

# Photo Opportunities

## Background: Using photographs in the classroom

**Age group: 7-11**

### Why use photographs?

Photographs are hugely influential in all our lives. Every single day we are exposed to hundreds of images, from the cereal packet we see at breakfast, to advertisements, newspaper photographs, and shop window displays. Images like these play an important role in shaping our ideas about ourselves and other people.

However, the pictures we see do not always tell the whole story. Media representations of countries of the South<sup>1</sup> can often contribute to negative stereotypes. It is important that children, as well as adults, learn to question photographs. Visual literacy can be as important as print literacy when it comes to getting the most out of today's information-rich environment.

Good photographs are an open-ended resource, with lots of potential for use in the classroom. Working with photographs of people and places from around the globe provides children with stimulating, challenging, and creative learning opportunities, and helps them to gain knowledge and critical understanding of the wider world.

These Cool Planet pages are based on an Oxfam photopack for schools, *Photo Opportunities 2000*. The photographs in the **photo gallery** (see Power Point) are taken from the *2000 Oxfam Pictorial Diary*, and show people from all over the world going about their daily lives. The classroom activities are designed for use not only with the photographs supplied, but also with other photos on Oxfam's website and with photographs in general.

Add to these photos, adapt them, share them with colleagues and pupils, and, above all, use them! You will be helping to give children a more rounded view of life in other countries, and enabling them to develop a sense of their own role as global citizens of an increasingly interdependent world, where respecting and valuing diversity is so important.

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<sup>1</sup> **What is meant by 'the South'?** In *Photo Opportunities 2000*, the term 'the South' is used to refer to countries which many teachers will know as 'economically developing' or 'Third World' countries. The term 'the South' is used to describe low- and middle-income countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Richer countries, which are sometimes called the 'First World' or 'the West', are referred to in this booklet as 'the North'.

## Choosing and using photographs

Many children will be used to looking at photos of friends and family, and most children will already be familiar with having their picture taken. (They will understand that this is not always a positive experience!) The immediacy and familiarity of photos as a medium may suggest that working with them in the classroom is straightforward. However, visual literacy is a skill that needs to be taught, and working with photos should not be seen as an easy option. It is important to be clear why photos are being used, and how they fit in with the rest of the work that the pupils are doing.

Photos can be a good way to introduce a new topic, such as families or homes. They are useful in establishing a baseline of knowledge and understanding that children might already have about another place, or other people's lives. They can provide a neutral starting point, a forum in which children can begin to share, discuss, and question their ideas, with confidence. Pupils should be given the opportunity to discuss photos without feeling that they might be giving the 'wrong' answer or opinion. Remember that different children will interact with and interpret each photo very differently – in just the same way as they would react when meeting someone for the first time. A child's expectations, experiences, and preconceptions will inform their understanding.

Schools use photos in many different ways, and it is worth considering where and how photos are used, both in the classroom and outside it. For example, what sort of images does the school use in its own publicity material?

## How do children respond to and 'read' photos?

Research<sup>2</sup> has shown that when children look at photos, they are probably not 'seeing' what adults assume they see. This means it is important to use activities that help children to look carefully and critically at different parts of the photo, as well as the photo as a whole.

- Children will 'home in' on clues in the picture that seem familiar and use these to interpret the photo – even if their understanding of the clue doesn't fit the context of the rest of the picture.
- Children may add details that aren't there at all. They may 'see' things that are associated with what they feel about the photo, based on their existing knowledge and preconceptions.
- Children respond differently to photographs according to their age. Young children find detail very important; older children concentrate more on the overall themes of the picture. Younger children may not notice the middle ground of the picture, and will look more at the foreground and background.
- Children will tend to ignore the unfamiliar.

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Mackintosh, 'Learning from Photographs', in *Primary Sources: Research Findings in Primary Geography*, The Geographical Association, 1998.

## Checklist for using photos in the classroom

- Work with photos should be integrated with other classroom work
- Start with photos of people and places that children are familiar with, before moving on to less familiar subjects.
- Use photos of good technical quality.
- Put photos in some sort of context. Why was the photo taken? Who by? What for?
- Give children as much accurate information as possible about the people and places in the photos you use.
- Encourage children to explore the links between their own lives and experiences and those of the people in the photos.

Giving children the chance to take their own photos is a good way of building their confidence. You may be surprised by the results!

## Developing key skills

Literacy, numeracy, and communication skills are central to the primary curriculum, and can all be actively encouraged through the use of photographs in the classroom. Photographs are interpreted largely through language and writing: working with photographs can extend speaking and listening skills, and can help children to distinguish between fact and opinion. Remember, children will tend to think that what they see in photographs is 'the truth'.

Numeracy can be promoted in a number of ways. Photos can support work on collecting, representing, and handling data, and developing understanding of shapes, spaces, and measurement. Photos can also provide opportunities to discuss and describe patterns. Information from photographs can be gathered, sorted, and recorded in the form of different types of graphs, tables, and charts. Encourage the use of language appropriate to maths: words and phrases such as bigger than, next to, as short as, in, under, how much, altogether, come naturally when discussing photos. This will help to develop an understanding of mathematical language in a wider context.