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How to Capture Motivation in Pictures? Visual Methods in Research on Young People's School Life and Motivation

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Abstract

Voicing and exploring young pupils' motivation for learning is a central ambition within the field of education research, which can be strengthened through the use of visual methods. Based on a specific research project on motivation for learning and participation in and outside of school, this article explores both analytical opportunities and challenges concerning the use of visual material, such as everyday-life snapshots, as starting points for individual qualitative interviews focusing on perspectives, experiences, and everyday practices of secondary school pupils. The article shows that visual methods (participant-directed photo elicitation) in educational studies can provide access to situated narratives about both motivation and motives for (non)participation that can supplement methodological approaches such as observations and traditional qualitative interviews.

Keywords

visual methods, photo elicitation, motivation, learning lives, secondary school education research

Young People's (School) Life and Motivation

A young girl, Stine, describes her everyday life:

It's just school, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday and then work Saturday and Sunday. (Stine,¹ Year 10)

Stine is one of the pupils we followed in our study on young people's motivation for learning in secondary school. Several of the young people tell similar stories about school as "business as usual," a mass of routines in which they find it difficult to find ways to engage, become immersed, and concentrate in teaching contexts (Ziehe, 2004). Because *of course, you've always gone to school . . . school has always been there*, another pupil (Year 10), Karina, explains.

These perspectives recur in a number of recent studies, which indicate that motivation tends to decrease among older secondary school pupils in particular (DCUM, 2010; Nordahl et al., 2010; Rasmussen & Due, 2011). In the public debate, the idea that the school system is characterized by motivational challenges is often highlighted, but there is a lack of explanation as to why this is the case or proposed solutions to resolve the issue. On the basis of these debates on motivational challenges in lower secondary school, we studied young people's motivation for learning and participating at school, focusing our attention on how motivation or demotivation is created in *the*

interaction between lower secondary pupils and the school. However, the aim of the research project was also to understand the pupils' motivation for activities they were involved in outside of the school context (sports, hanging out with friends, etc.). We wanted to understand motivation in the different specific (learning) situations and contexts that the young people were a part of in school and everyday-life contexts, and in order to do this, we used visual methods. In the following we outline why.

Exploring Young People's Motivation Visually

Motivation is a difficult concept to study since it is intangible. How, then, can we observe motivation and how can we talk about it? Often, when we talk about motivation in everyday language, it is associated with individuals and discussed in quantitative terms, as something that one can have a lot of or (too) little of (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007), and motivational

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research has generally focused on few dominant concepts of motivation (Elliot, 2005; Maehr & Zuskoski, 2009). However, as mentioned above, we wanted to shift the focus to the situations and contexts in which motivation is created and explore motivational aspects more broadly. Thus, our approach is based on an understanding of learning and motivation as contextual and situated (Carr, 2001; Jackson, 2006; Lemnos, 2007; Pless & Katznelson, 2019). Through our classroom observations, we gained insight into how teaching was carried out, as well as into pupils' positions and their participation in the teaching. But as the motivation researchers Einar and Sidsel Skaalvik point out, it is difficult to draw conclusions about motivation based on behavior. Motivation cannot be seen, and therefore, pupils' behavior does not say anything about,

why the student is motivated to do a certain behaviour, what the student is motivated to do, or what the student's goal is. (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007, p. 161, our translation).

To gain insight into the young people's meaning-making and their different motives for involvement and participation/nonparticipation at school and in other life contexts, different approaches are required, such as photo-elicited interviews, which allow more space for the pupils' narratives and an open exploration of their situated meaning-making. Although visual methods and photo elicitation are not new within the education research field, they still represent an innovative approach (Ciola & Manasia, 2017), not least in regard to studies of young peoples' motivation in school as much research in this field uses an a priori and quantitative approach to identify specific (often singular) motivational goals and then attempting to validate these via psychometric research techniques (Dowson & McInerney, 2003). Only a minority of studies have applied qualitative approaches focusing on students/pupils' own, more open perspectives (Dowson & McInerney, 2003; Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Maehr & Zusho, 2009; Pullka & Niemivirta, 2016), and the use of visual methods is very rare.

We were interested in gaining insights into young people's meaning-making and motivation for learning, not as individual or intrinsic qualities or attributes but rather as "biographies in interaction with schooling" (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 16), with a focus on how school and other life contexts contribute to forming the ways in which subjectivities and motivation are created. Thus, the *interaction* between the young people's biographical experiences and orientations and school and other everyday-life contexts formed the focal point of the research project (see Pless et al., 2015). Therefore, we chose to use photographs as the basis for the individual interviews, based on the idea that participant-directed photo elicitation can help us explore *in situ* the subjective dimension of learning in everyday contexts and experiences and can thereby create a window into conditions, relationships, and objects that would otherwise risk remaining unacknowledged in "conventional" interviews (Ciola & Manasia, 2017; Rasmussen, 1999).

At the same time, we were, as previously mentioned, not only interested in understanding the young people's motivation

in school, we also aimed to access narratives from a number of different arenas in which the young people's lives unfold, in order also to investigate *whether* and *how* the young people create a connection between their school lives and everyday lives. These connections are often overlooked in research about youth and education, where the focus is centered on institutional contexts, which dominate interview situations. This tends to marginalize other elements from the young people's everyday lives (Jensen, 2008; Pless, 2009). Here, we were inspired by the Norwegian educational researcher Erstad and colleagues' (2009) interest in how young people learn and create meaningful "learning lives" (p. 100) through their movements between—and across—formal and informal learning contexts. Erstad et al. emphasize that learning identities are formed and created through positionings in different locations and through a number of practices, which, to varying degrees and on different levels, are connected to situational or institutionalized conditions.

Our experience from several research projects studying young people's participation in education is that a singular focus on young people's school life can make it difficult to engage young people, especially those on the margins of education, in dialogue. As Ball et al. (2000) suggest, there is a risk of portraying some young people as "having nothing to say" (p. 20) because the research focus on education fails to examine the lives that the young people live and are engaged in (see also Kennelly, 2017). By employing a broader focus on a variety of life contexts and through the use of participant-directed photo elicitation, we aimed to create the basis for a more inclusive dialogue with the young people (Erstad et al., 2009; Pless et al., 2015).

Voicing Young People's Perspectives?

Voicing young people's perspectives and narratives is a strong tradition within the sociology of youth. In parts of this tradition, the researcher's role is primarily to act as a form of "birthing coach" for young people's stories and to contribute to their dissemination (Marquez-Zenkov, 2007; Thompson, 2008). However, in recent decades, this approach has been met with increasing criticism for being based on the idea that the researcher can gain unfiltered access to young people's perspectives and views. As a result, a number of researchers point out that the "voicing" tradition may result in a certain amount of uncritical and unconsidered "microphone-holding", where young people's narratives and perspectives are presented as ahistorical "truths". This approach also tends to blur the power relationship between the researcher and the research subject and overlook the contextual dimensions of young people's narratives (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Nielsen, 2013; Yates, 2010). Thus, several researchers suggest the importance of a reflexive approach, where the interest in *understanding* young people's perspectives is based on, but extends beyond, the individual perspective. They point to the importance of understanding how these narratives are characterized by the societal contexts in which they are produced and argue that the narratives must

be understood as a product of interactions in a specific context—in this case, the interview situation (Faber & Nielsen, 2016; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2005; Thomsen et al., 2013).

Thus, using sociology of youth and these perspectives as our point of departure, we understand the narratives and youth perspectives that we accessed by way of the participant-directed photo-elicited interviews as situated narratives, which provide us with insights into the young people's lives, but which *are not* the same thing as the young people's lived lives (Holland & Thompson, 2009; Yates, 2010).

Visual Sociology, Visual Methods—Photo-Elicited Interviews

Visual sociology encompasses a wide range of different approaches. In this article, we focus on participant-based visual material in the form of everyday snapshots (Bramming et al., 2009). We draw upon a tradition in visual sociology known as photo-elicited interviews, which makes use of image material as the basis and framework for the interview conversation (Harper, 2002; Rasmussen, 1999; Rose, 2016). In the following, we briefly outline a range of research methodological arguments for the use of visual methods and more specifically, participant-directed photo elicitation in (youth) research.

Visual methods have long been an integrated part of anthropological and ethnographical research traditions, but in recent decades, they have achieved widespread use within sociology and educational research (Ciola & Manasia, 2017; Prosser & Loxley, 2008; Rose, 2016; Wall et al., 2012). Some even suggest that there has been a “visual turn” in sociology and narrative research (Faber & Nielsen, 2016; Thomson, 2008). Several researchers point out that visual approaches provide access to other types of narratives and perspectives than research approaches where the focus is solely on the spoken (or written) word (Drew & Guillemin, 2014; Faber & Nielsen, 2016; Harrison, 2002; Pink, 2004). Harper (2002), an American sociology professor and photographer and a central figure in visual sociology, emphasizes that:

Photo elicitation is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview. The difference between interviews using images and text, and interviews using words alone lies in the ways we respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. (p. 13)

Researchers suggest that the use of photographs in interview situations *exposes*, so to speak, other types of narratives and perspectives (Bagnoli, 2009; Kennelly, 2017; Prosser & Loxley, 2008; Rasmussen, 2013), while others argue that visual sociology is especially related to young people's own everyday practices due to the increasing extent to which images and visuality are part of their lives (via apps such as Instagram and Snapchat, for example (Leitch & Mitchell, 2007; Heath et al., 2009; Thomson, 2008). Finally, some researchers suggest that working with visual approaches involves a significant element of democracy and participation, especially approaches—such as participant-directed photo elicitation, which we apply—

where the participants themselves produce the visual material within a given field of research and subsequently have the opportunity to talk about the photographs they have produced in an interview situation. In this way, the participants are invited into the research process itself, and there are some elements of cocreation and cooperation between the researcher and informants, as the young people (the informants) involved in setting the agenda for the interview conversation through the visual narrative that they produce (Faber & Nielsen, 2016; Rasmussen, 2013; Thomson, 2008; Yates, 2010).

On the whole, the methodological literature suggests that the use of visual methods in qualitative research has a number of advantages. However, some researchers argue that there is no justification to the claim that visual methods are a “better” approach to data production. Rather, these methods can be considered an alternative and complementary approach that *may* lead to other forms of knowledge (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006). Visual methods in combination with other methods can contribute to *unfolding* the empirical focus (Nielsen, 2013; Rose, 2016).

Empirical Basis and Approach

The empirical material that forms the basis of this article consists of 25 photo-elicited individual interviews with lower secondary school pupils² (12 girls and 13 boys). The pupils who participated in the photo-elicited interviews were invited to participate based on classroom observations in order to gain access to perspectives and narratives from pupils who occupied a variety of social and academic positions in the class. Participation was voluntary, and the pupils and their parents were informed about the photography assignment and its purpose. The photo-elicited interviews were carried out as part of comprehensive qualitative case studies at six schools across Denmark. The schools were chosen in such a way that they represent different forms of secondary schooling (three state schools, one alternative school for young people who are struggling to meet the social and academic demands in school, one private school, and one independent boarding school³). We also aimed to achieve a broad socioeconomic and geographic distribution of schools.

Participant-Directed Photo-Elicited Interviews

Inspired by Bramming et al. (2009), the pupils were given a weeklong photography assignment. They were introduced to the assignment by one member of the research team, partly to ensure a homogenous introduction throughout the case schools and partly to differentiate the task from other “school assignments.” The specific assignment was as follows:

Take photos of situations in and outside school that you think are fun, exciting, interesting—that is, situations that make you curious - and situations that you think are boring, uninteresting - that is, situations in which you think that you would rather do something else.

There were no other instructions regarding how many photos the pupils should take, but they were asked to select six photos from school and six photos from their lives outside of school based on the photographs they had produced during the week and send them to the researchers. For both “photo series”, we asked them to choose three photos that showed “fun, exciting, interesting situations” and three that showed “boring, uninteresting situations” (12 photos in total).⁴ This selection process was partly used to reduce the number of photos to a manageable level and partly to start a reflection process in which the pupils were prompted to reflect on the situations that were most significant/important for them to talk about. Here, it should be briefly noted that the process itself was just as important as the product, since the process made it possible “to capture and attach meaningful parts of everyday life, the spaces and time, that they move in - and it [the photography process] can uncover meaningful relationships (friends, family, etc.)” (Rasmussen, 1999, p. 71), and as such, the photos formed the basis of the subsequent interviews.

As we were interested in nuancing and broadening the concept of motivation, we formulated the assignment both “positively” and “negatively” - by asking for both motivating and demotivating situations. We also emphasized in the assignment description that the young people should take photos both in and outside school.

In the following, we first provide some examples of the narratives about school life and motivation that were unfolded in the interviews based on the young people’s photos. Subsequently, we broaden our focus and show the narratives about the young people’s lives that the photos gave rise to, and we discuss how and to what extent the visual method allowed us to gain insights into the young people’s “learning lives” in a horizontal perspective. Finally, we examine two photos in more detail and illustrate how the photos, in and of themselves, can contribute to an analysis of young people’s everyday lives and the positions that are accessible to different young people - in and out of school.

Pictures of School Life—Motivation in Context

At first sight, the image material that the pupils produced was easily identifiable - and largely confirmed widespread images of school and young people’s lives. There were photos of school life with mathematics assignments, school books, pencil cases, noticeboards with pupils’ work, computer screens, teachers drawing, and talking at the blackboard/smart board, as well as classmates with their hands raised (during lessons) or messing around (during breaks). The photos of the young people’s lives outside school were similarly “typical”, with photos of dishwashers and vacuum cleaners, family meals, homework, photos from cafés, fitness centers, badminton rackets, handballs, guitars, computer games, Facebook, friends, and parties.

In relation to school life, almost all the photos acted as a productive and specific basis for the interview conversations by capturing and conveying situations, moods and moments, and the derived narratives about daily school life. In this way, we had the opportunity to gain insight into “taken-for-granted” and

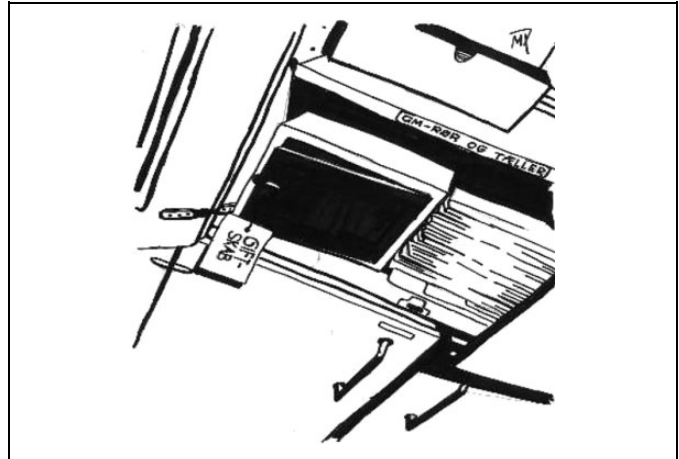


Figure 1. A “toxic substances cabinet” used in science teaching.

unnoticed aspects of school life and, thus, we gained insight into a number of elements in the young people’s lives that, from their perspectives, were meaningful - for better or worse. In the following, we provide two examples of the pupils’ photos⁵ and the narratives on motivation which they elicited. Specific artifacts in the classroom were a recurrent motif in the young people’s photos. One pupil, William, talked about a “toxic substances cabinet” used in science teaching (Figure 1):

I’ve taken it because I think what we did was fun. We were allowed to get into groups, and then we had to work it out. We had to do some tests with something that radioactive stuff could go through, and test how radioactive it was, so we had to measure that. I think it was fun because we had to do it ourselves and then work it out ourselves and learn something about it as a group. (William, Year 10)

The photo of a material object (a cabinet) elicited a narrative, where motivation is situated in a specific and positive learning situation which is linked closely to the way the assignment is organized (project-based group work), as this, according to the pupil William, allows him and his classmates to “work it out ourselves and learn something about it as a group”. The motivational aspects put forward in the narrative thus focuses on the possible exploration of the task given as well as underlining the importance of collaboration. In the analysis, we associate these perspectives with concepts such as cocreation, exploration, and involvement (Nordahl, 2003; Thøgersen, 2011), which are central elements in pupils’ narratives throughout the material. Several of the pupils took photos of their classmates in the class, such as the pupil Marie (Figure 2), who commented on the photo.

That—that’s the breaks. We have a really nice time there, I really like that about school. (...) because we can just do anything, we mess around and that kind of thing, we can just do that. (...) I love the class. (...) It’s just the pupils, that is, the people and our teacher and just the community that we have. (Marie, Year 10)



Figure 2. Classmates hanging out in class during break.

In this case (and in several others), the photo of the pupil's classmates gave us access to narratives about the importance of seemingly mundane aspects of school life, such as what happens during the breaks and between the lessons. Such images also elicited narratives about experiences of belonging and meaningful relationships to pupils (and teachers), which play a central role in the pupils' school motivation. As Marie explains, she "loves" the class and the teachers. However, in Marie's narrative, it also emerges that she generally experiences school life as "boring" and that she finds it hard to see the value of school and education as a whole. Based on the photo, a story unfolds that emphasizes the importance of the relational aspect of motivation with regard to the experience of belonging. However, at the same time, the narrative suggests that experiencing social belonging does not automatically lead to a sense of connectedness to the school's project and the academic content for all pupils, underlining the complexity of motivation school. Another pupil, Hannah, took a photo of a mathematics assignment (Figure 3), and based on this, she talked about what she likes about mathematics:

I'm better at mathematics than Danish, so I like working with mathematics because, fine, so I'm "stupid" in Danish, but I'm "clever" at mathematics, so it's nice in this way to work with mathematics, so it's nice that it's a feeling that it's something you can work out. (Hannah, Year 10)

Again, we are dealing with an easily recognizable photo of school life (a math book). The photo, however, initiated a dialogue in which it was highlighted how motivation was closely linked to the pupils' prior learning experiences of mastery or failure (the ability to work it out or not), as well

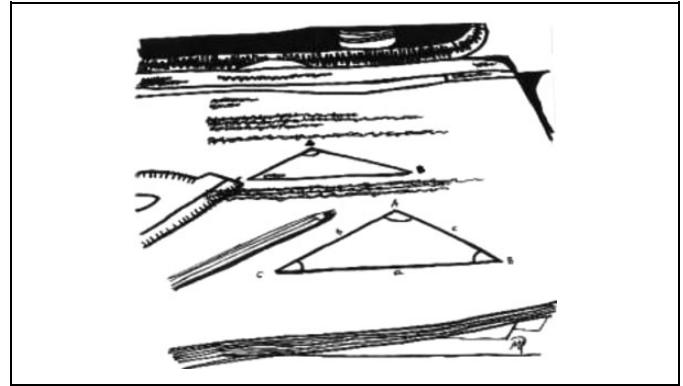


Figure 3. A math assignment.

as how she had come to view herself as a learner in regard to different subjects. The narrative elicited by the photo thus allows for a narrative of motivation as linked closely to experiences of mastery and self-efficacy, as well as underlining how motivation is linked to the availability of viable subject learner positions, which allow pupils to view themselves as "good enough".

The examples above only form a small sample of the young people's narratives, but we have included them here to provide an insight into some of the overall patterns that appeared throughout the interviews, which seemed central to the pupils' experiences of motivation in school. The young people's photographs of specific and different situations, artifacts, and people helped situate the narratives about motivation. The photos allowed for nuanced insights into the pupils' everyday-life experiences in school, and the dialogue that followed help shed light on how the seemingly mundane and often taken-for-granted aspects of school life also play an important role for the pupils' motivation in school, aspects which might otherwise have remained unnoticed in the interviews. The photos elicited narratives of a number of different motives for (dis)engaging with the subject matter and thus allowed for developing a nuanced understanding of motivational aspects at play in school. Furthermore, it became clear from the photo-elicited interviews that for the pupils, motivation was a changeable concept. In some narratives, relational aspects were accentuated in regard to some subjects and/or learning situations, whereas exploration and collaboration were accentuated in other situations and contexts. Thus, in the photo-elicited narratives, motivation was emphasized as something different to and more than an individual "quality" or a singular motive, as something dynamic and procedural, which occurs in interaction with others in particular contexts and settings (Pless & Katznelson, 2019).

Different Youth Lives: Balancing Acts in Young People's Lives

Digging further into the insights that evolved through the young people's narratives, we noted an absence of *direct*

associations between the narratives about their school life and those about their spare time. There were very few examples of young people who, from a learning-lives perspective, explicitly drew upon experiences from their spare time interests in the school context. One example of this was when pupils who had experienced serious illness among close family members brought this experience with them to school, where it appeared to support their motivation for and participation in natural science subjects. But in general, spare time and school life appear to function as separate life arenas. However, this is not necessarily problematic. The young people's spare time may function as a much-needed break from school life and as a space where they can (to a greater degree) be themselves without adult interference, develop other interests and areas of competence, and cultivate relationships with other young people.

However, there are a number of more *indirect* associations between school life and spare time, where pupils' positions and involvement in the two arenas seem to fit together. Thus, the photos and interviews with the young people showed that there were big differences in which position the young people adopted, depending on the communities and activities they were involved in in different arenas. The photos showed a pattern whereby the young people who spoke about being engaged in a range of spare-time activities outside of school also initially appeared to be most engaged in the school project. These young people often also held central positions in the peer groups in school. The lives of many of the young people in the study revolved around a tightly packed schedule consisting of sports or other spare-time activities several times a week as well as a part-time job in many cases. A regular weekday for these young people often consisted of school first, then work, sport, and/or time with friends. They would often only come home at dinner time, and after dinner, they would either do homework or perhaps watch television with their family before they went to bed. It was common for these young people to enjoy being busy and intense on the one hand but, at the same time, sometimes find it difficult to juggle all of these activities during the course of a day (and a week) on the other hand.

At the other end of the spectrum, we met a (smaller) group of young people whose everyday life and spare time appeared to be much less intense and "pressured". They were involved to a much lesser extent in organized spare-time activities, and much of their spare time was spent at home with their family, where they watched television, played online games, and spent time on social media. These young people were typically positioned marginally at school or in the class, and we believe that this was also the case in their spare time, where they also found themselves on the social peripheries of the youth clubs they attended.

In the following, we will focus on two young people's photos and narratives as examples of such extreme positions, but with a particular focus on how the interaction between photos and interviews provided us with access to a number of analytical insights.



Figure 4. Thea doing gymnastics.

Different Balancing Acts

This photo (Figure 4) shows a school pupil, Thea, doing one of her spare-time activities, gymnastics, which is a focal point in her life.

Thea: In the Center of Youth

On the photo, Thea shows her in a pose that signals self-confidence, competence, and strength. She is clearly doing something that she is good at—and has control over—and this is what she has chosen to show. This impression is reinforced in the interview conversation and through our observations in the school. Thea is a young person who holds a central position in school - she spends her time with the other popular young people during break times, she is active in lessons, academically strong and well liked among teachers, and she is also a central figure in a number of youth clubs outside of school, not least in connection with different sports.

The photo, which was the introduction for the interview conversation, and the narrative that subsequently develops on the basis of it, frames an important and consistent theme in Thea's narrative. She explains:

Thea: Well, it shows that I really enjoy doing gymnastics. (...) I think it's the feeling of learning a new jump, because, particularly when it's a wild jump, then you get kind of a complete adrenalin rush from it, even though it's a bit dangerous, it's really cool. (...) (Thea, Year 10)

I: If you had to say something about how much you want to, for example, learn a new jump in gymnastics or get better at something? Is that something that you are really interested in?

Thea: A lot. I had a period where I didn't really develop so much, compared to last year. That was a year where I quickly got a lot better and learned a lot of new things, but it helps a lot with my mood when I then develop in

what I'm good at and enjoy, and I'm really interested in improving myself and continue to maintain it and that kind of thing. (...) I just think that it's something inside me, that I want to be better and keep up and get good at it.

In this way, Thea's narrative largely confirms the impression that we, as researchers, immediately got when looking at the photo. It appears to be important to Thea to present herself as competent, to develop herself and continually improve. And on the one hand, during periods when she experiences a standstill and does not improve, she gets frustrated. On the other hand, it "helps a lot" with her mood when her ongoing work to develop herself bears fruit and she feels that she is improving. The same narrative recurs in relation to school life, where Thea emphasizes that it is *great to be one of the clever pupils* in the class, just as she describes how she struggles to accept not getting top marks in every subject. Thus, performing - and performing competently - plays an important role in Thea's involvement and motivation in and outside of school. However, at the same time, it also appears that the performance orientation not only forms a central and positive driving force in Thea's involvement, it is also something that she has struggled to balance. This applies both to her performance in sports, where she explains that it has led to periods of being (too) preoccupied with her body, weight, and food, and in relation to school.

Thea's narrative is about learning to plan her days and prioritize her activities, so that she can get her life to run smoothly. For young people like Thea, everyday life consists of balancing the many activities they are interested and engaged in.

The example above shows how the photo (from her spare time) paves the way for narratives from both her school and everyday life and for a multifaceted view of Thea's motivation in and outside of school. In this regard, it is important to notice that Thea asked someone else to take the photo of her, so that she could be in the center of the photo. In this way, the photo is an example of how photos can also be used as a self-presentation and as a young person's statement about how he or she wants to be seen by others. Thus, in the analysis of Thea's photo, it becomes apparent that there is an association between the photos and the interview; it is in the interplay between the two data sources in the empirical material that a narrative emerges about the delicate balance in youth life between the desire for control and performance on the one hand and worries and burdens on the other. In the interview with the next young person, we will meet the outline of a markedly different life that emerged. Samir has taken a picture depicting the view from his bedroom window; the play ground where he used to hang out, when he was younger. Samir explains that he spends most of his spare time at home with his family. For him, this is a way of shielding himself from the "troublemakers" who hang out where he lives, with whom he had previously played football. In the interview, we start with one of the photos that Samir has taken (Figure 5).



Figure 5. View of playground from Samir's flat.

Samir: On the Edge of Childhood

- Interviewer: Can you tell me what is in the photo and why you took it?
- Samir: Well, I took it because a long time ago, I used to go down there and play with the others, but now I've just stopped going down. So, it's just. [I, ed.] wrote that it was negative; that is, to be outside.
- Interviewer: Okay, that's there, where you live, right? And then that's the playground in front.
- Samir: Mmhh (confirming).
- Interviewer: When you went out before, were you with some of the ones who also lived there, or what?
- Samir: Yes.
- Interviewer: Okay. But you're not anymore?
- Samir: No. They started making trouble, so I just stopped hanging around with them, so I just stay at home sometimes. (Samir, Year 10)

As is evident from the narrative, Samir balances between a life with troublemakers and a safe (but perhaps also lonely) homelife. For him, no in-between positions appear to be available. This means that he largely ends up having an everyday life and spare time that take place at home and with his family - and which (to a great extent) are cutoff from activities with other young people.

Here, the photo gives us a way in to Samir's narrative, and one might say that, because of the photo, the interview process began even before the actual interview. In the interview situation, the photo functioned as a tool to move the conversation rapidly to a theme that is relevant for the interviewee. By way of the photo, the interviewee sets the agenda for what will be talked about and focused on (see Rasmussen, 1999). For a young person such as Samir, who appears to be shy, insecure, and reticent to speak, the image material appears to provide important specific "reference points" and a basis for the dialogue. These reference points were based on Samir's own selected photographs - and, in our experience, this led to a probably more detailed narrative about Samir's school and everyday life than we would have gained access to if the interview had been directed by our (researcher's) interview guides (see also Ball et al., 2000; Kennelly, 2017).

However, the photos did not only serve the purpose of supporting the interview conversations. Rasmussen (1999), inspired by the French semiotician Barthes, suggests that there can be several “layers of communication” in a photographic photo. On the one hand, there is a communication layer that is about what the photograph specifically depicts, a layer of communication that can form the starting point for a dialogue, as we illustrate above. On the other hand, Rasmussen suggests another layer of communication: the photo’s “silent meaning.” The “silent meaning” often remained unarticulated in our interview conversations but nonetheless contributed to the way in which we decoded and understood the photographs (see also Richard & Lahman, 2015), and thus helped us to understand the young person’s situation. Thea’s photograph is a self-portrait of her doing gymnastics. At one level, the photo thus depicts Thea involved in a spare-time activity she is highly engaged with, but as a different layer of meaning, the photo can also be said to connote an image of a young person pre-occupied with (bodily) self-performance, a connotation which is confirmed throughout the interview, where performance and control form a strong story line. The photo Samir has taken is taken from inside his apartment, looking out at the playground, which is the focus of the photo. At another level of communication, the photo, however, also connotes space and distance and can be interpreted as an expression of the experience of being an outsider, which he also expressed in the interview. The photo of the (empty) playground, where Samir used to spend time with friends, from which he now must stay away because the same friends cause trouble, can simultaneously be seen as an illustration of the difficulties associated with the transitional move from a child to a youth position. The photo primarily communicates a sense of being an outsider and loneliness, feelings that can also be interpreted in the interview text, but which are strengthened by the photo. As this example demonstrates, photos can powerfully convey the emotions of the interviewees, and this can help us to better understand their situation (Yates, 2010).

By way of the photos, we gain insights into how the young people’s learning lives unfold differently across various contexts. For example, there is a clear connection and continuity between the strategies that Thea adopts both in and outside of school. She adopts strategies and approaches that generally are acknowledged as resourceful in the contexts she is a part of - among friends, teachers, and other adults. Thus, Thea is able to benefit from the connections that arise between her life arenas, even though it requires a certain amount of “balancing work”, to ensure that a strong involvement and focus on performance does not “boil over” and manifest itself in the form of pressure and stress (see also Stefansen et al., 2017). Also, Samir’s photo narratives about life in and outside of school are evidence of continuity and context across life arenas, but in a completely different way to Thea. Whereas Thea’s involvement in spare-time activities and the strategies she adopts there can clearly be transformed into resources along the way, this appears to be much more difficult for Samir. As his turbulent schooling, among other things, indicates, he struggles to assert himself and

be acknowledged. He is aware that the sense of belonging he previously had to “the troublemakers” will not create opportunities for acknowledgment and inclusion in school (and family life), but no obvious alternatives seem to present themselves.

In general, the two young people’s photo narratives can be seen as illustrations of the polarization in youth life which, as previously mentioned, recurs throughout the study’s empirical material. Overall, the research project depicts markedly different youth lives.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this article, we highlight how participant-directed photo elicitation allows a nuanced, broad, and context-sensitive exploration of young people’s subjective experiences of motivation at school. The photos taken by the pupils help provide insights into some of the seemingly mundane aspects of school and everyday life, which, as the analysis show, play an important role for their motivation, aspects which can be difficult to access using more traditional interview forms. Furthermore, some of the photos provided the opportunity (in collaboration with interview data) for a closer study of the expectations, dreams, losses, experiences of pressure, and so on, that were expressed through the photos, adding another layer to the analysis of the visual and spoken data material. Finally, the study highlights the value of using visual material to explore the interlinks between young people’s experiences and positions in and out of school contexts, and thus helps us gain insights into the young people’s learning lives across their life contexts.

In this article, we mainly focus on the opportunities that arise when visual methods are used. However, we also experienced challenges during the course of the research project. A few of the young people who found themselves on the periphery of school life found it difficult to understand the point of the photography assignment and took only a few - or no - photos. There are several possible explanations for this, but this phenomenon shows that this approach is not a quick fix when it comes to including vulnerable young people and their perspectives in the research process. Further work and supplementing methods are required in order to include young people in a variety of ways.

In a broader perspective, there was another challenge associated with working with photo-elicited interviews. Through the image material, we gained certain insights into the young people’s learning lives across their life contexts, but since the basis and framework for our specific meetings with the young people was the school context, this element ended up playing a prominent role in the interview conversations, often rendering the young people’s everyday lives outside of school a secondary matter. Thus, we had relatively little access to the ruptures and developments in the young people’s “learning lives” across different contexts (as is, e.g., suggested in Erstad et al., 2009; Wulf-Andersen et al., 2016). Our experience suggests that if we want to gain a better understanding of and focus on young people’s everyday-life practices, it would be advantageous to meet and interview the young people not only in the school

context but also in the other life arenas where youth unfold. In a future perspective, it would be interesting to focus on the joint production of visual data with the young people to a greater extent—in a similar way to the inclusive and ethnography-inspired research approaches used by researchers such as Kennelley (2017) and Pink (2013). Despite these reservations, it is, however, our perception that participant-directed photo elicitation forms a fruitful and productive approach in order to explore and gain insights into young people's experiences and everyday practices in school.

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Notes

1. The pupils' names have been changed to ensure anonymity.
2. In Denmark, primary and lower secondary schools consist of 10 years of compulsory education. Pupils can furthermore choose a Year 11, if they, for academic or other reasons, do not feel ready to proceed to upper secondary education. There is no streaming in primary or lower secondary school. We interviewed young people in Year 8–10 (where the pupils are 14–16 years of age), with the majority of interviewees being pupils in Year 10.
3. In Denmark, a large proportion of young people spend Year 11 at a boarding school. These schools often specialize in specific creative or sports subjects, and for some young people, a year here is viewed as an opportunity to delve into other interests than the traditional academic subjects. The pupils were interviewed while attending these different forms of secondary schooling.
4. The majority of the young people selected 12 pictures, which were sent to the group of researchers, while a few sent less. The interviews were based on the submitted image material, but we examined situations that they experienced as “exciting/boring” in both school and their spare time in all the interviews.
5. In order to ensure anonymity, the young people's photographs are presented in graphical form.

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