This is the published version of a chapter published in *Engaging with Educational Space: Visualizing Spaces of Teaching and Learning*.

Citation for the original published chapter:


N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-96316
THE TEACHER AND EDUCATIONAL SPACES: THE PHOTOGRAPH AS A TOOL FOR TEACHER REFLECTION

Maria Deldén

This chapter addresses the relationship between work and educational spaces. An empirical study was conducted in an attempt to make visible the spaces in which teachers move during the day to see the impact – or non-impact – of the spaces on the teacher and his or her work. How does the teacher physically move around the school building during the day? How does the teacher reflect on its spaces? Additionally, this chapter addresses what the teacher might discover about her working place and pedagogical work using photographs as memory triggers and tools for reflection.

The Visual as a Tool for Understanding the School Environment

As shown by Schratz and Steiner-Löffler in Pupils Using Photographs in School Self-evaluation, photography can be beneficial in evaluation processes. The authors let pupils take photographs of places in school that they liked or disliked and then used the images to evaluate and discuss their choices and what improvements could be made. Schratz and Steiner-Löffler address the domination of methods in school research based on the spoken or written word. By using photographs, they wanted to explore the value of the visual in educational research. They found that by using images they could expose new layers of reality and by freezing moments isolated from their context.

discover new perspectives. Their work inspired me to use photographs as a tool to reflect on the everyday activities of the average teacher.

Using photographs in educational research requires us to reflect upon the essence of the photograph and how it can be interpreted. In *On Visualising Past Classrooms*, Ian Grosvenor focuses on photographs as historical evidence. He argues that it is essential to see the photograph not as an objective mediator of the past but rather as a subject taken out of its content. A way to interpret and understand it could be as a text read with conceptual tools borrowed from other disciplines. With a more critical reading, the photograph can become a valuable part of historical and educational research.

Using a visual source to trigger memory highlights the role the body plays in perceiving, interpreting and understanding lived experience. We interact with spaces both physically and mentally, making them what they become. To be able to really see the workplace implies a need for distance. Catherine Burke writes about alienation versus familiarity in relation to everyday life and how by looking at photographs, we can alienate ourselves from the familiarity of the “everyday” in order to really see it.

The Place and the Task

The study took place at Bobergsgymnasiet, an upper secondary school in a small community in the north of Sweden. The school has been my workplace for sixteen years. It was built in the 1930s and has since been expanded and renovated to in response to changing needs, demands and pedagogical ideas. Once inside the school you become aware of the thick walls, the long corridors and the traditional classrooms with windows that let in plenty of daylight. At the centre of the school (built in part in the 1960s) lies a newly renovated learning centre, situated next to the school library. In a separate building some 100 meters from the main building, you can find the sports hall.

48 Ibid., 246.
51 Burke (2001), 191–201.
I wanted to find out what impact the school spaces have on the teachers and if it would be possible to reflect on everyday activities using photographs. Earlier research has found a relationship between how pupils involve in a task and how the seating is arranged in a classroom. So we know that space matters. But how does space make a difference for the teacher?

I asked one male and one female teacher to document all the spaces a teacher uses or simply passes through over the course of an ordinary workday. They teach different programmes and only occasionally cross paths. After the day was done, they sent me the photographs and I printed them out. Then I sat down with each of the teachers on their own and we studied the photographs and reflected on the spaces. I was curious to see if the visual sources that they themselves had produced would lead them to discover things in their working place and in their pedagogical work that had not been visible before. I had prepared some questions for the interview inspired by Grosvenor’s text on the critical reading of photographs. The questions stimulated the teacher to reflect on what was seen in the photographs and what thoughts and feelings this evinced.

For ethical reasons, I asked the teachers to document empty spaces or just the backs of the students, so that no one could be identified. As to the teachers I informed them about the task and its purpose and obtained their consent before embarking on the task. The teachers also had the opportunity to read the final manuscript and make comments.

The Teachers Document and Reflect

Teachers Siw Frisk and Anders Pettersson agreed upon a day to take their photographs. Anders decided to document two days because he thought that would result in a more accurate image of his work. After they were done, I met with Siw and Anders individually. I interviewed them for about an hour in semi-structured interviews. The photographs were spread out

---


54 Both interviews took place 2012-10-26.
on the table so we could see them all at once. Clearly, the photographs had been taken out of their original context and put into another. I also tried to maintain a critical approach to the respective conversations. We began by talking about the spontaneous reaction they felt when they saw the photographs in their new context. The conversations proceeded according to the experiences of the teachers and to the interview questions.

“Different Places Awaken Different Feelings”

Siw took 19 photos during one day. Her first impulse was to tell me about her workday illustrated by the photographs. She used words expressing movement: “First I came here”, “then I went there”, “then I walked”. She told me about her activities. She used the word speed (sometimes stress), but mostly speed to express what creates energy for her. I asked Siw to pick four of the images and tell me something about them. While telling me about these places, she discovered that each one had a feeling connected to it. One example of this is a photograph of the library. The feeling connected with this image was happiness, because she appreciates the support she gets from the librarian. She told me how they collaborate and how she can rely on the skills of the librarian. When she plans her classes, she talks to the librarian in advance so that she can organise literature for the students corresponding to the specific subject. Other feelings roused by looking at the photographs were frustration, interrupted rest and pride.

One thing we talked a lot about were the feelings Siw experienced while looking at two different classrooms where she often teaches (Figure 1 and 2). She started out by describing the two spaces and while talking, came to the conclusion that because of how the classrooms are furnished, she feels and teaches somewhat differently in each.

So how did she describe herself in relation to these two spaces? Classroom 1 is bigger and the teacher is in front of the class. This puts the teacher in control. Classroom 2 is a smaller room and the desks are arranged in a group. When teaching in this room, Siw sits among the group and she feels more relaxed and secure. When I asked her in which classroom she considers herself a better teacher, she didn’t hesitate to say Classroom 2.
Figure 1. Classroom 1.
Photo: Siw Frisk (2012).

Figure 2. Classroom 2.
Photo: Siw Frisk (2012).
Anders took 39 photos in two days. He put a lot of effort into the shoot. When we met and he saw all the photographs, he was a little frustrated about the disorder I had created. He tried to put them back in order and little by little succeeded in reassembling it and recalling the order of his working day. He often said, “Now I remember!”

Anders teaches physical education. He described the two offices he has, one next to the sports hall and the other in the main building (Figure 3 and 4). He often moves between these two places. Seeing the difference between the two sites, he started to talk about the development of his subject, physical training and health. The site close to the sports hall is very small (Figure 3) and Anders told me that thirty years ago, there was no need for more space because the subject did not consist of much theoretical content. Nowadays a physical education teacher needs to do much more lesson planning and, as shown in Figure 4, Anders needs more space for to work. After talking about these two work sites, Anders suddenly said that he had forgotten to take a photograph of his third workplace – a desk at home.
Anders has a broad understanding of what a classroom is. He considers different spaces as classrooms. In the photograph below, we can see Anders projecting an image on the wall of a small building near the forest. He transformed this little house into a classroom because he wanted to be close to the very essence of the lesson – how to orientate in the forest. After the session in the little house, he and the pupils went out into the forest to continue the lesson. Anders transforms not only this building but all kinds of other spaces into classrooms: the forest, the lake, the mountains, the ice rink, the ski tracks, the football pitch, the local gym and so on.

He thinks that he teaches in a different way when he uses spaces outside school and feels it promotes a more relaxed atmosphere and closer relationship with the students. He mentioned that the limited amount of time he has to teach so much content makes him feel frustrated and criticised the difficulties the school has incorporating adequate technology in teaching.

Discussion

The teachers participating in this study expressed different opinions on the benefit of using photographs to provide new perspectives. The female teacher was very positive and through the photographs discovered things she had not seen before. The photographs and the conversation led to a feeling of having the energy and inspiration to change things. Among other things, she felt encouraged to try and involve her pupils in painting their classrooms. The male teacher had his doubts. He did not think looking at the photographs would bring new insight. For some, images can immediately trigger a deeper understanding of their workplace, but not for everyone. Nevertheless the photographs were an inspiring source of conversation, conversation that led to a somewhat new understanding and broader perspective.
This empirical study highlights the different approach to the photographs on an emotional level. The female teacher often referred to her feelings and during the interview the feelings she felt about the school spaces were awakened and present. The male teacher had a more rational approach toward the photographs and his narrative was less emotional and more focused on the actual details. In both cases the conversations lead to reflections on ‘everyday’ working experience as well as on teaching and the curriculum. By seeing photographs in a new context, the teachers could alienate themselves from the teaching situation and reflect from some remove. 55

Burke describes the school as an emotionally charged space. 56 One reflection generated by this study concerns the body. Listening to the interviews, I became aware of how much our experience of “everyday” is lived through the body. What we see and how we see it, the feelings evoked and how teaching involves not just cognitive thinking but also bodily experience, are aspects that came to the fore in the interviews. In the interview with the male teacher, it was interesting to note his “making of educational spaces”. 57 He is concerned about the students’ bodily experience of his teaching and organises educational spaces in different places according to the content of his teaching.

The teachers did not document all spaces, for which they had different explanations – they did not have their camera with them or they simply forgot to take pictures. So there are of course things not seen in their photographs that would have provided further information about an average working day and school spaces. Important to remember is also the fact that the photographs do not show everything; they are small fragments of reality captured in a moment that has passed and it is these pieces that talk to us through our eyes. As Grosvenor points out we need to be critical about that. 58

The study sheds light on all the little tasks teachers perform but that are quickly forgotten. With some pictures, both of the teachers had difficulty remembering what they had been

55 Burke (2001).
56 Ibid.
doing in that particular space. And both were surprised upon realizing that they moved around so much and did so many different things in the course of an average day.

Concluding Remarks

I consider talking about work with teachers with the aid of photographs as memory triggers and tools for reflection to be a sound method. Conversation becomes lively and more anchored in lived experience. As a colleague, I learned a lot about the work situation of my fellow teachers.

Talking about spaces also leads to talk about pedagogy. It is clear that when placed in a new context, the photographs, though rooted in their original context, can elicit new, sometimes unexpected perspectives. It would be interesting to study how pedagogy might evolve if teachers used photographs to initiate a dialogue between themselves and their students about the everyday activities of teaching in relation to curriculum and learning.