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Visual Studies and Democratic Spaces: Textual Evidence and Educational Research

The opening of this exhibition made up of photographs and drawings of ten years of schools in democracy in South Africa offers a vision of research in the social sciences that suggests that “textual evidence” is not simply limited to policy documents, interview data, focus groups and classroom observations, but rather encompasses what is the obvious – the visual – what different schools look like, what different classrooms look like, what voting/democracy looks like in a school in relation to, for example, the election of school governing bodies, and indeed what transformation looks like. These are *images* of schooling in the *face* of democracy. Visual culture, as we are seeing in the context of South Africa more generally, is coming to be regarded as space for interrogation and examination. A good example of this can be seen in Annie E. Coombs (2003) recent work, *Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*, and Faber and Van der Merwe’s (2003) recent work on portraits of families. In the context of research in education, I particularly like what Vinson and Ross (2003:25) have to say in *Image and Education*:

With respect to education and schooling, we must first accept that in the (post)modern era schools and classrooms – teaching, learning, assessment, policy, and so on – are visual, and that the relevant actors (teachers, students, administrators, parents, etc.) are meant to be seen. We must face, further, simply that watching and being watched does not automatically mean that we understand what is being watched – what and who we are watching and being watched by. We must accept that schooling, as an element of society, as a component of everyday life, is visual, both internally (in that pedagogical practices today frequently make use of TV, video tape, the Web, etc.) – and externally (in terms of the growth of ‘distance education,’ for example, but also vis a vis [sic] the fact that the public often confronts schooling in terms of both news and entertainment media accounts of its procedures and dominant/dominating policies and practices).

But in order to develop these understandings we need to draw on methodologies and approaches to research that give us the tools for exploration – something that we find in the work of Visual Studies (which encompasses areas such as Visual Sociology and Visual Anthropology), along with some aspects of Media Studies and Arts-Based Inquiry. These include work in at least four broad and overlapping areas that all have something to say about democracy in and of itself:

- photography/drawing and participatory methodologies;
- representation/representivity;
- photographs and research as social change; and
- photographs, memory and the archival object.

Photography/drawing and participatory methodologies

Perhaps the most significant area in the context of a conference on ten years of democracy relates to the notion of visual studies and cultural production – and the ways that the visual can be a tool of democratisation in and of itself. The politics of language, access to education and so on should be making us more attentive to finding new ways to give voice to educators, learners, parents, managers and the various stakeholders in education. Some of the most significant work to emerge within the framework of research in the last few years is based on the idea of “photo voice”. (See also Wang, 1999; Wong, 1999; Mateo, Sanchez & Lykes, 2000; Lykes, 2001.) In some of my own work I have borrowed from Spence and Solomon’s (1995) *What can a woman do with a camera?* to formulate the questions “what can a teacher do with a camera?” or “what can a learner do with a camera?” or “what can a child do with a camera?” (Mitchell & Weber, 1999; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Weber & Mitchell, 2004). How can we, literally, see the world through the eyes of educators and learners? Probably some of the best known research in this area comes out of the work of Wendy Ewald, James Hubbard and others internationally who focus in particular on the everyday photographs of ordinary people. How does putting a camera in the hands of a learner or a teacher or a member of a school governing body help us to both construct and deconstruct schooling? What do playgrounds look like through their eyes? What do images of sexual harassment and gender-based violence look like? What happens when we ask members of the Representative Council of Learners to take pictures of leaders? How do photographs – and drawings (as we see on display here) – allow learners to “speak” and speak back?

Representation/representivity

A second area of research with Visual Studies addresses representation itself. What kinds of images of schooling exist in the public imagination? Within the United States, one of the most famous photographs of integration was a photograph of Clarissa T. Sligh, a schoolgirl whose photo appeared in newspapers around the world as emblematic of crossing over into a racially desegregated school. As Sligh now writes all these decades later (cited in Willis, 1994), it is important to understand now what it means to “work with” personal and public memory. In the history of South Africa there are famous photographs – the poignant image of Hector Peterson, the images of the long snaking lines of voters waiting to cast their vote in April 1994. What images, though, do we have of schools and learning? Photographs of the elections of school governing bodies, images of multi-grade classrooms, farm schools, integrated classrooms, first assemblies, disability and access, and so on?

Here we can also draw on the recent work on fatherhood in this country. What are the dominant images of fatherhood (endnote 1), and how can an understanding of the dominant images along with “new perspectives” help us to look for images that disrupt and suggest change? A group of young people at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, for example, have been involved in photographing teenage fathers. What are the images of HIV/AIDS? What is visible and visual in a culture and what is invisible? Gabrielle Griffin’s (2000) work, for example, talks about the ways in which the highly visual culture of AIDS in the United States in the 1980s became invisible in the 1990s. Why and what can we learn that we could apply in South Africa. As Martin (2004) recently posed it, “How can visual culture help us understand the face of AIDS?” Gideon Mendel’s (2001) very powerful work, *The Broken Landscape*, is a recent example in Southern Africa of contesting these invisible spaces. This suggests that media analysis itself is an important component of re-examining schooling and visual culture.

Photographs and research as social change

We need to think about the ways in which this work can be seen to link up to what Schratz and Walker (1995) refer to as “research as social change”. Visual Studies – the uses of photography, drawings, video documentary, visual mapping and so on – opens up the possibility for accessible and democratic viewing spaces. I think, for example, that an exhibition like this would work in its current state in a petrol station/community centre, and in so doing invite any viewer to comment, to imagine, to “access” a mode of inquiry. And while it is true that we need to think more about visual literacy and ways of seeing, participation in the project of accessing photographs and drawings does not rest solely on print literacy. Anyone can view, comment and arrive at new insights.

For example, recently we conducted a study in Swaziland of sexual violence in and around schools. Seventh-grade learners in a rural school, “armed” with cameras, took pictures of what they saw as being “safe” and “unsafe” spaces. Their teachers, when they saw the exhibition, were surprised at how frequently toilets appeared. They commented that they had not thought about the ways in which the apparent isolation of the toilets actually made them dangerous for girls. When this same exhibition was shown to UNICEF workers, they too were surprised but began to explore ways of incorporating into their work on the physical environment of the school attention to sexual violence, an area that had previously only be part of the Child Protection Unit. New alliances were formed. The visual in these instances serves as both a “voicing” technique and a change space.

In a project in the Free State, learners were asked to “draw gender violence”. A video documentary, *Unwanted Images: Addressing Gender-based Violence in the New South Africa* (Mak & Mitchell, 2000), was produced. It has been used with many audiences to raise awareness about the extent of school-based violence from the point of view of learners).

In another project, one of the postgraduate students with whom I am working at the University of KwaZulu-Natal recently explored the “contested” space of “picture day” and class line-ups in his classroom – and in particular the common practice of lining up boys and girls separately. As he pointed out, all of the group work that his fifth graders do is in mixed-sex groupings, so why should they be separated on picture day? When he asked the school photographer to “hold off” on the separated groups and to arrange the students according to height, the photographer suggested that he, the teacher, first get permission from the principal. In the end the picture was a new configuration made up of a mixed group of boys and girls organised according to size. The teacher in question said he took it up to his staff room to demonstrate the ways in which photographs might disrupt some of our everyday assumptions about gender. For him, then, it was research on gender-in-action – or research as social change.

In another project that we have just started also at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, we are exploring the ways in which educators and community health workers, both working with the same young people and with the same community in addressing HIV/AIDS, might begin to “learn together” through a photography project. Again the idea is that the photographs produced within the project are only part of the process, and it is the “making public” that offers new spaces for dialogue and change (endnote 2).

Photographs, memory and the archival object

Finally, a fourth area within Visual Culture looks at the notion of photographs as objects. In the growing body of work on photographs as objects, we might look to what Annette Kuhn (1995) describes as “acts of memory and imagination” or what bell hooks (1994, 1995) talks about in relation to “collecting loss” – nostalgia, looking back to look forward. What gets photographed and why? What doesn’t and why? Who takes the photographs? Where do photographs get stored? The body of work within cultural materialism has now begun to identify key features of individual and collective memory. From the work on family photo albums – particularly the work of Jo Spence (1986) and Martha Langford (2001), but including the current exhibition in Pretoria on Nine Families – to the idea of what gets stored, where and so on makes us begin to examine the politics of the photograph as object. Within school photography there are a number of different initiatives world wide – the school photograph and the class picture as “a lasting impression”.

I would argue, as would others, that we need to pay more attention to different types of public archives and collections. Where do these photographs reside? In a country where education is seen as a key tool for transformation, we might know a great deal about what the face of that transformation really looks like or how it will be remembered if we began to be systematic in our approach to collections. Again, it is only in these systematic approaches that we begin to understand how we construct our own histories of schooling. Already, for example, we might ask where are the faces of ordinary teachers, principals and school governing bodies? Where are the faces of teachers who are no longer alive as a result of the pandemic? Should all schools and districts not have their own archives? How do these archives become central to

the way that a school or other educational institution begins to study itself?

Conclusion

Photographs, drawings and other forms of visual culture should be regarded as textual evidence in our study of ourselves and our institutions. I suggest that we see exhibitions such as this one as helping to expand our repertoire of methodologies in educational research and as helping to expand the repertoire of possibilities for new perspectives and new forms of participation in the processes of research: changing images within a democratic process and democratic practices within new spaces for inquiry.

Endnotes:

1. I refer here to the recent work of Linda Richter of the HSRC and the visual images of the Fatherhood Project.
2. Here I refer to an NRF-funded project, 'Learning Together: Towards an Integrated Participatory Approach to Youth, Gender and HIV/AIDS Interventions in Rural KwaZulu-Natal Schools' (PI, Naydene DeLange with C. Mitchell, R. Moletsane, J. Stuart, T. Buthelezi, M. Taylor, F. Mazibuko).

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Useful websites

Centre for Arts-informed Research, University of Toronto,
<http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~aresearch/airhome3.html>
Image and Identity Research Collective, www.Iirc.Mcgill.Ca

3. Albie Sachs Justice of the Constitutional Court

The Photo Exhibition was officially opened by Justice Albie Sachs.