“May I show you our school?”

Biocultural ethics in a visual ethnography in southern Chile

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Abstract
This report describes the relationship between a rural school in northern Patagonia and its immediate surroundings. Through an ethnographic approach, it brings together different images of the everyday lives of students and teachers, challenging the boundaries between anthropocentric moralities and ecological urgencies, state education and Mapuche cosmovision, classroom and forest.

Keywords: Visual ethnography, Visual culture of schools, Biocultural ethics, Chile, Mapuche

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> I can notice it in the children who have graduated: they have already acquired the habit of asking for permission, for example, seeking permission from a tree to take a dihueñe [a type of mushroom]. These are things that you can teach in everyday life. Because it's like the stage where children are more receptive and you impact a lot on them (Visual arts and technology professor, Primary School of Hualapulli, 2023)

This report will describe the relationship between a rural school in northern Patagonia and its immediate surroundings. By quoting a teacher's words on the importance of asking a tree before grasping the dihueñe mushroom that only grows in its branches, we want to stress how biocultural practices articulate everyday pedagogical experiences, bringing together references to ancestral, local and instructional ways of knowing.

Figure 1 A wooden sign at the entrance of the school greets "Alongside natural resources, true values are lived. Welcome". Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Private Primary School number 33 of Hualapulli is located in Chile, in the region of Araucanía, Municipality of Villarrica, in a rural area between lakes, volcanoes and forests, amidst the ancestral land of the Mapuche people. Its environment is characterised by an exuberant native nature, shaped by the agricultural and forestry practices of the Mapuche, the Chilean peasantry and the European immigrants who arrived in the 19th century.

Among the 54 students, aged between 7 and 11, some children have lived in the countryside for generations, others commute every morning from the town of Villarrica (10 miles away), and some have recently arrived with their families, moving away from the cities that suffered from the Covid-19 pandemic. These demographic changes, together with an ongoing social tension concerning the ownership and use of land complexly reflect in educational spaces. Specifically regarding how families, students, teachers and authorities perceive and understand coexistence among different peoples and beings.

Figure 2 Side view of the school façade. On the front right side, the mural portrays Kai-Kai and Tren-Tren, on the back left side the almost unnoticeable Chemamull (traditional wooden human sculptures) merge in the forest. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Upon arriving, a circular path leads to the building. The front resembles a wooden country house, with the Chilean flag on one side, like many others in rural areas in the region. However, this school has a distinctive mural on one side: the snakes Kai-Kai (in blue colour for the sea) and Tren-Tren (in red for the fire of the volcanoes) teach an ancestral allegory about the origins of the world: they are engaged in a never-ending fight in which there are neither winners nor losers, but beings who learn to co-inhabit through complementary energies. The fact that both snakes are accompanied by the local kingfisher and the chucao (bird endemic to the region) adds to the understanding that this school procures to integrate natural, aboriginal perspectives into a cohesive project.

1. Biocultural ethics as a lens for ethnographic interpretation

Based on contributions from biology and environmental philosophy, Rozzi (2013) has advanced the notion of "biocultural ethics" as a lens to reconcile the well-being of humanity with that of all beings on the planet. To this end, he proposes a threefold relationship between habitats, habits and co-inhabitants that we adopt as a framework for observing the daily work of this school.

It is interesting to note that the notion of habitat derives etymologically from the Greek ἦθός [ethos], literally, the den, dwelling, or residence of an animal (Liddell and Scott 1889). In this sense, the habitat goes beyond the mere physical consideration of space and implies a place of everyday life. In other words, while there are many geographies, territories and environments in the world, the place that is named habitat is defined by a certain commitment and interdependence that deserves to be cared for and shared. For the community of Hualapulli, the habitat of their school is defined by a broad understanding of the immediate forest that incorporates the school building and surroundings, as well as the trails and different spaces for gardening and recreation that have taken shape over the years.

Habits emerge as recurrent practices of thinking, feeling and acting in the world that facilitate or shape life in a specific habitat. In a school like

Hualapulli, these practices typically reveal the intimate connection between biological and cultural dimensions. For instance, when students feel sick, they approach their gardening teacher and ask for herbal water. This is a clear example of how the consumption of medicinal herbs is intertwined with the care of the garden, which in turn implies a relationship with the plants being cared for. In the garden, teachers teach a form of care that requires respect and gratitude with the plants. Moreover, the tradition of drinking herbal water to cure an upset stomach is reinforced by the exercise of going to the garden and asking the plant for permission to take its leaves and use them to heal oneself.

Co-inhabitants are all of us (human and other-than-human) who, through our habits, shape the habitat we share. This includes the interactions between species and cultures. In this sense, the students and teachers of Hualapulli have an impressive ability to name and describe birds (such as *queltehue*, *chucao*, *bandurria*, *pitío*, and hummingbird), trees (including *coihue*, *hualle*, *maqui*, *hazel*, *radal*, and *arrayán*), and Mapuche mythological beings (such as Chemamull, Tren Tren, Kai Kai, and Ñgen) that they share their habitat with. Their recognition of co-inhabitants is so developed that some of the children and teachers can even imitate birds' songs or refer to particular individuals of the local biota by their names, like "the canelo" or "the wailing tree".

Figure 3 Among the trees there are two Chemamull, wooden sculptures that symbolise an allegory of the origin of the world. In the words of a teacher, they are "the protection that we have, the school, nature [...] I go out and I see it [...] I remind myself that there are things that are superior to me". Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

This triple lens of the biocultural ethics helps attend to usually unadverted aspects of school life. For example, while in the Araucanía Region one-third of the population identifies as descendants of the Mapuche people, recent studies have shown that the educational experience in schools within the region often separates the official curriculum from the ancestral knowledge of native peoples. Specifically, school textbooks do not include teachings about native flora (Medina et al. 2020), and some schools promote an essentialist stance on aboriginal culture that favours a pure tradition and cancels dialogues between students from different social backgrounds (Luna 2015).

On the one hand, such a situation risks ignoring the relevance of ancestral custodians of habitats, reducing conservation habits to technocratic initiatives,

and creating an anonymous hierarchy between human and other-than-human cohabitants. On the other hand, there is a real opportunity for schools to foster emotional connections with local habitats while generating positive attitudes towards co-inhabitants through direct embodied experiences.

It is often suggested that combining traditional wisdom with scientific knowledge is essential to tackling social and environmental issues. However, attempts to promote intercultural environmental actions often fail due to the lack of a common framework for dialogue (Mackey & Claudie, 2015). Hence, as the Hualapulli school undergoes the transition from traditional to modern rural life, it presents an environmental, educational, and intercultural challenge worthy of exploration.

2. A visual ethnography in the school of Hualapulli

Visually examining the everyday life of the school of Hualapulli implies moving beyond the usual study of the "visual culture of schools" (Prosser 2007) to include the sensory experience of local biota, weather, surroundings. In this sense, in Chile, the text "The invisible (f)actor: everyday aesthetics and visual culture in school spaces" (Errázuriz 2015) was a milestone, expanding the investigation of visual culture towards the sensory experience of the general surroundings of the school. This relationship has made it possible, for example, to explore which images of nature teachers choose to present local landscapes and cohabitants to their students (Méndez et al. 2023), or which pedagogical criteria guide the management of visual resources in schools and education faculties (Bravo and Marini 2023), among others.

In methodological terms, these studies have been moving towards visual ethnographies that are permeable to multisensory aspects (Pink 2013), which in turn allow for a more complex grasp of the relationships between school and natural environment. In this way, it is possible to produce econarratives (Payne 2013) that describe the different relationships between humans and other-than-human in indoor and outdoor classroom spaces, or the transformation of the school habitat with the passing of the seasons, among other experiences that show layers of interaction with the environment.

Over the past three years, one of the authors of this report has been conducting an ethnography at the school of Hualapulli. During the last year, another author joined the task intending to produce a visual record of the school. During a visit, an unexpected situation arose. As the authors arrived on one cold autumn morning, the headmistress approached them and offered to show them around the school. They agreed and began walking towards the main corridor of the building, but the headmistress turned them around and invited them to follow her towards the forest while some students joined them. This unexpected invitation compelled us to ponder the school's perception of its surroundings with regards to its institutional educational plan. Accordingly, we began to visually document the routes that students and teachers typically take in, around and about, between school facilities and forest.

Figure 4 "Mari mari, chumleymi?" (Hello, hello, how are you?) is the friendly welcome on the threshold of the main entrance, next to the Director's office. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Throughout this process, certain visual artefacts, climatic qualities, and animal and plant life gave rise to reflections and practices that were intertwined with environmental considerations. In describing their experiences, both students and teachers drew freely upon knowledge of the Mapuche cosmovision, references to formal school culture, and insights from their immediate territory. Their ability to effortlessly navigate through different epistemic registers led to the following question:

What do the visual features of the places that students and teachers routinely visit (paths, forest, playground, corridors, classrooms) reveal about the experience of nature that this school embodies?

It is interesting to recognise that as we talked, questioned, walked, stood in silence and paused over many visual details together with students and teachers, this visual ethnography was enriched by multi-layered, multi-sensory experiences. In an iterative and inductive exercise, the task of seeing became less isolated and dominant, contributing to more subtle and complex exchanges between colours, shapes and shadows that were signified in the community. As if the natural adjustment to the rhythm, pace and walking style that comes from sharing many paths with others had metaphorically and interpretatively permeated not only the identification of what the school shows but also how it does it.

For example, on a dry spring day, the route between the path (Figure 5), the stream (Figure 8), and the playground on the hill (Figure 11) often invites a race between the children, making the trail's details ethereal and almost irrelevant. During winter rains and snowfalls, this same route becomes slow and difficult, but the risk of slipping on some icy puddle is rewarded by a clearer awareness of the interweaving between the cadence of the body and the vision of the environment, especially when climbing a hill as described by Lund (2005). Something similar can be said about playing soccer in the pitch and how it is transformed when the wetland emerges or remains hidden beneath the surface (Figure 13).

Figure 5 And so we went into the forest to have our hosts introduce their school. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

3. The Wailing Tree

Figure 6 "The wailing tree", is the centre of an opening in the forest. Three girls are "listening". Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Flanking one of the entrances to the forest next to the school's facade, we find a *coihue* of titanic proportions, probably the largest and oldest specimen on the entire property. It is an evergreen tree, more than 30 metres high with leafy branches that sways elegantly in the wind and generates a dome of sun reflections around its circumference. No grass grows in its shade, but there are cut trunks and benches that suggest a place to rest.

Both teachers and students refer to it as "the wailing tree". The reason is that when students behave disruptively in the classroom, the teacher asks them to "go listen to the tree". But what do they hear there? In principle, nothing, there is no strange music or a hidden device saying something. However, the very presence of the tree, the overwhelming size of its branches, and its imprint among the other species in the forest generates a kind of wonder halo. One feels called to linger, keep at a distance from the trunk, open the eyes a little wider and look up, enraptured by this daily and marvellous experience of being in front of a unique tree.

Figure 7 For the Mapuche people, the *copihue* flower is a symbol of happiness, friendship and gratitude. Due to its indiscriminate extraction, in 1971 its total or partial cutting, transport and commercialisation was prohibited. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

It is relevant to point out that when students "go and listen" to the tree, they are not being expelled with the typical "get out of class" or "go to the principal's office". On the contrary, the entire school community trusts that "the wailing tree" will be able to teach something that has no place or that has been disabled in class. On the one hand, this practice of going out, stopping, looking carefully and connecting with all the senses favours what we could call a pedagogical symbiosis. Students arrive in ebullience, probably frustrated at not finding a proper place in class and having been ordered to leave. The tree receives them, welcomes their disorientation or restlessness and responds in the only way possible: upright, docile to the wind, generous in its shade, and present to the very moment.

On the other hand, this entry into the forest makes it possible to interrupt or slow down the typical school rhythm, which is often hectic due to curricular requirements and pedagogical tradition. Within the halo of this tree,

there are no deadlines, learning sequences or standardised assessment criteria. The pause justifies itself.

Figure 8 Two girls observe mushrooms by the Poinpoinko stream. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

As time passes, one can suddenly notice that a vine has taken the *coihue* as a support, and grows to embrace it and intertwine the highest branches. It is the *copihue*, "Chile's national flower" which has beautiful red petals in the shape of a small flame hanging upside down. There is also the Poinpoinko stream that meanders through the trees, and houses all kinds of daily games and ancestral traditions. For example, during the Wiñol tripantu (the Mapuche celebration associated to winter solstice), the whole school goes to its waters to wash their faces as a sign of renewal together with nature. Next to the stream, an infinite number of mushrooms of diverse and intriguing colours, sizes, shapes and textures appear.

Figure 9 "we don't touch them so as not to hurt them". Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

The *copihue*, the Poinponko and the many mushrooms have always been there, but probably when we reached the tree preoccupied with school, research or our usual tasks, we could not notice them as co-inhabitants. Recalling Merleau-Ponty, one could argue that this experience is not about listening "*to* the tree" but "*with* it", that is to say, being sensitive enough to perceive together with the tree the stream, the wind, the birdsong; learning to recognise a kind of background rhythm, unpretentious yet ever-present, of which we are always members and which unites us to the entire forest.

4. The playground

Figure 10 Three girls pause before entering the forest. They are surrounded by different species of trees and bushes. At their feet, a sign reads 'SENDERO', the Spanish word for 'trail'. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Entering the forest demands the practice of some daily rituals. Between games, walks and classes, children incorporate them. The first and perhaps the most important is the greeting. When approaching each of the forest's paths, students and teachers make an almost imperceptible pause, asking permission from those who take care of the place: to the trees and the forest as a whole, particularly to the Ngen. For the Mapuche cosmovision, the Ngen are energetic beings who protect the balance of life, oversee all behaviours and demand some form of retribution in case nature is altered in any way. Hence the importance of greeting with an attitude of respect, becoming conscious of how we care for the forest we inhabit.

As students guide us uphill through this path surrounded by trees, asking permission from the other beings that live there, teachers constantly remind everyone that we need to keep an attitude of respect. Within this atmosphere, when we finally reach the top of the hill we find a section of the forest transformed into a playground built of wood, connecting branches at different heights, hanging ladders and even bridges. The teachers call this place "the psychomotor circuit" and explain that it was designed for climbing, balancing and jumping. The children call it "the playground" and describe it "as a place to play... But the idea is that if there is one child before you, the others have to wait for their turn".

Figure 11 A teacher talks with students in "the psychomotor circuit" or "the playground". Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Students' calm enthusiasm makes us inquire about the frequency of their visits to this playground. When asked, one girl answers "We come sometimes...every other week. We want to leave this place alone for the birds, it's like their home". Another student commands us "We mustn't shout because birds live here too".

These conversations give us a glimpse of the relationship children have developed with the forest: it is a place of play, but it is also a place that is inhabited by birds they know well, and which they take care of as they acknowledge this playground is their home. The relationship between play and care is a significant one, especially if we think of it in terms of childhood experience. This is to say, regulating the impulse to play, or even postponing the visit to the playground as a child is a task that we find astounding. It reveals a pedagogical practice that creates common limits in connection with nature, amplifying the sense of pedagogical symbiosis: this playground it is a space for play and games but, at the same time, it is an inhabited share of land where one has to know when to be silent, when not to interrupt, how to leave, and when to get back in the appropriate time.

Figure 12 The view from the top of the slide. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

While doing a photographic exercise during a break, some girls came up to talk to us and suggested that we take a photograph of the school from the top of a slide. As we talked, they described the scene "You can see the children, you can see the houses, the classrooms...and because there is a pitch, that is the meeting place where they are almost every day". As we climb the ladder of the slide to fulfil the request (Figure 12), it was possible to notice how the school and forest have grown together. The school has created an opening which offers the only level ground where students and teachers can play without obstacles. The forest has enveloped the school, shielding it from harsh winds and snowfalls.

Figure 13 The wetland. In the back of the scene, children are playing soccer. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

A wetland lies at the foot of the hill. Rainfall determines whether it will emerge, remain as a puddle or disappear due to the layers of groundwater, creating an intriguing natural phenomenon which affects teachers and students differently. For the teachers, it entails looking after children as they risk getting wet and muddy, especially during the wet season. For students, the wetland is a year-long fun: as it gets dry it becomes an extension of the soccer pitch; when it is partially wet during the freezing winter mornings it becomes a small ice-skating field, when all ice melts it becomes a puddle for intense mud combats.

5. To be nature or to be in nature?

Figure 14 As the bell rings, a girl runs to class. In the centre of the figure, a mural portrays local biota. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

Coming down from the hill, through the pitch, we face the school's back entrance. There, the different materials in the roofs and walls, and the alternate volumes of each space, give the impression that the building grew in stages, like so many schools -rural and urban- that are born as a single house that then evolves according to the needs of the community (Errázuriz & Marini 2016). Sometimes, this ends up getting in the way of the landscape; other times, as is the case in Hualapulli, the buildings strive to maintain continuity with the surroundings.

An indication of this continuity is the mural that greets those who pass between the classrooms, the bathrooms and the playground. Here the same flora and fauna of the neighbouring forest are reproduced, consisting of ferns, Canelo flowers, a huala, a chinita, beetles and even a mushroom. One morning, while we were returning from visiting the hill, a teacher told us at that exact spot, as if summarising her experience, "This school is not in nature, this school is nature". Such a statement accords with students" descriptions of "the wailing tree" and "the playground": In Hualapulli, the awareness that nature is always *here* is evident. Nature reveals as a mediation between the world and the school, right now; an emergent net that maintains an essential porosity between all beings.

Figure 15 The reflection of the sky in the ceiling, the *ñinim* (Figure that represents the Mapuche cosmovision) design in the door, and the wooden heater in the corner tint this otherwise average class with typical Patagonian traits. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

As we approached the classrooms from this backyard, we encountered another aesthetic gesture that emphasised the fluidity between habitat, co-habitants and school: the large windows of the classes reflect the sky in the ceiling of the room. It would seems that the classic inside-outside or artificial-natural distinction has no place in here; as if the knowledge and habits associated with the natural environment were allegorically admitted into the lesson's usual space.

In contrast, as we enter the main corridor and head towards the room shown in Figure 15, there is such an abrupt change that one might doubt whether we are still in the same school, region, or country. References to local flora and fauna seem to have been extinguished. At first glance, the darkness of this space and the scarce traces of purposeful appropriation stand out. Concerning obscurity, other studies in southern Chile have already noted that the interior spaces of rural schools tend to be dark, perhaps due to the materials used to insulate from the cold and rain, which prevent the use of large windows or skylights. If the function of the corridor were merely to communicate the entrance with the classrooms and the backyard, this lower-quality lighting could be justified, as there would be nothing relevant to look at here.

Figure 16 Main hallway. The ochre of the walls' dado and the white of the upper part of the walls and ceilings connect all interior spaces of the school. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

However, there is a deliberate visual design of the artefacts that populate this corridor. The three yellow circles with Mapuche iconography that refers to the relationship with the different energies in the natural world, and the black and white weft that joins the upper frame of the corridor with the right wall, implied the use of a ladder and a careful bonding of surfaces. Yet, they are made of less durable materials than those used to welcome all visitors (Figure 4). Furthermore, although the position of the books in the shelves seems to indicate frequent use, the emptiness of the two bulleting boards -in an image captured in the middle of the school year- as well as the solitary table and chair make it difficult to understand the visual purpose of this corridor.

The end of the visit to the Hualapulli School brings echoes of the road sign that greets all visitors (Figure 1): the welcome sign on the blackboard and the geometric design of the *ñimin* as the window frame of the classroom door. Inside the classroom, the welcome sign between the clock and the whiteboard are world heritage of school visual culture. It would be hard to imagine a primary school without some form of these artefacts, designed to teach the value of chronological time, the relevance of welcoming each other, and the importance of learning to look to the front.

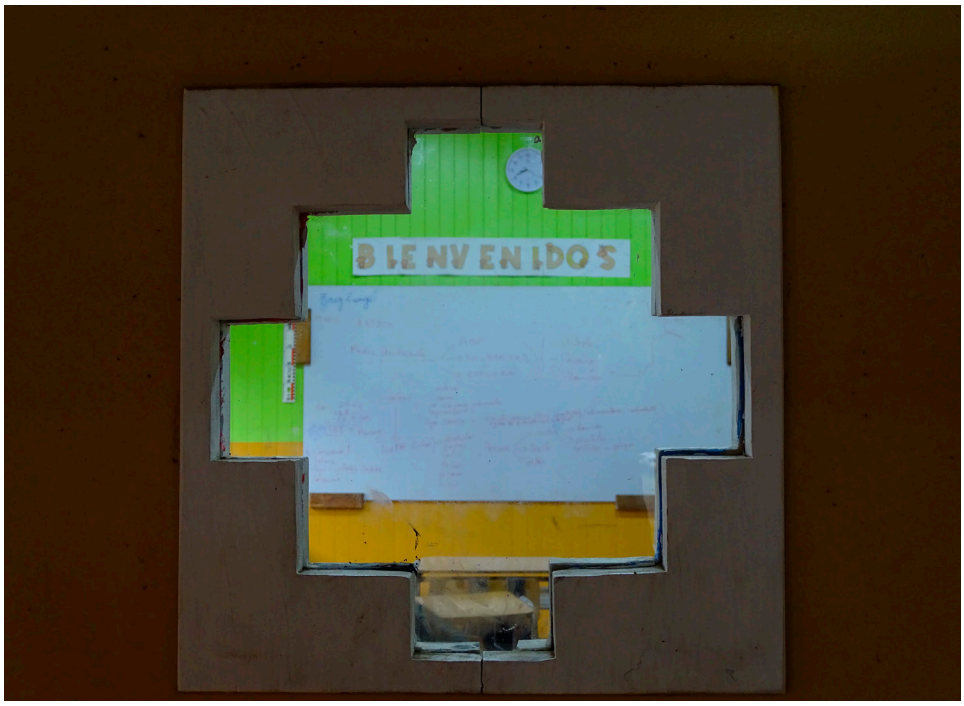

Figure 17 Classroom doors take the figure of the ñimin as their window frame. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

The *ñimin* is a traditional design that arises from imagining a cross or two ladders linking heaven and earth (up-down), forest and home (outward-inward). As if it were a pedagogical metaphor, the *ñimin* reminds us that these are the fundamental relationships that need to be taken into account in education and life. In this doorway, it is the vantage point from which to look into or out of the room.

Within an overall fluent and enriching dynamic, Figures 16 and 17 help notice a subtle tension in the relationship between school and nature: when pedagogical practices extend to "the wailing tree", the stream, "the playground", the hill and the wetland, the very life of the school *is* nature. Everything becomes slower, docile to the weather and attentive to a multi-sensory understanding of learning. But when we enter interior school spaces, the visual culture of the classrooms and corridors seems to keep repeating that the school is *in* nature or that it symbolically refers to nature, without becoming an expression of it.

One could argue that the habitat of the forest merges the school institution and its habits and cohabitants into a common relationship; while the traditional school space of classrooms and corridors leave cohabitants outside, acknowledging nature as a vital metaphor for school learning, but not necessarily reconfiguring its instructional practices, ways of looking and organization of class time.

All in all, the identification of this tension allows us to value the daily exercise of education that takes place in Hualapulli, not only for the sake of continuing working with this community, but also with the hope of sharing its practices and sensibilities with other rural and urban schools in Chile and the world.

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