

# The Great Ordinary: The Photographs of Edith Amituanai

by Hannah Sperber

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## Overview

This article explores the work of a prize-winning West Auckland photographer whose work has been shown around the world. Edith Amituanai photographs the ordinary, everyday world around her, documenting it as a record for the future. The article provides an insight into an art form that Edith has made her own. Students will identify with her subject matter (students walking to school) and may be motivated to try looking at the world the same way that Edith does – as if she is an alien.

The article includes tips and tricks for taking photographs and a poem that reflects Edith's interest in the world at the end of the driveway.

This article:

- uses questions to support the readers' curiosity and imagination
- explores the central abstract idea of recording images for the future
- explores the idea that artists take risks and push boundaries
- supports readers to make connections between how an artist works and what an artist hopes to achieve.

A PDF of the text is available at [www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz](http://www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz)

Texts related by theme

“John Pule: Artist of the Pacific” SJ L4 Oct 2012 | “At the end of the driveway” SJ L4 Nov 2016 | “Six Photos” SJ L3 Aug 2016

## Text characteristics from the year 7 reading standard

been flattered or excited. But people have  
Edith thinks that's because they recognise her as being part of their  
community. "I'm working from the inside. If you know the people  
and the culture of a neighbourhood, you can tell when it's OK to  
take a photo." It's also much easier to convey your warmth and good  
intentions. "I imagine I'm trying to take the best possible pictures of  
my family to show strangers," Edith says.

In the end, Edith is an artist, and part of that role means exploring  
boundaries and asking tricky questions. How much privacy can we  
expect in public? Is it OK for an artist to risk making someone feel  
uncomfortable? Can a photographer assume that their camera will  
always be welcome? And there's an even bigger question: if artists  
didn't have the freedom they need to make their own unique work,  
wouldn't this mean we'd only get a certain kind of art?

elements that require interpretation, such as complex plots,  
sophisticated themes, and abstract ideas

Sāmoa in the 1970s. They  
homes that merged ideas about being Samoan  
with ideas about being a New Zealander."

Edith found these rooms fascinating because  
they raised so many questions. "What do you  
decide to take on from the culture you live in?  
What objects do you display in your home to  
signify who you are? And how have ideas about  
identity changed for my generation?"

Edith has said there's no way she could  
ever put together a living room like the ones  
she has photographed. And she thinks the same  
goes for other second-generation Samoan New  
Zealanders. Things have changed. This is why  
her living room photographs have become a  
collection of images

complex layers of meaning, and/or information that is irrelevant  
to the identified purpose for reading (that is, competing  
information), requiring students to infer meanings or make  
judgments

**The Great Ordinary**

When she studied photography at art school, Edith came  
across the work of Daniel Meadows. He is also a documentary  
photographer. Meadows travelled Britain in the 1970s and 80s  
to capture what he called "the great ordinary" – everyday  
to capture what he called "the great ordinary" – everyday  
to capture what he called "the great ordinary" – everyday

people doing everyday things. In the same way, Edith is most interested in the familiar,  
especially young West Auckland faces and scenes. "I feel like what's around me demands  
to be shown. It's important – and right here!"

Edith says it's easy to think that the more exciting things are happening somewhere  
else. "But that's not true. We can connect to the big picture ... by looking at what's  
happening in our own neighbourhoods. What's fascinating to me is usually just next  
door or just down the street – right under my nose!"

Cruising around Rānui, Edith says she sees moments of significance every day.  
... best way to attach a camera to her bike so that she

metaphor, analogy, and connotative language that is open to  
interpretation

**Tips and Tricks:  
Edith's Advice**

• A nice camera helps, but it  
isn't essential. A camera is  
just a tool. Use whatever you  
have, but take the time to  
think about what makes a  
photograph work. Consider  
the frame. What's in it and  
what's not? Think about  
colour, shadows, lines, and  
shapes. And never forget  
about the light. It adds a lot  
to the way a photograph  
looks and feels.

illustrations, photographs, text boxes, diagrams, maps, charts,  
and graphs, containing main ideas that relate to the text's  
content



Reading standard: by the end of year 7

## Possible curriculum contexts

### ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 4 – Ideas: Show an increasing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

### ENGLISH (Writing)

Level 4 – Ideas: Select, develop, and communicate ideas on a range of topics.

### THE ARTS (Visual Arts)

Level 4 – Investigate the purpose of objects and images from past and present cultures and identify the contexts in which they were or are made, viewed, and valued.

– Explore and describe ways in which meanings can be communicated and interpreted in their own and others' work.

### Possible first reading purpose

- To learn about what inspires a young Pasifika artist
- To learn about photographing everyday subjects as an art form.

### Possible subsequent reading purposes

- To explore the purpose of Edith's art and the contexts in which it is made, viewed, and valued
- To explore understandings of the role of art for people now and in the future
- To learn how to take similar photographs.

### Possible writing purposes

- To write a personal response to Edith's art
- To compare Edith's photography with other art works
- To compare some of Edith's photographs with pictures of similar subjects from another place or time.



The New Zealand Curriculum

## Text and language challenges

(Some of the suggestions for possible supporting strategies may be more useful before reading, but they can be used at any time in response to students' needs.)

### VOCABULARY

- Possibly unfamiliar words and phrases, including “document”, “purposeful”, “slouching”, “fieldwork”, “ninja”, “flattered”, “good intentions”, “exploring boundaries”, “preserving”, “trace”, “merged”, “archive”, “frame”
- Idiom: “low-key”, “non-event”, “vanish without trace”, “to take on”, “second-generation”
- Words derived from “signal”: “signify”, “significantly”, “significance”
- Figurative language: “demands to be shown”, “under my nose”, “Cruising around”, “as if you were an alien”.

### Possible supporting strategies

- Identify any words your students may find challenging and make decisions about when and how to provide support, including buddy support.
- If the idiomatic or figurative expressions are not familiar, explain them briefly and list them for later study.
- *The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction*, pages 39–46, has useful information about learning vocabulary.
- See also [ESOL Online, Vocabulary](#), for examples of other strategies to support students with vocabulary.

### SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED

- Familiarity with seeing, taking, and using photographs
- Some familiarity with artists, what they do, and how they work
- Some understanding of what it means to belong to more than one culture
- Some understanding of the concept of privacy
- Some understanding of behaving in a culturally appropriate manner.

### Possible supporting strategies

- Prompt the students to make connections between their own experiences of photography and the article. Ask them to compare Edith's work with the kinds of photos they take or use.
- Explain the meaning of “second-generation Samoan New Zealanders”. Invite students who have personal experience to share some of that experience, for example, about the ways their family shows their culture in their home.
- After a first reading, initiate a discussion about privacy in relation to taking and using photographs of other people. This is a sensitive and topical subject. Be aware that it may raise issues (such as their use in social media) that distress some students.
- It may also be culturally inappropriate to take a photo. Discuss this idea, drawing out any examples that the students know about.

### TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE

- Non-fiction text with descriptions and explanations
- Use of photographs
- List of “Tips and Tricks”
- Diagrams showing the placement of each photo on the page and its title, similar to what you might find in an art gallery.

### Possible supporting strategies

- Skim and scan the text to identify its purpose, features, and the information that can be gained before reading.
- In a later reading, you could ask the students to look at the poem that follows this article. They could compare the ideas in the poem with those expressed by Edith, analyse the rhyme pattern, or examine the way the word choices match the subject matter.
- Discuss the purpose of the diagrams. Ask students why the writer might have decided to use them.



Sounds and Words

# Instructional focus – Reading

**English** Level 4 – Ideas: Show an increasing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

**The Arts (Visual Arts)** Level 4 – Investigate the purpose of objects and images from past and present cultures and identify the contexts in which they were or are made, viewed, and valued; Explore and describe ways in which meanings can be communicated and interpreted in their own and others' work.

## First reading

- Set the purpose for reading.
- Examine the title and the photographs and share how they provide clues about the content. This will help the students to build connections with the text.
- Read the first page together and then ask the students to discuss the various ways in which Edith is “known”. *Why do you think she describes herself as “that girl who bikes”?* Come back to this point in a subsequent reading to compare Edith’s “low-key” style with the photographs she takes.
- Have the students work with a partner or small group. Tell them to pause at the end of each section to share any questions. The questions may be to seek clarification of a word or idea or in response to a concept.
- After the first reading, put the students’ questions together for subsequent readings.

## If the students struggle with this text

- Spread the reading over two or more sessions, chunking the text and providing focused guiding questions for each section.
- Prompt the students to mark (in pencil) or make a note of any words, phrases, or ideas they find confusing. Check these as they finish each section.
- Stop at the end of page 19 to discuss the way Edith uses the photographs. *Is it OK to display them in galleries or on a bus? What do you think?*
- Remind the students to use the photographs to help make connections with the text. *Making connections with the photos, for example, with the driveway or living room photos, can help you understand the text.*
- After reading the text, ask the students to summarise the main idea and to give their opinion of that idea.

**Subsequent readings** How you approach subsequent readings will depend on your reading purpose.

### The teacher

Ask the students to reread the first paragraph.

- *What does it mean to “be known”? Edith is known in several ways: why does she want to remain “low-key”? How does this fit with the kinds of photos she takes?*

### The teacher

Ask the students to compare the photos Edith has taken of living rooms with photos seen in magazines showing inside people’s homes.

- *How are the rooms she captures different? What does this tell viewers about them?*
- *Why is Edith anxious to record rooms before they “vanish without trace”? Why would they?*
- *She asks, “What objects do you display in your home to signify who you are?” Why might this be different for second-generation Samoan New Zealanders? Would it change with the next generation? How and why?*

To assist English language learners to build their vocabulary and their ability to listen to English, use the lounge images to create a listening task, such as listening to pictures, listening dictation, or a barrier exercise.

To develop the idea of what people value, the students could study the living room photos and use a Venn diagram to place items that are different from items in their family’s living room, items that they have in common, and items that their family has but that are not in the photos. With a partner, they can then compare their diagrams and think about how their own culture influences what they value.

Use ideas from the text to create a Say It activity to help English language learners discuss the ideas from Edith’s point of view.

### The students:

- identify the ways Edith is known: as a bike rider, as a league team manager, and as a successful photographer
- synthesise information across the text (“working from the inside”; taking photos in people’s homes; “everyday people doing everyday things”) and what they know about celebrity culture to understand that her work relies on remaining a trusted member of her community.

### The students:

- use their prior knowledge of magazines, along with the images in the text and what they have learnt about Edith’s purpose, to infer that these rooms are usually only seen by family and close friends
- infer that for Edith, it’s important that her photos record how people really live and what items help them identify themselves
- evaluate Edith’s ideas as they view the photos and synthesise information across the text to infer that the rooms are an important part of our social history: they capture the transitions made as immigrants become New Zealanders
- think critically about the purpose and value of her photos as an “archive” and form hypotheses about how and why things might change over time.

## Subsequent readings

### The teacher

Lead a discussion about Edith's assertion that "what's around me demands to be shown ... We can connect to the big picture ..."

- *What does this phrase mean for you? What things "demand to be shown" in your class, school, home, or community? How do the things happening in your neighbourhood "connect to the big picture"?*

### GIVE FEEDBACK

- *You made connections between Edith's work and the images you've seen in the art gallery. This helped you to agree that "ordinary" and "everyday" images are just as important as posed and staged portraits.*

### METACOGNITION

- How did your thinking about the photographs and their importance change as you read and reread this text?

### The students:

- make connections between the ideas in the text about "the familiar" and their own lives to identify, understand, and evaluate how they are connected to a bigger picture, for example, through social media; through the music, videos, and games they use; and through the ideas and dreams they have.



Reading standard: by the end of year 7



The Literacy Learning Progressions



Assessment Resource Banks

# Instructional focus – Writing

**English** Level 4 – Ideas: Select, develop, and communicate ideas on a range of topics.

**The Arts (Visual Arts)** Level 4 – Investigate the purpose of objects and images from past and present cultures and identify the contexts in which they were or are made, viewed, and valued; Explore and describe ways in which meanings can be communicated and interpreted in their own and others' work.

## Text excerpts from “The Great Ordinary”

## Examples of text characteristics

## Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

Page 19

In the end, Edith is an artist, and part of that role means exploring boundaries and asking tricky questions. How much privacy can we expect in public? Is it OK for an artist to risk making someone feel uncomfortable? Can a photographer assume that their camera will always be welcome? And there's an even bigger question: if artists didn't have the freedom they need to make their own unique work, wouldn't this mean we'd only get a certain kind of art?

### QUESTIONING IDEAS

When a writer wants to make readers think more deeply about an idea, they can pose questions that push the reader's thinking. By first providing information and a context, open-ended questions can force readers to consider their own responses and opinions.

Ask the students about their purpose and how they will achieve it

- *If you want to challenge your reader's thinking about an idea, what techniques can you use?*

Prompt students to consider the impact of this extract and other examples of challenging writing.

- *Try out a few ways of challenging your readers. Ask a writing buddy to help you compare the various ways.*
- *If you're using questions, are they open-ended? Are they rhetorical? Will they make the reader stop and think? Are they the kinds of questions you might have asked yourself as you researched and wrote your article?*
- *Have you given the reader enough background information to consider your questions? If not, what can you add?*

Page 17

Most of the photos in the series show kids deep in their own worlds, as if there's no camera there at all. Some of them are with friends, chatting and laughing. Others are alone. A few look purposeful, like they're running late for school. One or two are slouching, maybe still waking up.

### DESCRIBING A SCENE

Simple factual descriptions of small or individual details, when put together, can give the reader a powerful mental image.

Explain how writers choose language to create an image for the reader. Prompt the students to identify descriptive language in the article and ask them to write and revise their own passages using the examples as a model.

- *Find sentences in the article that are descriptive. Which words has the author chosen? Why are they effective? How can you use these as models?*
- *Read your work aloud. Does it convey the mental images you want readers to form as they read? If not, what do you need to change?*

Page 24

A camera is just a tool. Use whatever you have, but take the time to think about what makes a photograph work. Consider the frame. What's in it and what's not? Think about colour, shadows, lines, and shapes. And never forget about the light. It adds a lot to the way a photograph looks and feels.

### INSTRUCTIONS

When writing tips, guidelines, and instructions, it helps to use action words (including those that refer to interior action or thinking) such as “use”, “consider”, “Think about”.

Ask questions to help students clarify the relationship between their writing purpose and the structure and language that will best meet that purpose.

- *Is your purpose the same all the way through? In this extract, the purpose is different: it's to help readers improve their photography skills.*
- *Where you are using different text structures for different purposes, how are you varying the verbs, phrases, and structures? (Interactive cloze tasks can help English language learners notice changes in the language used).*
- *Will readers know how to read each part of your text?*
- *Do you need to provide more (or less) support?*

### METACOGNITION

- How much are you influenced by other writers? How much does the work of other writers help you to form and express your own ideas?

### GIVE FEEDBACK

- *You've replaced a part of the text with two excellent questions. These will make your readers think more about that idea rather than just take your word for it.*