

# PHOTOVOICE AS DATA COLLECTION METHOD IN A COLLABORATIVE, VISUAL, PRACTICE-ORIENTED INQUIRY ON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In this paper the arguments for a research theme and a specific research option are discussed. Since pros and cons towards junior high schools in the Flemish educational landscape are subject of widespread policy and societal debates, this research will immerse in the educational processes of five schools, who are implementing practices and ideas of the educational reform in the first grade of secondary education. The strengths and concerns of artefacts, processes and educational practices contributing to a successful junior high school are being mapped by the use of photovoice. Pupils, teachers and school leaders are asked to take a picture as an answer to concrete research questions. Critical dialogue is enabled through focus groups where these photos are brought in by the (young) photographers. By making visible the experiences of all school members, all can have a voice in the exploration and understanding of successful ideas and processes of schooling. Therefor this photovoice research functions as an emancipatory research method.

Keywords: photovoice, junior high schools, educational reform, practitioner research

## 1 FLEMISH JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS AND / IN THEIR CONTEXT

### 1.1 Why this research?

A reform of the organization and the curriculum of the first grade of secondary education - called junior high school or middle schools (*'eerstegraadsschool'*) age 12-14 years-, in Flanders will have its take off from 1st of September 2019. From that moment, each individual school will be stimulated – or even urged - to reform their own pedagogical project accordingly to the curriculum targets defined by the Flemish government. At the same time all schools have to reorganize their time tables, study subjects and school structure. Unfortunately, there is not yet a consensus among the educational stakeholders on the direction in which this educational innovation process should lead. The perpetual attempts to reform Flemish secondary school are accompanied by a profound societal discussion on the degree in which secondary education must be developed: either as selective schooling or as comprehensive schooling. One of the main questions in this debate is: should the age of a determining study choice be postponed? Or do we find it more admirable to orient learners at the age of 12 to a specific training and homogeneous classrooms?

Both educational practitioners and researchers have been working for decades on developing education systems worldwide for one or the other model. In a nutshell: Flemish proponents of the

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selective system argue that an early selection and an early study choice ('early tracking') prepares students better for the labour market or for study success in higher education (Duyck and Anseel 2012). Concerning this argument, a selective school system (e.g. a grammar school) provides economic profit and enables learners to specialize on an early age. Strong vocational study programs benefit from long-term professional activities during school time. Within the same educational system, strong cognitive oriented study subjects benefit from an early start of their academic curriculum. Teachers in a selective school system also often prefer an early selection because it enables them to work with more homogeneous class groups. In addition, motivating students is easier in a chosen subject of training, therefore early tracking is a logical consequence.

Proponents of the comprehensive system, however, stress the importance of equal opportunities and a long(er) period of a common curriculum for all pupils. Since the choice for a certain study subject is also determined by the circumstances in which children grow up (family, home language, neighbourhood, community, etc.) this determinant choice must be postponed for as long as possible (Boone and Van Houtte 2013, Goosen and Boone 2017). In mixed groups, low-performing pupils benefit from working with high-performing students because of peer effects and – however less – vice versa. Therefore a broad orientation in all available choices or possible interest domains should be preferred (Nicaise et al. 2014). Scandinavian countries took a leading role in the development of such a comprehensive education system: pupils are engaged in an equal, common curriculum for up to 16 years and get top scores on PISA tests (Sahlberg 2011).

Not only did 'left egalitarians' but also agencies like OECD argue for this so called late tracking because it ameliorates the performances: it endeavours a broad participation and therefore indirectly ensures economic profitability (OECD 2012). Based on PISA data, Dronkers summarizes this trade-off: in education systems with late selection, the social inequalities are the smallest, while this is not at the expense of a lower average performance of the strongest. High-performing students can also learn at a high pace. Contrarily, early selection at the beginning of secondary education is advantageous for children of the upper class and disadvantageous for students from the lower class (Dronkers 2015).

An additional argument to investigate (the reform of) junior high schools, is educational freedom. Given the Belgian educational context, freedom of education or educational freedom is juridically clearly defined and constitutionally enshrined in article 24. According to the Belgian Constitution, educational freedom encompasses (1) The right or freedom for citizens to start and organize a school (active freedom). Every citizen has the right to establish and create a school, the so-called freedom of establishment ("oprichtingsvrijheid"); the right to organize a school according to one's philosophical, ideological, religious and/or pedagogical vision - the freedom of orientation ("richtingsvrijheid"); and the right to manage a school without governmental interference, to develop a pedagogical project and to act upon this particular pedagogical, religious or ideological vision - the freedom of organization ("inrichtingsvrijheid"); (2) The right for parents and pupils to choose a school (passive freedom) congruent with their religious, ideological or pedagogical view. They can even opt for home-schooling (Belgian House of Representatives 2014, De Groof and Willems 2018, Glenn and De Groof 2012, Veny 2010). Although this might sound thought-out, educational freedom is a persistent theme in juridical, political and policy discussions and also in debates about the funding of schooling and the way education has to be governed and controlled (Wouters, Geerinck, and Lievens 2017). Because of these ongoing discussions, the current reform involves a considerable responsibility of each individual (junior high) school.

Given the actual tensions and the existing diverse educational landscape in Belgium, one would expect more (collaborative) research on educational concerns, on its trade-offs and on pedagogical opinions related to this reform, however, this is not the case.

## 1.2 What is the central focus?

Since the actual need for a systematic inquiry into junior high schools, the Teacher education department of the University Colleges of Leuven-Limburg (UCLL) funded a research project dedicated to this topic. This project does not aspire to write an additional meta-review nor to formulate a definitive answer on this educational issue. On the contrary, this collaborative and visual research project admires to contribute substantially to the understanding of the main actors and artefacts of junior high school education and how their actors are dealing with the constitutional right to develop a renewed pedagogical project. Junior high schools take thus a key position in this project and within them, the members of the school – students, teachers and school leaders and the (possible) artefacts that reinforce or hinder the education of the curriculum. The opinions, insights and considerations of the creation of an entirely new pedagogical project embody the core of the inquiry. As it comes to defining the central research question, this practice-oriented research investigates which artefacts, processes and educational practices contribute to a successful junior high school. Therefore, this practitioner research will immerse in the educational processes of five junior high schools, who are developing into a more comprehensive junior high school. Thereby, ‘successful’ is defined as a school (1) in which learners manage to achieve the prescribed learning outcomes; (2) in which learners and teachers develop a positive self-esteem (well-being) and (3) a school that invests strongly in positive orientation of learners in their school curriculum.

In order to document the current changes in the Flemish educational landscape, five junior high schools (‘eerstegraadsscholen’) were selected. The participating schools were recruited on the efforts they make to reform their school system: (1) they take arrangements to reduce the impact of social factors on school success; (2) they invest in the wellbeing of their pupils and teachers; (3) they work on the orientation and self-regulation of their learners and (4) they implement more process and student oriented methods of evaluation. This reform often stands for another organization of the lesson table, for example through a differentiated approach, flexible learning pathways, clustering of courses and learning subjects and the deployment of project based learning. The final selection of the partner schools is based on the additional criteria of a balance between regions and school communities and on the stage of innovation (just started with a new pedagogical project, in the middle of a process or involved in such an innovation for at least five year).

Mapping teaching and learning processes and its meanings and impact requires a participatory, practice-oriented inquiry. Therefore, in this research project each partner school will be investigated on three levels, each involving specific data collection method:

1. On the first level, photovoice (Wang and Burris 1997, Codesal et al. 2017) is used as a data-collection method to gather, share and deepen the ideological, practical and eventual opinions, considerations and critical remarks of the stakeholders. This is done by the members of the school – pupils, teachers and school leader(s), who take pictures and discuss these pictures in focus groups. The research project requires four photovoices in each of the five schools: two with pupils and two with teachers and school leader(s). The first photovoice maps the general (dis)appreciation of teachers and school leader(s) towards certain artefacts, processes and practices in their school. The second photovoice focuses on the metacognition of learners and their capability to make well-considered choices concerning their learning process. These photovoices deliver not only qualitative data but also allow schools to work on the quality assurance of their school (improvement).
2. Secondary, the research team engages in collaborative research. Together with the school, the researchers try to narrow down the gap between theory and practice. Since photos are not the only means to envision a successful, the researchers of the university college, explore - together with the participating teachers - literature, resources and good practices and embed insights from desk research into school practice. Through experimenting, the partnership will

clarify as precisely as possible which artefacts, processes and educational practices contribute to a successful junior high schools.

3. Eventually the research team will measure the school performances of learners, by taking a selection of validated survey-tests, called Parallel tests, developed by an academic partnership of a university and the Ministry of Education. These tests are taken at age 14 on the bridge between the second and the third year of secondary education. The tests are subject-bounded and measure the acquisition of the final objectives of the first grade of secondary school A-stream. The results of these tests are at school level and not at the level of the individual: the results of the particular school are situated towards average performances of Flemish schools with a similar pupil population (Janssen 2017).

Since the project consists of five case studies, the scope of this research is limited in time, place and activities (Harrison et al. 2017). It might seem not obvious to generalize conclusions on the basis of these five schools. However, this mixed methods approach allows the researchers to meet the rather ambitious research question. This design delivers on the one hand a detailed description of the processes, artefacts and practices and on the other enables pattern forming. Because of the broad and in-depth analysis of certain processes, this research provides insights that can be, and most probable will be, relevant and applicable to other schools (Flyvbjerg 2006).

## **2 WHY PHOTOVOICE?**

Photovoice as a data collection method is a practice in which members of a community identify, represent and enhance certain processes by taking, sharing and discussing photos (Wang and Burris 1997). This critical dialogue in small inquiry groups delivers in depth insights into ongoing processes. In this research design there were four main arguments which pleaded to choose for photovoice as a research method.

First, photovoice enables people to record and reflect on their communities' strengths and concerns. By connecting images and words to events, the members of the community are enabled to prioritize their concerns and discuss their problems and solutions, which contributes to the empowerment and emancipation of the participants. The experiences of the "unknown" are made visible (Hannes and Parylo 2014). That is why photovoice is often used in emancipatory contexts and finds its roots in critical pedagogy. The discussion on the images facilitates showing ownership of the participants. On a second level, photos taken by participants contribute to a better understanding of the process. They deliver in depth material and unique data (Codesal et al. 2017). Thirdly, photovoice promotes critical dialogue about important issues through large and small focus groups talks on photographs. This sharing can deepen and broaden the interpretation of their experiences. Participants also create a common understanding. In the end, photovoice is interesting for advocacy. Images can be a powerful way to reach policymakers and other stakeholders. From this point of view, photovoice can offer a new perspective on the discussion in secondary education and the junior high schools. In short, photovoice gives an opportunity to generate new, different, rich, contextualized knowledge (Prosser and Loxley 2008, Wang and Burris 1997).

Pupils and teachers are often portrayed as objects or implementers of a policy (Koro-Ljungberg 2014). Photovoice involves them as active agents for change. The analysis of the pictures and the conversations will lead to evidence-informed policy recommendations. In this process, images can be as much as or (even) more persuading than words. This is a shift from a researcher-centred construction to those of the participants (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). This does not imply that participants have full responsibility for the technical research development, nor that the participants should be active research partners at any stage of the research process, but that they influence the direction and content of the research in different ways. The participants have the freedom to create

their own agenda. The researcher does not have complete control over the creation of the photos or over the sense of meaning associated with the visual material because of different reasons. First, participants keep control over the data collection. Second, they are (co-) owner of the research material. Space is also created for negotiation about the use of the material. A fourth reason is that there is talk of building a process with regard to informed consent and the negotiation of power and control over the research. Lastly, time is given to adjusting or questioning the research questions. The unexpected results are not seen as problematic but constitute the enrichment and contextualization of the research material (Prosser and Loxley 2008).

### **3 HOW TO WORK WITH PHOTOVOICE?**

In our view, it is not enough to provide a camera to speak of participatory research. It is also about the way our participants can and want to deal with this instruction and want to share their opinions.

Although photovoices with pupils differ from photovoices with teachers and school leaders, there are a few parallels. In this research, we divided the photovoice methodology into four stages: (1) preparation, (2) dialogue, (3) registration and (4) analysis. During the preparation phase, pupils as well as teachers and school leaders received a concrete question. For instance the learners had to portray the question: “what stimulates you to learn?”. During the focus group conversations we connected the photos with their school: how does your school facilitates you in a way that stimulates you to learn? Weaknesses and strengths of processes, school structures, artefacts and curriculum materials were mapped.

During the preparation phase, pupils also received an introduction into smartphone photography. By giving them some background on light effects, framing, selection, disturbing elements on the photo, line proportion, colour use and shape of the photo we tried to augment the quality of the photographs. Beside, pupils were trained to visualize learning processes, by discussing existing photos and quotes.

As it comes to the photovoice with the staff, we asked the teachers and school leaders to take two photos and to discuss the images during one hour. One of their chosen pictures shows the answer to the question: “which aspect(s) of the concept of our school do I translate successfully into practice?”. And one picture that shows: “with which aspect(s) of the concept of our school do I experience difficulties in practice?”. The concept of the school was specified in the following aspects: differentiated instruction; dealing positively and systematically with differences; growth mindset (Dweck 2017), with focus on feedforward and feedback (Hattie and Timperley 2007); schools connected to the city/urban location; longer lesson blocks; flexible organization; integrated artistic education; holistic evaluation, with attention to feedback and reflection; focusing on orientation and self-management.

In order to facilitate the conversations on the pictures, we worked with a few techniques, adapted from Ritchhart, Church and Morrison’s Making thinking visible. A strong technique for introducing ideas and exploring ideas is the thinking routine: “See, Think, Wonder” (Ritchhart, Church, and Morrison 2011). During the first step, participants have to describe what they literally see on the photos. Then they have to talk about questions as: ‘What do you think about the photo?’ and ‘What is this picture telling about learning?’ In the end participants elaborated on: ‘What questions does the photo raise about learning?’

Pupils also invented a headline for an article in a newspaper. Another association-method that was being used is ‘The hand’. In the first stage, by pointing to the thumb, the next questions were being answered: What do you like about the picture? What happens in the photo? In this stage technical elements were discussed. The second stage, called the index finger, was about the following questions: What is the message of the photo? What does this picture teach you? The middle finger was connected to a focus on: What do you find less beautiful about the photo? Technical issues were again being discussed here. The ring finger was the last stage and was related to the following questions: Does the

message of the photo match with your vision on learning? Which personal experiences can you connect to this message?

Participants discussed the content and the quality of the photo; especially the light effects and the framing were popular subjects. Some photographs were rather plain: they imagined for example a computer, a piece of paper or groups at work. Others were rather figurative or metaphorical: they envisaged a plant, railway or old building. During the discussion, it is tremendously important that there is an open area to speak; that there is no given direction, no right or wrong.

## CONCLUSION

The use of photovoice in our practice-oriented based research is a powerful research method to grasp the opinions of the students, teachers and school leaders of the five schools that participate in the research projects. The photos that are being taken and discussed give insight into the strengths and concerns of practices and ideas related to the upcoming reform in junior schools. Mapping these practices and ideas can function as an inspiration to other schools who have to adapt themselves to the educational reform.

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