ANALYZING SCHOOL IMAGES TO REVEAL THE VALUES AND NORMS OF GREEK MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Visual methods are often marginalized in educational research and have not been employed to collect information about cultural identities of the school and its effect on the students. The aim of this paper is to examine visual methods for understanding the visual culture of schools and how these images are perceived and processed by High School students in Greece. It reports on a participative research project in four secondary schools in Greece from distinctively different cultural and economic backgrounds. The strategy of research applied in this study is grounded theory and the qualitative methods of research are: structured interviews (4 interviews done and transcribed during one month), scaled questionnaires were distributed (80 done during one month and transcribed) and photography (800 photos taken during one month and described) and repeated visits in schools. There were at least 80 students involved at the project during one month. Moreover this presentation draws on content analysis as a systematic, rigorous approach to analyzing documents obtained or generated in the course of research. Finally the presentation will conclude that these approaches provide a comprehensive view of how visual images are produced and interpreted, and of what their potential social consequences may be. The use of visual methods is not without challenges however. Securing ethics approval and school participation along with problems protecting participant agency were some difficulties encountered in the current study. For those wishing to pursue less conventional educational research methodologies in school settings, this presentation will also highlight possible benefits and problems.

Keywords: *school culture, visual images, multimodality, participatory social research, hidden curriculum*

Introduction

Over the last three decades visual studies have come to play a particularly meaningful role in social science research. Many remark on the potential this type of methods can have on educational research especially in understanding the ethics (Cook-Sather 2014), policy (Bragg 2007) and practices (Mitra 2001) of school units. There is a growing recognition that observable and tactile information is important for understanding school culture (Prosser 2007). Moreover, as many prominent scholars put forward, one strength of visual research lies in its use of technology to slow down and repeat observations and encourage deeper reflection on perception, and meaning (McDermott1977; Mehan 1993). This is important since in visual images the connotation, denotation and significance of collected material that are too often taken for granted. In addition, it has also been remarked that the visual images of a school can have a strong influence in developing and forming civic identity (Fielding 2004). It is also noted in the work of Halpin and Croft (1963) that the visual messages of a school reveal the implicit powerful forces that shape everyday activities, as well as the values norms beliefs and customs that an individual holds in common with the members of the social unit. It can easily be understood, from the above reasons, that visual methods can assist educational researchers in unraveling the forces present but also hidden in a school, thus understanding the forces that can influence and even shape the educational outcomes of particular school units . It's important to recognize however, that the visual culture of a school is a combination of generic and unique elements (Prosser 2007).

Generic visual culture describes observable, inscribed and encrypted similarities of schools in terms of visual norms, values and practices, which constitute taken-for granted in schools. However, as Prosser continues, because schools

comprise of individuals, agency and the capacity to (re)interpret generic visual culture, school people create their own unique visual culture. The visual culture of schools reflects teacher folklore i.e. 'all schools are the same but different' (Prosser 2010). There are also warnings about practices that simply use visual methods as informing of the meaning of messages, (Ruddock and Fielding 2006) or, as described by Alderson and Montgomery (1996), simply 'informing' children and young people. The desired alternative is a spectrum of dialogue (Lodge 2005) with children taking increased responsibility on which images will be placed in the school as well as taking significant roles in the decision-making processes (Robinson and Taylor 2007); although the extent to which full participation is necessary, possible, or indeed desirable, to qualify as 'voice' is up for debate (Hart 1997).

The aim of this paper is to analyze the visual messages of 4 distinct school units and examine the meanings, significance of production, consumption and circulation of material culture; crosscut by thematic concerns i.e gender, race, or communication. Also, since this research focuses on students whose age group is, according to UNCRC, able to express their experiences and opinions for their formal education (UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25). This paper will be a research with and for the students rather than on them since students will actively participate in the research. Educational research on visual images of schools is under developed in Greece. There are no studies that focus on visual messages. Educators often either ignore and overlook school visual culture, or in most cases educators as well as those in authority make decisions on what should be placed or allowed in a school under the perception that high school students are incapable of having opinion on the issue: they do not have firmly formed views (James et al. 1998), will be influenced by the adult asking the questions (Hill, 2006) or need to be protected from the perhaps sensitive/threatening issues (Alderson 2008; Cremin and Slatter 2004).

Finally this paper will view the way school images affect students of particular school units (Kalatzis & Cope, 2008).

Methodology
Our sample consisted of 4 schools chosen from areas, with a wide variety of economic and social background. Economic zone ranking of the Ministry of Economics was used in order to indicate the extent to which a school draws its students from low or high socio-economic communities. Moreover, rankings from the Ministry of Education, that rank schools according to their performance in university entrance exams were also taken into consideration, while selecting the schools. Student population was ethnically diverse comprising mainly of Greek students, but with a significant number of students from Albanian and Middle East origins. The staff was only from Greek origin however. Two hundred students and 50 teachers participated in the research. In total, 65% of the participants self-defined as European the 20% as of Balkan origin and the rest as of Middle East origin.

The procedure followed was: First the researcher, applied for the consent of the Ministry of Education to ensure access to the schools and their collaboration to research. This process took about 3 months to be completed. Afterwards, the researcher contacted the principal of the school to arrange a convenient date to visit the school and take pictures and video of the images in and outside school premises. Also, she emailed the school the parent consent form that should be distributed to students in order to have their parents' permission   to answer questionnaires and participate in the research. Then, in the arranged date she took photos of the school, in one day after school hours, in order not to interrupt school life but also so as not to have issues of shooting students while trying to capture an image. This made the research logistically possible while offering a discrete moment of school life to analyze. Afterwards, the images were examined and ten most prominent regarding their place in school as well as their frequency of message were developed. The images were classified in the following categories:

Classification of visuals
The visuals were first classified in categories relating to who was responsible for producing and placing them. Teacher-Students or Other. Then they were classified in one of the 20 categories : related to courses, racial, insults, sexual insults, general insults, sexual humor, general humor, dominant gender (male female) romanticism, politics, drugs, religion, morals, names, sports, personal problems, art, music,   sexuality, philosophical remarks, and miscellaneous. The researcher then returned to school, usually after two days, to distribute questionnaires to both teachers and students (usually 20 students participated).

We designed questionnaires because they are frequently used and are considered as accurate and precise methods, in quantitative research in social sciences and associated research areas (Parfitt 2005).We used Linkert scale questionnaires drawing form their advantages as a method, since they are easily understood and do not require a lot of time to be completed; show a distinct advantage when dealing with abstract issues such as opinions and feelings

(Nemoto & Belgar 2013). Moreover, since Linkert extend from one extreme to another, they assist the researcher to arrive at a thorough understanding of the target construct.

As result, this strategy can conclude in a more well-developed, accurate comprehending of the construct of our research (Nemoto & Belgar 2013). The questions were carefully designed and on accordance to theoretical standards. Each question was designed to measure one idea and was written in straightforward, easy-to-understand language so that the meaning of the item was unambiguous to respondents (Wolfe & Smith, 2007). For instance, high-frequency, nontechnical vocabulary were not used, and complex grammatical constructions were eliminated. Moreover, conjunctions, such as and, or, and but were not employed, as they generally indicate the presence of two ideas (i.e., a so-called "double-barreled" question).

Finally, issues of insincerity of response, particularly the tendency of respondents who want to please and the related problem of "attitude forcing" (Parfitt 2005), as well as issues of non-response were taken into consideration while designing/analysing the questionnaires. Numerous techniques have been employed in trying to maximize questionnaire response rates (Armstrong 1975; Kanuk and Berenson 1975; Linsky 1975 cited in Yu & Cooper 1983), such as variations in questionnaire design and presentation as well as offering of incentives for responding and follow up contacts.

After the questionnaires were collected the researcher displayed in print the ten collected images (the most prominent in school according to various visual theories regarding the prominence of the message   ress (1996), Leeuwen & Oyama (2001) Denis, M., & Kosslyn, S. M. (1999) and initiated an informal discussion on students' feelings about these images or about any other images the students wanted to talk about and the researcher had not put forward. The researcher kept notes of their responses.

Results

From the visual collected 81% was placed in the school by teachers particularly Technology, Biology and IT teachers. The messages teachers displayed, were either mainly related to courses 20% or to general issues. The most common being Environmental issues with smaller percentages of Art. The remaining percent of schools visuals involved graffiti and visual messages carved or drawn by students on desks, chairs or outside school usually during lessons or after school hours. Most of these visuals and messages, concerned sexuality (18.9%) (image 01) and sports (image 02). The proportion of student produced visuals concerned sexuality in addition to the categories of sexual request, sexual humor, sexual insults and remarks was 41%. The second highest proportion was reference to sport teams (15%). Of the 20 categories of graffiti, sexuality, sports-music and politics were those found most frequently in student produced messages. (18.4% and 15.4%, respectively).

What seems to be particularly interesting is that schools that could be classified as of a high socio-economic status had political messages put by students' supporting left wing political parties that are traditionally associated with the working class (image 03). Another interesting finding is that of the "non-legitimate" and offensive messages 70% were produced by male students while female students appear to produce messages relating to philosophy, art and courses.

Also reported in the study is that visual with romantic content were found more frequently in women's desks chairs or restrooms than in men's (image 04). This anonymous school testimony bears witness to the importance of emotional relationships for women (Mellen, 1998). All the categories of visuals were present at some level in the male's visual messages, whereas racial insults, references to drugs, and references to sex were absent from the women's. Female's visual messages were more conservative and conventional than male's; morality and religion represented 1 1.6% of the content of the female's visual messages but only 2.1% of the male's. We also need to note that male's visual messages were prevalent and dominant outside the schools building while female's were limited inside the premises.

A final point that needs to be pointed out is that although the messages students of all backgrounds produced could almost be equally fitted in the above classifications, in school of low economic background the percent of racial, ethnic and racist remarks was very high. Also, as it can easily be seen from the sample of the images shown. In the schools of low ranking and socioeconomic background there is a distinct absence of visuals and images "formally" displayed, while this gap is "filled" by students' own messages on school walls and equipment.

Finally in no school discussion among staff and students, as of what should be on the school space was ever conducted. The most that was asked of the students was to draw a theme that would later be displayed by staff around the school.

Discussion
Drawing on the results of the survey we could argue that schools of low socioeconomic background were exposed to very few visual messages and where visual were present they only portray images that showed school values and rules. In Schools of high socioeconomic rank, however, there are more and more images of school activities in schools particularly since digital photography has made it so easy to capture events and activities for displays. Many of these images reinforced positive messages about pupils and about the opportunities the school provides for excitement, enjoyment thereby playing a significant role in reinforcing/promoting desirable norms and establishing ideals. However, this use neglected much of their potential contribution to educational processes and to the development of school as educational institutions.

There were groups of teachers, as well as students that wanted to portray images that showed their pride in their school and images that portray school values that otherwise could be lost. Many teachers mostly focused on the displays and pictures that showed school performance in certain subjects such as technological projects and participation in European programs i.e youth parliament, Erasmus etc. We need to point out though an important finding. In the low income schools students felt freer to place messages around the school. However, at the same time they felt unsatisfied with the appearance of the school that seemed to them as neglected. In the case of the high income schools most students however focused on images that were linked to aesthetically pleasant results and on messages, and again on images mainly produced by students (image 05). Then, there were some mostly older students that focused on images linked to school management and relationship with their peers. This last point highlights the contribution that images can make to informed discussion of the perspectives of those whose critical voice goes unheard. The students thoughts and feelings interestingly matched the percentages of visuals. Meaning that where, for instance, sports were more prominent the interests of students and the discussion did evolve around this topic.

Accordingly, in schools were visuals of cultural issues were present students seemed more aware, sensitized and willing to talk about issues in such areas. They felt mostly satisfied with the appearance of their school, though not free to put visuals or interact with the school space. We must note that every month they were asked to clean their desks of any messages and the schools was maintained and painted annually.

Another finding, was that in high income schools the community, especially the parents association were allowed and given space to put messages inside the school, usually of informative nature about forthcoming activities. We need to note that while the perspectives of teacher and even parents are often well represented in qualitative school based educational research the perspectives of students are often marginalized if not ignored entirely (Allen 2009). Since pupils have the least amount of power in school communities (only through the 15 elected board) and the least say in terms of their education, authorities make it even more complicated and difficult for students to engage in research.

Yet in my opinion it is these marginalized pupils opinions that are of most value in stimulating institutional change; because they are the most strongly subject to the taken for granted and unquestioned by those who are more powerful. Interviews and questionnaires although difficult to obtain were not adequate methods to unravel students' perspectives. Student's also reported that our research offered the students and staff an opportunity to view their school from their and other's perspectives. Our research was thought by students, as something "out of the ordinary" an interruption of the routine. Some of the students also valued the fact that their opinion not only was asked but also that it was treated as equal to those of their teachers. They valued that they were treated as equals in the process, although in practice their different status afforded them minor involvement in the educational processes. It was interesting to find that images such as (01) signified different things and provoked different to students and staff.

Image (05) in most students of the school provoked feelings of happiness and joy while for teachers it seemed as self-evident, unimportant signifying emptiness and loss. However, it was also found that certain images provoked a shared perspective between teacher and students mostly images that had to do with litter and environmental issues. However, we must point out that, there were many hurdles that needed to be overcome for our research to be feasible. Obtaining consent to enter the school was time consuming and involved a lot of bureaucracy.

Another major challenge this project faced was securing schools' participation. Even with the ministry's permission most schools were reluctant to participate and posed several hurdles on the process. Particularly most school principal wanted to check the photos taken and usually insisted on deleting photos that contained messages/signs that could diminished authority or could portray the school as neglected by the principal. Faced with a method not commonly used and not anticipated the principal expressed considerable anxiety and skepticism. The teachers' and principal's reactions reflect wider anxieties about camera-use at school. A number of high profile media cases involving students taking photos on mobile phones and distributing them via the internet have heightened fears about this issue (Netsafe 2005). Some of the schools enforce strict rules around camera phones and punish students for inappropriate use. When cameras were routinely perceived as problematic their research use was perceived too perilous and as undermining school authority. Anxiety about cameras appears to invoke a 'double standard' with photographs viewed potentially more exposing and dangerous than written text. Emmison and Smith (2000) reveal this point in their discussion of authors' and editors' reluctance to include photographs in published works: What is ironic, we suggest, is that whilst photographs are often deemed to be unacceptable by authors and editors, textually explicit descriptions of morally suspect materials are considered less so. Such a 'double standard' tell us quite a lot about the relationship of our society to the image as opposed to the text. Whilst texts are associated with reason and higher mental faculties, images are seen as subversive, dangerous and visceral. (Emmison and Smith 2000, 14)This unease related to the school being identifiable even with the use of a code.

The research was only allowed to proceed on my guarantee measures would be taken to prevent the school's identification. School-based research can also be hindered, by congested timetabling also hampers accommodating 'an extra' like research, when academic pursuits take precedence. In addition, the need to negotiate alterations to ethical approval prolonged fieldwork. Although time-intensive, acting on teachers' suggestions was a means signaling their concerns were valued. Key to participation in schools was the ministry's consent and supportive teachers who considered the research beneficial to students and helped quell senior management's anxieties. Securing school participation was subsequently a challenge as the research was constituted as 'too risky' by principals anxious to avoid unwanted publicity.

During our research issues of gender, sexuality emerged since, visual images/messages regarding gender and sexuality were the second most commonly produced, by students. However, researching issues of sex representation and gender issues in schools is challenging because it asks questions about an issue which is socially constituted as 'private', 'embarrassing', 'non relevant to educational goals" "political" and subsequently 'problematic'.

As a result, the researcher was not allowed by the present class teacher to discuss such issues with the students even though students did point out several times such issues, drawing from the pictures shown to them. In some occasions, even such visual were not permitted to be shown at all to students, though they were collected in the school and had a prominent presence in the school space. To conclude, it was of major interest to see that visual around the school do shape and express the values of the school and the local community. To take things further, the researcher shape the belief that using visual methods can provoke students into thinking further of what they took for granted.

Also, images of a school can act as a contact zone, where teachers and students of different ages of ethnic groups can come together, if not on equal terms, nevertheless in a place were communication is possible. The images and texts can foreground different perspectives which provide different questions and alternative to the dominant accounts of schooling. None of this however is possible if visuals are not "seen" and explored in the educational process.

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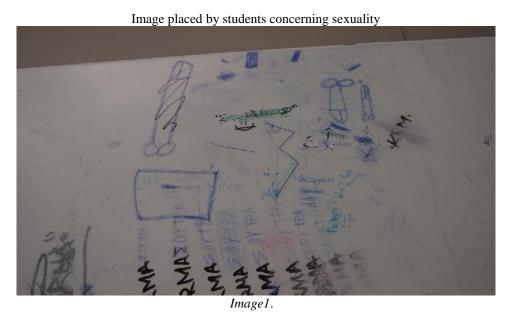
Image placed by students concerning sexuality

Image1.

Image placed by students concerning sports

Image2.

Image placed by students concerning left wing parties support

Image 3.

Image with romantic content placed by students

Image 4.