

**ANALYZING SCHOOL VISUAL MESSAGES
TO UNDERSTAND THE EFFECT OF MULTI CULTURALISM
IN GREEK HIGH SCHOOLS**

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Abstract. Visual methods are often marginalized in educational research and have not been employed to collect information about the co -existence of multiple cultures in schools and their influence on the students, teachers and the responding community. The aim of this presentation is to use visual methods for understanding the culture of schools and how images/visual messages formal or informal are perceived, processed by high school students in Greece and the extend of intergrading and acknowledging diversity of the examined school units. 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 done 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/visual messages 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 with camera retrieval and protecting participant agency were some difficulties encountered in the current study. For those wishing to pursue less conventional research methodologies in educational settings, this presentation will also highlight potential benefits and struggles.

Keywords: visual signs, content analysis, multiculturalism, cultural analysis

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 multiculturalism (Mitra 2001) of school units. There is a growing recognition that observable and tactile information is important for understanding school culture as well a cultural forces within a school (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 (McDermott 1977; Mehan 1993). This is important since in visual images the connotation, denotation and significance of observations 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.

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 of multiculturalism. 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 and their potential in unraveling cultural forces in schools. 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. The images that referred to different cultures contained messages regarding racial issues were then developed and present to students of an agreed class of the school unit.

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. The student produced messages

involved various messages concerning racial messages particularly insults against certain ethnic minorities that have recently come to Greece.

Discussion

Drawing on the results of the survey we could argue that schools of low socioeconomic background were exposed to very few visual messages concerning the integration of social groups. In Schools of high socioeconomic rank, however, there are more and more images of cultural elements however only portraying image of high prestigious countries and ethnic groups. However, this use neglected much of their potential contribution to educational processes and to the development of school as educational institutions. We need to point out though an important finding. In the low income schools students felt freer to place messages around the school and the messages the student produced were friendly to ethnic group as well as supporting diversity. Which seems particularly important since the areas of those school have high percentages on immigrants, and the wider society seemed to disapprove of them and considered them as a problem. 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, racial threats and aggression were more prominent the interests of students and the discussion did evolve around this topic. Accordingly, in schools where 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. Students also reported that our research offered the students and staff an opportunity to view their school from their and others' 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.

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