



International Network for School Social Work

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Seeing and Understanding with Photographs Marion Huxtable

Adam's photograph could be used to illustrate what 'well-being' looks like in a kindergartner. He looks directly into the camera, shoulders squared, not smiling, but relaxed and alert. His crew-cut hair is brushed back from his handsome face. His gaze invites you to like him.

Adam is one of the classmates who accompany Ili Maso to sessions with the school social worker who is working out a plan to encourage Ili Maso to speak in class. So far this year, Ili Maso has not spoken to either his teacher or his classmates. In another photograph, the two boys sit side by side at a table. Adam turns his head to look right into the camera, this time with a broad smile, which seems both friendly and mischievous. Ili Maso's head is tilted down, his hands seem to be together under the table, his eyes look down and away from the camera, his shoulders are hunched, hair covers his forehead, and his mouth is compressed. He is smiling, with his lips puckered together so hard as to prevent the smile from opening his mouth. The smile is visible in his averted eyes and around his mouth, in spite of what looks like a strong effort to keep his mouth closed. The contrast between the boys is striking, especially around mouth, eyes, head, shoulders and arms.

Photographs like these help the school social worker to see many aspects of the child and to get a look at the child's inner world. Children who are silent in school are a difficult challenge, as they often do not speak in school for months or years. Studying the photograph of Ili Maso was only one part of the school social worker's evaluation (taking into account his culture, place in the family, school environment and family trends) that was the basis for developing a plan to help him become more at ease in school and to express himself. By the end of his kindergarten year, he had started to speak a little to classmates on the playground, had spoken occasionally in class, used his body more freely, and clearly enjoyed school.

Developing a plan for change with a child becomes much easier when we understand what is contributing to the behavior that is causing concern. However, children do not easily reveal themselves, and may be unable to explain what the trouble is. School social workers piece together their understanding of the child from many sources, including observations in the classroom and on the playground, interviews with the child, teachers and parents, school records and educated guesswork, before attempting to make a plan.

Often getting a clear picture is limited by lack of time, insufficient contact with family members and the child's inability to express his feelings. School social workers become creative in overcoming time constraints, in communicating with children who do not speak out, in reaching out to parents and in using every means available to assess the problem. Observation is one of our best tools because school social workers have the opportunity to see the child's behavior in many settings: in class, on the playground, walking to school, and at home. Observation involves knowing how to look to find out what is happening inside. Often, before you have been able to notice a child's feeling or mood, the child has moved and the social worker's thoughts have also shifted to keep up with what the child will do next. Studying a photograph permits you to take the time necessary to see and understand what the child's face and body language can reveal.

When you look at a photograph, take time to look at everything in it, including the background, the interaction between the people in the photograph, how the person relates to the camera (and the person taking the picture) and the subject of the photograph.

If you have a photograph in your wallet, practice your skills in observation and interpretation by studying it for a few minutes. Look at every part of the photograph, as there will be parts of it that you have not noticed before. If there is more than one person in the photograph, how are they relating to each other? Are they touching, where are they looking, what are they doing? What is the emotional state of each person and how is it expressed in the body posture, eyes, mouth, hands and even clothes? If there is only one person, how does he or she relate to the camera and to the person who took the picture? What does the background tell you? What does the person's clothing tell you? Study the photo in detail. How is the person expressing emotion? How does the person use his eyes, hands, and body?

Try the same exercise by studying a photograph of singer Johnny Cash (<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/archive/covers/0,16641,1101030922,00.html>). Time Magazine, in a feature commemorating his death in 2003, described the singer's voice as "...the deep, dark voice of a man counting out his demons and his losses with the stoicism of a poker player dealt a bum hand." What he revealed about himself in his music also shows in his face in Time's September 22, 2003 cover photo. The marks of suffering left on his face by a lifetime of accumulated grief and pain are remarkably like those on the face of the artist Rembrandt in old age (<http://artroots.com/art2/rembrandt4.jpg>). Rembrandt painted his own face more than ninety times. These paintings show that Rembrandt understood how a picture of a person's face reveals their internal experience.

There are many opportunities to use photographs to help you understand the children you work with. Consider using photos taken in class and on the playground, photos that children bring from home, and photos they take of their friends and families. Family photos can be especially helpful when you conduct groups on divorce, grieving or other family issues. Photos of a child in school can help you when you discuss the function of behaviors with the child, parents or teachers as part of a behavioral assessment.

If you are interested in exploring more deeply how to read feelings and behavior from photographs, the book *Photoanalysis* by Dr. Robert U.Akeret is fortunately still available in inexpensive used copies from Amazon.

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/stores/offering/list/-/0883260662/all/ref=dp_bb_a/103-7836999-2299036