

Photography in Media Education: a critical review of national and international experiences in visual teaching, documentation and image rights

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Abstract: The advent of digital technologies has led to a profound reconfiguration of visual communication, redefining the methods and meanings attributed to the production, use and sharing of images. In this context, photography, now a widespread and accessible practice, has become a complex socio-cultural device capable of influencing the construction of identities, the processes of representing reality and relational dynamics. The pervasive integration of photography into everyday life calls for educational reflection focused on the development of visual literacy and visual citizenship skills, which are essential for the critical, ethical and conscious use of images.

This paper presents a review of national and international literature, supplemented by an analysis of project documentation and case studies, with the aim of outlining the state of the art in the use of photography in school contexts. The objective is twofold: on the one hand, to map the theoretical and methodological approaches that characterise the teaching of photography; on the other, to identify the most significant practices in terms of educational innovation, inclusion and social participation.

Perspectives emerge that recognise photography as a cross-cutting learning tool, capable of combining technical skills and critical reflection, promoting processes of empowerment, digital responsibility and active construction of meaning within the framework of contemporary media education.

Keywords: photography, media education, digital skills, learning, school



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1. Introduction

The contemporary communication landscape, both in Italy and internationally, is undergoing a transformation that can be described as epoch-making. The digitisation of languages, the ubiquity of mobile technologies and the incessant circulation of images have redrawn the boundaries of communication, knowledge and learning. The image is no longer a mere accessory to the word but, as Rivoltella (2019) argues, has become a cognitive environment and symbolic horizon in which identities, relationships and social practices are formed.

In the context of the so-called “screen society” or “image society” (Fontcuberta, 2018), knowledge is increasingly constructed through media processes that combine cognitive, affective and sensory dimensions. The digital revolution has not only multiplied the quantity of images, but has profoundly changed their semiotic nature,

converting them into dynamic, fluid, participatory traces. Photographs, once fixed on paper or stored in private albums, now move in the fluid space of the internet, becoming elements of immediate interaction, components of a global conversation that combines aesthetics and communication.

This change directly involves schools and education. Educational institutions, called upon to interpret changes in society, can no longer limit themselves to transmitting disciplinary content, but must promote integrated literacy that includes visual and digital culture (Lancini, 2020). Educating in the language of images means training citizens to read, understand and critically produce visual representations, developing what is known as “visual literacy”, an essential requirement for contemporary citizenship (Grossi et al., 2025).

If modernity has built an education centred on writing and the linear logic of words, digital post-modernity requires a pedagogy of the gaze, attentive to the mechanisms of vision and its cognitive and ethical implications. As McLuhan (1964) observed, every medium is an extension of the human body and mind; consequently, understanding the media means understanding ourselves in the process of interacting with technology. Photography, the iconic language par excellence, a tool with introspective and aesthetic capabilities, represents in this scenario a privileged key to contemporary visual culture and a methodological laboratory for rethinking teaching practices from the perspective of media education.

2. Democratised photography: from technical privilege to the everyday act of seeing

2.1. From its origins to digital: a brief historical overview

Since its inception in 1839, photography has presented itself as a synthesis of science and art, an expression of a typically modern tension towards objective knowledge and, at the same time, towards the search for beauty, towards that *kalòs kai agathòs* of Greek memory. The first photographic processes on copper and glass plates, complex and expensive, required chemical and optical skills, confining photography to a small elite of scholars, professionals and artists. With the introduction of flexible film and the first portable cameras at the end of the 19th century, photography began to move away from the experimental sphere and enter people's everyday lives. The Kodak No. 1, with its famous slogan “You press the button, we do the rest”, marked the first true democratisation of the gaze. From that moment on, anyone could capture and preserve fragments of reality and truth.

During the 20th century, the spread of compact cameras and the advent of colour and instant photography further contributed to making photography a mass cultural phenomenon. The image imprinted on film became an integral part of the collective imagination, a vehicle for family memories, a testimony to historical events and a tool for social communication. With the transition to digital, between the end of the last century and the beginning of the new millennium, the transformation became definitive: photography dematerialised, migrating to the electronic circuits of the network and taking on an immediately shareable nature.

Smartphones, equipped with built-in cameras and constant internet connection, have made every individual a potential producer and distributor of images. Thus began a widespread and ready-to-wear practice of mass digital photography, between narcissistic selfies, social networks and vampiric likes (Ravasi, 2022).

The act of photography has therefore lost its exceptional nature to become an everyday, pervasive and almost automatic gesture, inscribed in social and communicative routines. Today, as Hand (2012) observes, photography is “ubiquitous”: it permeates every sphere of experience, accompanying relationships, emotions, work and learning, transforming itself into the basic language of contemporary life.

2.2. The camera as a cultural and identity device

In addition to its technical history, photography has always been a cultural device of great significance. It does not merely record reality, but symbolically constructs it.

As Bresson (2005) stated, taking a photograph means holding your breath for a moment, when all your senses and powers of perception are focused on a reality that is about to vanish. In that instant, capturing an image becomes a source of profound pleasure, both physical and mental. It is an act in which the mind, gaze and emotions align perfectly, working together to fix what is being experienced.

Every photograph, at the moment it is taken, establishes a relationship between subject, object and time, becoming a testimony not only of what has been, but also of the gaze that wanted to capture it. Barthes (1981) defines it as an “emanation of the referent”, that is, a spectral presence that makes the past visible and transforms it into memory, understanding it as a tool of communication. According to the French semiotologist, it is necessary that the denotative aspects — i.e. the elements that make up an image and define its basic meaning — be accompanied by connotative aspects, which add further levels of meaning. It is precisely in the interaction between these two levels that educational opportunities can be generated, capable of stimulating reflection, encouraging critical and creative thinking and broadening interpretative perspectives.

Digital photography, due to its immediate, reproducible and accessible nature, lends itself particularly well to this type of approach: practising it in a conscious and generative way can become a learning experience through action (learning by doing). In this context, mistakes are not an obstacle, but rather a resource that can encourage the activation of new cognitive and emotional processes.

In the digital age, this relationship is amplified and complicated. Photography, rendered immaterial, becomes a tool for self-representation and identity construction. Social networks, in which the circulation of images is incessant, have made photography part of a communicative and relational ritual: taking photographs means being there, manifesting oneself, declaring one's presence in the world. This aesthetic of instantaneity has profound sociological implications: photography, from a static document, is transformed into a dynamic and performative language, in which the image constructs the self and at the same time exposes it to the community.

As Di Profio (2024) points out, the click of the shutter can be interpreted as a moment of suspension, an “anticipatory void” in which the photographer and the subject photographed enter into a relationship of mutual revelation. This interaction reveals the aesthetic and contemplative dimension of the image, the intertwining of light, gaze and silence. The camera thus becomes a cultural mediator, a lens that not only filters reality but also allows humans to reflect on it and on themselves, restoring a dialogue between vision and interiority, between the individual and the community.

Photography is also a device for collective memory. It participates in the definition of cultural heritage, contributes to the preservation of tangible and intangible assets, and promotes the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Photographic campaigns, digital archives, and participatory projects promoted by institutions and communities testify to how photography becomes a tool for territorial enhancement, historical documentation, and social cohesion.

2.3. Narrative, knowledge and visual competences

Every shot involves a gesture of selection, a choice that makes visible what would otherwise remain unnoticed. From this perspective, photography is not only an aesthetic language, but also a cognitive practice, a way of knowing the world through the filter of the gaze. Photography involves a series of mental operations: observing, analysing, deciding, interpreting. These are actions that require perceptual and critical awareness, true processes of visual learning. The photographer becomes the poet of reality, the gaze of the century, the one who, with the photographic eye, is so capable of seeing beyond the contingent, capturing the contingent and the accidental to bring it to the surface, to show the invisible relationship between beings and things (Zuliani, 2022; Sontag, 1977).

Visual culture therefore requires new skills. Visual literacy, as defined by media education, includes the ability to read and produce images, to understand their symbolic meaning, and to evaluate their credibility and emotional impact. It is intertwined with digital literacy, which concerns the responsible and creative use of technology, and with cultural literacy, which involves deciphering the aesthetic and communicative codes of a society. In this sense, photography becomes a privileged laboratory for the development of these integrated skills: learning to photograph means learning to think through images, acquiring the ability to make aesthetic judgements and critically reflect on the reality represented and on what one wants to bring out of that reality.

3. Photography in education: cross-curricular language and active citizenship

3.1. Media Education and pedagogical framework

In the contemporary education system, Media Education has taken on a strategic role as a theoretical and methodological framework for the integration of media into teaching. There has been a gradual shift from the defensive idea of “education against the media” to a positive and constructive concept of “education through the media” (Buckingham, 2019). Photography fits perfectly into this transition, moving from a simple illustrative medium to a cognitive and communicative tool capable of guiding learning processes, encouraging reflection and promoting teaching methods that respond to the learning styles of the class (Heacox & Cash, 2020).

The *Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo* emphasise the need to develop students' digital and creative skills, but this objective can only be said to have been fully achieved when the visual dimension becomes part of ordinary educational planning. Photography represents the meeting point between artistic language, scientific and/or humanistic disciplines and everyday communication practices. It can visually represent what is discussed in class and allows for active and participatory learning based

on research, cooperation and dialogue between disciplines, thus responding to the call of new pedagogical challenges (Aldridge, 2016).

3.2. From nursery school to secondary school

In nursery schools and educational services for children aged 0-6, photography is often used as a tool for observation and pedagogical documentation. Following the approach of Clark and Moss (2014), known as the “mosaic approach”, educators use images to listen to children's voices, visually reflecting their experiences and points of view. Photographs become conversation starters, bridging the gap between the adult world and the child's world, providing an opportunity to reflect on children's perception of space and relationships, and serving as a tool for cognitive, emotional and psychomotor development.

There are two possible approaches to using photography with children under the age of six: the first is photography as an image to be read, including on screen, as a tool for reflection and generating questions; the other aspect concerns the use of the camera by children themselves. It captures a moment of reality in a static, two-dimensional and partial way that otherwise could not have been observed in such a specific way, creating a representation filtered by a gaze, a tool and a perception.

In primary school, photography can support the development of emotional and social skills. The I.D.E.E. (Image, Didactics, Emotion, Education) project, conducted in a school in Fiano Romano (Morsanuto et al., 2022), demonstrates how exploring emotions through photography facilitates self-awareness and collaboration. The pupils, invited to represent emotions such as joy, fear, anger or surprise, rediscovered the possibility of translating inner feelings into shared images. This process, also analysed from a metacognitive perspective, encouraged dialogue between peers, empathy and emotional self-regulation, with significant results even for pupils with special educational needs.

In secondary school, photography becomes an ideal field for interdisciplinary teaching and civic education (Mard & Hilli, 2022). The analysis of historical photographs allows for an in-depth exploration of history and memory, while the use of urban and social photography allows for reflection on space, identity and environmental issues (Pellecchia & Governa, 2023). Photovoice and digital storytelling practices encourage students to recount their own world, combining creativity and critical reflection, and transform the photography workshop into a place for building visual citizenship, making learning concrete, critical and real. Such activities allow participants to share their stories through photos, which involves selecting images that most accurately reflect and explain the issues, theories and themes that emerge (Schell, 2009; Cabanes, 2017; Santinello et al., 2022).

3.3. Documentation, metacognition and digital practices

Photography, as well as being a form of expression, is also a tool for educational documentation. The photographs that accompany educational projects and experiences are not simply an archive of images, but an active memory device that allows us to review the educational process, reflect on what has been learned and engage in dialogue with families. The use of photographic portfolios, which is widespread in many nursery schools, promotes metacognition and collective participation in the evaluation of the educational process.

In the context of secondary school and university, photography can be used as a means of transformative reflection (Fabbri and Romano, 2022). In the visual storytelling workshops described by Occhini and Bosco (2021a,b), students and teachers construct digital narratives that interweave text and images, elaborating identities and meanings. The sequence of shooting, reworking and discussion becomes a space for self-construction and knowledge negotiation, a process in which the image acts as an epistemological mediator between theory and practice.

Far from being an obstacle, digital technology offers further opportunities for participation. Castiglione's *Edu-Social Algorithm* project (2024) experimented with the pedagogical use of Instagram as a collaborative learning platform. Guided by their teachers, students created educational profiles where they could share photographs, reflections and multimedia products related to the study content (Lavanco & Castiglione, 2023; Castiglione, 2023). In this way, the smartphone was reconfigured from a distraction tool to an educational device, a functional tool for the teaching and learning process, and the social network became a laboratory for visual writing and cooperation, consistent with the models of the Social Learning Network and the Mobile Learning methodology (Newton, & Williams, 2021; Manovich, 2017).

3.4. Meaningful learning and visual literacy skills

The integration of photography into the school curriculum allows for the combination of cognitive, creative and civic dimensions. Through the activities of shooting and analysing images, students develop critical thinking, observation skills and problem-solving skills. Photography requires choices and decisions, inviting students to think about composition, light and meaning, activating their aesthetic and logical judgement. At the same time, it promotes socio-emotional skills such as collaboration, effective communication, mutual listening and the ability to express emotions constructively.

From this perspective, teaching photography is equivalent to teaching conscious use of the media and ethically oriented digital citizenship. Di Bari (2023) speaks of a “generative screen education”, in which young people do not suffer technology but govern it, transforming it into an opportunity for knowledge and personal growth. Taking a photograph thus becomes a civic as well as an aesthetic gesture, an expression of active participation in contemporary visual culture.

3.5. Teaching tools and strategies for working with photography in the classroom

Developing teaching methods that are mindful of photographic images requires teachers to combine pedagogical reflection with technical expertise, so that every photograph shown or produced in the classroom becomes an opportunity for active learning and critical thinking. The use of photography in schools is not limited to the illustrative or decorative dimension of the lesson, but must be part of a project in which the image is a vehicle for knowledge, a space for discussion and a tool for understanding. From this perspective, the digital devices available — from interactive whiteboards to tablets, smartphones and collaborative platforms — become cognitive mediators capable of broadening the horizon of the teaching experience and promoting more flexible and inclusive access to content.

Teachers who wish to use photography in their daily practice must first adopt a method based on gradualism and pedagogical intentionality and be curious and en-

thusiastic themselves. As Triacca (2020) argues, photography lessons can be divided into several stages — from image presentation to analysis, from manipulation to independent creation — in order to integrate different languages and skills, promoting the transition from observation to production. During the observation phase, it is important to provide tools that help pupils develop an attentive and analytical eye. The so-called “guided image reading” sheets, derived from museum or archival methodologies (Library of Congress, Smithsonian), can be adapted to different school levels and lead students to distinguish between objective visual data and its subjective interpretation. In this way, photography becomes a text to be interpreted, inviting the exercise of critical thinking and inference.

The next phase, focused on manipulation, favours a laboratory approach in which images become materials to be explored and transformed. Working on fragments, recomposing photographs, modifying brightness or contrast using simple software, or adding captions and text annotations allows students to understand the constructive dimension of the image. In other words, they learn that every photograph is the result of a choice — of framing, point of view, lighting — and that these choices determine its meaning. The use of open source digital tools, such as Paint.net, Canva or Photopea, allows pupils to experiment with editing and composition in an intuitive way, promoting cross-curricular skills in the digital and visual arts. Editing thus takes on an educational function, as it trains pupils to reflect on the relationship between technological tools and language, between gesture and communicative intention.

At the same time, teachers can plan moments of creative production, inviting students to take their own photographs, either individually or in groups. Even a simple digital camera or tablet can be transformed into a creative workshop, provided that the process is accompanied by guiding questions: what do we want to represent? What message do we want to communicate? How can we translate a concept or emotion into an image? Working on the shot involves making decisions and develops planning and responsibility skills, which are key aspects of European key competences. Activities such as photo diaries, storytelling through images or digital storytelling allow us to connect the visual dimension with the narrative and linguistic dimensions: images are intertwined with written or oral text, generating a multimodal narrative that combines aesthetics and reflection.

The educational potential of photography is further amplified when it is incorporated into cooperative and interdisciplinary practices. Working in groups on a photography project promotes the construction of shared knowledge and the negotiation of meanings. Documenting real experiences — educational trips, outdoor school experiences, laboratory activities, experiences in the local area — provides an opportunity to bring disciplines closer together and consolidate experiential learning (Farné, 2021). In the scientific field, for example, photography allows us to explore natural phenomena and observe the details of plants or experiments; in the humanities and social sciences, it allows us to read contemporary reality from a diachronic perspective, recognising the signs of time and change in objects or landscapes. Working with images thus takes on a heuristic and reflective value, because it invites us to formulate hypotheses, compare interpretations and verify cause-and-effect relationships.

From a practical strategy perspective, it is useful to promote active observation methods and slower viewing times. Activities such as the *30-second look* (Triacca, 2020)

— an exercise that invites participants to observe an image for a few seconds and then remember its details — stimulate selective attention, visual memory and shared reasoning. The use of interactive whiteboards for large-screen projections, or tablets for individual observation, allows for the modulation of perceptual distance and variation in the relationship between the body and the image: looking closely helps to capture details, while viewing the whole activates the overall composition of meaning.

Tools such as the *Thinking Triangle* or photographic concept maps also allow the analysis process to be represented graphically: after discussing the content of the image, students can summarise it in logical visual diagrams, developing descriptive texts or personal reflections. The activity thus takes on a metacognitive function, as it leads to the explicit expression of thought processes and the connections between perception and idea.

Collective reflection is essential. Every photography project should include a debriefing session, in which pupils and teachers analyse the results together, evaluate what has been learned and discuss the aesthetic and communicative criteria adopted. Shared review of the photographs produced helps to raise awareness of the choices made and to understand how the meaning of an image can change depending on the context and the observer's perspective. From this perspective, photography becomes a space for dialogue, for reworking knowledge and socialising experience.

Finally, photography can be used as a tool for documenting the entire teaching process. The images collected during the activities become traces of learning and can be used to create digital portfolios, class blogs or shared visual diaries. Applications such as Seesaw or Padlet, integrated into secure digital environments, allow students to archive their progress, receive feedback from teachers and, in some cases, communicate the results to their families. Such documentation is not merely for display purposes, but represents a metacognitive opportunity to recognise the stages of one's journey and transform experience into awareness.

For an effective teaching of photography, therefore, a coordinated set of tools and strategies is necessary: guided analysis to develop critical thinking, manipulation to understand the constructive nature of the image, production to exercise creativity and communicative responsibility, documentation to consolidate reflection and share knowledge. In this circularity, photography becomes a privileged educational medium, capable of stimulating perceptual and symbolic intelligence, integrating different languages and promoting cognitive, relational and civic skills in pupils that are fundamental for the integral formation of the person.

4. Image rights, privacy and teacher training: legal and ethical issues

4.1. *Image rights as a guarantee of the individual*

The massive dissemination of images and the ease of sharing offered by digital technology now require particular attention to be paid to the legal and ethical implications of photography. In Italy, the protection of the person portrayed is enshrined in Article 10 of the Civil Code and Articles 96 and 97 of Law No. 633/1941 on copyright, as well as in the European Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018). These regulations establish that a person's image cannot be displayed or disseminated without their consent, except in cases of public interest or relevance in the exercise of public functions.

In schools, this means that the production and publication of photographs of pupils or students must be accompanied by the informed consent of parents or guardians and a clear definition of the educational or documentary purposes. Photography can only enter learning environments if it respects the dignity and safety of those involved. The school therefore becomes the guardian of a dual commitment: to guarantee freedom of expression and, at the same time, to protect privacy.

Alongside the regulatory framework, there is a need to promote a widespread culture of visual responsibility. Phenomena such as sharenting, analysed by Cino and Demozzi (2017), highlight the risks arising from the uncontrolled publication of images of minors, including by adults. Digital citizenship training must therefore also extend to families, so that sharing becomes a conscious act that respects the rights and sensibilities of children and young people.

4.2. The ethics of the gaze and the deontology of the image

In addition to legal constraints, photography raises fundamental ethical questions. Every gaze carries power: to look means to choose what to show and what to hide, assuming responsibility towards others. In an educational context, this responsibility translates into a formative task: helping students recognise the significance of their visual gestures, understand the consequences of representations, and reflect on the limits of what is permissible and respectful.

Volpi (2021) emphasises that 21st-century teachers must not only be competent in using digital tools, but also aware of the cultural and communicative implications of images. The pedagogical ethics of images therefore consist in guiding learners towards ethical use, avoiding forms of manipulation (think of the many stories of image manipulation with AI) or inappropriate dissemination, but also in promoting photography as a vehicle for dialogue, solidarity and cultural democracy.

4.3. Teacher training and digital visual literacy

Integrating photography into teaching requires teachers who are able to interpret and critically use visual language. Professional development is needed that includes three levels of expertise: technical, semiotic and legal. Teachers must know how to use digital tools in a way that is functional to teaching design, decode images as complex cultural texts and be familiar with the rules governing data and image protection.

Training must take a workshop-based and interdisciplinary approach, combining theory and practice. The role of the teacher is redefined as that of a “visual curator” (Rivoltella, 2020), a mediator between culture and technology, capable of translating the language of photography into a learning experience. Only with teachers trained in ethics and communication is it possible to build a safe and creative digital environment, where photography becomes a tool for emancipation and not indiscriminate exposure.

5. Conclusions

Today more than ever, photography is a technology of vision that permeates social and educational life. Its educational potential stems from its ability to combine aesthetics and ethics, creativity and awareness, memory and design (Bedi & Varga, 2021). National and international experiences show how photography, when incor-

porated into intentional educational programmes, fosters the development of cognitive and emotional skills, promotes inclusion and strengthens active student participation (Gheno & Matroianni, 2018).

Yet structural and cultural limitations persist. Uneven access to photographic and digital technologies creates disparities between schools and regions; teacher training – often involving teachers who present images without a specific and established educational purpose – is often insufficient to address the complex issues of visual literacy and communication ethics; society as a whole struggles to distinguish digital competence from the purely technical use of devices. Alongside these critical issues, the hyper-production of images poses risks of overexposure and loss of meaning: photography, from a tool of memory, can become an automatic gesture that consumes reality rather than revealing it (Nowotny, 2021).

To overcome these limitations, an educational strategy is needed that recognises photography as an interdisciplinary and formative language. It is necessary to enhance technological infrastructure and visual laboratories in schools, use digital technology in an educationally conscious manner without neglecting traditional analogue approaches, promote ongoing teacher training focused on image culture, and consolidate interdisciplinary research networks capable of connecting neuroscience, aesthetics, psychology and media pedagogy.

In an age in which visual representation shapes our perception of the world, education must become a place for reflection on seeing. As Barthes (1981) pointed out, every image contains an absolute detail, an act of presence that questions the viewer. Educating about photography means learning to dwell on this question, to read the visible as a space of meaning.

The act of photography, which has become commonplace and widespread thanks to digital devices, can thus regenerate the human capacity to observe with awareness. Teaching photography is not equivalent to teaching a technique, but to training the sensitivity of the gaze, the ability to connect intuition and thought, empathy and critical distance.

Di Profio (2024) reiterates how the art of seeing manifests itself poetically when we observe the world in order to capture it in a photograph. This seemingly simple act encapsulates the formative power of photography: that of turning light into a tool for knowledge and connection, giving the subject the opportunity to rediscover themselves as part of a shared universe.

Ultimately, photography, from technical invention to universal language, is now called upon to become the educational medium par excellence. Educating people in the art of photography means educating them in responsibility, critical thinking and care for the visual world; it means training citizens who not only look, but understand what they see, restoring meaning to the multitude of images that permeate our era and which, through school and culture, can still be transformed into tools of knowledge, empathy and freedom.

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