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Beneath the Great Dome: Photographs as Means in the Study of the Senses and Emotions of Day-to-Day School Life

Catharina Hultkrantz

The roof of this whole building is a glass dome with parts which can be opened on hotter days.106

Hearing, smelling, seeing and touching have been essential to mankind from time immemorial. In the same way as the taste of Marcel Proust’s madeleine cake conjured new memories, the smell and sound of school might act as the catalyst for former students’ reminiscences about their school days. But what memories of today’s school will be carried into the future? The present essay highlights the importance of the senses and our relationships to enjoyment and learning in an everyday school environment. Through visual studies, new and interesting ap-

106 On “the school I’d like,” through the eyes of 12-year-old Rowan from Hope Valley in Burke and Grosvenor (2003), 24.
proaches become visible. What follows is a qualitative, visual study inspired by the work of Michael Schratz and Ulrike Steiner-Löffler, as well as by Ian Grosvenor’s articles about the impact of school environments and the importance of the senses for the experience. In this study, pupils and teachers were asked to take photographs and comment on their workplaces, places they like to take their breaks, and places they do not like to be in at all.

The School

Parallel to my postgraduate studies at Umeå University, I have spent several years working at the Knut Hahn Upper Secondary School in Ronneby, a small town on the coast of southern Sweden.

Built in 1969, the school was cast in the same mould as so many other new school buildings at that time. The desire to renew and reconstruct schools was above all prompted by the high nativity rate, but also by a perceived opportunity for improving pedagogy and democratic training in a modern setting. The Ronneby initiative resulted in a two-storey school building with big windows, a flat roof, red brick and stained wood features. The style was characterised by a bid to amalgamate architecture and nature. But all things new grow old as time passes, and by the beginning of the 21st century the ravages of time had left their mark and technical advances brought fresh needs, and so the municipality decided on a complete renovation. The job took two years, and in 2004 a refurbished and brighter upper secondary school building with geometric glass domes was ready for use.

Entering the school, one is struck by the light reflected from the glass roof of the atrium and study hall, and by the open-plan layout. The classrooms have panes of glass facing inner balcony corridors also serving as light sources, in harmony with rows of windows overlooking the schoolyard. At the time of writing, Knut Hahn with its twelve study programmes is the

workplace for some seventy teachers and approximately 700 students. Beneath everything new, however, lie the foundations of the school built in 1969. Memories of classrooms and corridors linger in the mind of everyone who passed through the premises during those important years, when school contributes to so much more than basic education. Often, in a small town like Ronneby, with 28,000 residents, several generations of one and the same family have attended the same school. After a few decades, former pupils return as parents, bringing with them their own internal images of the school.

In “Reading Educational Spaces: The Photographs of Paulo Catrica,” Grosvenor et al. write that “schools are more than physical structures, in part because of the emotional depth of the experiences that take place in them”. In this text, a woman poignantly describes how obscure memories come back to her on a return visit to her old school:

I notice how my physical body remembers these spaces. Some changes disarmed me more than others and I find myself disoriented, as if just yesterday I was walking this path, and suddenly a new science building was plopped in my way. In the library, the old smoking room where I spent hours over my books is now a computer lab, and I walk into that room expecting to smell smoke, even though I have been told that smoking has been banned from the room for over ten years. One classroom building looks much taller than it should... Another still smells like it did 25 years ago. I see myself walking in a state of ‘two-ness’, with a double identity that is composed of past and present intertwined.

109 Including headmasters, administration and janitorial staff, the number rises to 120 employees. Another few hundred adult students and immigrants take classes in Swedish.

110 “The interpretation of educational spaces is never ‘pure’, because it is always read through the eyes of people with connected histories: past students and teachers who remember their experiences; future students and teachers who wonder what their experiences will be like; managers and policy-makers who evaluate the effectiveness or usability of facilities; historians who decipher meaning from each name carved on wooden desk, frayed textbook, or own school map”. Grosvenor, Lawn, Nóoova, Rousmaniere and Smaller (2004), 327.

111 Ibid.
From the window by my desk on the upper storey, I can look out over the study hall beneath one of the glass domes. The headroom and the large amount of floor space inspire a stately, almost sacred ambience. The place is full of life and movement, with students working, either in groups or individually, on various tasks. They sit round tables and computers forming islands in the middle of the concourse. The quotation above made me wonder how present-day students and teachers experience our common workplace and what memories will accompany them into the future. But how do you gain access to the inner worlds of individuals?

Arno Schmidt posed the question: “Why not think of life as a chain of photographs and reading its text as if turning over the pages in a photo album?”. He claims that visual studies could provide new answers to the question of how people perceive their surroundings. Other scholars too have written about the potential for using images to articulate experiences of school. Photographs can elicit things words cannot, especially if age or language level makes it hard for the communicator to express himself. In his article “Finding a Silent Voice for the Researcher: Using Photographs in Evaluation and Research,” Rob Walker mentioned the importance of not shutting our eyes to visual studies as fruitful and viable in our quest for answers.

Traditionally, though, the emphasis of academic research has been on the written word. Schratz and Steiner-Löffler acted on these thoughts in their study of younger children’s experience of school, asking them to use photographs and verbal remarks to answer the question: “Where in school do you feel good, where not and why (not)?”. Their study presupposed that pupils regarded the feel-good factor as an important criterion of a good school. They soon became aware of the power of visual studies when they set about analysing the pictures the

112 Schratz and Steiner-Löffler (1998), 236.
pupils had taken, and their findings were presented in a guide for the benefit of other teachers and researchers.116

I wanted to try the method out in my own study, and since I wanted to find answers to the same questions, I chose to almost follow in their footsteps, with the additional intent of studying the most popular workstations. I also included teachers in my study, to see whether their answers had anything in common with those given by the pupils. Obviously, workstations are perceived differently from the respective points of view, since teachers are allotted a desk in a workroom, whereas pupils are free to find their own, informal arenas in school. I began by asking eight pupils and two teachers to photograph three places each with their mobile phones and to comment on their selections. After a few days, it became clear that a number of the pupils would not have time to participate in my study, due to homework demands, and so in the end my study came to include five pupils and four teachers. I asked my informants to photograph:

1. Their most common workplace.
2. The nicest place for taking a short break.
3. A place where, for some reason, they disliked being.

All participants in the study are anonymous, and all but two were over 18 at the time of the study. Those under 18 obtained parental permission to take part.117 As in the above mentioned article “Photographs of Paulo Catrica”, all the pictures are devoid of people, so that the beholder can fill them with their own experiences and think themselves into the pictures, which I imagine is made easier by avoiding an over-emphatic date stamp.118 Another motivation for using unpopulated ima-

116 Ibid.
118 “[The] photographs drew attention to themselves straightaway, they did not include people, either looking at the camera or being observed. They appeared to be calm…reflections on the spaces of the school which observed everything – the floor, the ceilings, the way that paper lies everywhere, the cupboard, the arrangement of the rooms, display and notices, and surfaces. Their tranquil reflection allowed the viewer to see the spaces of schooling […].”
ges was purely practical, in that I could then use the pictures without having to ask the people in them for permission.\textsuperscript{119}

When the pictures started coming in, I felt at first that I was only seeing close-ups of tables and chairs. Additionally, the pupils tended to comment their pictures in very few words, and I began to wonder whether the study could yield any relevant information. But when I assembled the pictures in various combinations, patterns began to emerge. I discovered that it wasn’t classrooms that the students regarded as their most common workstations but rather the benches in corridors and study hall to which they returned as soon as lessons were over. This implied that the students were constantly in a place where they had a great deal of sound and movement around them. These are central spaces that everyone has to pass through several times over the course of a school day. The high sound level was in fact a recurrent theme of their descriptions.\textsuperscript{120}

The teachers’ workstations looked more personal and appealing. As a rule, the teachers shared workstations with several others. All but one reported a great deal of rushing in and out of the workrooms and an intermittently high sound level. The exception may be due to the fact that respondent shared a workroom with only two other colleagues. Two of the respondents described how they

\textsuperscript{119} Wiles et al. (2008), 41.

\textsuperscript{120} For more about the history of (listening and) sound in school, cf. Burke and Grosvenor (2011).
tried to shut themselves off by putting on headphones and turning their backs to the rest of the room. Being able to look out the window from one’s workstation was another means of increasing concentration. The same stratagems were mentioned by a couple of the students as a recourse for working undisturbed, but the effect must have been harder to achieve in their case, given that they were sitting in communal spaces.

“Sound” is a word which, one way or another, is mentioned by all the participants in this study. The teachers wrote that they would rather sit by a window in the corner commanding a view of the room and its entrance. Several of them referred to the importance of feeling secure in their workplace. One lit a small candle to make the place cosy, and others wanted their books and material within easy reach. Teachers and students alike described the importance of a comfortable chair, a good desk, benches, books and computers at the workstation. The teachers, as a rule, were satisfied with the material, whereas the students often stated that their chairs were hard or uncomfortable and that there was too much distance between different types of work material.121

Unpopular places were invariably described and explained in terms of subjective sensory impressions and feelings, something Grosvenor previously observed, showing that their roots extended far back in time and varied according to purpose.122 One girl described the science department as chilly and wrote that she always felt cold there, which made it hard for her to concentrate. A boy described the same area as cold and boring. All this surprised me, for I had believed it to be a popular spot. There are always students sitting there working when you pass by. It should be added that the area’s heating system had been playing up for some weeks preceding the study, which may have influenced the answers given. A recurring problem in studies like this is that seemingly insignificant, momentary details can bulk large in the mind of the informant. Another explanation may be that these two students are taking the social science programme and are thus casual visitors who perhaps do not feel at home on the premises. The answers may also

121 Cf. McGregor (2003), 360.
betoken an element of rivalry between study programmes. One of the girls, taking the science programme, referred to the same department as a place where she gladly took short breaks, because her classmates were there.

Two students who did not know each other photographed the same furniture arrangement in one of the corridors as an uninviting place. Both of them described a high sound level and general hustle and bustle as their reason for not liking the spot. A female teacher mentioned the toilets as malodorous and inhospitable. A male teacher disliked the teachers’ corner in the school cafeteria because it was difficult to eat there in peace and quiet. The corner is located at one end of the students’ dining hall, a large room with tubular steel furniture producing scraping noises whenever a chair is moved. An older female teacher disliked the computer rooms, which she associated with computer glitches and lessons getting derailed. A male teacher disliked being in a certain classroom because it felt darker and colder than the others, which tended to make the students feel sleepy. That teacher, incidentally, was the only one to refer to classrooms as unpopular places (if computer rooms are to be counted as classrooms). One boy disliked being in the cafeteria, because it was crowded and noisy, at the same time as two other students and a teacher referred to the cafeteria as a favourite haunt for the very same reason, i.e. because it was full of people and movement. Could it be inferred that those who feel shy or vulnerable deem such spaces discomfiting? None of the participants, however, complained of being unhappy at the school; they accepted the situation and in all other respects appeared to like it there.123

As mentioned earlier, the cafeteria and the science department were also popular with those who felt secure there and had their friends there. The two female teachers referred to the library as a comfortable place. They read periodicals and browsed through newly acquired books, but they liked it above all because it was one of the few quiet spots the school had to offer. A boy taking the technology programme was happiest in the computer room, where he had access to IT and the company of friends. A boy taking the music and performing

123 Ibid., 675–687.
arts programme preferred being in the music room, to write music or practice different instruments together with classmates. The two male teachers preferred taking their breaks in the workroom. Breaks rarely coincide, and all the teachers expressed a wish for change, so they could spend them together with their colleagues.  

![Image of the library](image_url)

**Figure 5. The library.**
Photo by female teacher (2012).

**Concluding Remarks**

The aim of the present study has been to identify what pupils and teachers think and feel about everyday school life by testing a visual method. All the participants used words expressing sensory experiences and the high sound level was a common recurrent theme. Cold places and dark rooms were also mentioned as significant factors in how they felt in specific situations. This could of course be easily remedied by rearranging the furniture, putting socks on chairs and opening up more small group rooms. More relevant is to not ignore the power of the senses in school.

124 “Staffrooms are also distinctive spaces where professional culture and (gender) power relations are played out... ‘Here you tend to come across any remember of staff and the conversations tend to either a common “moan” about a topic of general concern...or a joke’ (Head teacher of expressive art, Kingbourn)”. In McGregor (2003), 361.
According to their submissions, the majority of pupils attending Knut Hahn feel content at school. But in this study we can see new things that are essential to note. Two of the teachers taking part were so inspired by the method that they will replicate it in their classes as part of a workplace health and safety course.

Visual studies can thus undoubtedly reveal interesting new angles of approach to day-to-day school life. If we act on students’ and teachers’ sensory experiences, the feeling of at-homeness may be enhanced and the learning environment made more efficient. In the long term, this kind of responsiveness can make our school careers a positive experience and a memory to be cherished. The visual method is a key granting access to inner spaces, an effective and viable manner of sharing in other people’s actual experience of school. Finally, I take the liberty of borrowing a quote with which Grosvenor begins one of his articles.125 A quote that surfaced in my consciousness with increasing intensity while conducting this study:

‘Open it and sniff it. What do you smell?’ Morandi inhaled deeply... ‘This would seem to be the smell of a barracks.’ Montesanto in his turn sniffed. ‘Not exactly,’ he answered. ‘Or at least not so for me. It is the odour of elementary school rooms; in fact, of my room in my school... I understand that for you it’s nothing: for me it’s my childhood’.126

125 Grosvenor (2012).