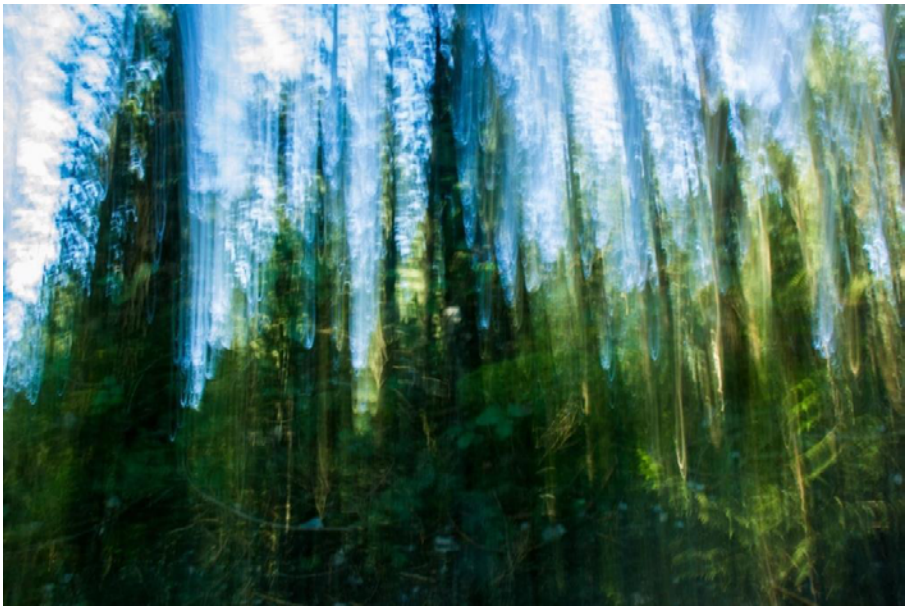

Photo credit: Catalina Baeza Hidalgo

Timothy Morton (2010) states that an approach rooted in complexity values all that emerges in the process of thinking-doing-feeling—where everything makes a difference, everything is relevant (the imperceptible, the incongruent, the peripheral). As Morton suggests, valuing details and attuning to how/where the research wants to go, what is pulsing in the making, instead of predetermining and prefiguring allows multimodal ways of exploring and a less static approach to the practice of pedagogical documentation. In my experience as an instructor in early childhood education, I have observed that our approach to documenting practices often tends to focus on what is immediately apparent in the process. This often silences what lies beneath the surface—the aspects that are alive and vital but not easily recognized. We grasp and document elements we can categorize, tell linear stories about, and draw conclusions from. We often construct linear narratives and breathe a sigh of relief as if we have successfully documented something of value. However, it is the complexity Morton describes that truly matters to the practice, the recognition of what is just beginning to move, full of potential. A pedagogical documentation from this perspective would include the movements between lines, the moments of hesitation, subtle changes of light, the quality of silences. A documentation that sketches or tells a story about the not-yet, that celebrates improvisations (Kind, 2023), that includes the margins and makes them visible through multiple modalities. We bring into our rooms *the elusive*. The paradox inherent in pedagogical documentation is that it can become a static portrayal of learning, potentially disrupting the very essence of the process by imposing an end result or preconception.

In the photo below I, too, lean with the child, stretching toward the moment. I do not feel the need to write a rich description afterward. The image did not become static; it kept unfolding over weeks, languaging. It spoke about stillness, encounters, and movement. In that unfolding, educators, children, and I allowed the ripples of a moment to remain present, not passed, because underneath the image, there is a life that reverberates with meaning. Sharing this image is part of its significance. This photo would become an integral component of a family of creative expressions, artifacts, and stories, evolving as living narratives in which ideas about the world and children's place within it are co-constructed (Rinaldi, 2006) through different modalities and experimentations. These expressions and traces of meaning making are not disconnected. Instead, they offer a larger scheme of meaning.

Photo credit: Catalina Baeza Hidalgo

As early childhood educators walk alongside children, engaging with diverse creative modalities in pedagogical documentation, I seek to enliven these practices, remaining rooted in the world of relationships that coexist in pedagogical contexts. In my own practice, photography has allowed me to pause and attend to children's complexity with openness to the unknown, the not-yet, and with a resistance to concluding learning processes and what might still be in its nascent form—an approach that calls for deep respect and attentiveness.

Pedagogical documentation can be embraced as a profoundly creative act. This understanding of documentation finds its roots in the act of encounter. As Manning (2008) states, research has always been a modality of practice with its own creative edge. It is a mode of activity in which new thoughts arise from interaction with a specific event. Rollo May (1994, p. 77) similarly explains that creativity occurs in the act of encountering—each other (educators and children), materials, and the more-than-human. The vitality that emerges from these encounters cannot be fully described or explained through written language. Pedagogical documentation is also a creative encounter with meaning—one that is active because it happens in the present moment, in the now—not as a record to be displayed as evidence of what took place. What happens in the present moment, when engaged through diverse modalities and experimentations, brings the encounter—the event—into life.

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