

**PhotoLit: Self-Expression Through**  
Digital Photography and Creative Writing

Deanna Del Vecchio

A Thesis  
In the Department  
Of  
Art Education

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## Abstract

### PhotoLit: Self-Expression Through Digital Photography and Creative Writing

Deanna Del Vecchio

Informed by the literature on community arts, critical pedagogy, and visual literacy, this thesis serves to summarize and analyze the teaching project I undertook for my thesis research. PhotoLit was a youth photography and creative writing workshop that I facilitated with a group of ten young people who recently immigrated to Toronto. The program aimed to engage the youth with creative means of expressing themselves and provide them with the tools and skills to think critically about their surroundings. PhotoLit was centred on the themes of self, family, and community. I used action research and reflective practice methodology to examine and improve my teaching practice.

## Acknowledgements

It goes without saying that I could not have done this alone. In recognition of all the help I've received along the way, here are some notes of appreciation:

To Kathleen Vaughan, who has surpassed all the expectations I had of a thesis supervisor. Her thoughtful advice and genuine encouragement guided me through this entire process, from my first tentative inquiries about doing a thesis to the final submission of this document.

To Lorrie Blair and Linda Szabad-Smyth, the members of my thesis committee. Their insightful feedback helped make my defense a rewarding experience.

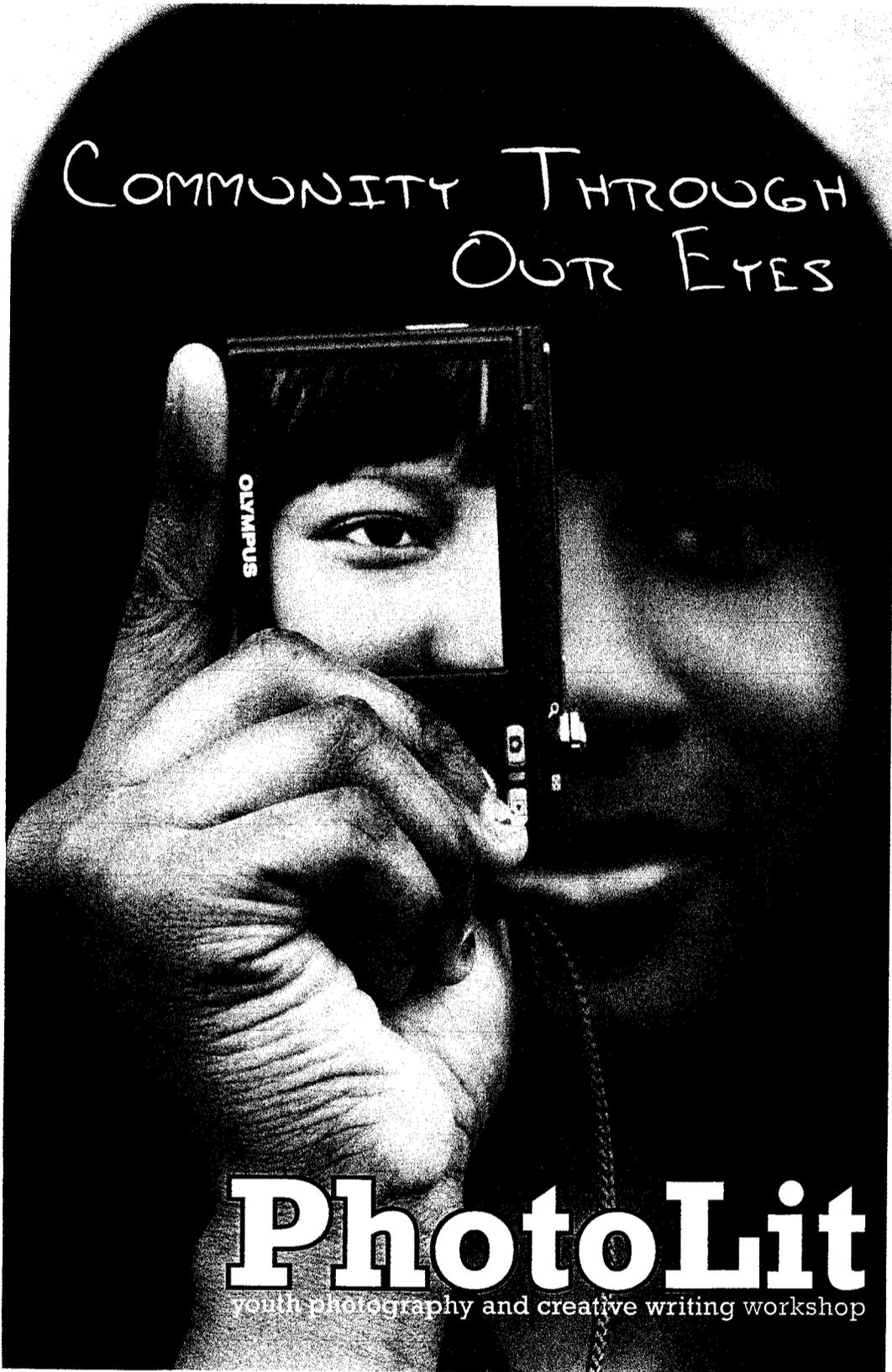
To Liz Forsberg, Katherine Earl, Erin Schachter, Faduma Abdulle, and everyone at Art Starts and For Youth Initiative. It was a pleasure to work with such inspiring and dedicated people, and to be welcomed me so warmly into their communities.

To my family, especially my parents and my brother, for always being there for me over the years.

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COMMUNITY THROUGH  
OUR EYES



**PhotoLit**  
youth photography and creative writing workshop

“In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing.”

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

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## INTRODUCTION

My thesis project stems from my passion for art and social change, and explores photography as a mechanism for eliciting youth voice.

Structured as a teaching thesis, the project followed my journey working with Art Starts, a Toronto community arts non-profit organization ([www.artstarts.net](http://www.artstarts.net)). I used action research methodology to implement an extra-curricular participatory photography project with youth.

This document includes an introduction to the project and to myself as an artist and educator, followed by a review of relevant literature. Then, I discuss my methodology and sources of data. The procedure of the PhotoLit program is described in an informal narrative style, to reflect my open, dialogical process of developing and implementing the program. This project has been a journey for me, and I weave the journey theme into the text by including the musings that took place during my bike ride to and from each workshop session. These bicycle brainstorm sessions were fruitful sources of reflection on my teaching process and goals.

Since PhotoLit was highly visual, I have included an extensive body of images within this report. More than just figures or appendices, these photographs (some taken by me,

some taken by the participants) constitute a parallel record of the program and offer a visual record of the process that I consider essential.

I began this text with a quotation by writer and theorist Susan Sontag, and I continue this trend with each subsequent section. Throughout the process of researching, implementing, and analyzing my thesis project, I slowly made my way through Sontag's book *On Photography*. Reading in bits and pieces, I was drawn into Sontag's theory on the nature and significance of photographs in our society. Although she does not necessarily fit in with the visual culture analysis that pervades much of my research, many of her statements resonated strongly with me, providing a backbone to my thesis work. So, I include a quote from *On Photography* at the start of each section, to reflect her influence on my philosophy and process.

## Research Questions

My goals were layered and multi-dimensional, starting with the personal and expanding out into my community. Throughout this project, I explored my teaching persona and preferences, with the goals of having a positive impact on the youth participants, and examining a community arts framework. To reflect these concentric purposes, I developed three questions that formed the background of my research.

First,

- What factors contribute to my development and my success as a photography teacher in a community setting?

Second,

- What are youth responses to participation in a photography workshop oriented towards self-expression and critical thinking?

And third,

- What does working with Art Starts help me understand about the kind of community arts practice I value and wish to pursue, and how can I contribute to effective engagement with its community?

## Project Summary

In the spring of 2010, I ran a short-term community-based digital photography project called PhotoLit, which was based on Wendy Ewald's *Literacy Through Photography* (LTP) teaching method ("I Wanna Take Me a Picture" 12) of combining photography with creative writing. Rather than a stand-alone project, PhotoLit was the pilot for a workshop template that can be adapted to suit participants of different ages and abilities, as well as varied themes and subject areas.

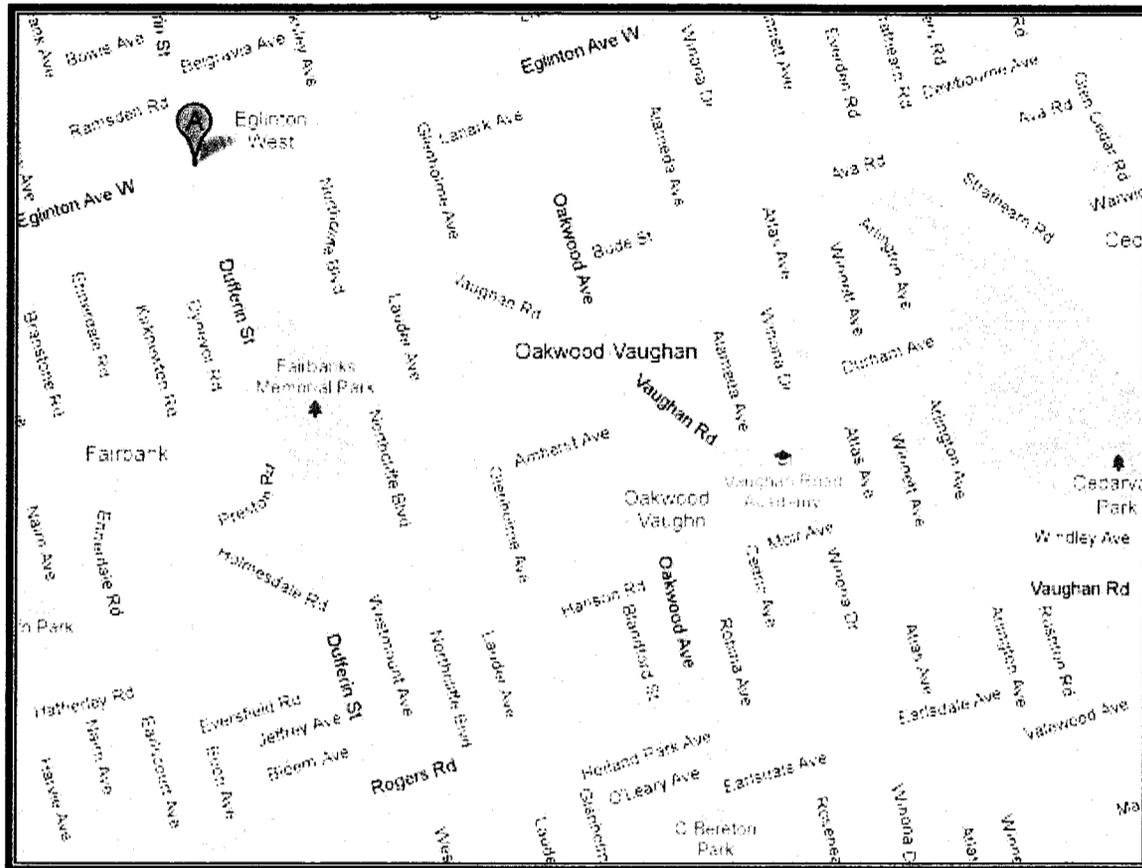
PhotoLit includes instruction in photography appreciation and visual literacy, as well as practical camera skills, combined with creative writing exercises. I used these topics to encourage the participants to think critically about their values and their communities, and express themselves with intention and thoughtfulness. The project began with shorter activities centred on analyzing photographs, shooting photographs, and writing reflections and responses. These building-block exercises led to a collaborative group project, the cumulative result of the workshop. The final project was a 'community alphabet', a collection of images and written pieces that represented the participants' views and visions of their local community, which was exhibited and shared with their peers and neighbours.

PhotoLit was hosted by Art Starts, an art-based community development organization founded in 1992. With a solid history of diverse programming, Art Starts "uses the arts as a vehicle to encourage social change in at-risk neighborhoods" (Art Starts, "Annual

Report”). In 2008, they ran 47 programs ranging from fashion design to world drumming to graffiti transformation, benefiting over 1,100 youth participants (Art Starts, “Annual Report”). Art Starts is grounded in its community and provided an excellent base from which to conduct my thesis work.

PhotoLit consisted of eight, two-hour sessions. They were scheduled twice weekly, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 4 pm to 6 pm, for four weeks in the Spring of 2010. The first session took place on Tuesday, March 30<sup>th</sup>. The program ran as a partnership between Art Starts and For Youth Initiative (FYI), a non-profit organization that aims to “create healthy communities by increasing the life chances of youth at risk” (For Youth Initiative). To accomplish this goal, they provide safe and accessible educational and recreational programming for youth. PhotoLit sessions were held at the FYI site at 1669 Eglinton Avenue West, just east of Dufferin. This site is called *The Bridge*, and is home to FYI’s Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program, newly started to engage newcomer youth “in programs and services that provide meaningful and constructive activities for healthy settlement in the City of Toronto” (For Youth Initiative).

Located in the north-western corner of Toronto, the Eglinton-Oakwood neighborhood (which includes the intersection of Dufferin Street and Eglinton) is bordered by Rogers Road to the south and Eglinton Avenue to the north, Dufferin Street to the west and Winnett Avenue to the East (see figure 1) (Witt 2).



**Figure 1. Map of Eglinton-Oakwood neighborhood. Google Maps; 29 Jul. 2010, Web.**

Residents have identified the lack of services for youth in the area. “There are so many youth and not a lot of opportunities... nothing to do, nothing extra curricular” (Witt 8).

There is a concern among residents regarding gun violence, gangs and drugs in the area, and the neglected appearance of the neighborhood (Witt 6). The Eglinton-Vaughan area is home to a higher than average number of single-parent families, and has a lower than average median household income, compared to the rest of the city (City of Toronto).

These factors suggest that a community-based photography project for youth would fill a

niche and be beneficial to this neighborhood, which “lacks a collective voice,” according to one resident (Witt 8).



**Figure 2. Storefront on Eglinton Avenue. PhotoLit participant.**

Demographically speaking, the Eglinton-Vaughan area has a higher percentage of recent immigrants than the Toronto average. The majority of the immigrants come from Southeast Asia (City of Toronto). Other prominent cultural groups in the neighborhood include people from Somalia and other African nations, the Middle East, and South America. Programming offered at The Bridge reflects this diversity – they have settlement workers who speak Somali, Spanish, Hindi, and Farsi.

The Eglinton-Vaughan area is also home to many of Art Starts' programs, although others occur throughout the city. Linking up with Art Starts allowed me, a recent Toronto transplant and a newcomer to the city's community arts scene, to connect with youth participants and the people who are working in my field of interest.

My contact with Art Starts first began in the fall of 2009. I was shopping around for an organization to partner with for my thesis project. After some email correspondence with Katherine Earl, Art Starts Program Director, we met in person at the end of November to discuss the possibility of working together on a photography program. Art Starts did not have any photo-based artists on their roster, and it seemed like the timing would be conducive to a collaboration. After some discussion, Art Starts offered to host my program as part of their Dufferin-Eglinton site activities, under the direction of site manager Erin Schacter. In keeping with the mandate of *The Bridge*, PhotoLit was targeted at youth who have immigrated to Canada within the last year. The number of participants was initially pegged at eight, although we later capped the registration at 14, to correlate with the number of cameras we had available – seven, each to be shared between two participants.

There was no cost to participants to join PhotoLit program. Participants received community service hours (a requirement for their high school diploma) if needed, and public transportation tokens from FYI to cover their transportation cost to and from the program.

## Personal Background

My reasons for choosing this area of research are rooted in my personal history and work experience.

I have been engaged in grassroots community work since high school. Through my undergraduate degree, this took the form of environmental and conservation activism and education, a fitting avenue since I majored in Environmental Studies.

After graduation, I moved to the Bahamas for an internship position, which marked the start of four years working abroad. I quickly tired of my office-based internship and decided that a career as a teacher would better suit my personality and values. Teaching positions have taken me to Western and Eastern Europe, Central America, and the Caribbean. I have worked with a diverse range of students, including affluent Canadian teenagers, pre-teens in the rural Bahamian islands, and primary school-aged Haitian children. I have taught subjects as wide-ranging as art, health and sexual education, and basic literacy.

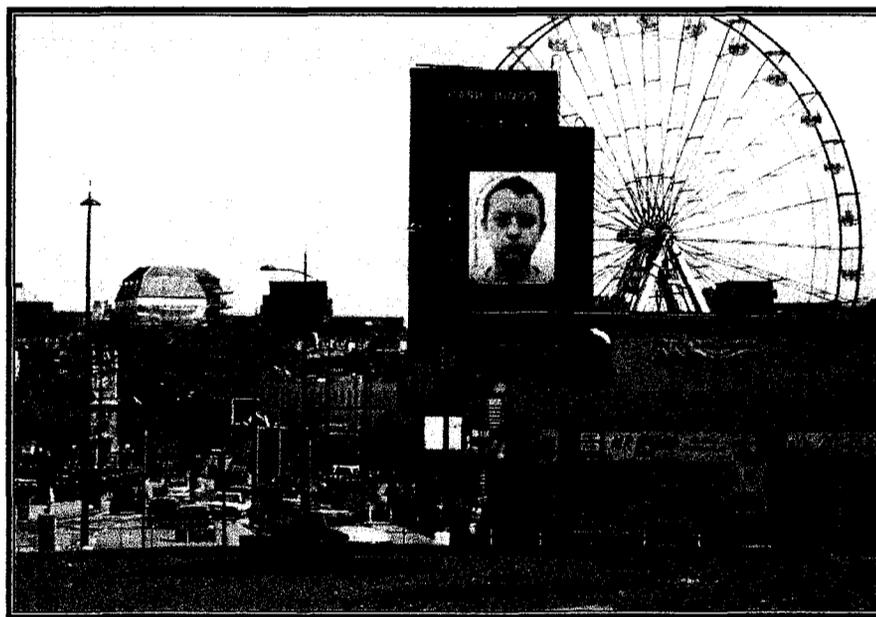
From this array of experiences, it was teaching art and literacy that captivated me. I was struck by the connection that I could develop with my students through the flow of creative activities, and by the improved confidence and self-expression that they developed as they learned to read, write, and make art.

This interest led me to my present situation, working towards my Master's degree in Art Education and conducting a teaching project that reflects my values and beliefs. I geared my thesis project toward encouraging my students to explore their own self-identity, and also to explore my own self-identity as a photographer and teacher.

My first foray into the power of photography and writing as teaching tools took place in 2006. I met Jennifer Galvin, an American documentary filmmaker, when she was working on a project on the island of Eleuthera in the Bahamas, where I was working as a middle school teacher. Jennifer's film, *Free Swim*, examined the paradox of children in a coastal community not knowing how to swim. She created a book as a companion piece, giving out disposable cameras to local children and asking them to photograph their relationship to the ocean. To flesh out the images, Jennifer envisioned including written pieces as accompaniments.

My involvement began at this stage – many of the children who had taken the photographs were my students, so in class we worked on examining their images, and writing poems and prose that captured the feelings evoked in their photographs. It proved to be a challenging task, since most of my students equated 'poem' with 'rhyme', so I had to be creative in finding ways to encourage them to express themselves freely, without being preoccupied by conventions and rules. I was inspired by this teaching challenge, and the seed was planted in my head that this was a direction I would like to explore more deeply in the future. So, when I was shopping around for a graduate program, Art Education seemed like a natural match for my research interests.

Also around this time, I discovered the work of Wendy Ewald (see Figure 3), who founded the Literacy Through Photography program at Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies. Ewald's work has been a huge source of inspiration for me both as a photographer and as an educator, and was also the impetus behind my decision to travel to Durham, North Carolina in the Fall of 2009 to take part in a Literacy Through Photography workshop at Duke. At this workshop, geared towards teachers and photographers who wish to use Ewald's methods in their own practice, I learned how to develop, structure, and implement a participatory photography project with youth, according to Ewald's approach. We discussed the theory and philosophy behind her work, as well as practical workshop exercises to include in our own programs. I incorporated this knowledge into the PhotoLit program.



**Figure 3. Ewald, Wendy. Photograph. Public installation. Web. 19 Jul. 2010.**

On a personal level, I planned to use my thesis project to connect and engage with the community arts scene in Toronto. I grew up in the suburbs just outside of the city, but as an adult, I have always lived in other provinces or countries. A desire to be closer to my family and put down some roots, after years of traveling and moving around, led to my decision to move back to Toronto. It has been a tumultuous move in many ways, as I find my footing in an old-yet-new place, and forge my identity as an adult in a city where I last lived as a teenager. This project has been a way to create links with people working in the community arts field in Toronto.

The PhotoLit program came together remarkably well. From my first meeting with Katherine, I had a good feeling that Art Starts would be the perfect home for my project. And, sure enough, the details fell into place smoothly. The Art Starts staff members were helpful and supportive of PhotoLit – part of the appeal for their organization was the thorough level of documentation that accompanies a thesis, which is lacking for most of their projects.

Art Starts' suggestion to run PhotoLit with youth from FYI's *The Bridge* Immigrant Settlement program was serendipitous. I had been hoping to narrow the thematic scope of the project, and the issues facing young immigrants provide a rich and intriguing focus. There is an added element of interest related to my own family's background. Both my parents immigrated to Canada from Italy when they were young. My mother's family moved into the Dufferin-Eglinton area, which was popular with Italian immigrants at the

time. (As noted in the mini-demographic profile, above, this population group is no longer strongly represented in the community) (City of Toronto). It seems like a completion of a circle, to be teaching a group of young immigrants in a neighborhood where my mother was once a young immigrant. The sense of connection to my own history reinforced my goal of using this project to create roots for myself and inspire the participants to create their own roots as well.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

“Photography is... a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power.”

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

I believe the above statement has just as much relevance today as it did in 1973. The art and technology of photography have changed drastically, but its social importance has remained, if not grown.

Sontag also stated that “everything exists to end in a photograph” (Sontag 24), but I would argue that the photograph is just the beginning. Once captured, the chosen moment can become a catalyst for learning, which is what I explore through the PhotoLit project. My project thus engages literature from four streams of discourse: critical pedagogy; visual literacy and visual culture; community arts; and participatory photography.

## Critical Pedagogy

My approach is grounded in the educational philosophy of critical pedagogy, as expressed in the writings of Paulo Freire, bell hooks and Henry Giroux. According to Giroux, critical pedagogy aims to “reassert the fundamental political nature of teaching and the importance of linking pedagogy to social change, connecting critical learning to the experiences and histories that students [bring] to the classroom” (Giroux 67).

Freire’s view of education as the practice of freedom (Freire 54) underpins the basic goal of my teaching practice, regardless of the subject area: to foster critical thinking. This can be accomplished by focusing on the process of learning, rather than the final product. Dewey defines education as “a process of development, of growth, [in which] it is the *process* and not merely the result that is important” (Dewey 4).

Freire envisions the student-teacher relationship as a dialogue rather than a one-way transmission of knowledge (Freire 56), which is in line with my goal of being teacher *and* learner during this thesis project. Hooks says that “in [her] experience, one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice” (hooks 40), which positions the teacher on more equal footing with students. I aimed to recognize my students as “social actors and cultural producers and as innovators of... cultural change” (Hoechsmann and Low 21). This was particularly important since I was running a community-centred program in a place that was new to me: my students’

perspective about their local area and culture was valuable. They had knowledge to share with me, just as I had knowledge to share with them.

Since the PhotoLit program addressed the issue of community and belonging, I looked to the literature on place-conscious education, or critical place-based pedagogy. David A. Gruenewald imbues the everyday word *place* with deeper meaning when he defines places as “centers of experience [that] teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy” (Gruenewald 621). The PhotoLit participants used their cameras and their pens to explore the linkages between place, identity and cultural experience (Gruenewald 625). In this way, their creative endeavours were imbued with meaning because they were investigating their own communities. Critical place-based pedagogy situates art-making as “part of a socially responsive process of reflection, critical thinking, and transformation” (Graham 379), lending purpose to the act of exploring one’s creativity.

## Visual Literacy and Visual Culture

Sandra Weber suggests a comprehensive list of reasons why images are valuable in an educational context. Images “can be used to capture the ineffable, make us pay attention to things in new ways, are likely to be memorable, can be used to communicate holistically, [and] can evoke stories or questions” (4).

Visual literacy can be defined as “one’s ability to comprehend and create information that is conveyed through images” (Philips 3). This term is especially relevant to PhotoLit because of the age group of the participants. “The proliferation and instantaneous consumer acceptance of advances in communication technologies... have occasioned a shift in literacy practices, especially where young people are concerned” (Philips 3).

As a system of representation, visuals “allow us to produce and communicate thoughts and images about reality” (Bamford 3). This visual vocabulary is a powerful tool for encouraging youth to express themselves.

Visual literacy “involves problem solving and critical thinking which can be applied to all areas of learning [and address] the need to develop critical thinking skills in relation to visual images” (Bamford 5). In terms of teaching implications, this makes it a natural partner to critical pedagogy.

A recommended strategy for developing visual literacy is “through exposure to interesting and varied images and through thoughtful and thought-provoking questioning and discussion” (Bamford 5).

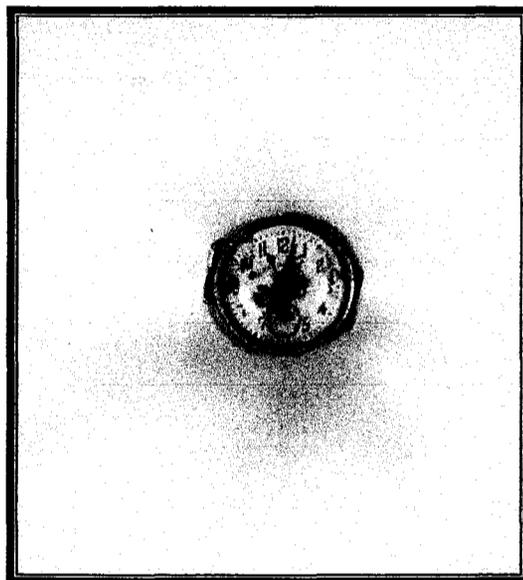
Looking at images involves relationships of power (Sturken and Cartwright 9) that are played out in the mind’s eye as an image is interpreted. Images have the power “to calm or incite to action, the power to persuade or mystify, the power to remember. A single image can serve a multitude of purposes, appear in a range of settings, and mean different things to different people” (Sturken and Cartwright 9). With such a pervasive role in our society, it seems logical and pertinent to encourage visual literacy skills.

A visually literate person is able to decode, appreciate and make sense of visual images (Philips 3). Being able to “read images in a meaningful way” (Bamford 2) is crucial, as images are a vital method of communication. Visual literacy involves understanding the language of representation used to create meaning about the world around us through images. This can be broken down into the categories of syntax and semantics. Syntax constitutes the building blocks of an image – factors like camera placement and point of view. Semantics refers to “the way images related more broadly to issues in the world to gain meaning” (Bamford 4) and is addressed by asking questions such as “who created the image, at what point of history, and in what context?” (Bamford 4)

We use words and images to “understand, describe, and define the world as we see it” (Sturken and Cartwright 10). The myth of photographic truth ties into the idea of

representation: as much as cameras have been thought to make objective images that clearly depict reality, there is always a person at work behind the machine. This person makes choices about framing, perspective, and composition that put their individual stamp on the image.

“Photographs are objects that channel affect in ways that often seem magical” (Sturken and Cartwright 18). We invest emotion and feeling into photographs, using them as a means to memorialize and emphasize. Yet the emotion is often tied to cultural context. Roland Barthes used the terms *denotative* and *connotative* to describe this concept. A good example is an image I often show in class, taken by Japanese photographer Shomei Tomatsu in 1973 (see figure 4).



**Figure 4. Tomatsu, Shomei. “Wristwatch Dug up approximately 0.7 km from the Epicenter of the Explosion. Nagasaki, 1961”. Photograph. Web. 19 Jul. 2010.**

The photograph depicts a broken wristwatch without a strap, shot against a nondescript white background. It makes for an unremarkable image, and when asked to describe it, students often say “it’s an old broken watch.” This is the denotative meaning. I then explain the story behind the photograph: the watch was taken from a victim of the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, in 1945. The time that it stopped ticking could very well be the time that its owner died. This is the connotative meaning of the image, the part that makes it culturally and emotionally significant.

There is no clear border between connotative and denotative meanings, as both can change depending on the society and the time period. The two concepts can be useful, however, to “help us think about the ways in which images both function narrowly to signify literal, denoted meanings and also go beyond that to connote culturally and contextually specific meanings” (Sturken and Cartwright 20).

PhotoLit addressed both the comprehension and creation components of visual literacy, through taking photographs and then examining them as inspiration for discussion and reflection.

One possible outcome of this self-reflection is the articulation of goals and dreams. Maxine Greene asserts that the role of the arts in education is to help us imagine “what *ought* to be” (Greene 123). This makes the arts an ideal vehicle for inspiring social change, as they have the potential to help youth envision a bright future for themselves.

Greene goes so far as to suggest that “if the significance of the arts for growth and inventiveness and problem-solving is recognized at last, a desperate stasis may be overcome and hopes may be raised, the hopes of felt possibility” (Greene 132). Her belief is well supported by the plethora of literature on art education and social change, which form the theoretical roots of my project (Albers, Bailey and Desai, Darts).

## Community Arts

Community art can be comprehensively defined as “public art that is experiential and inclusive, [involving] artists working with others in grassroots settings to create art in the public interest, consistent with the belief that art is or should be an agent of social change” (Lowe 459). It involves “making art in order to empower participants through self-expression and community building” (Wallace-DiGarbo and Hill 119).

The literature on community arts practice provides plenty of practical inspiration that I applied to the PhotoLit program. “As students develop their skills and techniques in art, they also become more proficient at representing their ideological beliefs” (Albers 7). Marybeth Gasman and Sibby Anderson-Thompkins’ after school art program for inner-city youth demonstrated this connection between art skills and self-expression. The researchers found that participants in their program had “the opportunity to practice positive risk-taking” (431) which helped them “build social competence and effective problem-solving skills” (431).

Art educator David Darts acknowledges “the importance of the arts in the development of thoughtful, creative, and engaged citizens,” (7) based on his experience teaching art at the high school level. He brought social concepts into his classes as a way to provide context and meaning behind the artistic techniques and materials. PhotoLit was a version of this, albeit in an extracurricular setting.

The medium of photography has often been used in community arts programming, and I have discovered many quality precedents for my thesis work. Photographs have frequently been used as “objects in the process of social change” (Mitchell and Allnut 261). Valerie Kinloch coordinated a project in which urban youth documented “their urban community by using photography...to capture temporal-spatial conditions in the postmodern landscape of Harlem” (42). Their photographs “initiated an inquiry into the value of sharing community stories” (45) and served as a springboard for discussion on how art can help connect groups of people to one another.

Stanley Chase, founder of the after-school youth photojournalism project Leave Out Violence (LOVE), conducted research into the experience of teens involved in LOVE programs. Chase found that “involvement in community-based arts projects can play a significant role” (iii) in the lives of youth. While acknowledging that there are no quick solutions for the youth involved in LOVE, who have been affected by violence, Chase’s findings nonetheless identified the positive benefits of a community arts project, including “a safe and secure learning environment” (iii). I aimed to provide a similarly

safe space for the PhotoLit participants, in order to cultivate a comfortable atmosphere in which they felt they could share openly.

Nance Wilson and colleagues ran an after-school photo voice program in a low-income community in California. Called the Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES) Project, it targeted 10- to 12-year olds and provided them with point-and-shoot analog cameras to “create images of their world” (Wilson et. al. 242). Free-writing exercises were used to generate awareness of the “issues and assets” (Wilson et. al. 247) in the local community. In a similar way, I used writing prompts and exercises to encourage PhotoLit participants to comment on their community. The YES researchers found that the young age of the students presented a challenge. It was difficult to find a balance between allowing the students personal control and providing the necessary guidance to avoid failure (Wilson et. al. 259).

Chelsea Bailey and Dipti Desai situate art as “a vehicle for examining the world in which we live through multiple and critical lenses, and for imagining our responsibilities and actions within that world” (39). During the PhotoLit project, I explored that idea with my participants, through photography and writing, in a participatory photography project.

## Participatory Photography

The specific locations and circumstances of Wendy Ewald's work vary greatly, but there are constants to be found in her method. From rural and urban areas of the United States, to the Colombian Andes, the Indian countryside, and a First Nations reserve in Labrador, Ewald's work really does span cultures (Hyde "Portraits and Collaborations" 172). Her participants tend to be pre-teen youth who are selected as an entire classroom (if she is working in a school), or by expression of interest and enthusiasm (if she is working in a community). No matter the location, her process involves teaching her students the basics of camera operation and darkroom developing, as well as the observational skills that any good photographer needs. Once the students are familiar and comfortable with their cameras, Ewald starts to give them more challenging conceptual assignments: asking Mayan children in Chiapas, Mexico, to enact their dreams and photograph them; asking inner-city youth in the U.S. to create self-portraits, depicting themselves as a different race.

In a nutshell, Ewald's work attempts to "articulate and integrate marginalized parts of the social body by educating those parts, via the reflective processes of word and image, to observe themselves and then record and display those observations" (Neri 32). In this way, Ewald embodies the concepts of dialogue and praxis espoused by Freire. Ewald has made note that her students quickly become aware of "the new power the cameras gave them" ("I Dreamed" 9) and used the cameras "as a means of self-expression" ("I Dreamed" 9).

The photo voice projects of Caroline Wang and Claudia Mitchell have provided insight regarding ethical considerations in participatory photography projects. These include how to prevent the invasion of privacy, “issues in recruitment, representation, participation, and advocacy, and...techniques...to minimize participants’ risks and to maximize benefits” ((Wang and Redwood-Jones 560).

Claudia Mitchell used a photo voice project involving Grade Six students in South Africa as a lens through which to analyze the ethical concerns that arise during youth photography projects. In Kwazulu-Natal, an ever-increasing number of children are becoming orphans due to AIDS, forcing them to face huge challenges in their young lives. The photo voice project in question aimed to give a group of such children agency to document the social conditions surrounding them (Mitchell et. al. 267-8). The researchers introduced the topic of ethics by questioning how photo voice researchers can be sure that their “well meaning interventions as adults do not in any way further endanger the lives of young people” (Mitchell et. al. 274).

Caroline Wang makes a formal list of her ethical considerations in a related article. Wang brings up similar concerns to those raised by Mitchell, and approaches them from a legal and moral standpoint. Wang outlines the specific ethical considerations that are built into the format of her photo voice projects. These include policies such as not photographing anyone without first obtaining written consent, and avoiding portraying people or situations in a false light. Wang “recruit[s] a target audience of policy makers” (Wang

and Redwood-Jones 562) before she begins a photo voice project, and begins her projects with training on “Cameras, Power and Ethics” (Wang and Redwood-Jones 567). These ethical considerations have influenced my own approach. Modeling after Wang’s method, I included a short discussion on ethics in photography, which covered the importance of obtaining permission before taking a photograph of someone, and the avoidance of potentially dangerous situations when photographing. A major ethical issue that Wang addresses is that of ownership of the images. Following her example, the PhotoLit participants own all the images that they produce during the program, which they were given in digital form. They pre-approved all publications and displays of their images. As part of their participation in the program, they agreed to have their images used in the exhibit, and also in my thesis paper. The multi-tiered consent form can be seen in Appendices A and B.

## METHOD

“Photographs furnish evidence... the camera record justifies.”

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

### Action Research

Action research provides an ideal framework for my project, as it is specifically designed to allow teachers to improve their own practice. Action research can be defined as “any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers...for the purpose of gathering information about...how they teach, and how their students learn” (Mertler 2). The backbone of action research is its cyclical structure, based on learning from experience (see Figure 5). This is highly relevant to the PhotoLit project, as I drew on past knowledge from my previous teaching experience and training, plus knowledge acquired during my research process. This knowledge base was put into practice throughout the process of teaching PhotoLit, and reflected upon both during and after, through my journal and field notes. Action research incorporates “strategies of planned action which are implemented, and then submitted to observation, reflection and change” (Tripp 159). The planned action in my case is the PhotoLit program itself, and the observation, reflection and change are encapsulated in my data collection process.

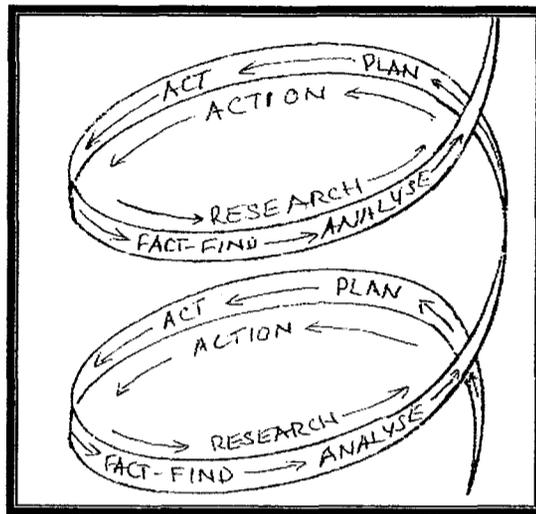


Figure 5. Action Research Model (Tripp 159).

By following the action research framework, I aimed to discover through my own teaching how I could enhance my effectiveness as a community art educator.

## Reflective Practice

Reflective practice was another vehicle towards achieving this goal. To this effect, I drew on the classic methodology for reflection-in-action set out by Donald A. Schon in his book *The Reflective Practitioner*. Schon calls for a structured “epistemology of practice” (viii) to tease out the nuances of professional practice. This centres on “problem setting, the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen” (Schon 40). By reflecting “on and in action” (Schon 54), I was able to identify the procedures I am enacting, as well as the intuitive knowing that supports my teaching practice. Schon advocates for a spiral process with stages of

“appreciation, action, and re-appreciation” (133), which mirrors and complements the action research model.

## Photography Education

As mentioned in the Introduction, my teaching strategy was based on Wendy Ewald’s Literacy Through Photography method. What makes her stand out is her “innovative way of making pictures – one that is collaborative and blends the insider and outsider point of view” (Hyde “Portraits and Collaborations” 172). I have come across many youth photography projects in my research, and none have struck a chord the way Ewald’s work has. Through her teaching methodology, she manages to instill in her students a sense of agency that they readily take on, producing consistently compelling images. “Artistically, the important difference in her approach stem[s] from the realization that by handing over ‘the means of production’ she could erase a good deal of the distance between artist and subject” (Weinberg and Stahel 8). Her students become both artists and subjects, exploring themselves, their families, and their communities with poignancy. Ewald “provides the impetus, the framework, the vehicle for the students’ ideas, expressions, and images” (Weinberg and Stahel 8).

Through Literacy Through Photography, Ewald “articulate[s] a process of teaching intuitively acquired over many years” (“I Wanna Take Me a Picture” 13). It is a method in which “...students document their lives and bring them into the classroom...[using] these images as catalysts for verbal and written expression” (Friesen and Hyde 95). The

combination of photography and creative writing provides a platform for examining four main themes: self, family, community, and dreams (Hyde “Literacy Through Photography”). What appeals to me about these themes is the way they start within the individual, and gradually build to incorporate outside influences. PhotoLit was based on the first three themes, leaving out dreams, which I felt was too large of a conceptual leap for the scope of this project. The first few sessions covered the self and family themes, and the final group collaboration fell under the community theme.

The LTP process involves reading images, pre-writing on a theme as a preparation for photographing, planning and taking photographs, writing as a response to the photographs, and finally, sharing the images and written pieces. LTP aims to teach how to communicate with the language of images and promote self-expression. Students benefit from being challenged to think creatively, and having the chance to meaningfully address issues of identity and culture. The LTP approach also provides “an opportunity for the teacher to be the learner,” which was particularly appropriate for my project, given my intention to explore my teaching capacities and preferences (Hyde “Literacy Through Photography”).

I also drew on inspiration from the photo voice technique developed by Caroline Wang. Initially started as a tool for participatory healthcare needs assessment, photo voice is based on Paulo Freire’s educational philosophy and the techniques of documentary photography (Booth and Booth 431). Its objectives are to “encourage people to reflect on

and record aspects of their own identity and experience” (Booth and Booth 432) and help them “project a vision of their lives that might educate others” (Booth and Booth 432).

As a type of participatory image-based research, photo voice is a useful point of reference for my own work. However, PhotoLit emphasizes the artistic and expressive aspects of taking photographs, and as such will be a better fit within the LTP framework.

There is a wealth of resources on teaching photography and facilitating participatory photography workshops. I have culled a selection of references to use as guidance.

PhotoLit included instruction on the basic elements of photography, covering topics such as perspective, point of view, framing, and positive/negative space (London, Stone and Upton 322), as well as camera function. The participants used digital point-and-shoot cameras and camera operation was kept to the basics. I encouraged participants to think before they shot – asking themselves questions such as “where is the light?” and “where is the interest?” before they pressed the shutter (Lamb and Johnson 54).

I drew on practical photography teaching advice from TeachingPhoto.com, an online newsletter for photography teachers, with archives topics from technical considerations to lesson plans and advice on classroom management.

The film *Born Into Brothels* is a poignant example of a participatory photography project. The filmmaker, Zana Briski, joined forces with educators to create a curriculum guide

that unites themes from the film with high school-level lesson plans. These learning materials include a section called “Critical Thinking Questions,” which I emulated in the PhotoLit project, as discussion-starters or to provide inspiration for writing exercises. Also useful for inspiration is a lesson called “The Transformative Power of Art” (Garvie, Khemchandani and Shpiro 23), which translates the idea of art as personal expression into tangible classroom exercises.

I found useful strategies for analyzing photographs in the *Teacher’s Guide for Photographic Discourse*. While this publication pre-dates the digital era, its contents are still relevant to the process of viewing and understanding images. The authors outline ten photographic elements that can be used as starting points for analyzing a photograph; these include basics such as framing and aesthetic elements, and also delve further with emotion, ownership, and intent (Nolker and Tyner 3).

## Sources of Data

The data resulting from the project took a number of forms:

- Interviews
- Survey
- Participants’ images
- Participants’ journals
- My photo-documentation
- My field notes

The most essential data is the images and writing produced by the PhotoLit participants. Other raw data includes my field notes and documentation photographs of workshop sessions and the final exhibition; results from an online survey I created for the youth to complete at the end of the program; as well as audio footage from interviews with participants, and ArtStarts and FYI staff. These interviews explored reactions and responses to the PhotoLit program and were conducted at the program site, immediately after the sessions, during the second and last weeks of the program.

Interview questions asked individuals to share their:

- Hopes and expectations before starting the project
- Opinions about the process of writing and taking photographs
- Perceived positive outcomes of the project
- Perceived negative outcomes of the project
- Ideas for future connections and directions for the project
- Sense of themselves as a result of having participated in the project

I took my own photographs of the participants to document the progress of the program, and took detailed field notes during the planning, implementation, and reflection stages of the project.

This varied line-up of tools resulted in a diverse collection of data sets, giving me a broad perspective on the process and results of the program. The data collection methods were complementary in that each one compensated for the shortcomings of another. For

example, the survey method was excellent for developing statistics and visual representations of the youth's opinions on PhotoLit, but did not provide any details or descriptions. This is where the interviews stepped in, to flesh out the survey results by adding a personal face to each question. Likewise, my field notes served as detailed descriptions of what occurred during each session from my perspective. These notes were augmented by my photo-documentation. Visual imagery gave added flavour to my written accounts by depicting the scenario and feeling of each workshop session.

The youth participants as well as their parents/guardians were made fully aware of the project's procedures and methods of documentation, before the project commenced, through a detailed consent form (see Appendices 1 and 2). Since most of the youth were under 18 years of age, a pre-requisite to their participation was the submission of the consent form signed by their parent or legal guardian as well as their own consent. The consent forms (one for the participants, one for their parents) included information about the nature and purpose of the project, and indicated that the participants were free to withdraw at any time during the process if they wished.

## PROCEDURE

“...the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people’s  
reality, and eventually in one’s own.”

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

### Planning

The planning stage of the PhotoLit program marked the beginning of my first cycle of action research. Each cycle consists of three stages: planning, then acting, and finally analyzing, which led directly into the planning stage of the next cycle.

Planning on the macro level was smooth and straightforward, thanks to the networking and organizational support from Art Starts. Erin organized a meeting with Faduma Abdulle, a Youth Settlement Worker at FYI, to solidify plans and work out the budget. FYI confirmed their interest in hosting the program, and agreed to provide:

- A meeting space
- The use of an LCD projector and laptop during sessions

- Computer use for participants
- Snacks
- Public transit fare

In turn, Art Starts would contribute funds for:

- Creating prints for the final exhibition
- Designing and printing a flyer to be used for recruitment
- Printing an exhibition catalogue
- Purchasing and developing film from disposable cameras

Art Starts also provided a coordinator (Erin) and an artist facilitator (myself). In order to fit in with the funding stream of FYI's Immigrant Settlement program, the program would be targeted towards youth who had moved to Canada within the last year.

I left the meeting feeling motivated and purposeful. PhotoLit was being supported, in both money and resources, by two well-established community organizations that believed it would be a valuable program. This boost of confidence was just what I needed to get started on the lesson-planning front.

With teaching experience in a variety of settings, I am no stranger to the lesson plan. My lesson plans have taken various forms over the years, from the bulleted list broken down into five-minute intervals, to the post-it note scrawled hastily ten minutes before class. For PhotoLit, I approached the lesson planning process in a holistic fashion, in order to

represent the action research and reflective practice frameworks that I would be following.

My goal was to create a set of well-rounded lessons that encouraged critical thinking and visual literacy, while teaching the participants how to take effective, thoughtful images. I also wanted a general program outline that could be applied to future incarnations of PhotoLit.

The first stop on my list of resources was the package of materials from the Literacy Through Photography workshop I attended. Using those notes and handouts as a guide, I sketched an outline of the program based on the over-arching themes I intended to cover. Literacy Through Photography's four themes are addressed in a particular order: self, family, community, and dreams, as previously discussed. Ewald often has her students re-enact scenes from their dreams, complete with props and costumes. The resulting images are often fascinating, but in the interest of time and focus, I decided to forego "dreams" in PhotoLit, and concentrate on the first three themes.

I parked myself in the aisles of the Ryerson University library for many an afternoon, perusing glossy photo books and thumbing through photography education texts to cull ideas for activities, exercises, and photographers to feature. The meandering nature of those library sessions allowed me to gather insight from a variety of sources and combine it in a way that reflected my unique teaching purpose and persona.

My initial brainstorm resulted in a rough plan for the eight sessions I had to work with. The first session would serve as an introduction to the program and the cameras, while giving the participants a chance to get to know each other and myself. The second and third sessions would be dedicated to self-portraits; the fourth and fifth to family, and the sixth and seventh to community. I earmarked the eighth and final session for preparation for the final exhibit, as well as general wrap-up.

To flesh out each topic, I built lessons that incorporated a number of consistent elements:

- Viewing images (taken by prominent photographers, the participants, or myself)
- Reflecting on images verbally (through discussion)
- Responding to images on paper (through writing prompts and exercises)
- Writing on a theme (to generate ideas for taking pictures)
- Camera exercises and photo shoots

To give the participants a basic foundation in visual literacy and photographic concepts, part of each session was devoted to learning about a new visual element, such as light, framing, perspective, or balance. This included a definition and examples of the day's visual element, as well as suggestions and discussion as to how participants could successfully incorporate this technique into their photographs.

My set of completed lesson plans marked the first stage of my first cycle of action research. The lesson plans were created as a whole in advance, in order to give the program a sense of flow. However, they were by no means set in stone. Each lesson was its own action research cycle, and so each lesson plan was malleable according to the results of the previous cycle.

Erin and Faduma recruited participants to the program through a variety of avenues, using a flyer designed by Art Starts as promotional material. Erin conducted targeted outreach to recruit participants via Art Starts' network of youth from past programs, and at events such as high school tabling fairs. I would get excited emails from Erin intermittently in the weeks before PhotoLit started, announcing that she had signed up another participant who she thought would be perfect for the program. On the FYI end, Faduma also spread the word to the youth who frequent the centre in the after-school hours. Our final tally before the start of the first session was thirteen youth participants, of whom ten completed the full eight-session program (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. PhotoLit participants, from the PhotoLit catalogue.

Session 1. Tuesday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

Lesson Plan:

- Introduction to the program and each other
- Distribute journals, introduction to photo analysis
- Photo element: LIGHT
  - Direction of light
  - Quality of light



**Figure 7. Eric poses during the 'direction of light' exercise. Photo by Jenn.**

As I contended with the roller coaster-style hills on my bike ride north to Dufferin and Eglinton on the first day of the program, I felt the predictable jitters one would expect when embarking on a new venture. Feet hard on the pedals, my mind ran through a laundry list of doubts and should-haves. Should have spent time at FYI beforehand to get

to know their community, should have gotten in touch with the participants already to introduce myself, should have explored the neighbourhood to find shooting locations.

I was immediately put at ease upon entering the FYI centre. I was welcomed warmly by the staff, many of who dropped into the room to inquire about the program. Soon afterward, I was approached by a young man named Eric who was hanging out in the programming space while I set up my materials. Within minutes we were engrossed in a conversation about this native country of Ghana, and the differences between life there and life here in Canada. Our discussion was an instant inspiration, giving me my first glimpse into the rich stories these youths had to share. It would also prove to be somewhat prophetic, as a major thread of our discussion throughout the program was cultural differences.

Other participants slowly trickled in, and the group began to take shape. Through past experience working with teenagers, I've learned that cliques are part and parcel of any group, and this one was no exception. Although seated in the same half-circle formation, there were pockets of youth who knew each other, and the divisions were clear – pairs and trios of hesitant girls, and one rowdy group of boys. I had no expectation of immediate boundary breaking, but rather hoped for an eventual amalgamation of the group. With that in mind, I kicked off the introductions by asking participants to switch seats and to sit beside someone they didn't already know, then interview that person and introduce them to the group. This marked my first attempt at 'reflection-in-action', and provides a good example of how I used this process throughout the program. The

problem was division with the group, and the decision to be made was how to foster inter-mingling among the participants. The means that I chose was to alter the introduction activity to include the step of switching seats.

I was impressed with the diversity of cultures represented in the group, with youth hailing from places such as Africa and Eastern Europe. After some initial quiet moments, the participants broke their silence, beginning to speak up and slowly respond to my prompts and questions as we looked at a street scene by Helen Levitt (see Figure 8). Prompts included asking about the visual clues that tell us about the time period when this photo was taken, and what the children's clothing tells us about their lives.



Figure 8. Levitt, Helen. "Untitled." Photograph. Web. 31 Jul. 2010.

During the first session of the program, I led the participants through some short verbal and written exercises designed to get them thinking about the role of photography in their lives. When asked to describe the last photo they took and why they took it, almost all of them said they had taken a photo of their friends at school, because they wanted to show people and/or put it on Facebook. This was a group for whom photography is ubiquitous, casual and ever-present. Many said they had joined the program to make new friends, and several said they were eager to “express themselves with a camera.” Eric had “no major experience” with photography; while Dasha recalled a vivid memory of seeing her grandfather take pictures with his old camera, then develop them himself in a darkroom, which sparked her love for photography.

Halfway through the session, we stopped for a snack break: today, it was beef patties and juice, courtesy of FYI. There had been discussion during the planning stages around who would be providing snacks, and I remember being surprised that snacks seemed to be such a crucial part of the program. But from the first session, I quickly realized that snacks were integral. Being fed makes one feel comfortable and taken care of, and adds to the level of ease within a group. Sharing food is an excellent way to break the ice.

Before long, we were packing up the cameras and bidding farewell until the next session. The *acting* segment of the first action research cycle completed, I embarked on a mental preview of the *analyzing* stage as I rode through the winding paths of Prospect Cemetery on my way home. My feet were noticeably lighter on the pedals during the return trip.

Upon arriving home I set to work, transcribing my mental musings into field notes. Among the notes I made were “good mix of activities – talk, writing, discussing photos, taking photos. Felt balanced” and “too carefree and thoughtless with shooting – emphasize holding camera with both hands, choose vertical or horizontal orientation, pay attention to your distance from the subject... think before you shoot!” These notes translated into alterations to the next session’s lesson plan to reflect what I had learned, segueing into the next action research cycle.

After a nearly two-year hiatus from teaching since starting graduate school, I had forgotten about the logical flow of writing, editing and adapting lesson plans, and I was happy to be getting back into this comfortable groove.

## Session 2. Thursday, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010.

### Lesson plan:

- Review last session's images
- Introduction to self-portraiture
- Photo element: FRAMING
  - Viewfinder as frame
  - Framing elements within the photo (i.e. windows, doorways)
- Self-portrait shooting session outside

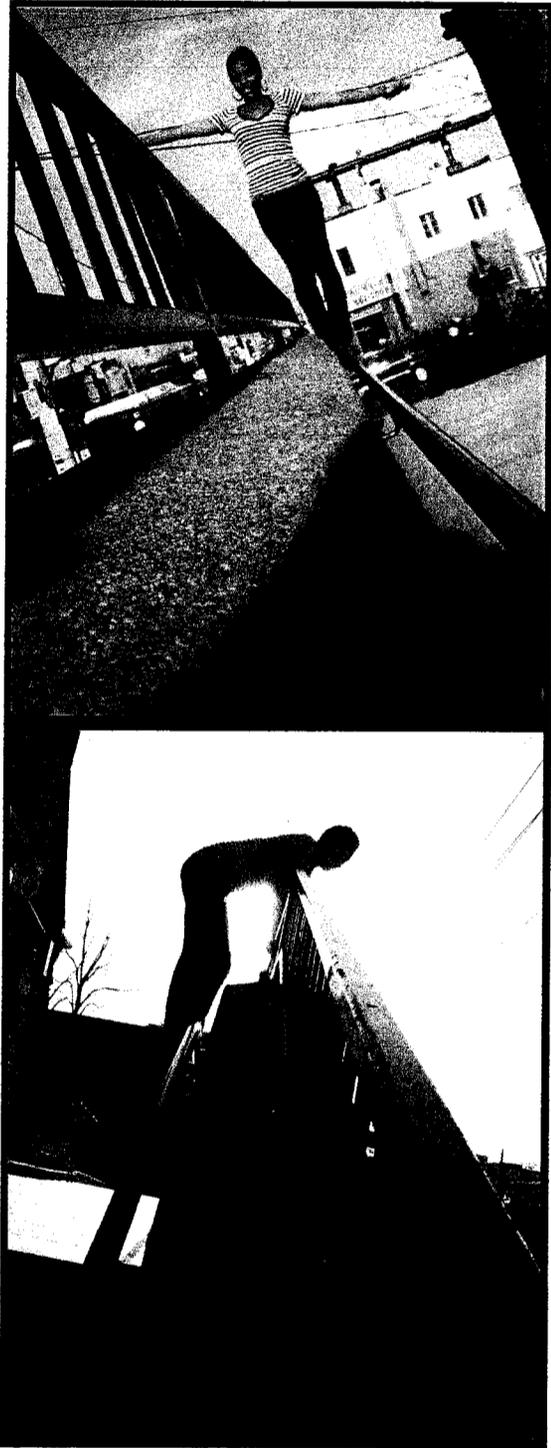


Figure 9. Self-portraits. Photos by Nicole.

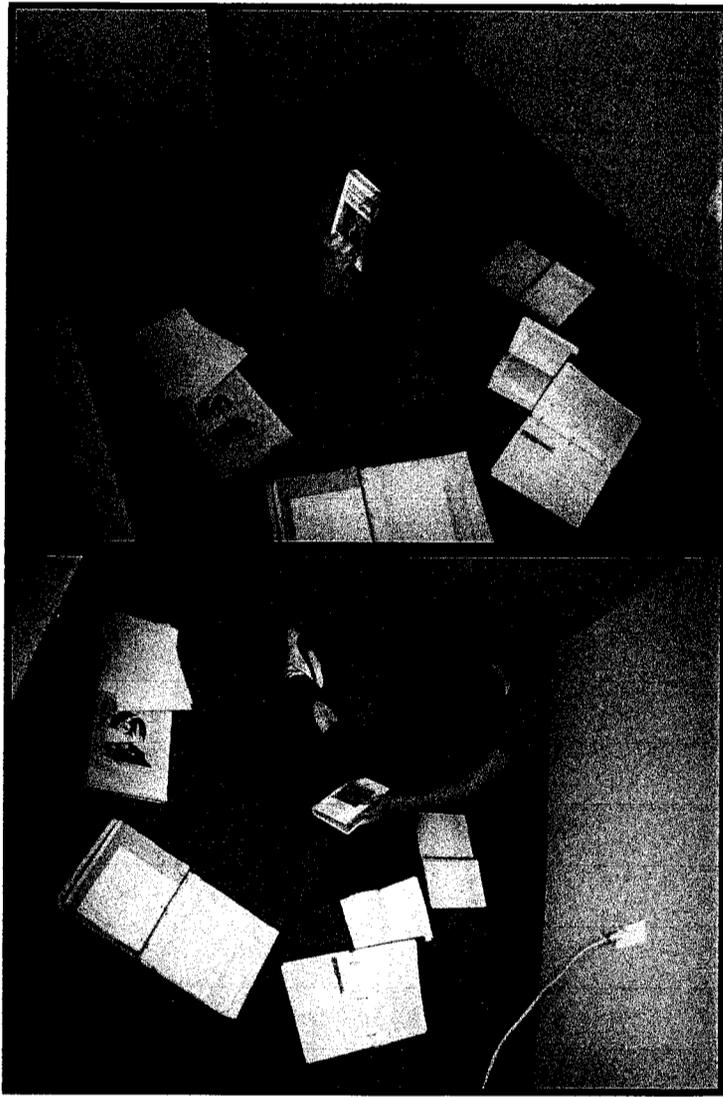


Figure 10. Self-portraits. Photos by Olga.



Figure 11. Shooting self-portraits. Photo by Deanna Del Vecchio.

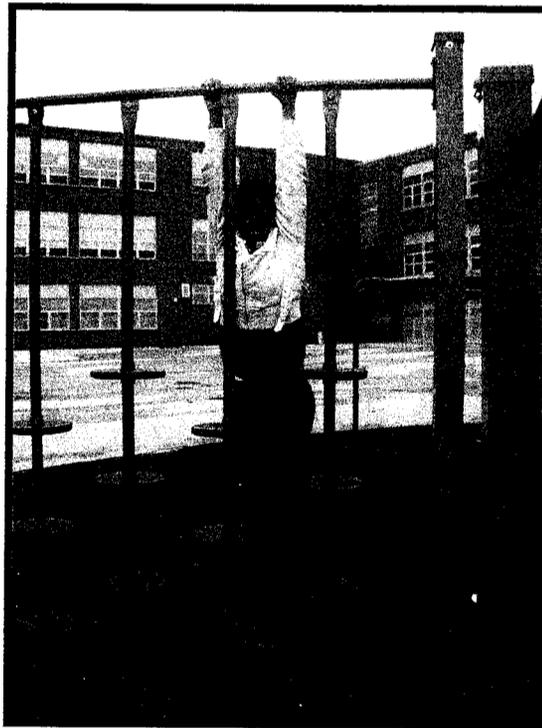


Figure 12. Self-portrait. Photo by Mabinty.



**Figure 13. Writing and snacking on pizza. Photo by Deanna Del Vecchio.**

Session two provided more insights into reflecting on my teaching practice, many courtesy of the participants themselves. On a photo shoot assignment, Mabinty and Judith asked if they could go slightly beyond the set boundaries on Eglinton to take photos at a playground on a nearby side street. I tagged along with them, and watched as they took imaginative, playful pictures of each other climbing on the jungle gym (see Figures 11 and 12). I realized that I should do some of my own scouting for locations to see what other such places might lay right around the corner. At the end of the session I took a detour around the neighborhood and made note of interesting sites to suggest for next session.

My bike ride home was proving to be a fruitful opportunity to explore and reflect. This time I took a differing route, heading east on St. Clair Avenue, pedaling past the mainstays of the *Corso Italia*. Many shops rang a bell in my mind, like Tre Mari Bakery, with a sign in the window advertising fresh *zeppole* in honour of the feast of San

Giuseppe. To me these places were symbols, connections that were relevant to my cultural history. They gave me a warm, fuzzy feeling of belonging. I sought to elucidate those same types of connections from my participants, by encouraging them to explore the culturally significant parts of their lives.

Breaks squeaking, barreling down a hill as I made my way south along Christie Street, I reflected on the relevance of the community arts model as I was experiencing it through this program. I was impressed by the infrastructure in place (the FYI centre with all of its resources, the breadth of Art Starts' programming) and by the dedication and enthusiasm of Erin, Faduma and the other support staff. But it often appeared to me that the participants were merely going through the motions during each PhotoLit session – doing what was asked of them, and contributing when asked to contribute. “I can't tell if the theory is translating, if they're buying into it, or just taking haphazard pictures,” I remarked in my field notes.

I intended the program to be meaningful for them, yet I wondered if it really was. Repeat attendance was one sign pointing to yes. Aside from the rowdy group of boys, who dropped off after the first session, I had a core group of 10 participants who were consistent in their attendance. That fact alone was evidence of interest. Perhaps I had an unrealistic expectation of an overt sign that I was “reaching” them. In particular, I hoped that the visual literacy skills, the underpinning of our photo analyses and discussions, were sinking in.

### Session 3. Tuesday, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

#### Lesson plan highlights:

- Review initial self-portraits from last session
- Photo element: PERSPECTIVE
  - Point of view
  - Above, below, or eye level
  - Foreground and background
- Second self-portrait shoot



Figure 14. Shooting self-portraits. Photo by Deanna Del Vecchio.



Figure 15. Self-portrait. Photo by Eric.



Figure 16. Self-portrait. Photo by Olga.

## Session 4. Thursday, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

### Lesson plan highlights:

- Visual element: SYMBOL
  - Use symbols to represent abstract ideas
- *Family* theme
  - Writing exercise
  - Milton Rogovin images
- Introduce *community* theme
  - Shooting session: photograph symbols that represent your community



Figure 17. Writing exercise on the theme of family.

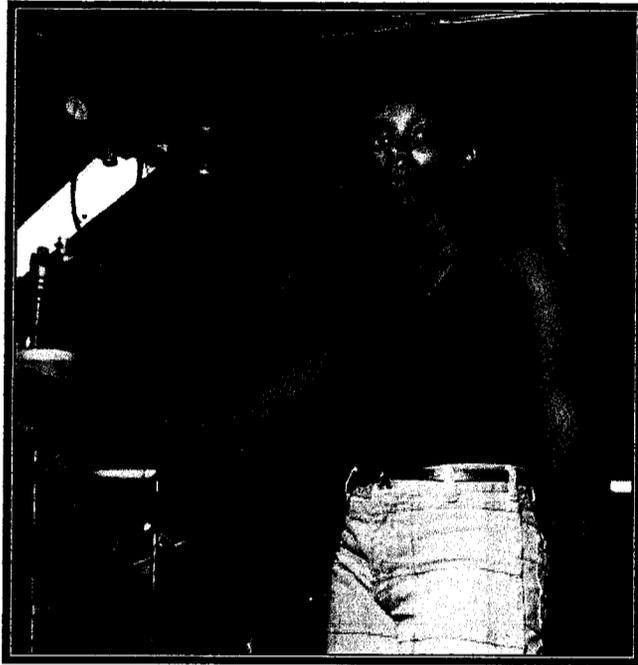


Figure 18. Rogovin, Milton. "Working People, Buffalo China Pottery." Web. 21 Jul. 2010.



Figure 21. Rogovin, Milton. "Working People, Buffalo China Pottery." Web. 21 Jul. 2010.



Figure 19. Symbol for school. Photo by Dasha.



Figure 20. Symbol for rules. Photo by Loretta.

By the fourth session, the group began to coalesce, shedding light on my musings about the program's relevance for the participants. I remember the special moment while we were all looking at an image projected onto the wall, and "I suddenly realized that they were talking about the picture – its composition, its message – without me prompting them. They were having a discussion and giving feedback all on their own." From the beginning, I had been impressed with the depth of insight that the participants brought to the table, but I usually had to prod and question before they would speak up. Now that they were sharing openly, I realized that the concepts were indeed sinking in – they were demonstrating a clear grasp of visual literacy skills as they discussed the photographer's vantage point and intention.

Other evidence that the youth were absorbing the photographic concepts came through the images that they produced. I normally showed them images from professional photographers to illustrate the concepts I was teaching them, but one session, I found myself choosing from their own self-portraits to demonstrate effective use of leading lines and perspective. I emphasized that fact to them to let them know that I was impressed with the quality of their work, hoping to encourage more thoughtful picture-taking.

One limitation of the program that I foresaw was the fact that the participants were not able to take the cameras home with them. The cameras we used were on loan to Art Starts, and so in the interest of ensuring that they were always accounted for, the participants were able to use them only during the workshop sessions. From my research

into participatory photography projects, I observed that the most compelling images were almost always made at home, in personal spaces. I knew that I would have to be creative in order to encourage the participants to be individualistic while making their images, to compensate for the limited shooting locations. Another solution I came up with was to use some of the program's funding to buy disposable cameras that the participants could take home.

During session four, we addressed the family theme through written reflections on their relationships with various family members, and the planning of photographs that they could take to represent those relationships. Their assignment this time was a take-home one: they were to use their disposable cameras to take the photos they had sketched out in class.

This exercise yielded a few striking results, such as snapshots of framed family photographs depicting loved ones who had passed away, superimposed with reflections from the glass that created an interesting effect (see Figure 21). There was also a compelling image of a female family member washing vegetables before a meal, the soft window light illuminating the water pouring from the tap, making for a surprisingly peaceful scene (see Figure 22). Although I was very intrigued by the family images, we did not have sufficient time to explore them adequately. We shuffled through them and discussed them as a group, and the participants wrote short descriptions for each of them, but I was disappointed that there was not more time to explore these rich images further.



**Figure 21. Family member from framed photograph. Photo by PhotoLit participant.**



**Figure 22. Preparing a meal. Photo by PhotoLit participant.**

My plans for the program included the creation of a blog, with a two-fold purpose: first, to make the participants' work public, imbuing it with a sense of importance; and second,

to create an easily accessible resource of course material for the participants to refer to. Together, we discussed their vision for the blog – ideas about layout and categories, as well as which images to include. Ideally, the youth would have been responsible for updating the blog at the end of each session. Given the time restrictions, however, I took it upon myself to take care of blog posts (see Figure 23). See the Conclusion section for further discussion of the time constraint issue with regards to the youth’s creative control.

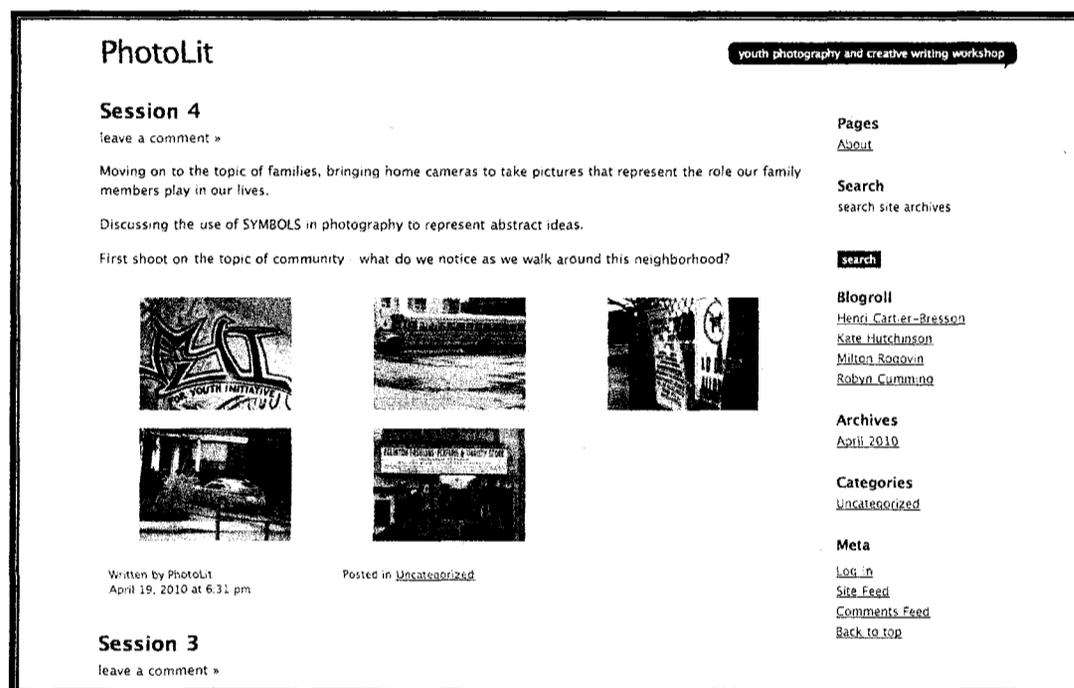


Figure 23. PhotoLit blog. [www.photolit.wordpress.com](http://www.photolit.wordpress.com).

One aspect of Wendy Ewald’s work that strongly intrigues me is her practice of photographing alongside her students, and exhibiting her images together with theirs. Working together implies a collaborative spirit and an equal footing that I wanted to emphasize with PhotoLit. So, I brought my medium format camera along with me to one

of the sessions. My plan was to take a portrait of each of the participants, to be included as part of their final exhibition.

It turned out to be an educational activity as well – the youth were interested to check out my camera, noticing how different it was from the digital point-and-shoot models they were using. I was happy to explain how it operated, opening it up to show them the shutter and demonstrate how to put a fresh roll of film inside. This resulted in a discussion about the difference between digital and analog technology, which was useful for teaching them more about the basic principles of photography and what is actually happening when they pushed the shutter. Film-based photography is a personal passion of mine, so I was pleased that the youth showed interest in it.



**Figure 24. Sharing digital versions of my portraits with the participants.**



Figure 25. Portrait of Loretta. Photo by Deanna Del Vecchio.

Session 5. Tuesday, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

Lesson plan highlights:

- Defining *community*
  - Mapping and writing exercises
  - Discussion
  - Generating lists of words for community alphabet
- Visual element: TIME
  - The decisive moment
  - Balance within an image
- Shooting session: images for community alphabet series



**Figure 26. Bird. Photo by Lily, Dasha, and Olga.**



**Figure 27. Waste. Photo by Jenn, Eric and Loretta.**



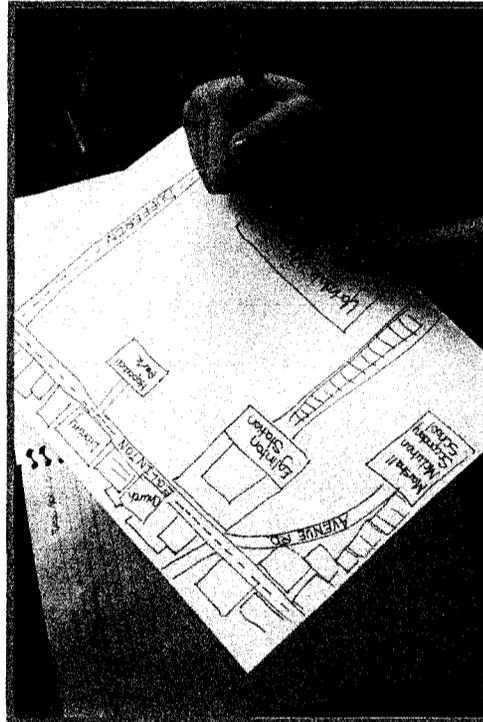
**Figure 28. Reviewing images on-camera. Photo by Deanna Del Vecchio.**

With the self-portrait and family themes covered, by session five we were ready to tackle the final topic, and the subject of our final exhibition: community. I showed them a photo essay I had put together with images from my own neighborhood. We discussed what the photos of budding spring gardens, people on porches, and houses with Virgin Mary plaques communicated about the area I lived in – a place where people looked out for each other, and valued religion and gardening. This was a pretty accurate description of my quiet street in Little Portugal. This photo essay was also a way for me to share something of myself with the group – after asking them to be open and candid about their own lives in our writing exercises, I wanted to reciprocate.



Figure 29. Delaney Street. Photo by Deanna Del Vecchio.

From that starting point, I moved on to a series of activities designed as preparation for our final exhibition photo series: a community alphabet, an idea borrowed from Literacy Through Photography in which a collection of words is chosen (one for each letter of the alphabet) that represent something important in a given community. One photo is taken to represent each word. I knew that it would be important to have focused brainstorm activities in order to generate meaningful words and ideas for images. We started by defining community and drawing maps of what our communities included (see Figure 30). But what interested me most was what the youth chose to exclude from their maps. Mabinty didn't want to include her apartment building in her map, explaining that she doesn't like her building because it is too violent. Judith also neglected to include her home – her map consisted entirely of her school building.

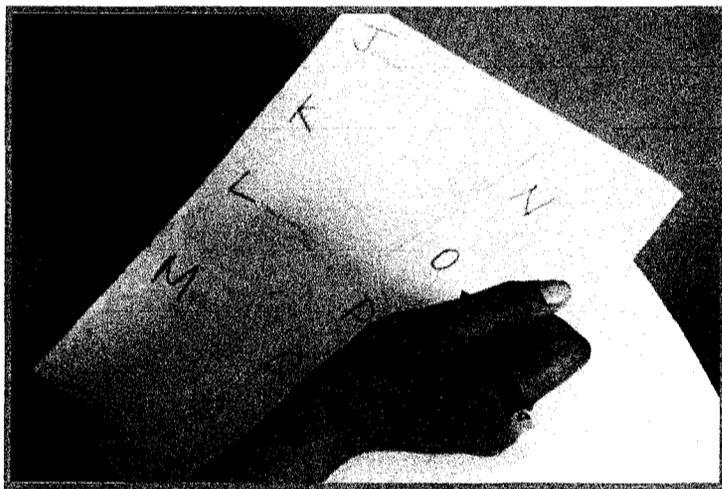


**Figure 30. Making community maps. Photo by Deanna Del Vecchio.**

Next, we talked about what we liked and disliked about our communities. Olga liked that there was a bus stop close to her house, and that her neighbours weren't nosy. The dislikes seemed to flow more easily than the likes. Dasha disliked "the old man who was

always shouting on [her] street in the middle of the night.” Judith disliked that there were too many murders in her neighborhood. Nicole disliked going into certain shops in her community “because men stare at you when you go in.” I was touched by their willingness to share openly.

From there, the participants broke off into small groups, the letters of the alphabet divided among them. They began to create lists of word possibilities for each letter (see Figure 31).



**Figure 31. Listing words to represent community. Photo by Deanna Del Vecchio.**

On Wednesday, April 21<sup>st</sup>, the PhotoLit participants got the chance to see a play at the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People ([www.lktyp.ca](http://www.lktyp.ca)). Erin had received free tickets and offered them to the group, and most of the participants were interested. This field trip, although unrelated to the content of the program, proved to be a bonding opportunity

for the youth and a chance to relate to each other through the new experience of seeing a live theatre performance.

I often did my best thinking and reflecting on my bike ride to and from the program. A new problem I had set for myself was how to inspire the youth to come up with personally significant words to represent their community, instead of the mostly generic words they had listed so far. As I left the FYI centre and headed west on Eglinton Avenue, I rode past a roti shop, a record store specializing in Haitian *kompa* music, and an African grocery store. I was reminded that the common thread linking all of the participants was their culture – they all came to Canada from other countries, and were in the process of reconciling their past with their present. What better way to make the exercise personally relevant, than to draw on cultural differences as a source of ideas.

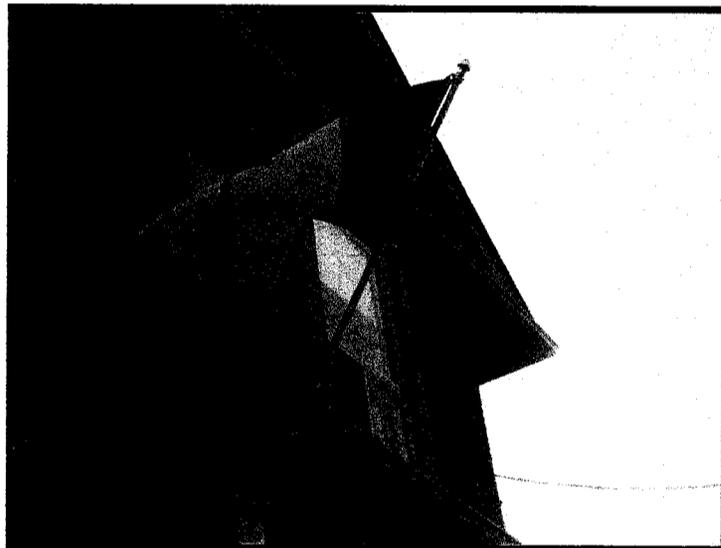
## Session 6. Thursday, April 15, 2010.

Lesson plan highlights:

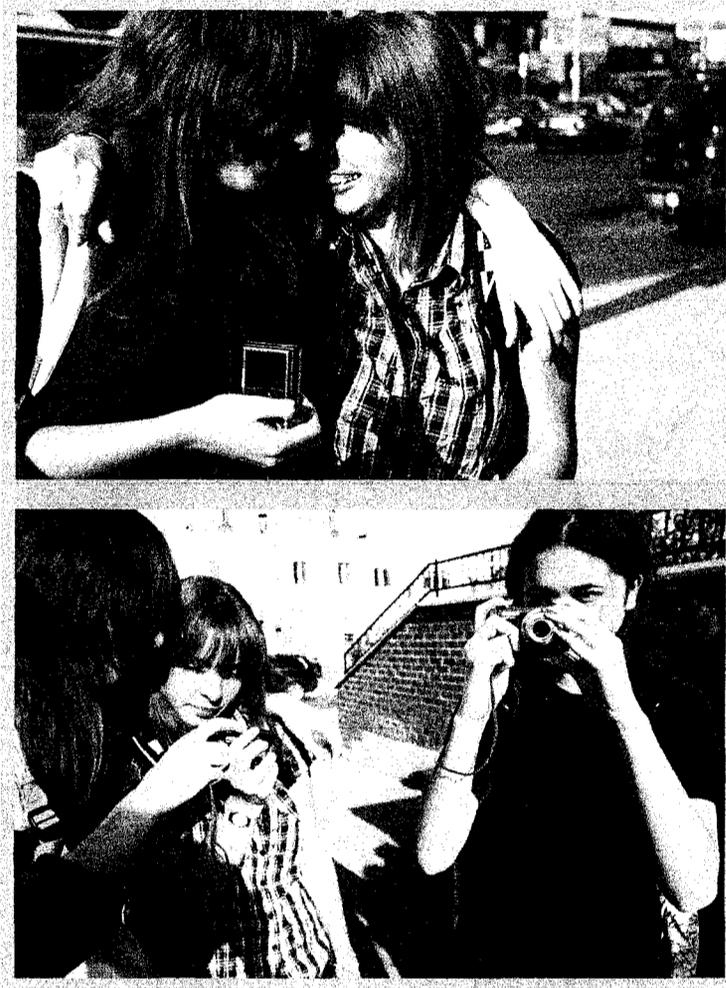
- More brainstorming to finalize ideas for community alphabet
- Long shooting session to allow for walking to further locations



**Figure 32. Excitement. Photo by Eric, Jenn, and Loretta.**



**Figure 33. Flag. Photo by Dasha, Lily and Olga.**



**Figure 34. Reviewing images. Photos by Deanna Del Vecchio.**

The next session, I initiated a discussion by asking the youth to name things about their native countries that contrasted with life here in Canada. I was amazed by the resulting conversation. With thoughtfulness and maturity, the participants brought up differences they noticed on a daily basis. They listened attentively and responded to each other's comments, creating a nuanced picture of cultural differences not only between their countries and Canada, but between Ghana and Russia, between Ukraine and Sierra

Leone. They remarked on topics from education and employment, to violence and police, to waste issues, to neighbourhood gossiping. Eric observed that students in Canada were more free in terms of the tolerance with speaking out in class, which he felt was due to the lack of corporal punishment. Lily agreed, saying that in the Ukraine, students were also better behaved in class. Mabinty shared that in Sierra Leone, it was common practice to bribe police officers with money, so law enforcement was not as fair as it is in Canada. Loretta concurred that such bribing also took place in Ghana.

Afterward, Erin described the conversation as magic. I agreed. The separate cliques of youth, who would barely make eye contact with each other during the first session of the program just two weeks ago, were engaged in a lively, respectful discussion. They were sharing personal stories and showing interest in what each other were saying. They carried the conversation so well on their own, that my only role as facilitator was to rein it in to leave enough time to go out and take pictures. This shed light on my earlier question of whether the program was significant for the participants. My chosen medium is photography, and I aim to teach my students how to look at and take photos. But the greater goal of my teaching practice (above and beyond the medium) is to foster open, respectful connection with others, something that was achieved during that session. The way the youth were engaging with each other was real and important, as much as I tend to emphasize the quality of the artwork as a core goal of the program.

At that point I felt that I “got it.” Got the intangible value of community work with youth, and the impact it can have on their lives. The funding and infrastructure and resources

create an environment where conversations like the one we just had can happen, where youth who may not seem to have a lot in common can forge connections and understanding, can think critically about their own life experience in relation to others' life experiences. The discussion prompts and picture-taking exercises amalgamated into something bigger: they created a safe environment for candid conversation. Many of the words that made it in the final selection were culled from this discussion, including violence, police, laundry, and education. Instead of alphabetical order, the images were organized according to colour and contrast, to create a visually pleasing display.

## Session 7. Tuesday, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

Lesson plan highlights:

- Discuss and plan the exhibition catalogue
  - Ideas for cover and title
- Review, select, and edit final images



Figure 35. Cover shots. Photos by Deanna Del Vecchio.



**Figure 36. Playing around with ideas for the cover. Photo by Deanna Del Vecchio.**

The remaining sessions were devoted to the development of the community alphabet project. In their small groups, the participants worked diligently to take pictures, write written pieces to accompany them, and edit their images in PhotoShop (after a brief tutorial I gave them to introduce them to the basics of this software). One group went on a long walk to track down the desired location for their shoot. Another exhausted themselves jumping over and over again to achieve the perfect airborne shot (see Figure 32).

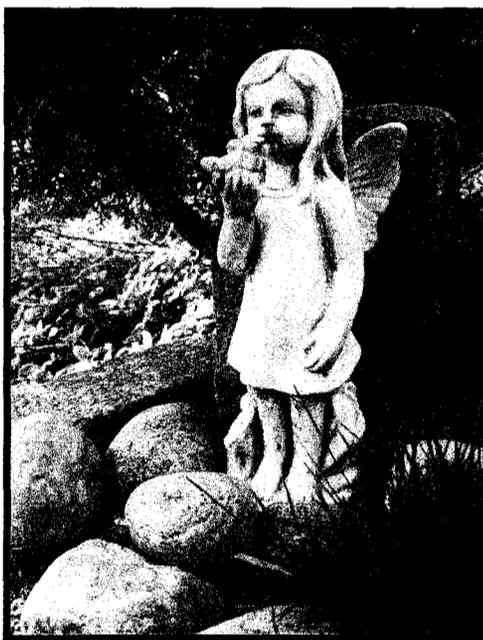
I explained the significance of the exhibit and catalogue that their work would be a part of, emphasizing that the Mayor of Toronto would be in attendance at the exhibit and that the copies of the catalogue would be distributed around the community. Due to logistics and time constraints, it was not possible for the youth to be involved in the design of the exhibition catalogue. Instead, we discussed their vision for its layout and design - they wanted bright colours. We focused on what they wanted on the cover. Eric came up with

the clever idea of a portrait of himself in which he held his camera pointing towards him, so that the viewer saw his face on the camera's LCD screen in the foreground, with his figure in the background (see Figure 35). We all agreed that this was an excellent idea for the cover shot, so I took a portrait of all of the participants posing the Eric way.

As a title for the exhibit, Lily came up with the simple yet effective "Community Through Our Eyes," which the others agreed on. I showed the youths the black and white medium format portraits I had taken of them, which I had printed in the darkroom, and shared my idea to include them in the exhibit. Although some of them were shy about seeing their printed headshots, they agreed to display them at the beginning of the exhibit as an introduction to them as individuals. My portraits served a dual purpose: first, to integrate my work into the exhibit and fulfill my goal of exhibiting alongside them, and second, to help assert their identity as photographers and cultural producers to the members of the public who viewed the exhibit.

The editing process involved each group choosing two to three of their eight community images to include in the catalogue, and to be printed for the exhibit (the catalogue is reproduced in Appendix C). It was here that I encountered another "problem-setting" situation: the dilemma of how much control to exert over the selection of work for the catalogue. I had my opinions on which images were more effective and well suited for the final piece, which were different than the participants' opinions, in some cases. For example, an image of a garden statue struck me as cliché (see Figure 37), while the group who took it considered it one of their best. As I circulated and checked out which images

they were choosing, I gave my input and suggestions. Ultimately, however, I chose to step back and let them take control of the editing process, in the interest of giving them complete ownership over their work. As much as I wanted the final exhibit and catalogue to have a certain cohesive look, it was more reflective of the aims of the program if the youth got to make their own selections independently. I encouraged them to make their selections of words and images based on the issues that had emerged during our discussion and brainstorming sessions. However, they seemed more interested in making selections based on images that appealed to them visually, and those that were memorable based on the effort they put into creating them. I emphasized selection based on theme, while they selected based on a more intangible like or dislike of a particular image.



**Figure 37. Image of garden statue for the community alphabet. Photo by Dasha, Olga and Lily.**

## Session 8. Thursday, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

### Lesson plan highlights:

- Discuss exhibit layout
- Writing
  - Biographies for catalogue
  - Descriptions to accompany exhibit
- Final image editing



**Figure 38. Editing images for the exhibit. Photos by Erin Schachter (top) and Deanna Del Vecchio (bottom).**

More “problem-setting” took place during the process of writing the image descriptions. This was challenging, since the youth needed many prompts before they would let the words flow. Judith, for example, turned immediately to the internet as she began her written description for her “police” photo. She was in the middle of cutting and pasting

text that turned up in a Google search of the word “police” when I interrupted her and told her that I wanted to know *her* opinions about the police, not the internet’s opinions. She rolled her eyes slightly as she closed the browser window and paused, contemplating what to type. I realized that perhaps it was her first inclination to seek out external sources of information when it came to writing, so I tried to emphasize to all the participants the value of their own opinions and my expectation that they write from their own experience.

Mabinty, normally a colourful storyteller, was hesitant and had barely written a few sentences. Curious as to where the disconnect was, I sat down next to her and asked her some questions about the image she was charged with writing about: a close-up of a washing machine at a laundromat. She spouted off stories and anecdotes at the drop of a hat, expressing herself with ease and flair. She launched into a fascinating tale about how laundry is so much easier in Canada compared to Sierra Leone, where “you have to have big rocks to scrub your clothes on to get them clean.” As she talked, I typed, transcribing her verbal outpouring into written form. It turns out that writing in English was the barrier – Mabinty’s written command of the language did not allow her to express herself as candidly as she could with words. But with someone else recording her story, it was much easier to capture the essence of her personality.

After Mabinty had worked on her own group’s descriptions, I asked her to circulate to the other groups to provide assistance if necessary, since she was clearly a natural storyteller. I hoped to use the participants’ individual strengths to motivate each other. The images

themselves served as effective building blocks for writing, especially in the case of the touchier topics, like violence and police. The images began to take shape as effective alternate ways of telling a story.

The final session marked the end of the youth's contribution, although my work was still piled high. Before the exhibit a week later, I was responsible for printing large versions of the images, preparing the prints for display in the exhibit, and designing and printing the catalogue. A daunting list, to say the least, and not one that I could check off on my own. All of the tasks on my plate were accomplished thanks to the generous assistance of friends and colleagues, reminding me of the importance of having a strong support network.

### The Exhibit. Friday, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

The exhibit launch was turning out to be a high profile event, as we were piggy-backing on two major happenings at FYI: the opening of a new youth centre at 1652 Keele Street and the annual ceremony for scholarship recipients. An open house was planned in celebration and the PhotoLit exhibit would be on display for the attendees to see. This arrangement was a huge benefit, because it meant that the exhibit would be viewed by a large audience that was representative of the local community – youth and partners of FYI, plus prominent local politicians, including Toronto Mayor David Miller.

Erin and I met up with a few of the participants before the exhibit and got them decked out in Art Starts t-shirts before we headed over to the new FYI site. Erin's clever finagling got a copy of the catalogue into the hands of the mayor, and a shot of our participants next to Miller, waving the catalogue enthusiastically (see Figure 39). It was a sweet closure to the program, but the public exposure didn't end there, thanks to the Art Starts network.



**Figure 39. Toronto Mayor David Miller with PhotoLit participants at the exhibit launch event. Photo by Deanna Del Vecchio.**



**Figure 40. PhotoLit participants and me in front of the exhibit. Photo by Faduma Abdulle.**

The exhibit was packed up that evening and brought back to the original FYI site, to be set up as part of Jane's Walk the next day. Jane's Walk is a popular community event held in a number of cities worldwide, organized in honour of urban theorist Jane Jacobs ([www.janeswalk.net](http://www.janeswalk.net)). The event features a number of citizen-led guided walks through different communities throughout the city. FYI, Art Starts, and PhotoLit were to be part of the Eglinton-Oakwood community walk. The day was rainy, but there was a respectable turnout of people nonetheless. I gave an overview of PhotoLit to the group before they filtered through the narrow hallway where the exhibit was on display. I got some positive feedback about the project from several individuals. The exhibition was further publicized by being featured in Victory magazine, a local youth-focused publication ([www.web.me.com/victorymagazine](http://www.web.me.com/victorymagazine)). The exhibit remained on display at FYI for several weeks, and then was moved to Art Starts' headquarters in Yorkdale Mall.

Future installations may include the Maria A. Schuka branch of the Toronto Public Library, located on Eglinton Avenue right next to the FYI site.

In her report on the PhotoLit program, Erin described it as “one big success story.” My field notes echoed that sentiment, as I commented “I am in awe of this” after the final wrap-up. Erin’s report continued on by stating that “PhotoLit became a safe, positive, respectful environment in which participants... were able to discuss the cultural differences between home and Toronto. Although there was a diverse group present, they were able to provide support to each other and accepted each other’s perspectives and experiences.” Tangibly, the program resulted in a public exhibit of photographs that was viewed by community members and politicians alike, and a catalogue to document the exhibit. Intangibly, it brought together youth from different backgrounds and created a positive group dynamic. A few of the youth friended each other on Facebook on the last day of the program, evidence of a positive connection.

On a personal level, the program gave me renewed confidence in my teaching ability and in the strength of the community arts model. In part, this was due to the positive experience of working with Erin and Faduma. Their encouragement and logistical support brought the program to life.

## ANALYSIS

“Photography is commonly regarded as an instrument for knowing things.”

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

I analyzed the data through a comprehensive review of the information I collected. Instead of transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews word-for-word, I listened to each three times and made detailed notes. The audio recordings and field notes were also instrumental in allowing me to reflect on my experience.

The visual methodology espoused by Gillian Rose provided a useful means of analyzing the substantial number of images that resulted from the program - my own, and those taken by the participants. “There are different ways of seeing the world, and the critical task is to differentiate between the social effects of those different visions” (Rose 9). The youths’ view of the world differs greatly from mine, and seeing how they interpreted the various themes of the program afforded me a window into their perspective that would have been otherwise unavailable. For example, when I think of *laundry*, I do not conjure up an image of washing clothes beside a river. Thanks to Mabinty’s photo, I am invited

into her reality in which she remembers washing clothes on a washboard as a young girl in Sierra Leone.

## Emerging Themes

The survey proved to be an extremely useful method of data collection, as the online tool I used ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) made it simple to gather participants' opinions and view their responses in visual formats such as chart, graphs and tables. I managed to get seven of the ten youth to complete the survey on the last day of the program. I found that the survey results mirrored the interview results.

Most of the youth signed up for PhotoLit because they wanted to be part of a photography exhibit, and because they wanted to learn how to analyze photographs (see Figure 41).

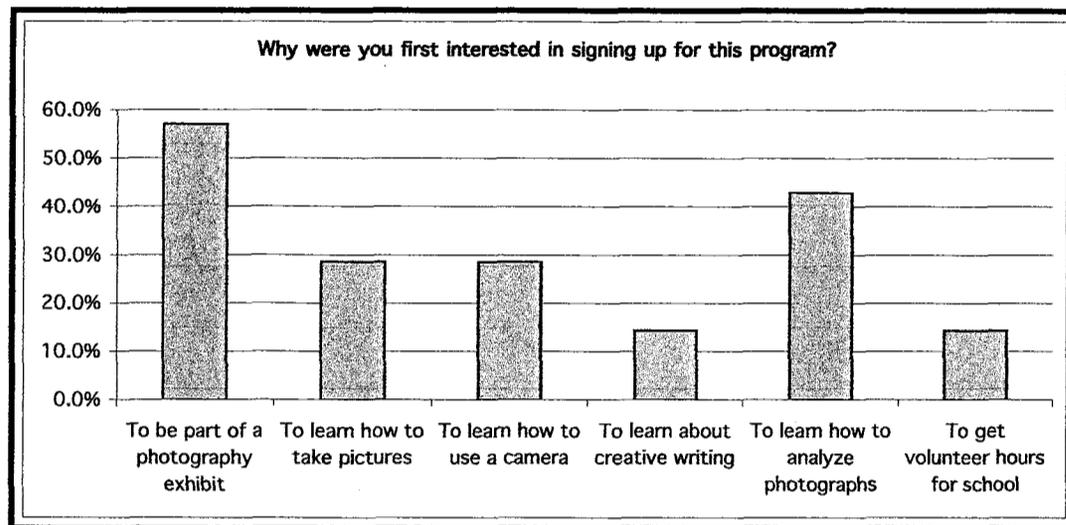
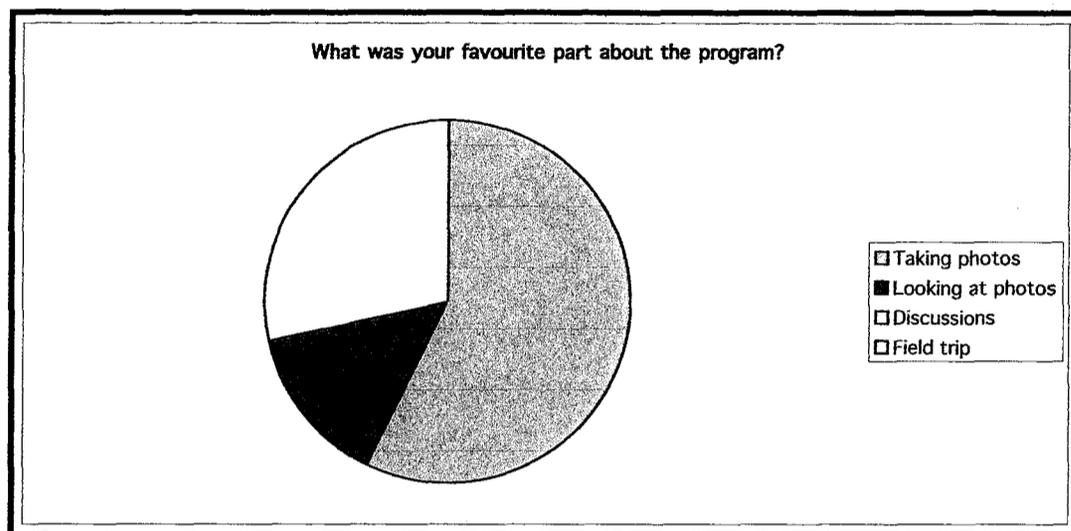


Figure 41. Survey Question 1.

In her interview, Loretta stated that the program piqued her interest because she “wanted to learn about how to use the camera, and how to take perfect pictures.” Olga, who had previous experience with photography, was particularly interested in being part of the exhibit, as a way to take a new step as a photographer. Mabinty emphasized that “if people don’t show their photos to the world, no one will know about them.” Others joined because they wanted to learn something new, or because they “love taking pictures.”

The majority of the participants named the picture-taking component of the program as their favourite (see Figure 42). They preferred the active portion to the more passive analysis and discussion of images.



**Figure 42. Survey question 2.**

The third question touched on the skills taught during the program. I was pleased to see that results were favourable, and the youth felt that they had learned something new related to most topics covered in the course material. Six participants saw improvement in their knowledge of how to operate the camera, and their ability to express themselves in general; while seven felt that their ability to take pictures and analyze them had improved. In her interview, Loretta mentioned that she learned “how to read the information in the picture,” while Mabinty said she learned “how to take a photo, where the light comes from, how to brighten a photo and how to turn the flash on and off.” Creative writing was an area where only two saw improvement, which is not surprising to me since the writing exercises served to support the photography goals of the program, and had not been emphasized independently.

The next two questions in the survey addressed the themes and broader goals of the program. The themes of self, family, and community appeared to resonate with the participants. Most agreed that the program had helped them think more about these topics (see Figure 43).

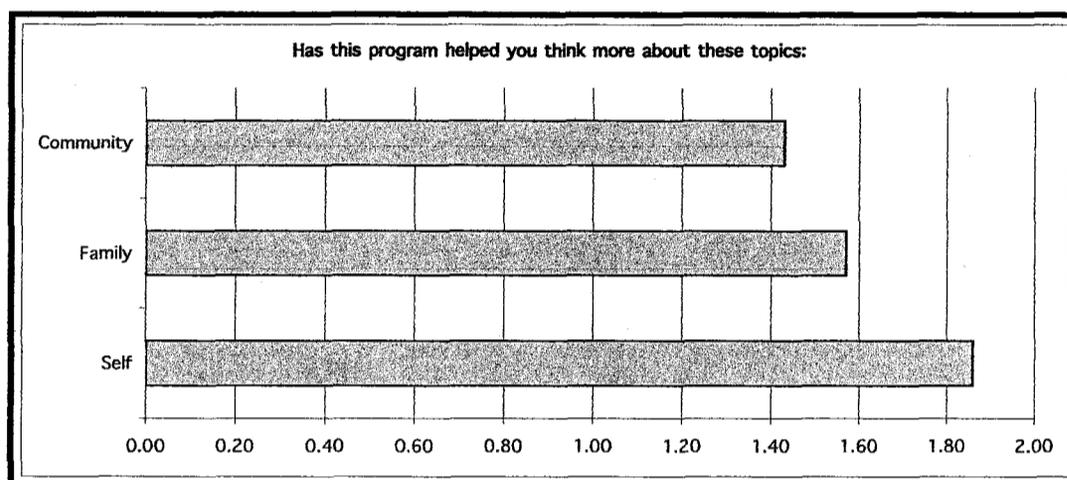
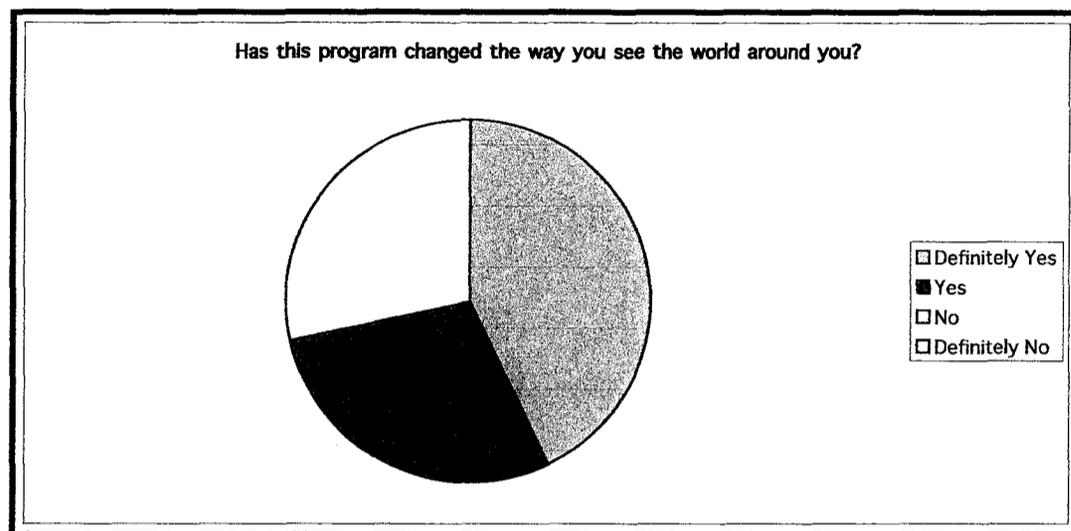


Figure 43. Survey question 4.

Responses were also positive to the lofty question of how the program affected their general view of the world, with five answering yes (see Figure 44). Due to the design of the survey and an oversight on my part during the interview process, I do not have further details as to what, specifically, the youth thought about related to these topics that they would not otherwise have on their mind. See the Conclusion section for further discussion of this oversight.



**Figure 44. Survey question 5.**

All seven of the youth who took the survey said that they would recommend it to a friend. I concluded the survey with two open-ended questions to get some constructive criticism from the participants. Suggestions for how to improve the program in the future reflected issues that had already come up in my mind. “Take pictures in different locations, and have more professional cameras,” one youth suggested. Others concurred that the limitations of picture-taking locations in was a challenge. Since the youth could not take the cameras outside of the session hours, we were limited to locations we could walk to within a few minutes, immediately surrounding they FYI centre, which made for some monotonous shoots. In her interview after the last session, Olga said that she would have liked to have more time to edit her images on the computer. I added this suggestion to my list of factors to consider for the next workshop.

## CONCLUSIONS

“Photography is a social rite through which  
people give shape to an experience.”

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

### Responses to Research Questions

Ultimately, PhotoLit has had a positive impact on the youth participants and on my own teaching practice. By working with Art Starts, I have begun to discern where I belong within the community arts scene in Toronto, and have set the stage for future projects and collaborations. In this section, I will respond to each of my research questions in turn, providing answers as well as noting where questions still remain, based on oversights in my research process.

My first research question was:

- What factors contribute to my development and my success as a photography teacher in a community setting?

This question was amply addressed through my field notes. Through the process of designing, marketing, and facilitating PhotoLit, I have identified a number of factors and characteristics that lead to success as a community arts facilitator. In fact, the ability to multi-task and play multiple roles is one such skill: in addition to skills directly related to the program, I had to be adept at networking and promotions in order to find a home for the project, as well as hone layout and design skills to put together the final exhibit and catalogue, among others. As Wilson noted after her YES Photo Voice project, “facilitation for empowerment requires a diverse and demanding skill set, including motivating youth, incorporating program goals, time management, modifying curriculum based on the needs of the group, managing group behaviour, instructing, and guiding critical dialogue” (258). This balance of artistic and technical skills with management and facilitation abilities makes for a unique skill-set.

Resiliency is another factor that influenced the program. I had to be resourceful as I shopped around for community organizations in Toronto and tried to pitch my idea in a way that caught their attention. I put a great deal of time into research and networking with various organizations, many of which came to dead ends. Resiliency was required to keep working until a successful match was made. Once the program started, compromise was needed to keep the project in line with the youth’s vision. As mentioned earlier, on several occasions I had to keep my personal opinions to myself and allow the participants to make their own decisions about how to take their photo, or which photo to choose for the exhibit. Wilson observed that “facilitators must be able to balance the goal of allowing youth personal control and power with the need to provide guidance to avoid

predictable failure” (258). Indeed, finding the middle ground between sharing my opinion in the interest of teaching them, and allowing them to make their own decisions, was a difficult task. This issue has been experienced by other arts educators, such as photo voice practitioners Tim and Wendy Booth who found it difficult to “find an acceptable compromise between fulfilling the... project and respecting the [participants’] will” (435).

Not surprisingly, creativity was another key factor, which was often coupled with spontaneity. Keeping the participants engaged was of crucial importance, especially in an after-school program in which participation is voluntary. This issue often surfaces in the community arts literature. Marybeth Gasman and Sibby Anderson-Thompkins noted about their Pennsylvania after-school art program that in order to keep participants interested and engaged, they emphasized “creat[ing] venues for children that stimulate[d] their creativity and thinking” (430). Creativity was required while I was initially planning the sessions, but also during the sessions. I had to come up with ways to involve all of the youth, in particular those who were not actively participating. Spontaneous modifications of activities and changes of direction were a big part of maintaining interest, and allowed me to draw in the stragglers and shy personalities.

My second research question was:

- What are youth responses to participation in a photography workshop oriented towards self-expression and critical thinking?

Interviews with the participants revealed that they did find it to be a valuable experience, in the sense that they learned new skills and made new friends. These criteria met their expectations of the program. My hope was that the program would help them think critically about the world around them, and through the survey, most of them indicated that the program did indeed lead them to give thought to the topics of self, community, and family. However, my data collection process was flawed in the sense that I did not gather sufficient information to determine *what* the youths were now thinking that differed from before, and *how* this new thinking impacted their lives. In short, I determined that they were thinking differently, but not what insights these new thoughts brought to their lives. More carefully formatted survey and interview questions might have elucidated those details.

From my observations, I found that the opportunity for peer interaction in a safe, non-threatening space was one of the major benefits for the youth. Other community arts facilitators have found similar results, noting that youth “crave interaction with adult mentors” (Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins 445). The youth responded positively to the questions about developing critical thinking skills, which was one of my central goals. In retrospect, however, I believe that the greatest benefit of PhotoLit was providing the youth with a positive outlet for their after-school energy and time. It has been noted that “a trusting, caring relationship builds self-confidence and creates strong-willed children” (Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins 447), which mirrors my observations of the staff and youth relationships at the FYI centre.

My third and final research question was:

- What does working with Art Starts help me understand about the kind of community arts practice I value and wish to pursue, and how can I contribute to effective engagement with its community?

Like any professional field, community arts is competitive. This competition is perhaps more evident in a large urban centre such as Toronto. PhotoLit coincided with my introduction to the community arts scene in Toronto. I discovered that there is a large number of artists and educators working in the field, and a wide spectrum of skills and talents. I was able to discern a spectrum among other people I met who are involved with community arts. At one end, were those who considered themselves artists first and foremost. They have a well-developed personal artistic practice, and are consistently producing and exhibiting work. They teach classes or workshops on the side, as a source of income. At the other end of the spectrum were educators who are experienced and interested in the arts. These individuals tend to identify more as educators, and are generally more dedicated to the underlying transformative goals and social change theory of community arts. I definitely fit into the educator description. I found it interesting to meet other community arts facilitators and determine where they fell on the artist/educator spectrum.

Art Starts has a number of talented artists on its roster, so I was surprised to learn that I was the only photo-based artist that they work with. This allowed me to contribute to the

Art Starts community in specific ways, such as photographing events including their studio-warming party, and providing photos to be used for their newsletter and website. In this way, I was able to provide a unique service to the organization and carve out a niche for myself within the Art Starts community.

Through PhotoLit, I was able to glean some wisdom regarding curriculum design within the community arts framework. Most significantly, I have learned to leave more time within the program sessions for writing exercises. Other art educators have made similar observations, such as Wilson who notes that a great deal of “one-on-one assistance is necessary to draw out developing writers to express their thinking in freewrites” (258).

Additionally, the public exposure represented by the exhibit required a substantial amount of time not just for taking images, but also for layout and design considerations. The participants needed ample time for discussion in order to make these choices thoughtful as opposed to haphazard. I tried to find a balance between course content and the final exhibition; but for future programs, I will allocate more time for editing and compiling the final project.

The other key issue is that of striking a balance between structured and unstructured time during a lesson. While it is important to keep participants engaged during the entire lesson, providing “down time” can give youth a chance to finish up previous tasks that took longer than expected. As mentioned earlier in this text, I found that overall, I had less time than necessary to cover all the aspects of the program. Due to time constraints, I

had to take over certain functions of the program that I would have preferred to entrust to the participants. These included designing the catalogue and maintaining the blog. While I had to undertake these tasks for practical time management purposes, I was nonetheless concerned that taking creative control in these ways would undermine the core goals of the program: to give the youth agency to share their own voices. Ultimately, I do not think this was detrimental to the program, because the youth were given a sense of ownership over the project in other significant ways. I explained to the youth that the tasks I took on were in the interest of time, and there appeared to be a general acceptance of this necessity.

In future incarnations of the program, I will try to give the participants enough time to take creative control of all the outputs. However, this issue is dependent on the time available within the context of the specific program. The number of sessions and time per session is often dictated by the hosting community organization, and in my experience, is commonly not up to the facilitator to decide.

Through PhotoLit, I was able to explore three research questions that are significant toward establishing myself as a community arts facilitator. With the support of two community organizations, plus their networks and resources, I was able to bring a participatory photography project to life, create community among a group of youth, and improve my teaching practice as a photography educator.

## Significance

I have since taught another eight-session PhotoLit workshop for Art Starts, and have been collaborating with St. Clair West Services for Seniors to plan an inter-generational PhotoLit workshop with youth and seniors in the fall. As a result of the initial PhotoLit workshop, I have adjusted my lesson planning process to include more unstructured time for discussion and catch-up on assignments. I will now aim to allocate more time for post-production in my lessons, in particular using Photoshop to edit images, as that has been a common request among participants.

This document functions as a detailed report of a community arts project and a reflection on the teaching process and persona of a community arts educator. It is intended as a contribution to the literature on community art education, and to the Art Starts organization. Initial conversations with Katherine Earl and Erin Schachter revealed that documentation of their projects was lacking. It is my hope that this thesis will serve as a valuable record for Art Starts, as a thorough documentation of the planning, procedure, and results of one of their programs. This may serve useful in demonstrating the scope and impact of their programs, as is often required for grant applications.

Participatory art projects with youth are worthwhile because they are a way to reach out to marginalized young people and engage them in positive learning experiences. The effectiveness of such projects has been demonstrated in many examples and documented

in countless academic articles. “As students develop their skills and techniques in art, they also become more proficient at representing their ideological beliefs” (Albers 10).

Coupled with personal experience, research has given me inspiration about the potential of participatory art projects. Art educator Maria Lovett conducted a visual art, photography and video project with Montreal high school students, and deduced from her experience that “media production allows youth the opportunity to articulate their own knowledge, develop literacies and actively engage in the issues most vital to their lives” (178). Art educators Maureen Kendrick and Shelley Jones concluded, after their photography and writing project with girls in Uganda, that “providing opportunities for youth to explore and consider their worlds through alternative modes of communication and representation has immense potential as a pedagogical approach to cultivate dialogue about the nature of social inequities” (397). And art educator Miriam Davidson, in her PhD thesis, asserts that “by providing children with learning environments in which deep personal connections are fostered (through care, dialogue and pleasure in learning), they may be empowered to employ the technical or artistic skills they are taught to create texts that are representations of their individual and collective identities” (iii). It is my hope that the success of PhotoLit will provide me with further opportunities to encourage “reading the world as a way to increase critical consciousness” (Kinloch 41) and contribute to the positive reputation of art as a tool for social change.

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## Appendix A. Participant Consent Form

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN

#### PhotoLit: Self-Expression Through Digital Photography and Creative Writing

##### *Introduction*

You are being invited to participate in a photography and creative writing workshop called "PhotoLit", being led by Deanna Del Vecchio for ArtStarts community arts organization and For Youth Initiative social services agency. This workshop is free and all the photographic artwork you create will remain your property.

##### *About the Workshop*

This 8-session digital photography course will enable you to learn new skills with the camera and the computer, and provide you with the chance to take pictures and write about what your community means to you. The PhotoLit workshop will take place at the For Youth Initiative site at 1669 Eglinton Avenue West in Toronto. Sessions will take place on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for four weeks, starting on Tuesday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010. The group's photographic artwork will lead to a community display open to the public and printed exhibition catalogue.

A teen or a parent may change their mind about participating and withdraw from the research project, exhibition, and catalogue with no penalty of any kind, at any time UP to the printing of the catalogue and the hanging of the exhibition.

##### *About the Research Project*

This teaching project is part of Deanna Del Vecchio's Master's degree in Art Education, in which she is studying how teens respond to participation in a photography project. You are being asked to consent to your participation in the project and indicate how you would like that to occur. (Note that since you are under the age of 18, both you AND your parent must consent in writing for you to be part of the workshop.) Alternately, you and your parent may give verbal consent, if that is more appropriate.

Deanna's research activities will include the following:

- taking pictures during the workshop of the teens at work
- interviewing the teens once the workshop is over and audio recording their comments about their experiences
- making private notes on her experiences as workshop facilitator
- taking pictures of the teens' photographic artwork, for documentation purposes
- organizing and hanging the exhibition
- organizing and arranging for the printing of the exhibition catalogue
- writing up her experiences in her thesis, which will be illustrated with photographs by Deanna and by the teen participants.
- talking or writing and publishing about her experiences at conferences or in articles for teachers, community artists, and others.

Deanna will store all her research materials under lock and key in her home office.

##### *About Deanna Del Vecchio*

Deanna is an experienced teacher and artist who has taught art to children and youth in places all around the world. Now, so that she can become a better teacher and improve her understanding of how children learn about photography, she is working on her

Master's in Art Education in the Department of Art Education at Concordia University in Montreal. You can reach Deanna directly at [deannadel@gmail.com](mailto:deannadel@gmail.com) or 647-865-2244.

*Consent Form:*

- I agree to participate in Deanna Del Vecchio's workshop and research study.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation without negative consequences up to the point of the printing of the exhibition catalogue and the hanging of the exhibition. I understand that I will be informed before that time occurs.
- I understand that the research (including photographs and text) will be made available in several forms:
  - in an exhibition open to the public
  - in a printed exhibition catalogue
  - in Deanna Del Vecchio's Master's thesis and other related scholarly projects (conference presentations or publications, for instance)
- I agree to be identified in the exhibition, catalogue, and thesis in the following way (please check one):  
  
under my own name  
**OR**  
under a pseudonym
- I understand that my parent must also sign consent to allow me to participate and indicate how he or she would like me to be identified. I understand that my parent's wishes will prevail except in one instance: if a parent allows for the child's name to be used but the child prefers to use a pseudonym, Deanna will use a pseudonym to refer to the child.

I HAVE READ THIS AGREEMENT CAREFULLY AND UNDERSTAND IT. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY IN THE MANNER INDICATED ABOVE.

NAME (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

If at any time you have questions about the proposed research, please contact the study's Principal Investigator: Kathleen Vaughan, phone (514) 848-2424, ext. 4677, email [Kathleen.Vaughan@concordia.ca](mailto:Kathleen.Vaughan@concordia.ca). She is supervising Deanna Del Vecchio's research. If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics and Compliance Advisor, Concordia University, Dr. Brigitte Des Rosiers, at (514) 848-2424 ext. 7481 or by email at [bdesrosi@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:bdesrosi@alcor.concordia.ca)

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!!

## Appendix B. Parent Consent Form

### **CONSENT FOR YOUR TEEN TO PARTICIPATE IN** PhotoLit: Self-Expression Through Digital Photography and Creative Writing

#### *Introduction*

Your teen is being invited to participate in a photography and creative writing workshop called "PhotoLit", being led by Deanna Del Vecchio for ArtStarts community arts organization and For Youth Initiative social services agency. This workshop is free and all the photographic artwork created by the teens remains their property.

#### *About the Workshop*

This 8-session digital photography course will enable teens to learn new skills with the camera and the computer, and provide them with the chance to take pictures and write about what their community means to them. The PhotoLit workshop will take place at the For Youth Initiative site at 1669 Eglinton Avenue West in Toronto. Sessions will take place on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for four weeks, starting on Tuesday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010. The teens' photographic artwork will lead to a community display open to the public and printed exhibition catalogue.

A teen or a parent may change their mind about participating and withdraw from the research project, exhibition, and catalogue with no penalty of any kind, at any time UP to the printing of the catalogue and the hanging of the exhibition.

#### *About the Research Project*

Because this teaching project is part of Deanna Del Vecchio's Master's degree in Art Education, in which she is studying how teens respond to participation in a photography project. You are being asked to consent to your child's participation in the project and indicate how you would like that to occur. (Note that since your child is under the age of 18, both you AND your child must consent in writing for your child to be part of the workshop.) Alternately, you and your teen may give verbal consent, if that is more appropriate.

Deanna's research activities will include the following:

- taking pictures during the workshop of the teens at work
- interviewing the teens once the workshop is over and audio recording their comments about their experiences
- making private notes on her experiences as workshop facilitator
- taking pictures of the teens' photographic artwork, for documentation purposes
- organizing and hanging the exhibition
- organizing and arranging for the printing of the exhibition catalogue
- writing up her experiences in her thesis, which will be illustrated with photographs by Deanna and by the teen participants.
- talking or writing and publishing about her experiences at conferences or in articles for teachers, community artists, and others.

Deanna will store all her research materials under lock and key in her home office.

#### *About Deanna Del Vecchio*

Deanna is an experienced teacher and artist who has taught art to children and youth in places all around the world. Now, so that she can become a better teacher and improve

her understanding of how children learn about photography, she is working on her Master's in Art Education in the Department of Art Education at Concordia University in Montreal. You can reach Deanna directly at [deannadel@gmail.com](mailto:deannadel@gmail.com) or 647-865-2244.

*Consent Form:*

- I agree to my child to participating in Deanna Del Vecchio's workshop and research study.
  
- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my child's participation without negative consequences up to the point of the printing of the exhibition catalogue and the hanging of the exhibition. I understand that I will be informed before that time occurs.
  
- I understand that the research (including photographs and text) will be made available in several forms:
  - in an exhibition open to the public
  - in a printed exhibition catalogue
  - in Deanna Del Vecchio's Master's thesis and other related scholarly projects (conference presentations or publications, for instance)
  
- I agree to my child being identified in the exhibition, catalogue, and thesis in the following way (please check one):  
  
under the child's own name  
**OR**  
under a pseudonym
  
- I understand that my child must also sign consent to participate and indicate how he or she would like to be identified. I understand that if my wishes will prevail except in one instance: if a parent allows for the child's name to be used but the child prefers to use a pseudonym, Deanna will use a pseudonym to refer to the child.

I HAVE READ THIS AGREEMENT CAREFULLY AND UNDERSTAND IT. I AGREE TO ALLOW MY CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY IN THE MANNER INDICATED ABOVE.

NAME (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

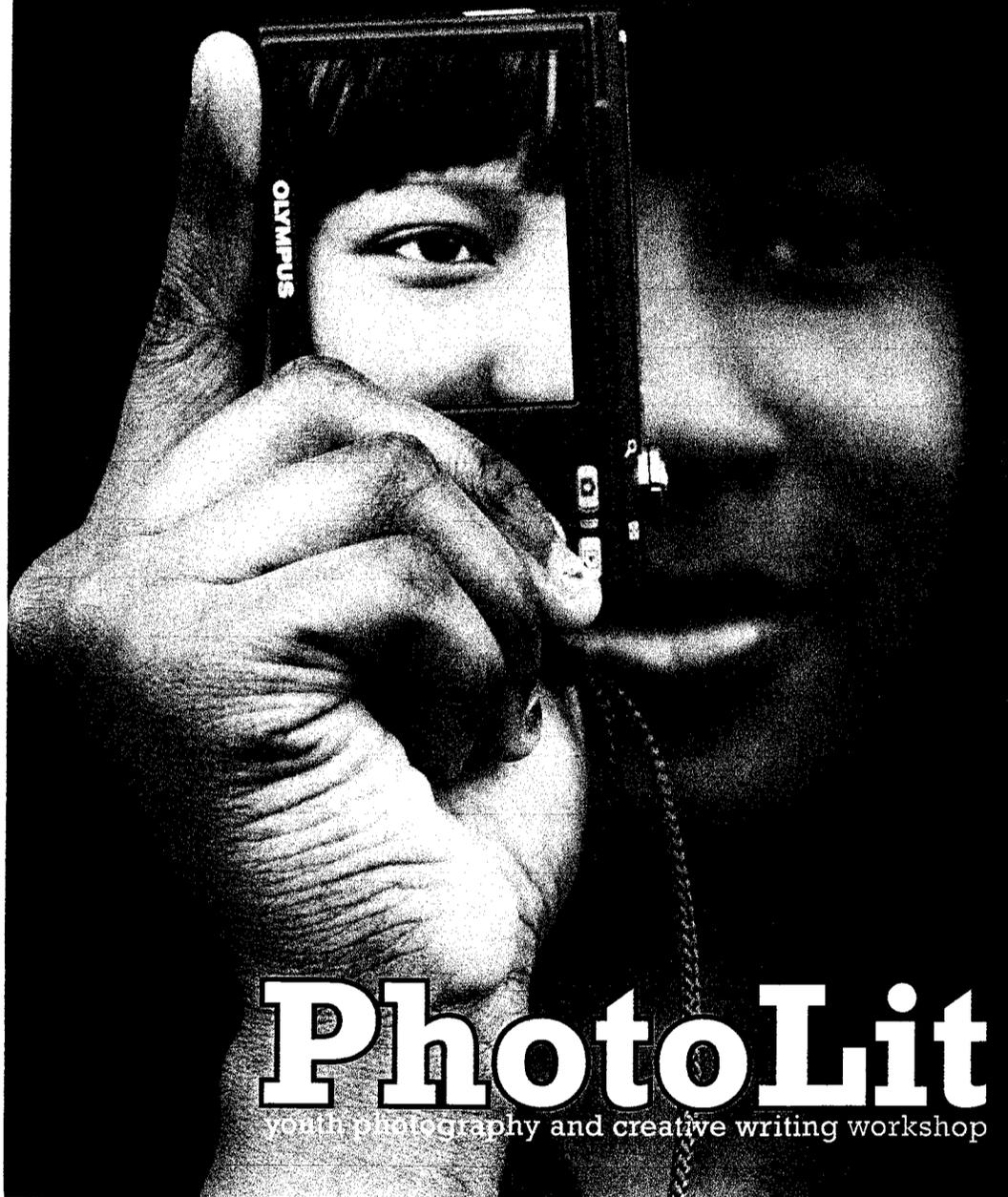
CHILD'S NAME (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

If at any time you have questions about the proposed research, please contact the study's Principal Investigator: Kathleen Vaughan, phone (514) 848-2424, ext. 4677, email [Kathleen.Vaughan@concordia.ca](mailto:Kathleen.Vaughan@concordia.ca). She is supervising Deanna Del Vecchio's research. If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics and Compliance Advisor, Concordia University, Dr. Brigitte Des Rosiers, at (514) 848-2424 ext. 7481 or by email at [bdesrosi@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:bdesrosi@alcor.concordia.ca)

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!!

Appendix C. PhotoLit Catalogue: Community Through Our Eyes

COMMUNITY THROUGH  
OUR EYES



**PhotoLit**

youth photography and creative writing workshop



Art Starts is committed to arts-based community development in the city of Toronto. Our mandate is to build healthier communities using the arts. At Art Starts we understand that the arts are a medium for engaging residents, creating a shared sense of identity, identifying challenges and collectively working to overcome them. Art Starts uses the arts as a vehicle to encourage social change in at-risk neighbourhoods.  
[www.artstarts.net](http://www.artstarts.net)



For Youth Initiative is an organization that is committed to creating healthy communities by increasing life chances of youth at-risk. We will do this through the provision of empowering programs and services that are youth-driven, inclusive and accessible. For Youth Initiative aims to create healthy communities where youth are fully engaged and equal participants in society.  
[www.foryouth.ca](http://www.foryouth.ca)



**Program Facilitator**  
Deanna Del Vecchio

**Coordinators**  
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**Printing**  
Perkins Mailing Services  
[www.perkinsmailing.com](http://www.perkinsmailing.com)

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**PhotoLit** is a photography and creative writing workshop.

For four weeks, a group of ten high school students met twice a week after school, to learn how to communicate with the language of images.

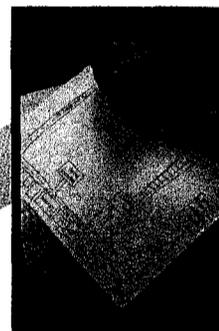
The workshop process involved learning practical photography skills, reading images, writing on a specific theme, and then planning and shooting photographs. Participants explored themes of self, family, and community. They took part in lively discussions, in which **culture** was an emergent topic – differences between the cultures they came from and the local culture in Toronto.

The exhibit **Community Through Our Eyes** stems from a community alphabet activity, in which participants chose a word and associated image for every letter of the alphabet. They narrowed down their selections, creating a final series of photographs that represents the way they see their community – issues that are important to them, and what stands out in their eyes.

**PhotoLit** was created by Deanna Del Vecchio, as the thesis project for her Master's degree in Art Education at Concordia University. Rooted in a community arts framework and aligned with her interest in art for social change, **PhotoLit** has the following goals:

- To explore photography as a mechanism for eliciting self-expression
- To encourage critical thinking
- To enhance visual literacy skills

For more information:  
[www.photolit.wordpress.com](http://www.photolit.wordpress.com)  
[deannadel@gmail.com](mailto:deannadel@gmail.com)



PHOTOGRAPHERS



Judith  
Born and raised in Ghana.



Lily  
Born to be free.



Eric  
A man with a vision. Likes the company of many people and watching cartoons.



Lovely  
Quiet and profound.



OLYA  
Head in the sky, body on the earth.



Nicole  
Queen of self-portraits.



Mabinty  
Born in Sierra Leone. Likes sports, shopping, and traveling.

JENN3

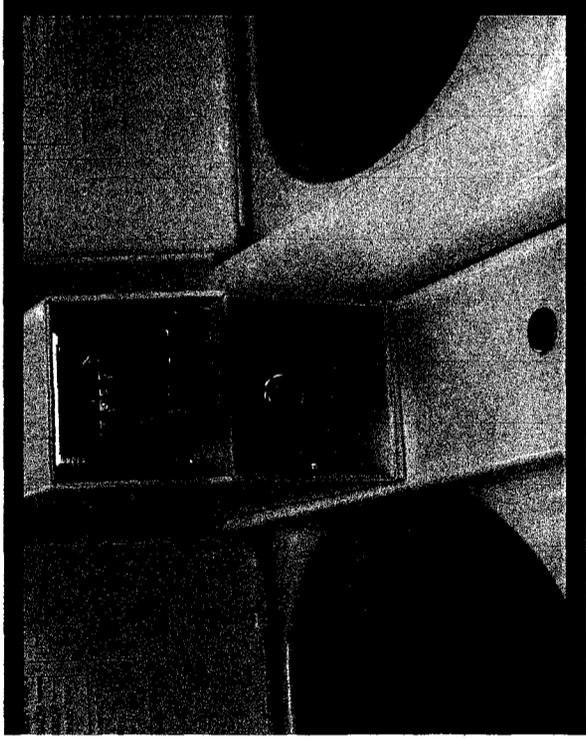
Likes writing stories, listening to music, and hanging out with friends.



Dariya  
Butterflying, willing to breathe in the world.



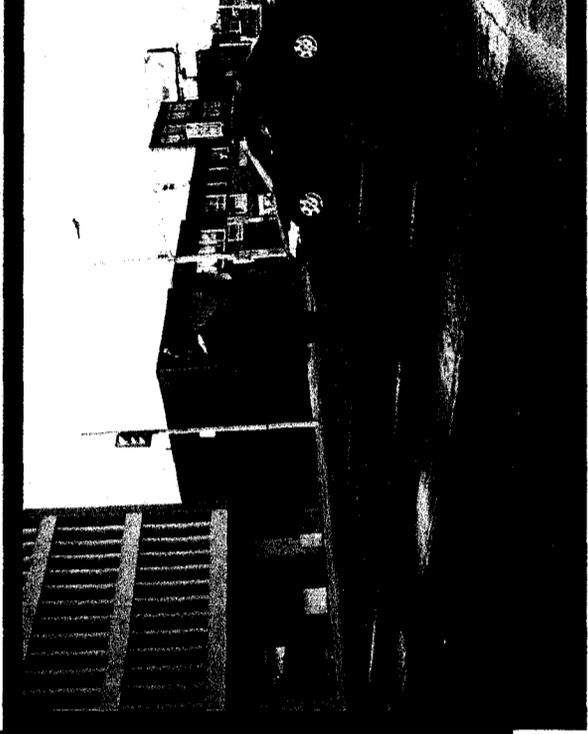
LORRETTA  
Likes taking pictures, shopping, and dancing. Loves to explore the beauty of the world.



## LAUNDRY

LAUNDRY IS DIFFERENT IN CANADA THAN BACK HOME IN SIERRA LEONE. THE LAUNDRY MACHINE IS EASIER, YOU PUT IN THE SOAP, YOU PUT IN YOUR CLOTHES, AND YOU WATCH TV. BACK HOME YOU HAVE TO WASH WITH YOUR HANDS AND IT'S HARD. YOU HAVE TO HAVE BIG TOOLS TO SCRUB YOUR CLOTHES ON TO GET THEM CLEAN. WE ALSO HAVE A WASHBOARD THAT YOU PUT ON YOUR LAP, AND IT'S HARD WORK. I WASHED MY OWN CLOTHES BECAUSE I DON'T LIKE PEOPLE DOING IT FOR ME, I WANT TO DO IT FOR MYSELF SO I WILL LEARN.

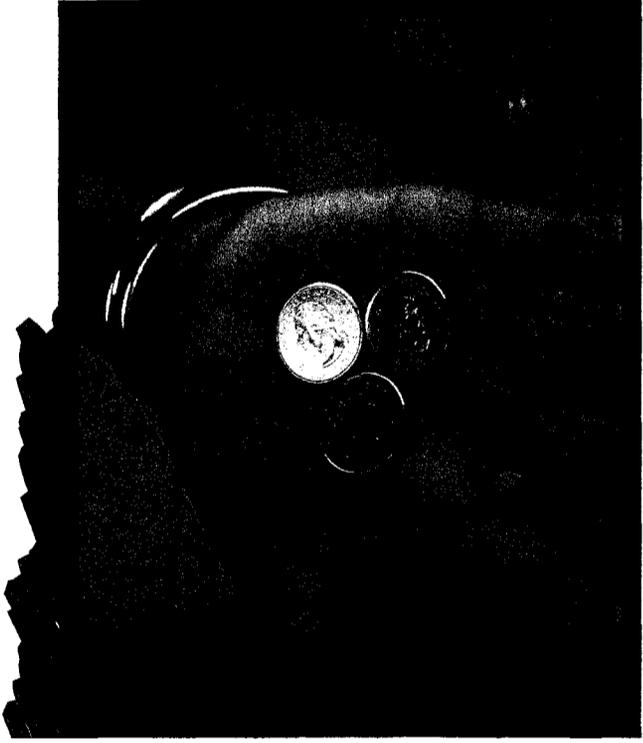
6



## SAFETY

EVERYDAY PEOPLE COULD GET KILLED BECAUSE OF THE SAFETY AT DUFFERIN AND EGLINTON. PEOPLE ARE IGNORING THE TRAFFIC LIGHTS, LIKE CROSSING WHEN THE HAND IS BLINKING. ANOTHER EXAMPLE WOULD BE, TRY WALKING ON A BUSY STREET, EVEN THOUGH IT IS THE FASTEST WAY TO GET TO THE OTHER SIDE. AND BECAUSE OF OUR CARELESSNESS, WE AVOID THE IMPORTANT THINGS THAT MAKE US SAFE.

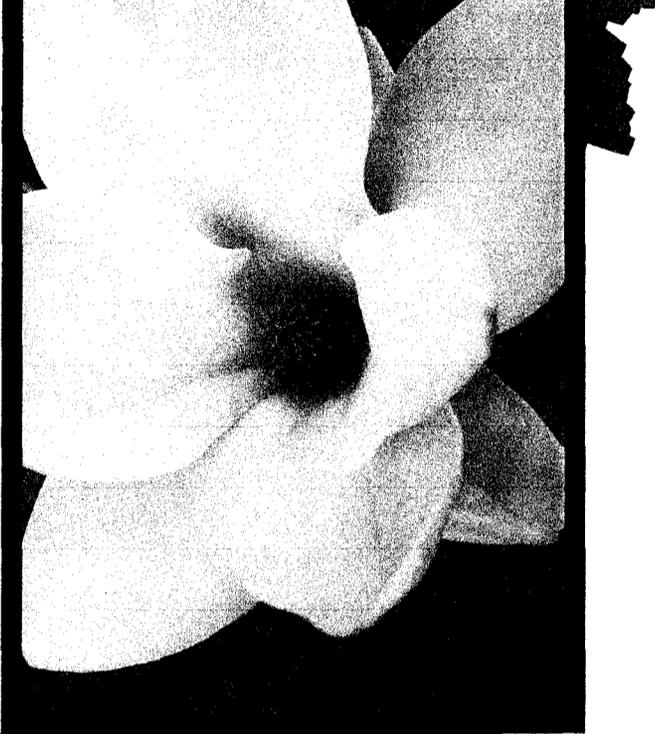
7



## MONEY

MONEY IS THE BEST THING TO HAVE. IF YOU DON'T HAVE IT, YOU WILL BE POOR. WITHOUT MONEY, YOU DON'T HAVE ANYWHERE TO LIVE, YOU NEED FOOD AND SHELTER. SOME PEOPLE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH MONEY, THEY ARE TRYING TO GET ENOUGH TO FEED THEIR FAMILIES. PEOPLE ARE GOING TO THREE JOBS IN ONE DAY. RIGHT NOW, AT MY AGE, I SPEND MY MONEY ON CLOTHES AND SHOES AND HAIR. ALSO, A PHONE AND PHONE CARDS TO CALL BACK HOME TO YOUR COUNTRY.

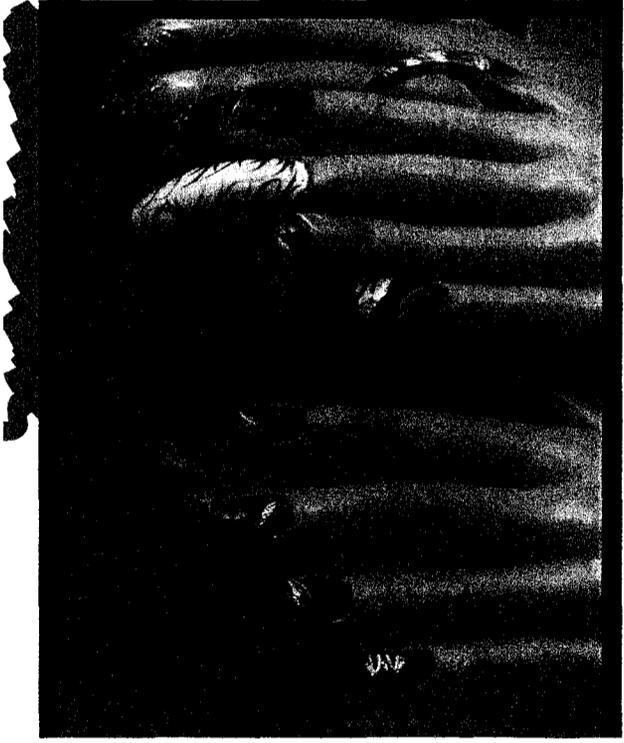
8



## FLOWERS

FLOWERS ARE COLOURS IN OUR COMMUNITY. WITHOUT COLOURS OUR LIVES ARE BORING. SO LET'S ADD SOME COLOURS TO OUR LIFE!

9



## NAILS

PATTERNS. COLOUR. GLITTER. SHORT. LONG. STRAIGHT. CURVY. DESIGNS.

DUFFERIN AND EGLINTON MAY IN FACT BE THE BEAUTY CAPITAL OF OUR CITY. OUR COMMUNITY HOMES A HUGE VARIETY OF BEAUTY SUPPLY STORES, SALONS AND BARBERSHOPS. THE COLOURS AND LIFE THAT SURROUND THESE LOCATIONS ARE AT LEAST PARTIALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR COMMUNITY'S CHARM AND UNIQUENESS. THE PRIDE IN SPORTING THESE ECCENTRIC STYLES ALSO DISTINGUISHES THIS NEIGHBOURHOOD FROM MANY OTHERS.

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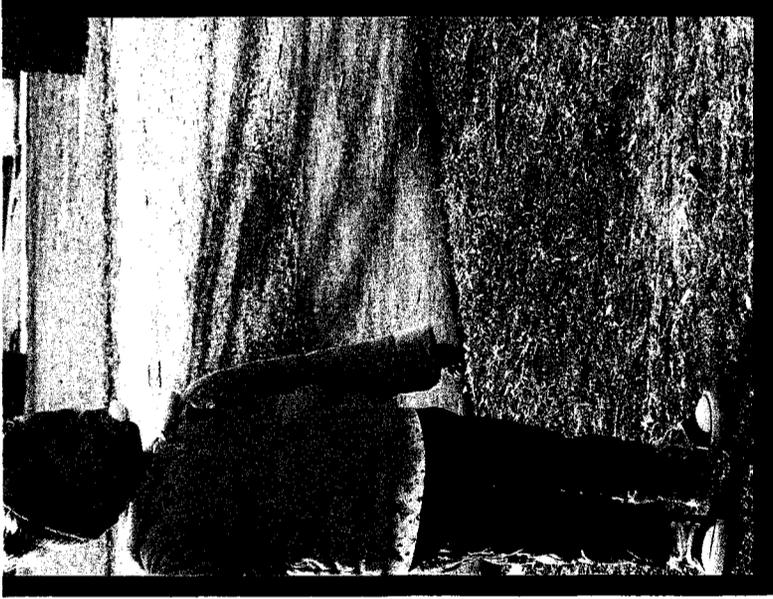


## VIOLENCE

VIOLENCE, A WORD THAT MAKES US THINK OF GUNS, POLICE, HORRIBLES, AND PEOPLE GETTING HURT. THIS NEGATIVE SHOWS THAT ALONG THE STREETS OF EGLINTON, THERE IS VIOLENCE. OUR WORLD IS A DANGEROUS PLACE, WHEN IT IS NOT AS SAFE AS IT USED TO BE IN THE OLDER DAYS, WHEN PEOPLE COULD

GO OUT FOR A LONG PERIOD OF TIME WITHOUT HAVING TO WORRY ABOUT VIOLENCE. LET'S SAY THAT YOU GUESS UP IN A VIOLANT PLACE, AND ONCE YOU KNOW OTHER YOU TAKE IT OUT ON SOMEONE ELSE, IT'S LIKE TAKING OUT ALL YOUR ANGER ON SOMEONE ELSE, RATHER THAN EXPRESSING IT IN A DIFFERENT WAY WITHOUT USING VIOLENCE.

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## CHILDREN

CHILDREN ARE MOST FLOWERS IN OUR LIFE.  
THEY BRING SENSE, SMILES AND LOVE TO OUR  
FAMILIES. CHILDREN ARE OUR FUTURE.

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## WASTE

TORONTO, ONTARIO. EVERYWHERE YOU GO, IT SEEMS LIKE  
GARBAGE IS EVERYWHERE. EVERYDAY THE STREETS OF TORONTO  
ARE FILLED UP WITH GARBAGE. BIRDS ARE DYING BECAUSE OF  
OUR GARBAGE, BECAUSE WE ARE TOO LAZY TO PUT IT IN A  
GARBAGE BIN. IF YOU PUT THIS TO A BIRD'S EYE VIEW, YOU  
WILL SEE THAT YOU WOULDN'T WANT TO BE IN THAT AREA, YOU  
WILL SEE HOW WE HUMANS LIVE OUR DAILY LIVES WITHOUT EVEN  
NOTICING THE LITTLE THINGS THAT CAN HARM ANIMALS.

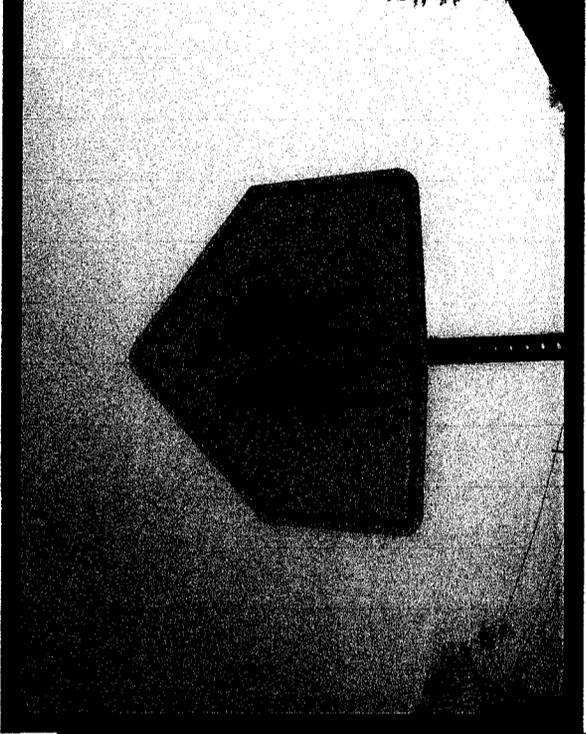
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## UNITY

WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT PEOPLE; WE HAVE DIFFERENT TYPES OF CULTURE, DIFFERENT TYPES OF SKIN COLOUR, DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES, ETC. UNITY IS WHAT UNITES US TO BE ONE, TO BE FRIENDS WITH OTHER PEOPLE; IT MAKES OUR WORLD A BETTER PLACE. WHEN THERE IS UNITY THERE IS PEACE, AND WHERE THERE IS PEACE THERE IS ONENESS AND WHOLENESS. THIS PICTURE SHOWS HOW DIFFERENT PEOPLE WHO HAVE DIFFERENT TYPES OF SKIN COLOUR CAN UNITE AS ONE.

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## EDUCATION

EDUCATION IN CANADA IS DIFFERENT THAN IN OTHER COUNTRIES. IN OTHER COUNTRIES, EDUCATION IS MORE SERIOUS AND SCHOOL IS YOUR WORLD. HERE IN CANADA, STUDENTS ARE MORE FREE. BY ENTERING SCHOOL YOU MAKE AN IMPORTANT DECISION FOR YOUR LIFE, AND YOU CHANGE. EDUCATION OPENS DOORS TO YOUR FUTURE.

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# PhotoLit

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