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Engaging through Images. A Photovoice-Based Approach to Embodied Intercultural Agency and Critical Digital Participation[1]

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Abstract: The contemporary lower secondary school ecosystem is characterized by hypercomplexity, globalization, and technological hybridization, requiring pedagogical approaches that recognize identity as plural, dynamic, and situated. Grounded in Embodied Education, which conceives knowledge as emerging from interactions between body, relationships, and environment, this contribution explores images as embodied pedagogical devices fostering narrative expression and intercultural agency, while addressing the challenges of platformization, datafication, and algorithmic homogenization. The contribution presents the design of participatory action research involving preadolescents aged 13–14, adopting the Photovoice methodology. The proposed pathway comprises three phases: critical media literacy; individual and collaborative photographic production addressing identity, cultural belonging, and relationships; and collective reflection through the SHOWeD protocol, fostering intersubjective negotiation of meaning. The research aims to investigate whether embodied photographic experiences can strengthen critical awareness of digital environments, media literacy, recognition of cultural differences, situated intercultural agency, and creativity of the gaze. By integrating embodied, intercultural, and critical-digital dimensions, the proposed approach seeks to promote critical digital participation and reposition preadolescents from passive recipients of standardized visual models to conscious authors of their own visual narratives, fostering authentic dialogue and culturally plural forms of expression.

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1. Images as Embodied Pedagogical Devices

The contemporary educational ecosystem is shaped by globalization, technological hybridization, and cultural complexity. Cultures can no longer be understood as bounded and homogeneous entities, but as dynamic formations characterized by transnational exchanges and varying degrees of creolization

[1] This contribution is the result of a shared reflection among the three authors. For the purposes of individual attribution, Sections 1 and 2 were written by Farnaz Farahi, Section 3 by Matteo Adamoli, and Sections 4 and 5 by Michele Marangi.

(Hannerz, 1997, pp. 8, 12, 18, 28). These transformations have redefined the ways in which people learn and educators teach, and educational research is confronted with contexts whose complexity cannot be approached through a single key, and in which the technological dimension merges into the rest of experience (Zoletto & Pasta, 2026, pp. 35–36). Intercultural research has read this condition through complexity, intersectionality, and superdiversity, holding that processes of diversification, marginalization, and emancipation take shape within a postdigital ecosystem and are mediated by digital technologies (Zoletto & Pasta, 2026, p. 34). As Pasta and Zoletto put it, "both the media, which are indistinguishable from the rest of life and society, and plural socio-cultural affiliations are part of the (postdigital and intercultural) social fabric in which we live" (2023, p. 20). Cultural belonging is dynamically reshaped by encounters with diversity, educational practices, intergenerational change, and social representations (Pasta & Zoletto, 2025, p. 34). This renegotiation of belonging invests the subject with a responsibility that can be an opportunity for openness and, at the same time, a source of destabilization (Farahi, 2021, p. 27). Work in early childhood settings shows meaning being co-constructed in the dialogue around the images, and calls for adults to recognize images, words, and gestures as validated forms of producing knowledge, without reducing them to verbalization alone (Guerra & Luini, 2026, pp. 223–224). In our view this scenario calls for educational practices capable of working with such complexity.

Embodied Education, the epistemological foundation of this contribution, conceives learning as a process involving brain, body, and environment, in which the body acts as a biological and cultural mediator of knowledge (Gomez Paloma et al., 2016, pp. 76, 79). Knowledge emerges through sensory, cognitive, emotional, and relational experiences, rather than through information acquisition alone. Central to it is the narrative dimension of learning, through which lived experience is interpreted from one's own embodied perspective and, at the same time, in dialogue with the viewpoints of others participating in the same educational context. Bruner has shown that we organize experience and the memory of human events mainly in narrative form, and that different versions of an event are negotiated among those who hold them (Bruner, 1991, pp. 4, 17). Conceiving learning as an embodied and narrative process reconfigures identities within an intercultural perspective, fostering the recognition of diversity as an intrinsic dimension of human existence.

Within this framework, images may be understood as embodied pedagogical devices, since they carry the narrative and intercultural features outlined above. Photographic documentation gives access to dimensions of experience that verbal language alone struggles to reach, bringing out content that is less cognitively filtered, while images and words integrate reciprocally in the construction of meaning; Guerra and Luini report this for children aged 3 to 6, whose verbal competence is still developing, drawing in turn on Collier and on Luttrell (as cited in Guerra & Luini, 2026, pp. 216, 223). Whether the symbolic nature of photography also helps learners cross linguistic and cultural barriers in plural classrooms is left open here. Ultimately, images can sustain authentic forms of engagement in which cognitive, emotional, and relational participation intertwine with the shared construction of experience and the development of intercultural agency; we have

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explored this use of images in photographic work with families in educational services (Farahi, 2022).

2. From Device to Pedagogical Design

Describing the image as an embodied device has a methodological consequence. Its educational value resides in the practices of production, selection, and shared interpretation that surround the photograph, and therefore in the pedagogical design that makes those practices possible. Rivoltella (2009, p. 128) distinguishes education-centered research, which moves from education toward the media, from media-centered research conducted from the outside, and locates the specificity of the first within teaching (Rivoltella, 2009, p. 133). The question of what a pedagogical design must account for becomes harder to answer once the images are taken, filtered, and circulated through platforms, so that data and algorithms operate behind the interfaces, outside what users can see (Panciroli & Rivoltella, 2024, p. 20), a condition those authors address by calling for literacies able to sustain critical thinking about data and algorithms (Panciroli & Rivoltella, 2024, p. 39). What is pedagogically at stake, in Dewey's terms, is the quality of the experience that a setting offers and its continuity with what will follow (Dewey, 1938/1963, pp. 33–50), and an image produced within a designed pathway is an experience of this kind, since it requires the learner to take a position.

2.1 Participation as a Pedagogical Question

Agostinetto and colleagues describe participation as *fine e mezzo*, both the end and the means, of intercultural education, and as not being the same as being in the same place and doing things together, since it concerns a quality and a directionality of relational action guided by the teacher (Agostinetto et al., 2021, p. 77). What makes participation possible in visual methods has been studied directly in early childhood education. In two parallel studies with children aged 3 to 6 in Spain and in Italy, participation depended on the ethical conditions established by the adults and on the adaptation of the method to the school context, while limited teacher involvement and organizational constraints reduced the horizontality of the process (Álvarez Díaz et al., 2026). Similarly, the Mosaic approach recognizes children as competent interpreters of their experiences through observation, child-led activities, and photography (Clark & Statham, 2005). Photovoice, a participatory action-research tool conceived to give voice to communities through photography (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369), becomes an educational device when the setting around it is designed to take up what the participants produce.

In a Photovoice study involving 36 students aged 11–12, Straub et al. (2025, p. 8) report improvements in cultural literacy through dialogue around images, while acknowledging the limited transferability of findings from a gifted cohort in an affluent school district. Our working hypothesis is that participation depends on the conditions the pedagogical design establishes, and that age bears on which conditions are required. In the case of maranza music, Zoletto and Pasta observe that platform visibility amplifies recognition and targeting at once (2026, p. 50). Exposing one's own image to peers, and consent over what is photographed and shown, raise the same ambivalence inside the classroom.

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The fragility of such pathways lies in their conditions of implementation, which Luini describes for the 3 to 6 age range as material, relational, temporal, and organizational (as cited in Guerra & Luini, 2026, p. 227), and which we assume to matter in lower secondary school as well. Among them is the stance the adults take. Participation is not the same as involving participants in a structured method, and requires contexts and postures that let them exercise choices throughout the process (Guerra & Luini, 2026, p. 227).

2.2 Towards Intercultural Agency

In a pathway designed in this way the intercultural dimension emerges from the process itself, since what becomes negotiable is the point of view from which each learner has framed and shown something, and not the cultural content a lesson might have chosen to treat. Agency, in an ecological understanding, is achieved in the interaction with a context, so that one may have it in one situation and not in another (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, pp. 136–137). Intercultural pedagogy marked its own shift when it began to consider the foreign pupil in terms of a resource and to acknowledge the enrichment and personal growth that can arise from the presence of culturally and ethnically different subjects, in place of approaches that framed migration primarily as a deficit to be compensated (Portera, 2017, p. 302). We use the term intercultural agency as a working definition for the form that achievement takes where those contexts are plural, that is, where the negotiation of roles and meanings crosses more than one frame of reference at once. Catarci and Fiorucci give this form its educational sense, since in their account differences "become points of view enhanced by educational processes" (Catarci & Fiorucci, 2023, p. 79) and education "assumes a value of empowerment", reinforcing the subject's "capacity for choice and self-determination" (Catarci & Fiorucci, 2023, p. 86). Intercultural competences involve the relational, communicative, and collaborative abilities needed to interact effectively and appropriately across linguistic and cultural differences (Fantini, as cited in Portera et al., 2015, p. 94). Photovoice makes visible the power relations at work in educational settings and lays the ground for a partial renegotiation of relational asymmetries, as Dell observes (as cited in Guerra & Luini, 2026, p. 226), although adult positions continue to exert an implicit influence. Those asymmetries are the ones between adults and children in an early childhood setting; whether an analogous redistribution operates across cultural and linguistic frames of reference is part of what the present framework proposes to test.

The following sections extend this framework through an analysis of the contemporary visual ecosystem and the design of a Photovoice pathway. The working hypothesis is that images produced and discussed within intentionally designed educational settings can make learners' perspectives visible, recognizable, and open to intercultural negotiation.

3. Images between datafication and participation in the youth context

In platform contexts, the image is not merely a symbolic and narrative object, but also a piece of data. van Dijck (2014) defined datafication as the transformation of previously unmeasured aspects of social life into quantified data, noting how this process is accompanied by widespread trust in the objectivity of data analysis. A shared photograph generates a multiplicity of traces: photo metadata, geolocation,

hashtags, reactions, viewing duration, and automatically recognized content. Couldry and Mejias (2019) interpret this extraction as a form of appropriation of everyday life, whereas Zuboff (2019) emphasizes its integration into surveillance capitalism. Cheney-Lippold (2017) further adds that data produces algorithmic identities—categories of belonging assigned by the system rather than chosen by the individual.

Crawford (2021) also demonstrates how images serve as the raw material for computer vision systems, often collected without consent and categorized using labels that embed social and cultural biases. For an early adolescent, this means that every shared image unobtrusively contributes to an apparatus that defines their visibility and, prospectively, feeds into the construction of personal profiles.

The first critical consequence of this framework concerns the quality of participation. Participatory culture has often been celebrated for the opportunities it provides young people (Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2009), but these same studies highlight the need to distinguish between mere access, interaction, and the capacity to influence contextual rules. Livingstone and Third (2017) argue that children's rights in the digital environment are not exhausted by protection or by participation understood as mere presence but instead require forms of effective agency. In a post-digital ecosystem where visual models gaining visibility are already validated by the system, individuals tend to be confined to consumption, replication, and the performance of familiar content and languages. This risks narrowing the critical and reflective distance that narrative experience requires participation becomes intense on a quantitative level, yet poorly generative in terms of meaning.

This tendency toward passivity is not an intrinsic trait of younger generations, but a potential effect of platform design. Pangrazio and Selwyn (2019) observe that understanding and protecting one's personal data requires deep, specific skills that are difficult to develop in an environment designed to make data opaque. Hintz et al. (2018) speak in terms of digital citizenship in a datafied society, wherein rights and the agency to act depend on the capacity to understand and challenge the logic of data.

The second critical consequence is the risk of homogenization. If visual language is understood—following Kress and van Leeuwen (2006)—as a set of socially constructed semiotic resources available for meaning-making, platformization reduces the variety that can effectively be practiced. Filters, templates, viral challenges, and aesthetic trends function as simplified grammars: they facilitate production and recognizability, but also establish what is easy, what is rewarded, and what remains marginal. Kress (2010) emphasized that meaning is constructed through design choices among available resources. When choices are pre-structured by the system, the scope for personal design shrinks.

In the logic of engagement, the most divergent, situated, and subjective forms are penalized—not through explicit censorship, but through a selection mechanism based on the measurability and predictability of response. This results in a self-reinforcing loop: rewarded images become models, models are replicated, and replication reinforces the model.

The diffusion of Generative Artificial Intelligence for image creation intensifies this process. Such systems, trained on dominant visual corpora, tend to reproduce the aesthetic conventions and stereotypes present in the source data (Adamoli & Marangi, 2026). Bianchi et al. (2023) have shown that text-to-image models can systematically amplify demographic stereotypes, echoing the risks of language

models trained on massive, poorly documented datasets that tend to incorporate the perspective of the most represented groups. Noble (2018) has demonstrated, with reference to algorithmic systems in general, how social inequalities are reproduced and naturalized by technology.

The risk, for younger individuals, is that a tool perceived as an expansion of creative possibilities ultimately narrows the symbolic repertoire: if it is sufficient to describe an image to obtain it, the work of observation, selection of perspective, and engagement with what is being depicted may become superfluous. What emerges is an impoverishment of the creativity of the gaze, understood as the ability to construct a situated, embodied, and culturally plural point of view on the world through images.

Based on these premises, the decision to focus the analysis on early adolescents is not accidental. According to the tradition of identity studies, adolescence is the phase in which the construction of the self intersects with the search for social recognition (Erikson, 1968). Boyd (2014) has shown how social network sites constitute "networked publics" for young people—spaces in which to experiment with identity under the gaze of peers, with a persistence, replicability, and searchability of content that live interactions often lack.

In this age group, approaching the end of lower secondary education, visual self-representation practices are daily and face very strong aesthetic and relational expectations. The early adolescent is therefore simultaneously the subject most exposed to the effects of platformization and the one for whom the construction of a plural, dynamic, and situated identity is most critical. Lower secondary school, as a meeting place for diverse languages, cultures, and affiliations, offers a particularly significant context in this sense: the way students produce and interpret images directly impacts the processes of mutual recognition inherent to intercultural coexistence (Adamoli & Miatto, 2022). The educational question, therefore, cannot be resolved simply by limiting device usage. Rather, it involves understanding which conditions allow for the reactivation, within a structured context, of those narrative, embodied, and dialogic dimensions of the image that platform logic tends to compress (Adamoli, 2021).

In the Italian context, this issue lies at the intersection of multiple traditions and regulatory frameworks. First, there is a consolidated pedagogical framework on media education, which national reflection increasingly interprets as the construction of alphabets suited to a post-media culture (Rivoltella, 2020). At the European level, the DigComp 2.2 framework and subsequent updates refresh citizens' digital competences, also taking into account data-driven and artificial intelligence-based systems (Vuorikari et al., 2022). These reference frameworks offer favorable ground and tend to frame competence primarily in terms of responsible use, safety, and information assessment. In principle, the critical analysis of visual languages as products of platform infrastructure appears less developed—an observation consistent with critiques of technocentric rhetorics. This interpretation requires empirical verification through policy documents and school practices. If confirmed, it would highlight the exact space in which a research path like the one proposed here can be positioned, within increasingly multilingual and multicultural classrooms where intercultural education and visual education intersect in a particularly evident manner.

4. Photovoice and research: an intercultural perspective

Photovoice originated as *photo novella* in the work of Wang and Burris (1994) with rural women in China's Yunnan province, and took shape as a method by drawing on Freire's (1970/2000) conscientization, documentary photography, and feminist theory (Wang & Burris, 1997). Two features follow that distinguish it from simple photographic production: the image functions as a device for critical dialogue rather than as data to be collected, and the group discusses its meanings through the sequence of questions known as SHOWeD, which moves from description to critical reading and action (Wang, 1999). From health promotion (Catalani & Minkler, 2010) the method has passed into educational research (Latz, 2017), while more recent literature points to its limits: empowerment and social change are not automatic outcomes, but depend on how the power of adults, the conditions of participation, and the use of the results are managed (Liebenberg, 2018; for a critical methodological guide, see Sutton-Brown, 2014). In the move from community to classroom, the unit of work remains the group: it is in discussion that the photograph becomes shared knowledge rather than merely individual expression.

In Italy, photovoice has been developed mainly within community psychology, as an instrument of empowerment and local change (Mastrilli et al., 2013; Santinello et al., 2022), and has been applied with adolescents in community settings (Caso, 2012), alongside reflections on participatory social communication with adolescents (Marangi, 2021). An explicitly intercultural use is documented by Rania et al. (2014), who employ it to foster critical dialogue on integration, while in educational contexts the most elaborate development concerns early childhood (Luini, 2025). To our knowledge, classroom pathways with preadolescents that have an explicit media and intercultural framework remain less documented; it is in this space that the proposal is situated.

From this perspective, the intercultural dimension of the method does not coincide with the integration of students of foreign origin. Understood in a cultural studies sense, interculturality concerns the way meanings and belongings are produced, contested, and negotiated in the representational practices of all subjects, including those whom no school statistic would classify as "different," and it distances itself from readings that fix individuals within their cultural labels (Dervin, 2016). If meaning is not inscribed in the image but constructed through processes of representation and interpretation (Hall, 1997), photovoice makes that construction observable, since every shot involves a choice about what to show, from which position, and for whom. Where platforms assign categories of belonging from the outside, the method makes it possible to exercise what Mirzoeff (2011) calls the right to look, that is, the claim to a subjectivity that is not reduced to an object of others' gaze. Discussion then opens that space of enunciation in which, in Bhabha's (1994) reading, differences are not juxtaposed but translated into one another, producing meanings that no starting position contained. Attention thus shifts from the students' origin to the conditions under which each can make their own point of view visible as situated, and therefore partial, alongside those of their peers.

On this basis, the proposal envisages a participatory action-research pathway with students aged 13–14 in the third-year classes of lower secondary school, an age at which identity work intertwines with online visual self-representation. The pathway comprises three phases, the last two of which cut across the sites of visual meaning distinguished by Rose (2016): production, the image itself, and its

reception. In the preliminary phase, students are introduced to the principles of photovoice and to a critical media literacy framework addressing platform, algorithmic, and datafication mechanisms. In the second, they produce photographs, individually and in small groups, in response to a shared thematic prompt on identity, cultural belonging, school and extracurricular spaces, and the relationship with the other, adopting a deliberately situated gaze. In the third, the images are collectively discussed following the SHOWeD protocol adapted to the school context. The research expectations, consistent with the hypothesis of 2.2, concern critical awareness of datafied and homogenizing logics, the recognition and negotiation of cultural differences within the class group, and the emergence of forms of creativity of the gaze that are alternative to dominant models, in keeping with a conception of digital competence that holds together creativity and participation (Marangi, 2023). Rules on consent, the recognizability of classmates, and the circulation of images will have to be defined with the school and families, because protecting the image is part of the critical pathway and not a preliminary formality.

5. Conclusions and directions for further research

This contribution has argued that the image can be understood as an embodied pedagogical device, but that its educational value depends on the design of the practices of production, selection, and shared interpretation that surround it. It has also proposed reading intercultural agency as what is achieved in interaction with plural contexts, and considering datafication and platforms as conditions that make this work both more necessary and more difficult. Within this framework, photovoice, understood in a broad intercultural sense, is a possibility to be tested in the field rather than a given solution, and it remains open whether it holds up in real classrooms, with the constraints of time, organization, and consent that characterize them.

Three directions for further research follow. The first concerns the empirical testing of the hypothesis and the construction of indicators of intercultural agency: multiple case studies in third-year classes of differing composition, combining the analysis of images and captions along Rose's (2016) three sites, observation of the SHOWeD discussions, and a follow-up, in order to understand whether the partial renegotiation of relational asymmetries reported between adults and children (Guerra & Luini, 2026) also occurs across different cultural and linguistic frames of reference.

The second direction compares photography with images generated by artificial intelligence. A pathway asking students to produce, from the same prompt, both photographs and prompt-generated images, and to discuss their differences, would make it possible to test whether the homogenization of visual models (Bianchi et al., 2023) affects the creativity of the gaze, and to turn the critique of platforms into a practice of analysis.

The third concerns continuity across ages and the education of adults. Evidence from early childhood (Álvarez Díaz et al., 2026) and from secondary school could be brought together in comparative studies, including across national contexts, to identify which conditions of participation are transferable and which depend on age, also in light of how children grow up and learn in algorithmic environments (Marangi, 2026). Since the quality of the process depends on the stance of those

who conduct it (Guerra & Luini, 2026), the next step is to work with teachers and educators on training pathways in which they themselves experience the method, starting from the ethical questions of consent and the protection of the image.

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