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## **METHODS FOR INTER- AND TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND LEARNING BASED ON PAULO FREIRE**

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**Exploring the Human-World Relationship with Generative Picturing: Experiences from a Research Project at a Lower Secondary School**

*ABSTRACT* The article presents Generative Picturing as a methodological framework for transformative research. Generative Picturing integrates different elements of qualitative methodology with the visual medium of photography in a recursive and participatory process. Exemplifying the application of Generative Picturing in the context of the author's research with a class of fourth grade lower secondary school students in Vienna, the article offers a practical frame and identifies lessons to be learned.

*KEYWORDS* Generative Picturing, methodological framework, transformative research, participatory research with children/young people, lessons learned

## **I. Introduction**

“[S]o we are just there collectively grasping, feeling the limitations of knowledge, longing together, yearning for a way to reach that highest point. Even that yearning is a way to know.” (hooks 1994: 92)

The article presents Generative Picturing (Brandner 2020) as a methodological framework for transformative research. Generative Picturing integrates different elements of qualitative methodology with the visual medium of photography in a recursive and participatory process. Offering a practical frame, the article describes and discusses the application of the

method in the context of a research project with a class of fourth grade students at a lower secondary school (“Neue Mittelschule”) in Vienna.

The yearning that bell hooks (1994: 92) expresses so vibrantly, the yearning for a different way to move about, for a different theory and practice of social change, unites people with different backgrounds and across the most different locations by exploring ways of being and relating to others, ways of understanding the world surrounding us, and nurturing ideas about possible futures. Research oriented at transformation and emancipation is nourished by this collective yearning. Critically inquiring into the status quo of both academia and social conditions, it sets out for a different research practice based on collaboration, contextual relevance, and an emphasis on process.

In the spirit of Paulo Freire, the “challenge is to build new forms of knowledge based on the dialogical situation that provokes interaction and the sharing of worlds that are different, but share the dream and the hope of building our *being more* together” (Zitkoski 2012: 101, original emphasis).

Pursuing the “hope of building our *being more* together” (Zitkoski 2012: 101, original emphasis), transformative research aims at understanding transformative processes, producing knowledge for transformation and advancing transformation through the practice of research itself (WBGU 2011 in Brandner 2020: 35). In opposition to the objectification of “the researched” common in academia (Fals Borda 1991: 4 f.; Letherby 2006: 89), research oriented at transformation and emancipation seeks a research practice committed to the acknowledgement and advancement of the subject status of the people concerned. The objectives of transformative research are addressed through approaches such as action research, participatory action research, emancipatory research and transdisciplinary research.

Transdisciplinarity as a form of transformative research is grounded in difference, in “the sharing of worlds that are different” (Zitkoski 2012: 101), and in the search to mediate difference in a way that its productive potential can unfold (Brandner 2020: 13ff.; Vilismaier/Brandner/Engbers 2017). Amongst the varieties of transdisciplinary research, the integration of knowledge spans not only across and beyond scientific disciplines but also transgresses the boundaries of academia. Transdisciplinary research as a participatory process of collaboration with actors “from outside

academia” (Lang et al. 2012: 27) and from different social fields and knowledge cultures, can strengthen the contextual relevance of the research and support transformative processes (Vilismaier/Brandner/Engbers 2017: 170; Jahn 2008: 27).

Generative Picturing is “based on the dialogical situation” (Zitkoski 2012: 101) and provides a setting for communication, learning and the collective production of knowledge. Mediated by pictures taken by themselves, participants experience and reflect the reciprocal relation between the Self and the Other, between subjectivity and objectivity. Developed for “situations of cultural diversity and difference” (Brandner/Vilismaier 2014: 205, my translation), Generative Picturing can be employed for collaborative and transformative learning processes in different contexts, such as conflict resolution, development cooperation, education, and transdisciplinary research. The wide applicability derives from Generative Picturing’s flexible structure and recursiveness, which accommodates a range of adaptations for the respective context and throughout the process. Because of that, it is particularly well-suited for open and explorative settings such as the participatory research project I conducted at a lower secondary school with a high proportion of marginalised and disadvantaged students.

This article presents Generative Picturing as a methodological framework for transformative research and is organised as follows. First, the methodological foundations and constitutive elements of Generative Picturing are outlined. The next chapter takes on Generative Picturing as a Freirean praxis for transformative research. The relevance of doing participatory research with lower secondary school students in a segregated school system is addressed in the subsequent part and contextualises the research. The fifth chapter describes the application of Generative Picturing in a school context, which is analysed and critically discussed in the last part.

## **2. The methodological framework of Generative Picturing**

Generative Picturing is a methodological framework (Brandner 2020) conceptualised for “situations of cultural diversity and difference” (Brandner/Vilismaier 2014: 205). Drawing on Homi Bhabha’s concept of “cultural difference” (Bhabha 2004 [1994] in Brandner 2020: 26 ff.),

culture is understood in a broad sense as established ways of practice and the production of meaning. As a “set of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 2002: 71 in Vilsmaier/Brandner/Engbers 2017: 172), culture shapes and is shaped by differences in lifeworlds and realities between and within societies. Generative Picturing can be employed for collaborative learning processes in situations where people are separated by differences in background, socialisation or specialisation, but connected through their experiences of shared phenomena or problems (Brandner 2020: 13). It is suited for group sizes of between eight to 20 people (ibid.: 134). Generative Picturing integrates different elements of qualitative methodology with photographic practice in a recursive and participatory process. A facilitator provides the frame for the group process to develop, organising and instructing meetings for participants to enter a dialogue with each other – through, with and about each other’s photographs.

Based on a Freirean approach (see chapter 3), Generative Picturing is embedded in postcolonial, photo-critical and emancipatory theory (Brandner 2020: 14). It was developed by Vera Brandner in her work as transdisciplinary researcher, photographer, activist and teacher in different contexts that can be described as ‘in-between’ (compare Bhabha 2004 [1994]: 56 in Brandner 2020: 42; Brandner 2020: 40ff.). Generative Picturing is part of a general shift regarding visual media such as photography within qualitative social research. Approaches in which photography is primarily used by the “researcher as photographer” (Emmison 2016: 298) are superseded by participatory approaches in which photographs are produced by those people whose lifeworlds are the focus of the research. For an overview of photo-based research methods, differentiated by their degree of participation and orientation towards process, see Brandner (2020: 111ff.; Emmison 2016).

Generative Picturing as a recursive and participatory process consists of four constitutive elements: Impulse, Photographing, Picture Dialogue and Mapping. Following an Impulse, through Photographing and Picture Dialogues, participants explore their own and each other’s lifeworlds and everyday realms, discovering the range of pictures and themes. Then, Generative Pictures and Generative Themes are identified in Mapping, which concludes a cycle of Generative Picturing. The Generative Map can be used in a continuation of the process as the Impulse for another cycle

of Generative Picturing. The recursiveness of the process allows participants to collaboratively gain ever more abstract and theoretical interpretations and understandings of the themes and questions at stake. For research purposes, the “processes of action, interpretation and communication” (Brandner/Vilsmaier 2014: 198, my translation) as well as the visual material facilitated by Generative Picturing can be further analysed. The following section outlines, in a basic form, the constitutive elements of Generative Picturing. For a more detailed description and options for variation see Brandner (2020). Participants can be encouraged to reflect and document their experiences throughout the process in a journal or research diary (*ibid.*: 137).

*Impulse:* The group process is initiated by an impulse given by the facilitator. Whether a specific subject is defined or not, rather than constraining the engagement, the impulse should be designed in such a way as to open possibilities while providing a frame of reference (Brandner 2020: 122). It ought to stimulate the participants’ photographic engagement with, and active observation of, their immediate lifeworlds. While its function can be compared to the invitation for narration in qualitative interviews (*ibid.*), within Generative Picturing the temporality of the response is shifted, which allows for a different dynamic to develop. Brandner (2020: 123) suggests structuring the impulse in two parts, anticipating the composition of the further process. First, each participant contributes something (e.g. an everyday or favourite object), which in a second step leads into the group exchange and reflection. In the context of this first impulse the facilitator should introduce ethical questions regarding photographic practice and, if necessary, instruct the participants on the use of a camera and/or photographic techniques. Both are issues that return throughout the process.

*Photographing:* Stimulated by the impulse, participants individually take pictures within their lifeworlds until the next group meeting. Exploring the world surrounding them, the lens of the camera literally enables participants to gain different perspectives on the subject and to approach it from different angles, and to document their observations. The interplay with the impulse is dynamic and it may be spontaneous and/or more deliberate and systematic, inquiring more into the depth or width of associations, relations and aspects spanning from the subject. Photo-

graphing as an element of Generative Picturing is located at the intersection of creativity, intuition, experience, observation and knowledge production. Part of the project planning are decisions concerning the type of camera (analogue or digital) and the extent to which technical aspects of photography (e.g. light/shadow, subject, composition) are addressed throughout the process (Brandner 2020: 127ff.). They depend on the context of the project and the facilitator's focus and abilities.

*Picture Dialogue:* Participants meet again for the Picture Dialogues, each person introducing a selection of their pictures into the group process. The Picture Dialogue constitutes a communicative situation in which participants engage with each other and each other's photographs. Participants inquire into the plurality of meanings and experience the "permanent alignment and comparison between one's own perception and the perception of others" (Brandner 2020: 131, my translation). First, the space is collectively set up as each participant arranges their pictures to be displayed. During an opening sequence participants move around and look at everyone's presentations in silence. Especially with larger groups, this silent viewing can be followed by participants writing down their first impressions of the pictures on adhesive notes and placing them next to the pieces. At the end of this sequence every photographer collects the notes added to their images. In smaller groups of three to five people, participants conduct a Picture Dialogue on every group member's photos. With the facilitator providing a time frame (at least 10 minutes), each Picture Dialogue takes place as a structured interplay between speaking and listening. First, the respective photographer is actively listening while the other participants share their descriptions, interpretations and associations connected to the images. What do they see in the photograph? What do they assume about the photographer's ideas and intentions? What does a picture express in relation to the shared subject of interest? etc. If needed, questions to support the reading of the pictures and to stimulate the exchange can be provided. Then, in response to the statements of the others, the photographer speaks about their own thoughts, intentions and experiences connected to the visual material. A session can be concluded after the Picture Dialogues, with participants returning to their individual photographic practice. Brandner (2020: 120) suggests completing at least two cycles of Photographing and Picture Dialogues before proceeding to Mapping.

*Mapping*: Mapping enables the condensation of the broad scope of themes, thoughts and experiences that emerged through the interplay of individual and group processes. First, out of all the pictures that have been shared, participants individually select those that gained large significance in the group process and, thus, can be regarded as generative. The group then collectively arranges these Generative Pictures in a Generative Map, which can be done in silence or/and in a group discussion (Brandner 2020: 138f.). The map displays the spatiality of relations, “the nearness and distance, boundaries and connections between the images” (ibid.: 120, my translation) and allows for the further identification and exploration of Generative Themes.

### **3. Generative Picturing as a Freirean praxis for transformative research**

Based on the insight of dialogue as an “epistemic relationship” (Freire/Macedo 1995: 379) and the “condition for intersubjectivity” (Losso 2012: 197), Generative Picturing facilitates communication, learning and knowledge production through dialogue and collaboration. In a setting of horizontal relationships and mediated by pictures taken by the participants themselves, participants engage with their situatedness, experiences and perspectives, “as differences between different knowledge and everyday cultures are respected and fertilized” (Brandner 2020: 15, my translation). Through these differences participants experience and reflect the reciprocal relation between the Self and the Other, between subjectivity and objectivity. A process itself, Generative Picturing reflects the human situation that is “unfinished, uncompleted” (Freire 2000 [1970]: 84) and constantly in movement. As participants from different backgrounds and epistemic cultures interact and communicate in a dialogic and iterative setting, knowledge as the process of knowing and inquiring, as well as its relational, preliminary and contextual character and boundaries, are experienced and reflected. Generative Picturing is, thus, a dialogical *praxis*: the conjunction of action and reflection that has the power to transform the world (ibid.: 87ff.; Brandner 2020: 238ff.).

Freire demonstrates with his “problem-posing education” that “the point of departure of the movement lies in the people themselves. But since people do not exist apart from the world, apart from reality, the movement must begin with the human-world relationship.” (2000 [1970]: 85) Departing from their situation, participants in Generative Picturing explore their lifeworlds and generative themes not only through the lens of their camera, but through the eyes of others. In dialogue with each other and mediated by the photographs, participants engage with the “human-world relationship” and their own situatedness. Generative Picturing’s dialogical praxis allows participants to trace the connections and boundaries between the pictures and the themes associated to them, challenging a “fragmented view of reality” (Freire 2000 [1970]: 73; see chapter 4). The constant and dynamic change in roles – between photographer, spectator and photographed – enables participants to become aware of the relationship between subject and object, between subjectivity and objectivity (Brandner 2020: 216). Brandner (2017: 209) argues that this experience of and reflection on the fluid boundaries of being subject/object can lead to further inquire questions of power relationships and how such fluid situations can be created outside of Generative Picturing.

Transdisciplinary research as a type of transformative research is “an integrative practice that is grounded in difference” (Vilsmaier/Brandner/Engbers 2017: 169). As a form of praxis, Generative Picturing enables making cultural difference visible and negotiable (Brandner 2020: 242). This, however, is not unambiguous or free of inconsistency or conflict, especially “when a process – such as transdisciplinary research – is from the start designed to provoke, because it feeds on utilizing differences and contradictions in a productive way” (Novy/Beinstein/Voßemer 2008: 35). As transdisciplinary research contexts are marked by uncertainties and the need for exploration and reflectivity, a recursive organisation of the process is beneficial if not essential (Lang et al. 2012: 27). The iteration of the elements of Generative Picturing provides such a structure and rhythm for a collaborative process. Repeatedly moving through the cycle of Impulse – Photographing – Picture Dialogue – Mapping, participants identify and progressively condense the generative themes, gaining and integrating evermore abstract and theoretical understandings.

#### 4. Participatory research with lower secondary school students

“The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.” (Freire 2000 [1970]: 73)

From March to June 2017 I conducted a participatory research project with a class of 19 fourth grade students (13-15 years of age) at a lower secondary school in Vienna. I entered this context as a university student, working on my master’s thesis (see John 2018). The research had a generative and experimental character. Departing from the “present, existential, concrete situation” of my research partners (Freire 2000 [1970]: 95), the topics and methods took shape in the course of the (research) process. It came to centre around the generative theme of “self-determination”, utilising a mix of qualitative methods. To do participatory research with lower secondary school students at their school means going right to the heart of the ambivalent nature of education. Working at the intersection of education’s oppressive and emancipatory dimensions requires navigating considerable contradictions, limitations and challenges.

School systems have a critical role in the reproduction and legitimation of societal structures of inequality and exploitation. Authors such as Louis Althusser (2014 [1971]) show how the school system contributes to the production of subjects as an effect of ideological interpellation. It “teaches ‘know-how’ but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology*” (ibid.: 52, original emphasis). Within the “banking concept of education” (Freire 2000 [1970]) students are disciplined, taught to accept “the passive role imposed on them” (ibid.: 73), and learn not to ask questions or challenge the status quo. This socialisation is complemented by the school system’s functions of selection, allocation and legitimation of inequality.

With “Maxwell’s demon” Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 36ff.) metaphorically refers to a thought experiment on thermodynamics, exemplified by the physicist James Clerk Maxwell, and relates it to the mechanisms of the reproduction of inequality through the school system. A demon is thought

to separate molecules according to their speed into two chambers with different temperatures. While the faster and already hotter molecules heat up even more in the warmer chamber, the slower and colder molecules continue to lose temperature in the other chamber. Maxwell's demon is even more powerful in segregated school systems such as the Austrian one, where children are already separated into different school types at the age of 10. In urban areas such as Vienna the transition to secondary education, and thus the allocation of students to either "Gymnasium" or "Neue Mittelschule", can only to one third be explained by differences in performance. Two thirds of the determining factors are accounted for by parents' socioeconomic background and level of education (Oberwimmer et al. 2019: 146). Due to this segregation, lower secondary schools in Vienna accommodate a high proportion of marginalised and disadvantaged students.

To enter this system at this location, a lower secondary school in Vienna, not only with an interest in the student's lifeworlds and concerns but with the intention of collaboratively doing research, can be considered an intervention into the dominant practice of both school and academia. It means working together with students "who, for various reasons, frequently are not believed to be capable of finishing school with good results, let alone of doing research themselves" (Wöhler 2017: 44, my translation; Freire 2000 [1970]: 106). Even for participatory research in school contexts, in general, it is quite rare that students have the opportunity to assume an active role as (co-) researchers (Feichter 2015: 37; Wöhler 2017: 34 f.).

My aim with the project was to open a space within the school system, in which a different way of being and doing research as a learning and humanising process can be explored, a space oriented toward the exploration of active roles, the asking of questions and the problematisation both of "the world as it is" and "the fragmented view of reality" (Freire 2000 [1970]: 73). Encountering the students as capable and knowledgeable, as partners in the inquiry, enables a collaborative process in which knowledge emerges through dialogue in order to "name the world, to change it" (Freire 2000 [1970]: 88).

## 5. The application of Generative Picturing in a school context

Generative Picturing was developed for situations marked by cultural difference and separation, in which people are, however, connected through their experiences of the same or similar phenomena and problems. The framework creates an intentional and purposeful space, somewhat disconnected from the dynamics and necessities of everyday life, in which participants can enter a collaborative process, exploring their lifeworlds and generative themes (Brandner 2020: 21). Given the context of my research, the decision to use Generative Picturing might seem like a contradiction. Working with an entire school class and mainly during lesson hours, how can a disconnection from everyday life succeed, if we are ‘right in it’, literally hearing the school bell all the time? However, several of Generative Picturing’s qualities outweighed this consideration and motivated my decision to employ the framework in this context. The horizontal organisation of the group process enables participants to interact and discourse with each other without the direct participation of the facilitator/researcher. In research with children and young people this can counteract the double imbalance regarding the dominance of adults and the traditional roles in research (researcher-researched). Jorgenson and Sullivan (2010; see also Woodgate/Zurba/Tennent 2017) recommend methods based on creative activities (e.g. drawing, photographing) for the research with children, as these promote active participation. Photographing as part of Generative Picturing introduces a creative, playful and palpable element into the (research) process. Moreover, I expected that the visual material produced by the participants would support their communicative exchange as a point of reference and a “basis for discussion and reflection” (Brandner 2020: 117).

In research contexts Generative Picturing can be introduced for different purposes and at different points of the process (Brandner 2020: 121). Within my open and experimental research approach, the methodological framework was employed with the intention of entering a collaborative research process and of developing a relevant and meaningful research topic together (Brandner/Vilsmaier 2014: 207). Generative Picturing was preceded by two introductory workshops (each five hours long) aimed at students gaining a basic understanding of social research and laying the foundation for the project. While the students were not asked to docu-

ment their thoughts and experiences in a journal or research diary, reflective elements were integrated at different points. The application of the methodological framework is described below, illustrating adaptations and experiences.

*Impulse:* As part of the second introductory workshop, Generative Picturing was introduced in a shortened and hands-on manner. Students used their smartphones to photograph a place at school which they associated with positive emotions. After that, a 'trial round' of Pictures Dialogues was conducted. The group was to get an idea of the overall process as a point of reference for the upcoming individual photographic practice, particularly because the impulse was deliberately kept rather open as part of the experimental research design: "What is on your mind? What are you thinking about a lot? This can be both in positive and negative ways." I was curious which aspects and themes the students would capture in their pictures when faced with such openness and liberty. However, a high level of openness carries its own risks, as it can cause confusion, lack of orientation and uncertainty for the participants (Brandner 2020: 120).

*Photographing:* The general approach to Photographing in this research project can be described as pragmatic. As all the participants possessed a smartphone, they were invited to use the built-in camera in order to encourage spontaneity, familiarity and accessibility for their photographic practice. Yet, the possibility of the medium being overly familiar and too much part of students' everyday habits, brings its own challenges in terms of intentionality and awareness. To some extent this was counterbalanced by the fact that, even if unintended, the students perceived the invitation to photograph as a kind of homework assignment. The participants utilised photography as a tool for documentation and expression. Thus, the pictures primarily held an instrumental function, with the purpose of activating the individual reflexive processes and eliciting different perspectives and interpretations within the group process. My focus on the spoken word resonates with Emmison's critical observation concerning the prevalent usage of visual methods (2016: 300, 307; von Unger 2014: 71). The visual material is frequently disregarded and receives little analytical attention, as communicative processes are the centre of interest.

*Picture Dialogue:* As shown above, Generative Picturing facilitates the interplay between the Self and the Other in a collaborative process

of learning and knowledge production. Within the Picture Dialogue this dialectic is manifested most clearly, and it is based on every participant contributing selected pieces of their individual photographic engagement to the group process. In preparation for the Picture Dialogues, everyone was asked to send me three pictures for printing. However, only half of the students contributed pictures, which created a dilemma, undermining the methodological premises of the framework. I chose to share these questions and concerns with the group, and the third meeting (2,5 h) started with a discussion about the situation. Most of the students thought that this one time everyone should be allowed to participate in the Picture Dialogues and that groups should be mixed with participants who contributed and participants who did not contribute pictures, with the students dividing themselves into four groups.

For the Picture Dialogues we moved from the classroom to the school's gymnastics room to create a certain change to regular lesson time. After the exhibition space was set up, the students had the opportunity to look at all the photographs displayed, sharing their first impressions, comments and ideas on adhesive notes. I participated in this opening sequence to get a feel for the situation and the space. There was a high level of energy and excitement as students moved around, interacting with each other and the pictures. For the Picture Dialogues, each group was provided with a set of optional questions to support the exchange (see Brandner 2020: 136f.) and asked to record their conversations using an audio recorder. Each round of Pictures Dialogues started in a lively manner and soon significantly dropped in energy and commitment. Although the time limit was adapted to seven minutes, it was difficult for the students to fill that time. Following the Picture Dialogues, the participants documented their experiences with a set of reflection questions.

*Mapping:* To provide an element of structure, an adapted form of Mapping was employed at the end of the first Picture Dialogues. As part of an individual reflection, each participant identified three key words connected with the Picture Dialogues and wrote each word on a coloured card. The class re-assembled in a circle and, moderated by me, these words were presented, arranged and related to one another. This process took quite some time and it was challenging to maintain the group's energy and attention. Bundling the individual engagements, a thematic map devel-



Figure 1: Impressions from the exhibition and the Picture Dialogues

*Source: Clara John, 2018*

oped in the form of a mind map (figure 2) and was to act as the impulse for the recurring individual photographic practice.

*Second cycle:* Every student but one contributed pictures for the next meeting (3 h). Disappointed by the previous occurrence, one student had persistently reminded her class colleagues about the task. Most students, however, contributed old pictures and did not engage in a photographic practice stimulated by the group process. Participation was now optional. Everyone decided to participate in the Picture Dialogues instead of attending the regular lessons. Reflections of the previous meeting and insights gained from listening to the recordings motivated some adaptations. The recordings of the Picture Dialogues were filled with laughter, jokes and private conversations. Some participants playfully engaged with the recorder, changing their voices or mode of speaking. Several contributions gave the impression that students were testing the boundaries of what was ‘allowed’ in this setting and how I would react once I heard the recordings. They were also filled with repetitive descriptions of the visual



material, comments such as “I don’t know what to say”, and silence. The students articulated little to no ideas or interpretations with regards to the pictures and the photographer’s intentions. As students had grouped themselves with their friends, certain communicative patterns had been facilitated and others inhibited. Together with the class teacher, utilising her knowledge of the social relationships in the class, I arranged groups between people who are usually in less frequent contact with each other. Before the opening sequence, I shared some of my observations of the process and emphasised the difference between description and interpretation. The structure for the session remained similar, but Mapping was structured into two phases. First, students conducted Mapping in small mixed groups with one member from each Picture Dialogue group and supported by a different set of questions. I walked around, listened and asked questions to stimulate the exchanges. All group discussions were recorded. In a second step, together with the whole class, these different maps were arranged in relation to one another to form one large map (figure 3).

The session’s atmosphere was calmer and more focused than the previous one. The participants seemed more familiar with the framework’s structure and purpose. At the end of the meeting, after the students had answered feedback questions, I paused the next iteration of Generative Picturing to take a closer look at the data and the overall process. So far, the framework of the method had worked differently than expected.

## **6. Discussion and lessons learned**

The previous section described the application of Generative Picturing in the context of a participatory research project at a lower secondary school, illustrating adaptations (e.g. a pragmatic approach to photographing, the introduction of additional elements of structure) and experiences (e.g. missing pictures/photographic practice, group dynamics). While Generative Picturing was employed with the intention of developing a relevant and meaningful research topic, the framework of the method had worked differently than expected. There had been positive responses to the horizontal organisation of the process and the group setting. However, there

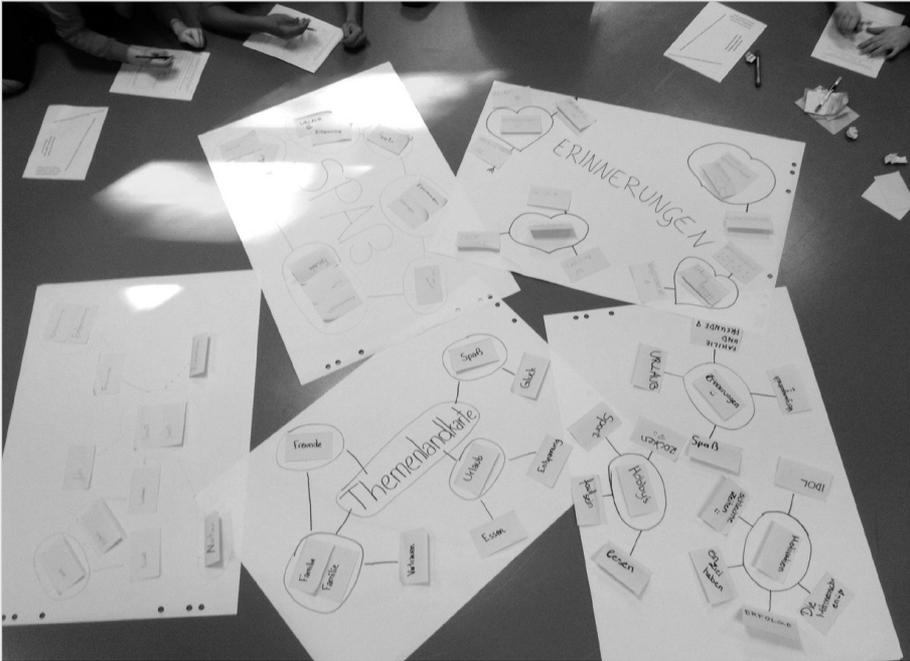


Figure 3: Thematic Map as a result of a two-phased mapping  
 Source: Clara John, 2018

was a certain lack of interest towards what other students said, because “we already know their opinions”, as one participant told me. “The others already know how we are and nothing new is said, but rather everyday conversations, normal conversations. With you there is more the effect that one says something new although the others are around” (D. in my research diary, May 18, 2017). During the Mapping exercises, in which I participated as a listener or moderator, participants showed more focus, reflection and interest towards the exchange with their class colleagues. Students actively sought my attention in different situations and asked for my participation in the feedbacks. Overall, I got the impression that many of the students felt the need to be seen, to be recognised as an individual and to receive attention, not just as a member of the class. Looking at the data and the process so far, weighing up the different dimensions and requirements of the process (e.g. research and pedagogy, group dynamics and individual needs, limited time frame), I decided to conclude Genera-

tive Picturing without having identified a generative theme as a research topic, and conducted qualitative interviews in settings outside of school. The framework of Generative Picturing had not sufficiently supported participants to articulate and scrutinise their viewpoints, experiences or interpretations in an exploration of their generative themes. The space was overpowered by the interpersonal relations, group dynamics and communicative patterns within the class. In retrospect, analysing the experiences of this limited application of Generative Picturing, several valuable lessons can be learned.

As the framework of Generative Picturing had worked differently than anticipated in the context of this research, I recognised this discrepancy as a valuable learning opportunity. Reflecting how participants interacted with(in) the methodological framework allowed me to gain further insight into the field. It highlighted the ambiguities connected to the role of a researcher in this context and the challenges of balancing openness and guidance. However, I failed to sufficiently feed these observations back into the dialogue and collaborative learning process with the students. In such a highly immersed situation, established group dynamics, relationships or roles do not dissipate just because of the research setting. For example, those participants who were highly engaged in the (research) process might have reproduced their established role as a ‘good student’, participating and meeting expectations as a matter of routine. While, what I had perceived as ‘boundary testing’, lack of focus, disorder or disruption at the time, may have been students expressing agency and self-determination in this space, realizing “the right to their own purposes” (Freire 2000 [1970]: 76). Thus, the research situation, the ways in which it is intertwined with existing structures, dynamics and (power) relationships, and observations of the process as such, need to be an integral part of the shared dialogue and collaborative process between researcher and research partners. If these aspects are acknowledged and adequately reflected, they can advance the process of learning and knowledge production (Brandner 2020: 252). As subjects of action and reflection, this is not opposed to the application of Generative Picturing. On the contrary, the experiences of my research show that it is worthwhile to search for ways in which these concerns can be integrated within or alongside the methodological framework of Generative Picturing. Particularly in highly immersed situations,

such as participatory research with a school class, Generative Picturing can only be realised as a process of actively creating an *intentional* space for dialogical praxis.

Nevertheless, within the immediate surrounding of the school, the methodological framework of Generative Picturing enabled a certain break with the dominant logic of school (e.g. static roles, performance review, clearly defined learning outcomes). Participants could assume active roles and be interpellated as knowledgeable subjects. It opened a space in which participants shared aspects and experiences of their (personal) lives, allowing others to gain insights into what mattered to them. The spatial configuration of the exhibition and the Picture Dialogues created an openness which enabled movement and the exploration of different forms of interaction and participation within and across the space. However, with group dynamics seemingly overpowering the space, participants were not able to inquire into the plurality of meanings and the relationship between the Self and the Other in an exploration of their generative themes. In retrospect, I can see that I concluded the work with Generative Picturing before one of its main qualities and strengths could unfold: the *recursive-ness* of the process. As every (group) process is different, a process in such a complex context and with such young participants would have needed more time to develop the inquiry and reflection, and to identify generative themes. For a process that takes time and is ongoing, the recursive-ness of Generative Picturing provides a temporal sequence and structure. As participants become familiar with the setting, the thematic exploration and examination can become more focused and intensified. Freire shows that transformative processes based on dialogue need love, humility, faith, trust, critical thinking and hope (2000 [1970]: 89ff.). Hope is “rooted in men’s [sic!] incompleteness, from which they move out in constant search – a search which can be carried out only in communion with others” (ibid.: 91). Hope nourishes “confidence [...] in the dialogue” (Streck 2012: 175). Thus, a dialogical and recursive process such as Generative Picturing needs to be grounded in hope and confidence. Navigating the challenges and specifics of the research situation, the facilitator – and the participants – need(s) to *trust the process* for its actual potential to unfold.

## 7. Conclusion

Generative Picturing opens a space to explore ways of relating to each other, of learning and doing research as a humanising process. Combining different elements of qualitative methodology with photography in a recursive and participatory process, it offers a valuable methodological framework for transformative research, such as e.g. transdisciplinary research. Even so, the experiences of my research with a class of secondary school students show that “[i]n practice, participatory research rarely follows the smooth pathway implied by theoretical writings” (Cornwall/Jewkes 1995: 1672). Oriented at participation and emancipation, such processes are necessarily messy and unruly. They require navigating the specific context and different dimensions and requirements of the process. The challenges and difficulties of conducting collaborative research in contexts such as the school system, and together with a group of disadvantaged students, are the same reasons that make this kind of work worthwhile and necessary.

The limited application of Generative Picturing in the context of my research has shown that, especially in highly immersed research situations, a critical reflection on that situation needs to be an integral part of the dialogue between researcher and research partners. Generative Picturing, developed and consolidated over many years of practical work, provides a well-founded methodological framework for (research) contexts marked by complexity and uncertainties. However, for the recursiveness of the process to unfold its potential, the facilitator and participants need to trust that very process. Employed in a school context, Generative Picturing can enable communication, learning and the production of knowledge if it is implemented as a process of actively creating an intentional space for action and reflection. Oriented at transformation and carried by the “yearning for a way to reach that highest point” (hooks 1994: 92), Generative Picturing can then facilitate a dialogical praxis in which knowledge emerges “through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, construing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire 2000 [1970]: 72).

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*ABSTRACT Der Artikel stellt Generative Bildarbeit als methodologischen Rahmen für transformatives Forschen dar. Generative Bildarbeit integriert verschiedene Elemente qualitativer Methodologie mit Fotografie in einem rekursiven und partizipativen Prozess. Der Einsatz Generativer Bildarbeit wird anhand eines partizipativen Forschungsprojekts mit Schüler\*innen einer vierten Klasse an einer Wiener Neuen Mittelschule gezeigt und analysiert.*

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