

ABSENCE/PRESENCE IN 'GREEN' IMAGININGS OF INDIAN SCHOOLS CAPES

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Abstract

This paper traces how a modest 'tree' in school premises, previously unnoticed in the public eye, becomes an emblem of pride for a large number of spectators; and how its material erasure makes it present and relevant for diverse groups of people. Physical effacement gives birth to an enacted object, with a new value ascribed to it. The findings from this study offer an effective beginning for a reflection on the construction of pride-objects in schools. This paper follows the narratives of two urban government schools in Mumbai, India that bear images of trees in their schools capes in absence of actual trees in or around their compounds due to varying reasons. Through interviews and non-participant observations, the discussion focuses on how different school members have noticed the school spaces and their configurations with respect to the absent/present trees. Instances of absent presence and present presence as well as connections between them are traced to discuss school members' identity work. By way of the school members' participation in the network of events connected to making the absent trees present, emergent valuation of objects in their schoolscape becomes visible. Present presences are found in the way notions of 'green' permeate into classroom talk and exercises such as writing letters to the editor of a local newspaper explaining issues of deforestation and measures to curb it, recitations of quotes in the morning assembly, visual-textual content prepared for celebrations of days of national importance, displays on school walls, artistic interventions and allied activities in informal spaces. Absent presences include invigilation and assessment pressures, maintenance of school status, role of media toward image-making of the school-self, student expression, and local histories. This has implications for understanding questions of representation of green, good and happy schools; and orchestration of environmental (pro)activism as part of curriculum work.

Keywords: *Green school image, absent presence, pride objects, school self.*

1. Introduction

The frequent invocation of the 'green' exhibits or displays in the schools capes for Environmental Education (EE) in scholarly discussion hints at newer interactional entities in the discourse of schools capes and also creates an image of the school as a designed nested site. Installations within the school grounds are typically built with certain pedagogical intentions. Place Based Education (PBE) advocates such as David Gruenewald (2003) have emphasised PBE which draws on local cultural, environmental, economic, and political concerns, to transform schools into sites for decolonisation and reinhabitation. This view prioritises a convergence of social and environmental concerns (Hayden-Smith, 2007); and locates teachers and wider communities in place-building for EE, but Gruenewald (2003) mainly talks about how standardised testing procedures rob teachers and students of the opportunities to practise critical pedagogy for EE.

Educationist David Hutchison (2004) explores the philosophy of place in education, current school design trends, and the infrastructure crisis, highlighting the potential impact of declining budgets, competing ideologies, and economic/technological shifts on K-12 education in the US. According to Hutchison (2004), educators can strengthen a sense of place in education by fostering a strong school spirit. Schools with a strong sense of place are more committed to their students and faculty. Maintaining cleanliness, safety, and avoiding bullying are crucial. Academic and athletic successes, along with celebrating accomplishments through concerts, plays, and graduation ceremonies, can deepen pride in place (Hutchison, 2004).

Although, the aforementioned studies contribute to learning about school pride and role of place in education, there is scant research on how installations involving trees take shape in school premises, and what they mean for the school members and school identity creation. Despite widespread presence of tree-based installations in school sites (Song, 2012), there seems to be less attention given to these artefacts. Hence, the aim is to address this gap through our study. The study is located in the government schools of suburban Mumbai in India. The research design is detailed in the following section.

2. Design

This study looks at specific installations in school premises in India to learn about their motivations behind their creation through conversations with school members and school observations. The significance of this study lies in its findings that challenge the common assumptions that schools create such installations only for pedagogical purposes. Our discussion highlights reasons for schools indulging in creation of such installations related to environmental education. The key finding suggests that the school's identity formation is seen as an important goal alongside pedagogical aims. The design of the study is inspired by qualitative ethnographic methodology as the research aim is to uncover subjective perspectives of the school members about the school installations. These results and discussion illuminate the reasons behind the production of these specific schoolscape installations.

3. Objectives

According to Jaworski and Thurlow (2010), schools stand for a particular type of “spatialization”, which is the process by which space is organised, experienced, and represented. Harvey (2009) conducted seminal work on this concept. In his writing about the urbanisation process, he notes how social activities shape and depict space, time, place, and nature in relation to one another. Place-making is a complicated social process that incorporates aspects of speech and language, institutions and rituals, beliefs, values, and wants, material activities, social relations, and power all at the same time. Our goal is to interpret space in terms of social practices related to schoolscape or the development of the schoolscape elements. While schoolscape studies have focused on the visible language by examining language ideologies (Brown, 2012; Laihonen & Szabó, 2018), minority languages (Biró, 2016), or trans-languaging (Straszer, 2017), the current inquiry is more interested in the use of space inside the school building, its premises and school boundaries following Krompak et al. (2020). Within schoolscape, this paper focuses on what will be referred to as the ‘school display’ – specifically the installations or landscaping in the grounds of the school premises. The following questions guide this study: What is the purpose behind the installations in the school ground? How are tree-based installations treated in schools? What kind of discourses and marginalisations characterise these installations?

4. Methods

The study is located in two government schools in suburban Mumbai. Data from interviews with six teachers and two principals (school headmasters) are used. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with all participants as well as performed observations that were recorded through journaling and note-taking. This paper is based on the data from an eight month long study. The study is inspired by ethnographic approaches under the constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), through which this inquiry seeks to understand the school members' perspectives to discover their subjective realities. Most constructivism-based research projects start with an open-ended investigation using research questions. Interviews were conducted in Marathi, Hindi and English language. All interviews were transcribed and translated to English before analysis. Data analysis was done through inductive coding until data saturation was achieved. After coding, an inductive-deductive method for analysis was followed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

5. Discussion

One of the schools had a patch of grass maintained in the shape of the Indian map, lined with bricks and a fence all around. This was the only grass patch in the school, while the rest of the ground had sand and mud cover where children played. This patch was initially larger, had a tree, and was open for student access. The other school used to have a lawn but now had tree stumps and debris in the lawn space. In recent years the new principal had initiated the renovation of this area during which one of the older tree trunks was carved into the shape of a pencil to signify the school's dedication to the national

literacy mission campaign. The pencil became an iconic pride-object associated with the school's identity, and the area where it was erected became a guarded space, thus restricting student access to the area. The school principals in the above schools maintained that the presence of the green patches was needed for increasing the visibility of the schools as their building had been surrounded by dumping grounds which affected the school admission rates negatively. In addition to this, the principal of the school that had the green-India map structure explained its role in the following manner: 'Here we teach children about our country, and what is cultivated in different parts of India. Children assemble around the map, and the teacher explains about crops grown in different parts of India by standing in the middle of the structure. It is important for the students to know about the country and keep its heritage clean and green. It is the symbol of our school.' The school organised a specialised training session centred around utilising the map. The training sessions, conducted by external non-governmental organisations and other entities, aimed to acquaint the teachers to demonstrate how the map could be included into the curriculum across Science, Art, Mathematics, and English. The head teacher was eager to underscore the significance of the green map not merely serving as a symbolic area, but rather being completely included into the curriculum and broader school community. In this narrative, the need for greening is framed by pedagogical goals and citizenship goals; as well as linked to school identity.

5.1. Present presences

Present presences are found in the way notions of 'green' permeate into classroom talk and exercises such as writing letters to the editor of a local newspaper explaining issues of deforestation and measures to curb it and recitations of quotes in the morning assembly. This was done as an extension to the principal's event of talking about the 'pencil tree' with a large group of parents. The discussion about the tree that was transformed in the shape of a pencil was discussed with children in the classroom by teachers. The tree in its new form became present through discussions about saving trees. Children were asked to write notes to the local municipality about tree-cutting that had been taking place in the forests of the city. The morning assembly was a space for singing songs about trees and the way students were required to become good stewards of the environment. Through this process, the school members asserted that they were 'mending' the school's lost identity.

5.2. Absent presences

Absent presences include invigilation and assessment pressures, maintenance of school status, and role of media toward image-making of the school-self. The green space in the school ground which used to have a tree initially and now had a landscaped grass-filled India-map was being used as a place for learning. The children were restricted from going close to the installations to keep the installations safe, thus curbing children's freedom. Thus, assessment pressures which were not usually talked about and remain absent otherwise, became present in the way the green space was used for coordinated and managed pedagogical aims rather than free exploration. The school had gained popularity among the neighbourhood due to the presence of the map and the interest of local media in documenting the endeavor. One of the teachers mentioned that the tree that used to be present on the patch was cut down because some electric wires were to be installed in the area and the tree's presence was an obstacle. Another teacher said that this story was not true and that the tree had been burnt due to lightning bolts during heavy thunderstorms. Yet another teacher shared a different story. She said that the tree had been cut as it was prone to collapsing during high winds. The school principal mentioned that the tree stump's placement at the 'heart of India' was to serve as a reminder to the children and everyone else about the importance of saving trees and that this is how 'humans can mend their mistakes'.

6. Conclusion

Teachers position green schoolscaping as mending. Teachers and school leaders engage with 'mending' discourses because it helps situate the 'greening' within the government school image and government school teacher identity. 'Greening' for urban government school members is a response to the negative public image of government schools. This response is manifested in the school member's mobilisation of the 'mending' discourse. Hence, green schoolscaping is rationalised through the mending discourse. The teacher and school leaders narrate accounts of mending to construct a 'green' school-image. The teacher as a mender repairs, heals, tends to, cares for and keeps. Simultaneously larger narratives of Environmental Education; assessment and audit culture (Apple, 2005; Power, 1997) feed the mending process contributing to image-making processes. The metaphor of mending helps in understanding what is perceived as in need of care by the school members beyond lesson plans. Studies in schoolscapes tend to ignore the notion of repair/mending mobilised by school members. A rare instance has noted schools positioning themselves as 'carers' through the 'art of display' (Thomson et al., 2007).

Another study talks about how tour guides take the role of activists to 'repair' the linguistic landscape of a city by proposing or displaying alternatives (Waksman & Shohamy, 2015). Mending as a conceptual-analytical lens has not found focus in studies on EE schoolscapes/schoolscaping. Forms of adherence or resistance to instrumental, gradual and participatory perspectives of mending might help explain presence/absence of particular voices in schoolscapes.

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