

Photo Story: A Narrative Method to Teach the Beauty of Imperfection and Develop Children's Aesthetics through Contemporary Culture Materialism - The Concept of Kintsugi as an Art Therapy Practice

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ABSTRACT : *This study examines the approach of the Photo Story method as a narrative and visual tool to support children's aesthetic and emotional development through engagement with material culture. The research implemented via the method of Action Research among children aged 7–12, and the separate projects explored how storytelling through photography enabled the participants to express personal experiences and form meaningful connections with objects. Findings indicated that children's relationships with objects are primarily emotional and symbolic rather than materialistic. Objects functioned as carriers of memory, identity, and interpersonal connection rather than mere possessions. Inspired by the concept of Kintsugi, the study further shows how children engage with and accept imperfection, fostering empathy, resilience, and self-awareness. Overall, multimodal storytelling practices are shown to enhance reflection, communication, and a deeper appreciation of the beauty of imperfection in educational contexts.*

KEYWORDS: *Photo Story method, Material culture, Narrative learning, Childhood aesthetics, Imperfection (Kintsugi)*

I. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary educational contexts, where achievements and ideals of perfection often dominate, there is an increasing need to create pedagogical spaces that value emotional expression and personal interpretation. This study encourages narrative inquiry, visual methodologies, and material culture. It will prove that children's relationships with the material world are not merely functional or decorative; they are deeply embedded with memory, identity, and emotional significance. At the same time, the study explores how storytelling through photography can support children's aesthetic and emotional development. Specifically, it examines the use of the Photo Story method as a multimodal tool that enable children to express personal experiences, reflect on meaningful objects, and engage in processes of self-narration. Both approaches of image-making and storytelling, create opportunities for children to articulate experiences that may be difficult to convey through verbal language.

Based on Action Research framework, the study was conducted with children aged 7-12 and unfolded through participatory, reflective practices centered on everyday objects. The research also draws on philosophical approaches to imperfection, particularly the concept of Kintsugi, which redefines damage and repair, as integral to an object's history. This perspective provides a conceptual lens through which children's engagement with worn, damaged, or "imperfect" objects can be understood as a meaningful and transformative process.

By focusing on children's narratives around both cherished and damaged objects, this research seeks to highlight how aesthetic awareness, empathy, and resilience can be cultivated through creative and reflective practices. Ultimately, integrating narrative and art-based methodologies into classroom practice, not only enriches learning but also supports children, in developing a deeper appreciation of imperfection as an essential aspect of human experience.

II. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Narrative: a methodological tool for exploring and constructing stories in Action Research

Narrative is the creation of meaning through personal experience and the process of reflective thinking (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Human experience could be explored, via the construction or reconstruction of individual's stories. Meaning that, narration is not merely a description of events but also includes the justifications and motivations of the subjects; it constitutes a form of interpretation of action (Tsafos, 2014, pp. 402-405). Furthermore, when participants in Action Research narrate, they give meaning to their experience within an interpretive framework that they gradually develop, through the values and theories they embrace. By

reading or listening to a narrative, an individual is introduced to another person's way of thinking and also the way things are perceived (Katsarou, 2016, pp. 249-295). Participants in Action Research have numerous opportunities to narrate; in fact, the entire process consists of a series of cross-modal narratives (oral or written) recorded in diaries or in inter-views (Katsarou, 2016, pp. 249-295). It is observed that there is a growing interest in the use of story creation, through the exploration of the participants' experiences (Burchell & Dyxon, 2000).

We also encounter other creative and imaginative narratives, such as stories that make bold use of stylistic devices like metaphor or allegory; after all, every narrative is built on metaphors and images (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors give meaning to the stories told by the participants. Linguistic patterns in narratives play an important role in revealing the underlying patterns that determine the way in which the teacher-researcher perceives the context of a problematic situation and, therefore, facilitate the understanding of the experience (Katsarou, 2016, pp. 297-8). Thus, researchers, can help participants to move from the familiar and known to the unfamiliar and unknown (Pourkos, 2011). It is important for educators to help children to identify connections in random or insignificant events of their everyday experience (Loliopoulos, 2004, p. 559). Research on memory, suggests that the best way to explore relations between events, is through storytelling (Loliopoulos, 2004, p. 559). Through autobiographical storytelling, children learn to remember in a personal and narrative way. Krasanakis argues that self-narration helps us to become more familiar with ourselves. While, Gersie (1997) argues that our desire to narrate helps us grow and ultimately be-come who we are, our personalities.

How children access their memories

Jolley (2018, pp. 246-250) notes that there are certain generally accepted problems and issues in interviews related to children's memory, as well as their access to their own memories. For example, children's relatively incomplete memories compared to those of adults, the difficulty of recall, their vivid imagination, and even the threat they may feel from adults' leading questions. The main problem during an interview with children, is that their memory of events is poorer than that of most adults. A younger child's recall, compared to that of an older child, tends to be accurate but incomplete and fragile, as the time distance between the event and the recall increases (Baker-Ward et al., 1993). There are three stages of process involved in retaining information within memory:

- In the first stage, some of the information available is identified (encoding) through sensory perception
- In the second stage, some of the information that has already been perceived and transferred to memory is stored (storage)
- In the third stage, the stored information is accessed when retrieval is needed (retrieval)

Research has shown that the main cause of memory difficulties in younger children lies in the retrieval stage. This is demonstrated by research showing that when children are asked to talk about an event, each time they give new information (Fivush & Hammond, 1990). Studies have shown that changing the conditions during the retrieval process is a method that can be used to help children recall more accurate details (Jolley, 2018, p. 247). Furthermore, due to the language limitations, clinical professionals supplement their questions with non-verbal aids, such as pup-pets and toys. The use of physical props may prove beneficial for children when encoding an event, due their developed sensory perception (Bjorklund, 1987; Salmon, 2001). The researcher can help children recall information by asking relevant questions and providing nonverbal cues and aids.

The Photo Story method

The Photo Story method is a research methodology, guided by the reflections of experiencing, patterns of communication and media. It focuses on things that matter and brings groups of people together, around objects of common interest (Varvan-takis & Nolas, 2021). Drawing inspiration from sociological methods (Lury & Wake-field, 2012) as well as cultural theory (Campt, 2017) the Photo Story method emerged from experimental, multimodal ethnographic practice with children (Nolas & Varvan-takis, 2020/2021; Varvantakis et al., 2019). It mixes photography with storytelling while at the same time collects verbal, visual and sensory elements of expression (Varvantakis & Nolas, 2021). The method follows the path of: image selection, exploration, storytelling, reflection and discussion, analysis and interpretation. In the final stage of interpretation, the facilitator can lead a deeper analysis of the stories and explore common themes, patterns or differences among the narratives.

Overall, the Photo Story method is a powerful tool for storytelling, self-expression and gaining knowledge about individuals' perspectives and experiences. The objectives of this methodology are to provide spaces for reflection, exchange of experiences and perspectives on topics of common interest, as well as to encourage participants to consider how they can bring the issues that matter to them to the public's attention. While the method gradual unfolds, many opportunities for discussion and reflection emerge. At the same time,

artistic practices become the tool to connect the image with the language (Varvantakis & Nolas, 2021). Via photographic narrations, children can explore and make sense of their experiences through visual and narrative means (Bach, 2007). The Photo Story method allows children to visualize and share "those experiences that go beyond what can be expressed in words" (Varvan-takis & Nolas, 2021). Additionally, the media of photography, can help children to see and think in a deeper way, as well as to interpret the reflections of their feelings and explore different subjectivities or identities (Ketelle, 2010).

III. THE RESEARCH METHOD

This study was held through the interaction of a team of twenty-five children, among the ages of seven to twelve years old, via Action Research. It consists of two separate projects. The first one demonstrates the importance of material culture to children and the second, which arose as a result of the first, argues the deeper feelings of children across their interaction with objects. The Photo Story method helped both, the educator-researcher and the participants, to unfold personal stories and share them within the team.

1st project: The important objects

Synopsis: Children took photos of objects they considered important and then commented on the photos, sharing their personal stories with the team (Table 1).

Project's objectives are for children to:

- Discover their meaningful and deeper connection to material culture.
- Get to know aspects of their classmates' lives.
- Listen with empathy and understanding to each other's personal needs and personalities through the telling of their stories.

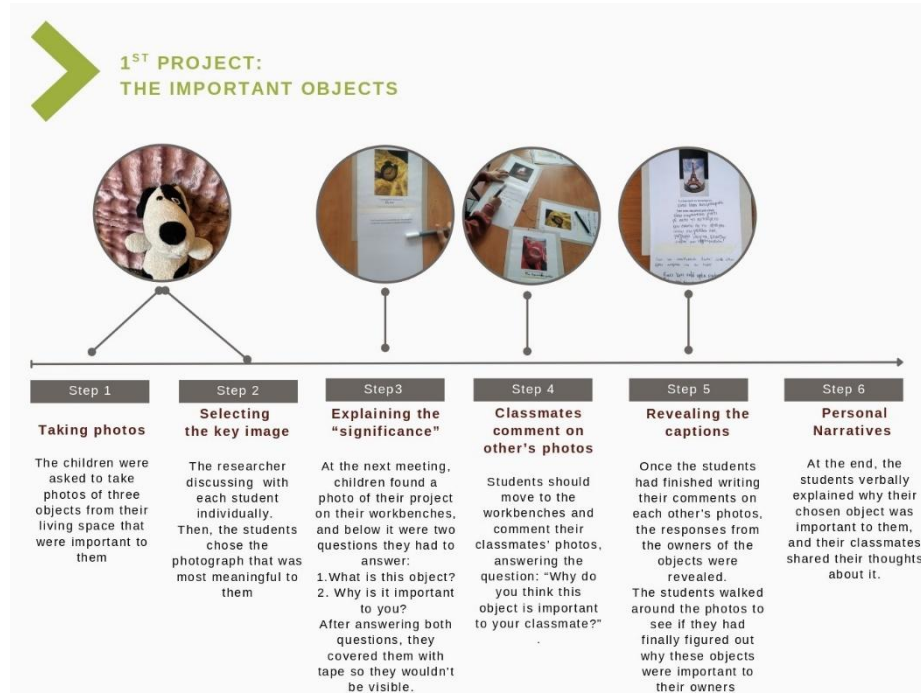


Table 1: Outline of the process of the 1st project: The important objects

2nd project: Inner fragments through materialism

Synopsis: Children took photos of a favorite object of theirs that had been worn out and presented it to the group. Then they discussed the photos and revealed stories.

Project's objectives are for children to:

- Discover that their worn-out favorite objects hold hidden stories, emotions, and experiences (Table 2).
- Recognize and accept the concept of "imperfection" in everyday reality.
- Engage with their "fragments" in a therapeutic way.

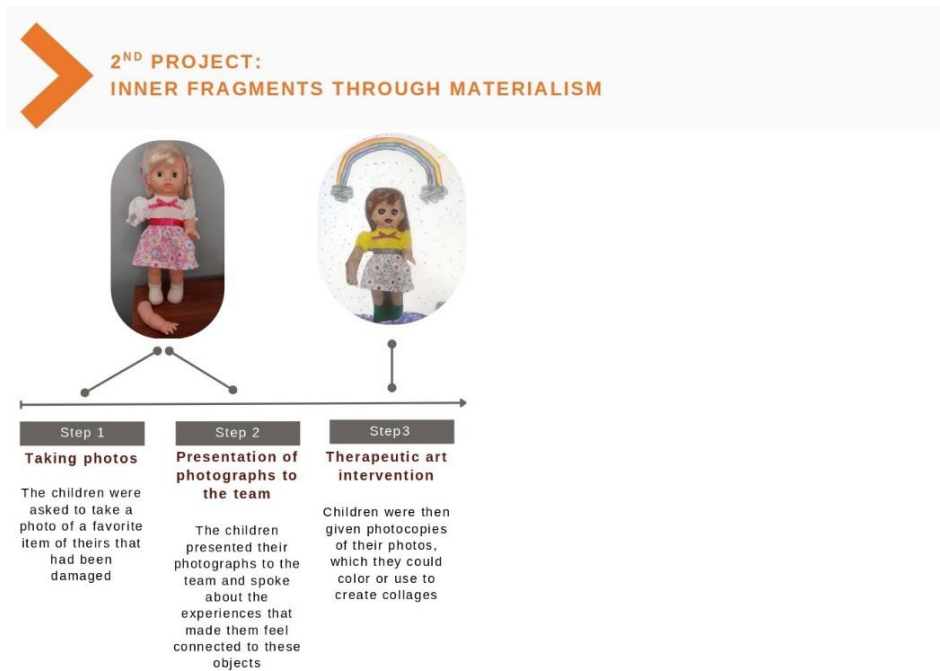


Table 2: Outline of the process of the 2nd project: Inner fragments through materialism

IV. RESULTS-INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The emotional importance of objects to children

In the project “The important objects” it was noted that the younger children chose to photograph stuffed animals, storybooks, and decorative items, while the middle-aged and older children chose items related to their hobbies and knowledge. Middle and older age children also chose tablets or televisions as their favorite items, in contrast to younger children, who did not prefer digital devices at all. Actually, it turned out that very few of them chose important objects from their daily lives. A few examples included a fireplace, a sofa, and a bed. At this point the researcher thought that the children had not understood the difference between a favorite and an important object; however, according to children’s explanations, the meaning of a favorite object was the same as the meaning of an important object to them. As it appears for young children, importance has an emotional dimension. Pallasmaa (2020, p. 153) argues that “For children, an object’s practicality isn’t very important; what matters is the emotional attachment they’ve developed to it” explaining that ultimately few of the objects children possess are truly necessary for utilitarian purposes; their function is primarily social and psychological. Norman (2005) notes that be-loved objects are more than just utilitarian for the individual; each one conveys a personal meaning and its own story.

Figure 1, shows a child's photograph of its bed. After a short dialogue between the child and the researcher, it was revealed that the most important part in this relation was that dinosaurs where in every corner of his bedroom. The child had quite a few stories to tell about it; he used to draw dinosaurs and collect books or accessories featuring them “since I was very young” as it says, even though it was only 7 years old. It is worth noting that this relation of the child to the dinosaur world, is not only emotional, but also represents the aspect of time for it. Child’s experiences, memo-ries, and deep emotions, prolonged the duration of this connection. Obviously, the bed itself was not as important to the child, as its decoration.



Figure 1: Child's favorite object was a corner of its bedroom decorated with dinosaurs

Narrative objects with human investment

Another important observation was that children used to give objects a human nature, for example, a child (11 years old) mentioned that it was talking to the clock when it felt alone (Figure 2). After hearing this story, the other children spontaneously began sharing similar experiences. This finding demonstrates that children may have interpersonal and animistic relationships with the objects that interest them (Danesi, 2017, p. 228). It has been observed, that sometimes objects are even perceived as an extension of the children's own selves (Danesi, 2017, p. 228). "All the objects around us are alive; they invite us to use them, tell us what to do with them, and are capable of engaging in human relationships" (Kytta, 2002). At the same time, Kontaratos (1983) states that human bodies and objects, acquire expressiveness when they become vehicles for our own psychological "experiences"; that is, when we become immersed through them and identify with them. Material culture appears to influence children more profoundly than is commonly believed, giving human characteristics and emotional implications to objects.



Figure 2: A child's favorite object, a watch that he makes conversation with

Building a storytelling method within the team

It has been observed that children of elementary school are eager to talk about themselves share their personal experiences. Especially as they grow older, they give more importance to verbal expression and

communication, and this a reason to utilize storytelling methods in aesthetic education. Children of all ages (7-10 years old) who participated in the storytelling sessions had no inhibitions or prejudices about their feelings or experiences. Apparently, a safe environment for “personal sharing” had already been established within the group. The process of storytelling, through play, dialogue, and personal narratives, felt like a therapeutic art form for the children as well as for the researcher herself.

When discussing the photos, it was noted that the children did not question their classmates' choice of objects and empathized with them. They also, sometimes commented on other children's objects in a first-person manner, as if they were their own, in other words, they strongly internalized the other's choices. There were so many comments under their photos that more sheets of paper had to be added (Figure 3). All this process seemed as a dialogical communication event (Pourkos, 2009, p. 421) and this was evident from the children's enjoyment in listening to others' stories (Mills & Crowley, 2014). Lioliopoulos (2004, p. 560) argues that is important for the educator to encourage children to tell their personal stories to one another, as well as to themselves. Krasanakis argues that in storytelling method, we witness a sharing of emotions, ideas, experiences, and actions from the storyteller to the listener. Both enjoy, reflect on each other, recognize, and come to know themselves; there is inter-action between them. Then the boundaries between the narrator and the listener blur and the symbolic material is replaced by reality and vice versa. This realization, that storytelling is a quintessentially social activity, is driven by the desire to communicate, by the need not only to create and experience stories, but also by the need to narrate and share them. All in all, is important to have witnesses to confirm our existence.

In the method of storytelling, children listen to other's stories, relate to them, or discover something they didn't know about themselves. Clark (2010) notes that listening to others is not only important for communication but also for participation. Add to this, Mills and Crowley (2014) note that children almost always enjoy listening to stories. It is worth mentioning that in 1983, Gergen and Gergen, invented the term “self-narration” to describe the process by which we tell stories about ourselves. In this way, individuals make connections between life events and acquire a sense of meaningful coherence, continuity, and duration. Through narrative therapy, people may gain access to their unconscious mind. All in all, storytelling in school-class, can serve as a motivation for learning, when children engage in the process and develop their critical and reflective thinking (Frazel, 2010).

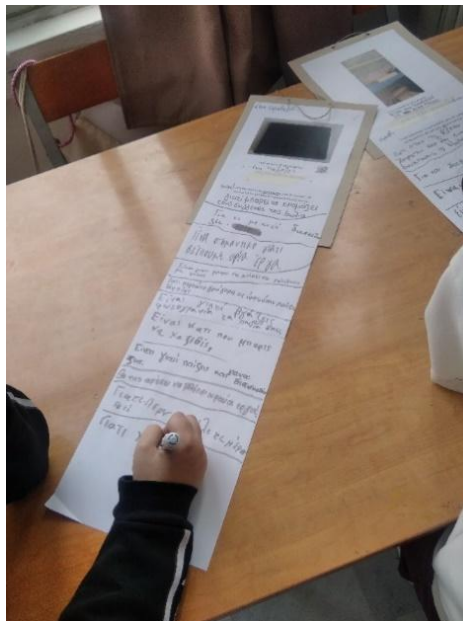


Figure 3: Children comment on their classmates' images

The concept of Kintsugi as an art therapy practice

In the first project “The important objects”, some of the children' stories involved persons and memories. A child (10 years old) presented the image of a flattened ball and explained why it had chosen it: “Because this is the last thing I had from a friend” in a dramatic tone (Figure 4). The child went on to mention, that they had lost contact after kindergarten, but still kept the ball they used to play with. In another case, a child (9 years old) tried to explain the significance of a wooden boat that had broken in the past and it had been put back together, with the help of a family member (Figure 5). The child was asked by the researcher if that person was still alive, and then it shared with the rest of the group this important information, about the loss of that

family member. The boat had become significant, because it symbolized the child's relationship with someone very close to it. This last two stories, and especially the rebuilding of the boat, evoked strong associations with the Japanese technique known as "Kintsugi", in which a broken object is reassembled and its cracks are filled with golden glue. The golden cracks symbolize the difficult and painful moments of life, as well as the path someone has traveled to get there. After all, Zen philosophy (Basho et al., 2013) seems to be aligned with therapeutic art forms. The researcher planned the next project, which was based on the conceptual idea of Kintsugi.



Figure 4: A child presented the image of a flattened ball as it's favorite object



Figure 5: A child presented the image of a reassembled boat as it's favorite object

In the second project "Inner fragments through materialism" children were asked to photograph a favorite object of theirs that had been damaged. Surprisingly, it turned out that everyone kept a worn-out, or broken object, sometimes even insisting that their family should not throw it away. During the process of the collage, the re-researcher suggested to a child to stick the doll's broken arm back on its body, so that it would look the way it did before. The child followed that advice, but as the process unfolded, the researcher realized that it didn't actually need that kind of intervention. The children then mentioned that they'd rather have their objects stay broken in their healing images. Children treated their objects in their own unique and personal way and

were emotionally more stable than the researcher believed, even more so what their teachers and parents believed. Children knew very well that their destroyed objects would never be the same as before, and for that reason they didn't need a fake replica that would present something other than reality. In Figure 6, a child's photo-graph shows a damaged old chair in which used to sit a beloved family member who is no longer alive (as it was mentioned) and next to it, we can see the it's therapeutic art intervention. Stavridis (1990, p. 179) argues "A trace is the worn armrest of the armchair where my father used to read".



Figure 6: A damaged old chair in which used to sit a beloved family member who is no longer alive, and next to it, the child's therapeutic art intervention

Cultivating children the deeper meaning of beauty of imperfection

Children approached these two self-biographical projects with emotional maturity. Through the representation of their own wounds, they discovered a side of their classmates that was unknown, personal, vulnerable, and sensitive. Furthermore, children almost instinctively knew how to heal themselves. It is necessary to point out, that compassion is not insignificant in times when anything less than perfection, is considered to be a complete failure for young people.

Nobuo (2000, p. 40) argues that in the central concept of the Wabi-Sabi philosophy, everything in this world is imperfect and ephemeral. Wabi-sabi philosophy talks about the beauty of the incomplete, the impermanent, and the imperfect. The realization that we are not perfect frees us from the obsession to be perfect, which is not natural (Nobuo, 2000, pp. 18–19). Add to this the philosophy of Kintsugi promotes acceptance and self-compassion, which provide emotional stability and allow us to adopt a loving attitude toward ourselves (Lohndorf, 2020, p. 72). Kintsugi encourages us to accept our situation with honesty and compassion. The hidden value of wounds is not unknown in psychology; in fact, Carl Jung argued that personality does not develop because it is beneficial to the individual, but out of necessity, thanks to the difficulties (Lohndorf, 2020, pp. 23–24).

Moreover, Saito (2007) argues that our aesthetic life includes not only pleasant but also unpleasant experiences that are characterized as depressing or sad. Saito notes that our usual reaction objects is to feel sorry because of their appearance "(...)a fact that drives us to repair, clean, or throw them away" (Saito, p. 31). However, the new aesthetics of everyday life, encompass unpleasant personal moments as well. De Certeau explains (2010, p. 295) that "Everyday stories speak of all those useful-useless things one finds in an attic".

Material culture a catalyst for the development of sensory memory

During these two projects, children began to observe objects more deeply and in a more sensory way; as a result, they recalled stories that had taken place during their interaction with them. "I can't remember what the door to my grandfather's farm-house looks like (...) but I can remember the resistance of its weight and the patina on its wooden surface, marked by decades of use, and I recall with particular vividness the smell of the house that hit me in the face" (Pallasmaa, 2022, p. 86). It is observed, that material culture serves as a catalyst for the formation of practices and methods, related to the development of memory on a multidimensional level, which involves the senses, experiences, and cognition. This study explored the interaction between children and the material world, and its direct impact on their sensory system, emotions, and experiences. By discovering the power and necessity of material culture, children learn to connect with it in a meaningful, emotional, existential,

and ontological way. Through favorite objects, children expressed their feelings, interests, concerns, thoughts, and other things that preoccupied them. Material culture appears to influence children more deeply than is commonly believed. Children discovered a new relationship with the material qualities, which is characterized by permeability, immediacy, and narrativity.

V. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that the Photo Story method, combined with narrative and visual practices, can serve as a powerful pedagogical and research tool for exploring children's relationships with material culture. Through storytelling and photographic expression, children were able to articulate personal experiences, access memories, and construct meaning in ways that extend beyond verbal communication. The multimodal nature of the method fostered a safe and dialogical environment, encouraging empathy, activated listening, and collective reflection.

The findings highlight that children's engagement with objects is deeply emotional, symbolic, and relational rather than driven by materialistic values. Objects function as carriers of memory, identity, and interpersonal connections, often embodying experiences of attachment, loss, and continuity. Furthermore, the integration of the concept of Kintsugi revealed children's inherent capacity to understand and embrace imperfection. Rather than seeking to "restore" objects to an ideal state, children accepted damage and fragmentation as meaningful elements of their life experience, demonstrating emotional resilience and authenticity.

Importantly, the study underscores the educational value of incorporating narrative and arts-based methodologies in classroom practice. Such approaches not only support aesthetic development but also contribute to children's emotional well-being, self-awareness, and social understanding. Material culture, when approached through storytelling and creative expression, becomes a catalyst for sensory memory, critical thinking, and identity formation. In a contemporary context often characterized by ideals of perfection and consumerism, this research suggests the need to re-frame educational practices toward cultivating acceptance, empathy, and appreciation of imperfection. The Photo Story method offers a meaningful pathway for achieving these aims, bridging artistic practice, narrative inquiry, and pedagogical innovation.

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