The Visual Differences of the Classroom Walls in Chilean Primary Schools

Luis Errázuriz and Carlos Portales

ABSTRACT

In a world increasingly saturated with images, the visual aesthetic dimension should play a more important role in the educational processes. Furthermore, classroom walls could be considered valuable resources to introduce visual literacy among children and teachers. However, Chilean educational policies tend not to pay much attention to visual culture in the classroom. Hence, the selection of visual images displayed on classroom walls as well as the way they are exhibited should be more carefully thought through. Under the assumption that visual resources are pedagogically significant elements, the present investigation examined the images displayed on the classroom walls of the first year of primary schools in the district of Peñalolén in Santiago, Chile. We present a comparative analysis of visual environments found in different administrative types of schools (municipal, subsidised and fully private schools), using a qualitative method, as well as a quantification of the sample schools. The analysis shows that inequality between types of schools reproduces in images, favouring private schools in aspects such as the degree of planning of the visual environment, student participation in terms of production, the aesthetic quality of the images and its iconographic variety.

KEYWORDS

classroom visual images, education inequalities, primary school environments, everyday school aesthetics, visual culture

Introduction

The following article summarises the findings of a research project about visual culture and everyday aesthetics in the classrooms of primary schools that are located in the commune of Peñalolén, Santiago, Chile [1]. The main questions that guide this investigation are: what kinds of images are displayed on the walls of first year primary classrooms? And, what differences can be observed in their visual culture according to the different administrative types of schools (municipal, subsidised and private)?

The above questions are not only relevant due to their pedagogical and social implications, but also because of their effect, in one way or another, enriching or impoverishing the school environment and its everyday aesthetic. It is important to remark that these dimensions often tend to be neglected in Chilean education. However, the quotidian visual environment has reached considerable importance in the last decades due to investigations carried out in countries like Mexico, the USA, the UK, Finland and Canada. Fields of study such as everyday aesthetics have reclaimed the aesthetic value of the daily environment and its influence in many areas of our lives (Mandoki 1994; Saito 2007). Furthermore, Arto Haapala (2005) argues that this not only affects individuals separately, but also the relations between them. Following this argument, the aesthetic configuration of the classroom would seem to be significant for the routine of separate individuals and also for the relationships they establish as a group within the learning environment.

In a similar manner, the contemporary approach to visual culture and its field of studies concurs with everyday aesthetics in terms of the importance given to the visual experiences that occur outside our 'structured instances of looking such as films,

television, art galleries and photography'. Thus, both include images found in everyday life such as visual elements displayed on the walls of classrooms (Mirzoeff 1999, 7).

Following this line of thought, in relation to schools, Eric Margolis (1999) proposes the existence of a visible but hidden curriculum, consisting of daily visual elements displayed within the classroom, which is, however, implicit as part of auxiliary learning devices, and therefore often overlooked. Despite its functioning on an implicit level, Margolis points out that the visual, but hidden, curriculum has a significant, unconscious influence on the school experience.

Arguments of this sort reinforce the need for a more serious consideration of the visual cultures displayed in classrooms, not only concerning their educating role but also with regards to how they affect individuals who inhabit the school space on an everyday basis. Furthermore, they represent a key educational challenge for the development of visual literacy in a world increasingly saturated with visual images, where children need a higher level of awareness and visual stimulus to analyse and interpret their environment.

Hence, primary school teachers, particularly art educators, should play a more significant role in developing students' critical approaches towards their school environment and its visual culture. For example, teachers could encourage children to approach the school's visual culture– according to their level of cognitive development– through basic questions related to the production of the image, the image itself and their audiences (Rose 2001). Bearing in mind this challenge, it is necessary in Chile– and perhaps in other countries– to expand the aims of art education towards new pressing challenges. Nowadays, it is not enough to understand art education concerned only with the development of self-expression, creativity and the teaching of art history; a more critical and responsible attitude should be promoted towards the school's visual environment.

The present project investigated schools of diverse administrative types and socio-economic backgrounds, in order to get a panorama of the visual culture and everyday aesthetics in primary schools' classrooms. This research found interesting differences between the visual culture exhibited on the classroom walls of municipal, subsidised and private schools. It is important to consider that often these types of schools are closely related to the socio-economic position and payment capacities of students' families. Therefore, the difference among them is often not merely administrative, but it mirrors the social inequalities of Chilean society. There is an extended consensus within researchers that the above three types of educational institutions are strongly stratified by socioeconomic status. For example, more than 70 per cent of students of the three poorest quintiles go to to municipal schools (Drago & Parades 2011, 170). In other words Chile's social inequality reproduces itself in the educational system, where the more affluent sectors of society are educated in private schools and the poor in the municipal ones.

The visual differences between these types of schools are based on several aspects, such as the adequacy of the images to pedagogic purposes; the organisation and spatial disposition of the images on the walls; the participation of students in the production and decision of the pictures that are present in their classroom; the inclusions– and exclusions– of messages, topics and contents in the images; and finally the iconographic and stylistic variety.

Summing up, according to the evidences found in this research, it would seem that the difference in the quality of the visual surroundings of classrooms adds up to the long list of unequally distributed assets between private and public education in Chile, hence constituting another issue that might need to be considered in order to improve primary education.

Quality of education and school environment

Improving the quality of primary and secondary education is undoubtedly one of the most pressing issues that Chile currently faces. As in many countries, this is one of the most persistent aims of the Chilean public agenda. This challenge is taking place within the current context of an increase in the allocation of public resources for education (Chilean Government 2012).

The idea is to strengthen the role of the state and public education, in order to promote greater integration and social inclusion, from preschool to higher education. Thus, education has become a key objective of the government; its effects span political, economic, legislative and judicial realms.

Despite these efforts, reorganising the education system at a national level does not necessarily guarantee an improvement in the quality of education, as these reorganisational processes tend to focus mainly on enhancing the academic performance determined by standardised tests that measure knowledge and skills merely in the areas of mathematics and language (Eisner 2005). From a broader and more relevant cultural perspective, improving the quality of education should also involve a more balanced development in the curriculum of the various languages and ways of knowing (sight, sound, space, etc.), promoting arts education and a more conscious aesthetic experience of the visual school environment.

The need to achieve a more balanced curriculum is not new. Viktor Lowenfeld, already in 1947, criticised the formal education at the time, warning that 'the basis for the development of education rests on 28 letters and 10 numbers. These 38 abstract figures, letters and numbers are handled and shuffled from the first grade to the end of high school' (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1972). Six decades later, amid the cancerous growth of visual images as an unstoppable phenomenon (Mirzoeff 1999), Lowenfeld's criticism becomes more significant, as these numbers and letters remain fundamental learning resources in Chile, and many places worldwide.

This situation is not surprising; literacy efforts in the early grades of primary education obsessively focus on the learning process of basic literacy and mathematical operations, that is, mainly reduced to the manipulation of the '38 abstract figures'. Indeed, if we look at the classroom walls of primary schools– the core subject addressed in this article– we will be able to see that many of the images reproduce numbers and letters, so that the visual repertoire tends to be rather limited, and as such, it impoverishes the perception of the world. Therefore, while the visual experience outside school is a key dimension of children's and adolescents' everyday life, the development of visual literacy and a more conscious attitude towards the environment remains a very marginal experience in Chilean school education.

Paradoxically, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the diversity and quality of the repertoire of visual materials displayed in some Chilean schools was higher than now (Errázuriz 1993). Indeed, classrooms not only exhibited pictures and illustrations related to different ways of knowing– to support the teaching of language, natural sciences, fine arts, history, geography, religious education and art, among others (Orellana & Martínez 2010)– but there was also greater rigour in the design and layout of images.

However, as we shall see, nowadays the visual culture displayed on the walls of first year primary schools– in several of the investigated locations– does not seem to match what would be expected of a quality educational environment, a situation that is even more evident in the low-income public schools. If the educational and emotional potential of the walls were considered more seriously– as the main visual screen of the school institution– these spaces could respond more appropriately to the educational challenges of our time.

The school system in Chile

The current structure of the Chilean education system is largely a result of the education reform made by the military dictatorship in the late 1980s (Aedo & Sapelli 2001; Mizala et al. 2004), when decentralisation of primary and secondary education was established by the administrative dependency and financing method (OEI 2014). This decentralisation resulted in three types of schools:

1. Municipal schools, which are public and owned and financed mainly by the state with funds administered through municipalities (local governments or councils). Tuition is subsidised or free of charge.
2. 2. Subsidised private schools (hereafter referred to as subsidised schools), which are owned and managed by private entities but receive state funding through grants given per enrolled student. Tuition is free of charge in some cases, while in others it is paid by the families of the students through a shared funding scheme.
3. 3. Fully private schools (hereafter referred to as private schools) are fully privatised in terms of ownership, management and financing. Tuition is paid through monthly payments by students' families.

Most comparative studies show a significant academic gap between private and municipal schools. For example, there are important differences in the results obtained in standardised tests such as the national test for university selection (PSU) or the national test for the measurement of education quality in primary schools (SIMCE) (Aedo & Larra~naga 1994; Mizala & Romaguera 2000a; Núñez & Risco 2004; Muñoz & Muñoz 2013). In fact, the most recent results of the standardised test SIMCE in the commune of Peñalolén (see Table 1) reproduce this inequality, showing a difference of more than 10,000 points between the average municipal and private schools.

There are other important aspects which show great levels of disparity between these types of schools, such as the distribution of cultural capital, the formation of the teachers and the socio-economic segmentation rates among students (Guari 1998; Brunner & Elacqua 2003; Valenzuela 2006; Bellei et al. 2010; Errázuriz & Portales 2014).

This inequality extends also to the visual culture of classrooms. Thus, visual differences between municipal and private schools should also be considered in the national context as a response to a socio-economic and academic segmentation.

Methodology

The present research focuses on images that are displayed on the walls of the classrooms in first year primary schools (the students' age ranges from five to seven years old) in educational institutions located in the municipality of Peñalolén, Santiago, Chile. This area is characterised by their economic, social and cultural heterogeneity (Vasquez & Salgado 2009), thus providing a suitable sample by offering a cultural background that exhibits several similarities with the national reality. However, it must be observed that this research is a case study of schools located in that specific area and, therefore, it cannot be considered as a determinant and final representation of the whole country. For this reason this study intends to be a first glimpse into this topic hoping to eventually complete the picture with further research.

Table 1. Mean SIMCE 2014, Peñalolén

	Mean RBD (Score)	Number of schools
Municipal	11394,5714	14

Subsidised	17428,8077	26
Private	21544,9091	11

The sample corresponds to 11 classrooms, equivalent to the same number of schools: four municipal, four subsidised and three private.

As the principal methodology, a qualitative approach was used, with the following emergent categories of analysis:

- Purpose of the images, which relates to the function that presumably fulfils each image. There are mainly four functions: didactic, which refer to those images that show curricular educational content; formative, which promote habits, values and behaviours; decorative, which serve an ornamental function; and finally, advertising purposes, those that promote a brand or product.
- Provenance of the images, which refers to the institution or person that produced the images displayed on the walls of the classroom. This category helps to recognise the agents whose images have access to the classroom.

Afterwards, other categories of analysis were applied, which were generated according to aesthetic criteria such as: iconographic variety, contemporariness of the images, complexity of the visual elements, stylistic diversity and spatial arrangement.

In addition, as a complement, a quantitative classification was made according to two of the broad categories mentioned (purpose and provenance of the images). The quantitative information was collected, using a cluster sampling, from the 11 classrooms mentioned. These were selected randomly within three larger groups corresponding to the three aforementioned types of schools: that is, four classrooms from municipal schools, four from subsidised schools and three from private schools. Next, 140 images from each type of school were selected randomly; 140 images from municipal schools, 140 from subsidised schools and 140 from private schools, resulting in a total of 420.

Planning the visual environment

By observing the visual elements displayed on the walls it can be inferred that there is a significant difference in the degree of planning, selecting and editing of images displayed in the various types of schools surveyed. The above difference is principally noticeable between municipal and private schools (see Figures 1 and 2).

A lesser degree of planning in municipal schools can also be noticed in relation to the purpose that the images aim to fulfil. In the totality of schools surveyed, most of the images fulfil a didactic purpose; however, this didactic feature is more evident in the private schools than in their subsidised and municipal counterparts.

This is confirmed by the figures (see Table 2), which indicates that 87.1 per cent of the images in private schools have a didactic purpose, 76.4 per cent in the subsidised schools and 68.6 per cent in the municipal schools. In other words, private schools utilise most of their visual resources to serve a pedagogical function, finding less priority in decorative or formative functions such as promoting values or desired behaviour.

Table 2. Purpose of the images

Purpose %

	Decorative	Didactic	Formative	Advertising	Total
Municipal	12.1	68.6	17.1	2.1	100
Paid	7.1	87.1	5.7	0	100
Subsidised	11.4	73.6	15.0	0	100
Total %	10.2	76.4	12.6	0.7	100

With respect to decorative images, it should be noted that they are lacking in two of the three rooms visited in the private schools. However, within municipal and subsidised schools, these images reach 12.1 and 11.4 per cent, respectively. Considering that this type of visual element typically does not meet any specific curricular function, it is possible to infer that the greater scarcity or absence of decorative images shows a tendency for private schools to use the visual elements in a more intentional manner regarding the specific pedagogical contribution that each image fulfils.

Some municipal schools also have images solely for advertising purposes to promote brands or products. There is a wide variety of the products in these images that range from ice creams and soft drinks to tissues and confectionery. Most of them seem to be products that normally target children as the main consumers. These advertising images constitute 2.1 per cent of total images within municipal schools. The second type of advertising images serves a different purpose. They include company logos of products, but they meet educational or formative purposes. For example, there is a poster that promotes hygienic habits as the main message, but it also shows the picture of a tissue brand in the corner. Both types of these branded images total 5.7 per cent of the visual elements of the surveyed municipal schools. From a pedagogical point of view, it is very difficult to justify the presence of such visual elements in classrooms. However, it is possible to imagine that their presence is, in general terms, the result of the low degree of thoughtfulness in the selection of images in the municipal schools. In the case of the second type of advertising images, it could also be that, confronted with the lack of financial resources to acquire visual material, schools accept images produced by brands when they are associated with certain contents that can be exploited by the teachers as didactic resources. Yet this does not deny that the inclusion of these images in municipal schools (see Figure 3) seems to show significantly less rigorous standard for the selection of visual materials than in the private schools, even if this lack of rigor is motivated and justified by economic factors.

Another indicator that can help track the degree of planning in the visual environment of the classrooms is the layout or arrangement of visual elements on the walls. In this regard, we find again a significant difference in the mode of displaying images between municipal and private schools. In the former, images are usually deployed in a haphazard way; whereas, in the latter it is possible to observe a greater care in the manner they are arranged. This can be considered in at least two dimensions.

Firstly, images in private schools are generally grouped by topic and/or curricular content, keeping a noticeable distance between thematic clusters, while in municipal schools images with different themes or curriculum content often share the same space. Secondly, in private schools, the compositional design seems to be more intentional as the spatial organisation of groups of pictures are arranged either in geometric formations or with some degree of symmetry. This involves a consideration of certain aesthetic criteria, and hence planning, which guides the place and order of each image on the wall. On the contrary, in municipal schools it is barely possible to recognise clearly distinct clusters of images, as they are usually deployed randomly on any spot that the wall may offer.

Participation of teachers and students

Teachers' and students' involvement in the production of the visual materials of their classroom is relatively minor. Classroom images are mostly manufactured outside the school. As for the images produced inside the school, it should be noted that very few are produced by students. In 10 of the 11 facilities surveyed, most images are produced by external agents (i.e. 68.1 per cent of all visual elements are generated outside schools and introduced into the classrooms without modification, or modified in some detail within the school), while those generated within schools constitute only 31.9 per cent of the sample (see Table 3).

The images generated by the public sector– government, municipality, etc.– are found and repeated in all municipal facilities, though in an occurrence of not more than 3 per cent. These images usually promote public utility messages, for example, eating and hygiene habits, therefore they are images whose purpose is formative. In contrast, in private schools there are no pictures from this origin while only a few of subsidised schools are generated by government agencies.

On the other hand, it is also necessary to note that the images generated internally in private schools are mostly made by children as pedagogical exercises, while in municipal schools they are primarily produced by teachers for educational and decorative purposes; and in subsidised schools a balance between the two modes is observed. However, images produced by students constitute a very small amount in municipal schools, indicating the low degree of involvement they have in the construction of their environment.

This is not, however, always the case in private schools. In particular, one of them stands out because of the influence of the Rudolf Steiner system on its pedagogical practices. Hence, in this school (see Figure 4), nearly all of the images were created by students as regulated pedagogical exercises.

Table 3. Provenance of the images

	Provenance %			
	External	Internal	Intervened	Total
Municipal	40.7	35.7	23.6	100
Private	62.1	35.7	2.1	100
Subsidised	68.6	24.3	7.1	100
Total %	57.1	31.9	11.0	100

Content, messages and values

Another recurring purpose of the images is to promote behavioural role models that attempt to shape values, habits, civic knowledge, customs and beliefs (patriotic, ideological, religious), among other purposes closely related to the notion of the 'hidden visual curriculum', which promotes messages, values and ideologies through images and other visual elements inside the classrooms (Margolis 1999).

These formative images show a significant quantitative difference between municipal schools, where they represent 17 per cent of the sample, and private schools, in which formative images constitute only 5.7 per cent. This discrepancy reinforces the idea that

private schools prefer to invest their visual aids for teaching curricula rather than for instilling values or habits.

In municipal and subsidised schools it is possible to find greater diversity of content regarding formative messages, such as promotion of disciplinary values functional to what the school requires in terms of student behaviour (punctuality, perseverance, responsibility, respect, obedience, etc.) and values that are related to the environment and public interest campaigns (health and hygiene). There are also images that promote national and patriotic historical subjects, deployed in higher amounts in municipal schools, especially graphic illustrations of historical heroes such as Bernardo O'Higgins and Arturo Prat (see Figure 5). These images are practically non-existent in the private schools. Attention should also be focused on the absence of images of South American indigenous cultures, especially in municipal and subsidised schools. Although it should be noticed that there are such representations within at least one of the private schools.

Another type of formative image, mentioned above, promotes disciplinary habits within the classroom, such as sitting upright or asking to speak by raising a hand. These visual elements abound in municipal schools, as well as in the subsidised ones, while they are only found in one private school, being totally absent in the other two visited. This indicates different approaches regarding the disciplinary aspect of the school system, an aspect that seems to be much more important to emphasise in municipal and subsidised schools than in private schools.

The aesthetic dimension of images

The first impression one gets when entering many of the classrooms is a nagging feeling of oppression in front of walls oversaturated with flashy visual elements. However, this does not happen in all cases, since again the classrooms of private schools differ from municipal and subsidised ones, where it is common to find that almost the entire wall is covered with pictures. This excess, plus the aforementioned disorder, contributes to a visual experience characterised by saturation and distraction. In contrast, classrooms of private schools have a far more sober image positioning, allowing blank spaces in the walls and generating certain patterns in the arrangement of images. This allows a more deliberately oriented visual experience. In this sense, there is a planned organisation that directs the gaze to focus on specific parts of the classroom walls.

Although municipal and subsidised schools deploy a larger quantity of images, they exhibit a more restricted repertoire than the private schools, mainly in two aspects: firstly, in terms of diversity of styles; and secondly, in terms of their iconographic variety. In most classrooms of municipal and subsidised schools the prevailing mode of representation resembles a cartoonish style that seems to appeal to a presumably childish visual format, similar to the old animated films, such as those produced by Disney and Hanna-Barbera, among others. Another fairly common style in these facilities consists of drawings that try to mimic the graphical skills of children; the results are often quite precarious. Some of the private schools also contain images of this type; however, they are not the majority, as they reserve space for other kinds of imagery, such as abstract expressions, geometric representations, woodcarvings, indigenous and Eastern iconography, natural landscapes and others (see Figure 6).

Another interesting point is the anachronism of the images found in municipal and subsidised schools. This not only in terms of the aforesaid iconography and styles of children's cultural industry of other generations, but also because the material itself is quite old compared with the private schools, where the images are usually more contemporary (see Table 4).

Conclusion

Images displayed on classroom walls are seldom investigated as teaching resources. Yet, it seems that they not only play a considerable role in the teaching and learning processes, but also could be considered as a valuable resource for promoting visual literacy.

The present research shows substantial contrasts regarding the uses and abuses that are conferred to the wall through visual images, which marked an advantage of private schools over municipal schools, as the former unfolded visual resources noticeably more suitable to the pedagogical task than the latter. A more coherent approach to visual culture on primary schools' walls requires planning the classroom's visual environment. In other words, considering the importance of imagery as a pedagogical resource implies investing time and energy to imagine, reflect, ponder and/or discuss the selection and the arrangement of the pictures displayed on the walls. In this sense, the amount and quality of planning that is shown by municipal and subsidised schools is inadequate, and it subsequently remains an aspect that weakens– even impoverishes– education.

Table 4. Comparison of Types of Schools

	Municipal	Subsidised	Private
Presence of pictures on the wall	High	High	
Presence of didactic images	High	High	High
Presence of formative images	High	Low	Almost none
Presence of decorative images	Medium	Low	Almost none
Presence of advertising images	Low	None	None
Diversity of the repertoire of images	Low	Medium	High
Contemporariness of the pictures	Low	Low	Medium
Participation of teachers in the production of images	Medium	Low	High
Participation of students in the production of images	Low	Low	High

Evidence of an inadequate planning in this regard are the saturation of walls, the anachronism of numerous images and the inclusion of visual elements for purposes that do not appear to contribute at all to the creation of an interesting and meaningful pedagogical educational atmosphere in a school context, such as advertising images.

The content of the images, as transmission of values and ideological notions, is another dimension to be considered, taking into account its pedagogical function and relevance in the context of various educational projects, both in its explicit and implicit aspects. However, it is not enough to consider only images found on the walls. It is also essential to ponder the exclusion of visual elements, such as the Chilean and Latin-American artistic heritage, as well as indigenous cultures. The absence of those and other topics is particularly evident not only in the municipal schools, but also in most of the subsidised schools. This not only impoverishes the visual repertoire but it also replicates a restricted and exclusive notion of the national and continental identity.

On the other hand, the presence of images created by students varies significantly depending on the type of school. While in the municipal schools the presence of these

images is usually very limited, in the private schools the presence of student-produced images is considerably larger. The inclusion of such images is important, not only because it allows students to participate in the construction of their visual environment, but also because it encourages them to identify themselves with their educational space. Furthermore, it must be pointed out that the strong predominance of teachers' visual preferences in municipal schools implies, as a consequence, the ignoring of children's visual cultures, ideas, feelings and taste. Hence beyond promoting visual literacy concerning images displayed in classrooms walls, there is also an interesting challenge for art educators to encourage children to imagine and produce their own images, so they can be more involved in the creation of their own surrounding.

With respect to the iconographic and stylistic variety, it is clearly perceived that there is much more aesthetic diversity in private schools, for example, in the abstraction levels of the images or in the presence of multicultural symbols. A greater degree of diversity in the images can contribute to the literacy of students and improve their understanding, interpretation and appreciation of the visual elements that we encounter on an everyday basis.

These aesthetic–visual differences not only tend to reproduce symptoms of the educational inequality in Chile, but they are also significant when one considers that the classroom wall and the images that are displayed in it are an educational resource. It is for this reason that it is necessary to continue researching these issues raised in this article in more depth. For example it would be important to identify features to explain the 'visual cultural gap' between municipal and private schools. Perhaps some factors that might help to illuminate this are related to the teachers' aesthetic and cultural sensibilities. In Chile, it is quite common that most educators who work in municipal schools were also students in these types of schools. Therefore, it could be assumed that they tend to reproduce, where they teach, the visual environment they saw when they were students. However, in order to corroborate or dismiss this as well as other hypotheses it is important to promote specific research that focuses in this area.

Note

1. This article is part of the research 'Everyday aesthetics in schools of Peñalolén' (La estética cotidiana en establecimientos escolares de la comuna de Peñalolén), awarded with the National Fund for Scientific and Technological Research (FONDECYT: Fondo Nacional de Investigación Científica y Tecnológica), Project No. 1120058, (2012–2013).

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