

Chapter # 11

ABSENCE-PRESENCE IN THE PRODUCTION OF ‘GREEN’ SCHOOLSAPES

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ABSTRACT

Schoolscapes are increasingly involved in the production of ‘green’ artefacts, installations, and activities. However, schoolscape discourse rarely features design processes and negotiations related to school ‘greening’. What does it mean for schools to become ‘green’? This chapter offers a critical examination of school ‘greening’ beyond its pedagogical purpose, particularly through tracing logics underlying production and consumption of tree-based installations in government primary schools of suburban Mumbai. Participant observation, and go-along conversations with school members reveals an image of a ‘green’ school, as an intense version of reality. The schools bear ‘presence’ of trees in absence of actual trees in or around their campus, through crafting site-specific displays. The discussion articulates how ‘green’ schoolscape is projected as a prospective remedy for many issues. The desirability of the hyperverdant projections seems to rest on the seemingly liberating, yet normative discourse of ‘mending’. Analysis of schoolscape production concludes that, despite their apparently subversive character within educational conventions, the ‘green’ imaginings inadvertently reinforce the very norms they seek to challenge. This could result in school members negotiating paradoxical expectations. Implications are discussed with regard to new ways of thinking about schoolscape design research in the context of Environment Education.

Keywords: green image, absence presence, schoolscape.

1. INTRODUCTION

Schools are becoming sites for ‘green’ artefacts and activities to support the implementation of Environment Education (EE) pedagogy. What does it mean for schools to become ‘green’? What are the conditions within which ‘greening’ unfolds? Existing research in school practice of ‘greening’ tends to foreclose inquiry into its diverse narratives. Majority of scholarly research on schoolsapes, primarily as linguistic landscapes, is limited to depictions of environmental crises (Ardhian, Setiawati, Sukmawan, Setiawan, & Purwaningrum, 2020), ecological symbolism (Setiawati, Sukmawan, Ardian, Setiawan, & Purwaningrum, 2020), environmental issues (Mendes, 2020) and so on. In contrast, the chapter seeks to uncover ‘greening’ through the school members’ perspectives, mainly teachers, and the complexities of community, institutional, governmental, and social contexts influencing them. Schoolscape refers to the images, humans, other-than-humans, symbols, written language, placement in time and space (Shohamy & Waksman, 2009, 314) as well as oral language (Brown, 2012) in schools. Extending these definitions, for the current inquiry, schoolscape is not considered as an object or setting, but as a verb – schoolscape. The phenomenological stance (Pope, 2006) especially encourages observing and examining the performative nature of how individuals construct the schoolscape as an ongoing process.

Schoolscapes in our study refers to school displays and related social practices in production of murals, installations, and exhibits. Our examination of schoolscape production shall reveal that, despite the ostensibly subversive nature of ‘greening’ initiatives within conventions of the formal education system, the schoolscapes seldom diverge from prevailing ideologies; rather, they inadvertently reinforce the very norms they aim to contest in leaning towards a hyperverdant image. In proposing the term hyperverdance, we draw on the concept of hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1994), that manifests through carefully curated performative spaces where ‘greening’ unfolds’.

2. BACKGROUND

Schoolscapes could have varying goals – moral, didactic, pedagogical, wellbeing-oriented and so on. The current work reveals absent presences underlying various objectives for which ‘greening’ is pursued, through three installation displays in Mumbai schools. The Primary school system of the Mumbai Municipal Corporation in Maharashtra, India, is the largest urban primary school system in Asia, with over 0.47 million students from low-income families receiving free education across eight different instructional media (Juneja, 2001). A municipal school building in an urban setting often consists of four or five stories, featuring a flagstone or concrete courtyard. Incorporating environmental issues into public school curricula continues to pose a challenge (Kim & Fortner, 2006) due to lack of skilled staff, infrastructural limitations, and various socio-economic forces shaping school members’ lives. Greater Mumbai is divided into seven administrative zones, each comprising three to five wards designated alphabetically. This chapter, based on data from two schools, is part of a larger study for which field work was initiated in June 2022 for a year. Access to a total of four schools from the S and N ward was secured upon due consent from official channels.

3. OBJECTIVES

The research objective is to investigate the purpose behind the installations in the school ground; the treatment towards tree-based installations in schools; and various discourses, performativities, and absent presences characterising these installations. While schoolscape studies have focused on examining language ideologies (Brown, 2012), patterns of language related to climate change (Solihah & Anjaniputra, 2024), and temporalisation in schoolscapes (Aya & Savski, 2023); the current inquiry is more interested in the production of material displays inside the school building premises. The term ‘green’ for this study is not defined based on theoretical literature, rather it is mentioned as it colloquially emerged in teacher-talk.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

The data for this study is based on research in two government primary schools in suburban Mumbai. Data from go-along conversations with six teachers and two principals is included in this chapter. All the teachers were from primary grades, and taught Environmental Studies (EVS) in addition to teaching their subject specialisations. Field-notes from participant observation were analysed alongside go-along conversations. The teachers’ quotes are labelled as T1, T2 and so on, while the school principals’ quotes are labelled as P1 and P2. The three installations or displays in the school grounds that this chapter considers are an India-map structure around a tree stump, a pencil-shape carved from a dead tree, and tree-plantation ceremony set-up.

5. METHODS

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. The researcher recorded go-along conversations with school members as well as conducted observations that were documented through audio-recording, journaling, and note-taking. Go-alongs happened 2-3 times per week, and were not continuous but broken into segments based on the teachers' availability. A total of 405 hours of data was collected across a year-long study period with four schools. This chapter is based on the data from two of those schools. Walking and conversing do not yield a traditional interrogative interaction as in interviews, rather offers a possibility for members to engage in more spontaneous dialogue and movement (Anderson, 2004). The study employs the guided approach (Kinney, 2017), which involves participant-led go-alongs, wherein the participant assumes the role of the expert guide, leading the researcher through specific regions in the school. The researcher lingered around while listening to members discuss something and go about their day. Field notes contained systematic documentation of the observations and conversations.

Since EE is not considered a core topic in school curriculum, school members hesitate to share their experiences regarding it. Further, teacher lives are complex, and surrounded with various societal and other forces. Methods such as interviews, focus groups, video documentation, and diary studies have limitations such as uneven participation of teachers, gatekeeping by school officials, time and other pressures, and ethical concerns. Hence, the go-along approach emerged as an appropriate way to build rapport with school members and learn about the schoolscape practice with least amount of interference or interruption in the school members' schedules. The researcher accompanied school members to various areas of the school and also became a participant-observer during school activities. Key questions considered by the researcher during the go-alongs were: How did the idea of the display come to be? What is the process of thinking about and preparing the displays? When and why were certain concerns thought of as relevant? How do the activities and displays imagine school members and their roles? How and what kind of negotiations emerge in the framing of the displays?

Teachers often returned to the same location multiple times during walks with the researcher to add to their narrative of conducting activities or producing displays. No time restriction was imposed on the go-along conversations; nonetheless, most lasted a minimum of thirty minutes, with duration solely dictated by the school members. The conversations focused on teachers' negotiations pertaining to realising 'green' displays. Conversations were conducted in Marathi, Hindi and English language. These were transcribed and translated to English before analysis. Data analysis was done through inductive coding until data saturation was achieved. In the first phase, key aspects of activities which the teachers described and discussed among each other were coded and labelled. The subsequent phases were conducted as open-coding to generate sub-themes based on teachers' ideas, feelings, and negotiations related to schoolscape. For instance, episodes from the data were analysed by noting specific sections from discussions and field notes which concerned notions around school identity and location. Further analysis revealed that these were related to larger themes of how activities within public-facing portions of the schools were treated. Sections within episodes were labelled to arrive at groups of themes. For instance, a discussion between teachers around reasons to develop the map installation was tagged under "negotiating purpose".

6. KEY FINDINGS

This chapter discusses two of the broad themes emerging from the analysis: The first theme is ‘Greening’ as ‘mending’ with subthemes 1. Restorative reminder and 2. More than a school; and the second theme is ‘Green’ imaginings with subthemes 1. Inviting the outdoors and 2. Model ‘green’ appearance.

6.1. ‘Greening’ as ‘Mending’

This theme elucidates the notion of ‘mending’ expressed in school members’ discussions as part of their planning for certain installations.

6.1.1. Restorative Reminder

One of the schools has an installation in the playground area that shows the map of India contoured on the ground, lined with stones and bricks. It has a tree stump in the middle. This installation was being conceived at the idea level and its rough form was in place on the ground. So, a vision was in place and ‘in use’ in its temporary, rudimentary form.

The school principal mentioned that the tree stump’s placement at the ‘heart of India’ was to serve as a reminder to children and everyone else about the importance of ‘saving trees’, and ‘mending their mistakes’: (P1: “This is how humans can mend their mistakes”).

Thus, ‘greening’ of the school through such an installation is perceived as an act of ‘mending’. The school members dwelt on how to develop the installation of the India map. 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 got burnt due to lightning bolts during heavy thunderstorms. Yet another teacher said that the tree had been cut as it was prone to collapsing during high winds. Production of the installation was seen as a mark of pride for the school, though there were varying perspectives on inclusion of the tree stump: (T1: “Why form a huge map around a dead tree? The tree stump is an obstruction in the centre. Instead, we can colour the stump and stick some decorations on it, bugs and butterflies may be, and make the map structure elsewhere.”), T2: “But try imagining the tree at the centre of India. The memory of the tree can also be a message for younger generations. In fact, this map could be the main attraction during Independence Day celebrations.”).

Discussions about whether the tree should be part of the installation highlights teachers’ concerns about what the overall installation’s message could be. The stump serves as more than a conventional aesthetic prop for T2. The ‘message’ is explained as an important restorative ‘reminder’ by the principal in the quote here: (P1: “The tree at the heart of India would remind everyone that it is time we made amends. It is important for the students to know about the country and keep its heritage clean and green. This map would be the pride of our school.”).

The principal’s response talks about the tree stump as both a reminder of loss and a sign to start over. As the consensus over having the tree stump at the centre of the map became prominent, there was a discussion about access to the installation as well: (T3: “We need to think of marking timings and boundaries for entry so that the structure remains protected. Else, the children might start playing inside the map structure any time during the day.”), T2: “Maybe, T1’s idea about colouring and decorating the stump can help in communicating the exclusivity of this installation. We can fence it too.”).

Children’s possible interactions with the installation posed a concern for its maintenance. While T3 and T2 were concerned about protecting the structure, the principal proposed the installation’s pedagogical purpose. Exclusivity was emphasised to create a

distinction between the map and other elements of the playground. The principal, in response to T3 and T2, presented a perceived novel-use of the stump, as in the quote here: (P1: Yes, but a teacher can sit on the stump, surrounded by children, and conduct regular storytelling sessions and lessons about seasons or crops grown in different parts of India. Such concepts will be admired by the officials and parents.”). The quotes in this theme overall show that maintenance of school identity, pedagogical goals, and commitment to reverence for national heritage emerge as functions of the installation. In contrast to T2’s idea for the map as a prominent ‘attraction’ for parents and officials visiting the school on Independence Day, P1 imagines an everyday function.

6.1.2. More Than a School

The tree is once again an absent presence in another school where the government school image must be restored through reviving a large pencil-shape carved out of a dead tree trunk. A photograph of a large pencil-installation from another school was filed in the school portfolio record which was spoken of by the principal while sharing her vision to revive their school’s installation to signify the school’s dedication to the National Literacy Mission campaign. Here we see a discussion on its upcoming plans: (P2: “Since this tree is situated near our school’s entrance, we must revive it. Let us bring back the giant pencil.” T4: “Yes, but it should not look like a regular pencil. Maybe one with wings? We already have a spare pair of wings from last year’s annual-function.”, T6: “Should we let children think of something to do with it? It will be a unique idea. It can be an eco-craft project for them. Or perhaps we can have some volunteer groups for help.”, P2: “No, no. Think more. It is in the forefront of the school building. It represents us. Our school must look like more than a school, like a place to dream big and experiment. It should feel alive, unlike other government schools!”). A mundane object such as the pencil is distanced from the layers of signs carried by this installation as it becomes a reference of itself, rather than the pencil as we know it.

Two interconnected aspects are discussed here. One is about achieving the spectacle of the pencil-tree, and the other is questioning the meaning of school itself. There is a longing to project the school as ‘more than a school’. The image of government schools was brought in as a context to further support this desire. The response by T6 was uttered in the context of a staff meeting which took place a few weeks ago, wherein there were discussions to engage children in craft work. The principal’s vision of creating ‘more than a school’ appears to contrast dominant notions associated with schools. At the same time, there is some sort of hesitation towards including children into the design process. The way the school must look is already envisioned by the school teachers and principal, as evident in the proposal to add wings and a constant emphasis on the prominent location of the installation.

6.2. ‘Green’ Imaginings

This theme further elaborates reasons for ‘greening’ installations beyond pedagogical purposes.

6.2.1. Inviting the Outdoors

Teachers discussed the issue of maintaining ‘greenery’ within the ‘map’: (T2: “How do we maintain the greenery within the map boundary?”, T1: “We do not need to. It need not be picture-perfect. Instead, we can colour the boundary stones green and erect some green-coloured wooden sticks perhaps?”, P1: “Yes. Our children and teachers can do this with whatever is available around. No need for external volunteers taking a long time to do something big and fancy. Imagine a teacher sitting on the tree stump with children sitting all around. It can be, you know, camping style.”). The feel of a camp-site and a perceived sense

of ownership is evoked by the principal in scripting teacher-student performativity (Ball, 2003) through the imagined installation plan. This description echoes the previous expression of creating something ‘more than a school’. Camp-like setting and atmosphere is visualised as a rarely found activity both in the busy city and regular school life. School thus becomes a site for staging such performances. Maintenance of ‘greenery’ was raised as an issue by T2, while T1 provided an alternative by suggesting an accessible option, that of green-coloured stones and sticks. T2’s concern to maintain the grassy-greenness of the map is contrasted with the principal’s idea of a rustic and wild feel of camping sites. One can notice aspirations to simulate something which is “out there”, inside the school.

Invigilation is an absent presence. The green-map installation is imagined as a managed space. It is proposed with specific functions in mind regardless of the occurrence of perceived external invigilation possibilities. Schoolness of the ‘green’ installation is maintained in suggestions for creating physical and temporal boundaries. Children are imagined as visitors, allowed only at certain times and for specific pedagogical purposes. They become an absent presence. The school principal – a figure of authority – while addressing a crowd of parents refers to the act of tree-memorialisation as an act of ‘repair’: (P1: “Children in cities need to reconnect with the environment and repair lost relationships ... The remnant of the tree in the middle of the map is our reminder.”).

6.2.2. Model ‘Green’ Appearance

The metaphor of ‘mending’ is re-invoked in the build up to a tree-plantation ceremony in school. In the process of curating the events of the ceremony, the tree is framed within ‘care’ scripts. Care for the school and the planet is projected in ‘caring for those who care for us’ – a piece of text written on a poster next to the spot where the first tree of the event is to be planted. Teachers made sure that they sent information about the event to the parents’ social media groups, and reminded them to keep posting photos of the event online. As such, in ‘greening’, surveillance is simulated as school members become self-governed without explicit external monitoring. The tree-plantation activity normalises displays of and reverence for specific forms of labour and codes which form another layer of absent presences, clear in the following discussion between teachers: (T1: “Do not forget to record the process of planting the tree.”, T3: “Yes. And we must remember to tell the students to colour the watering cans before the shoot begins. They have to rehearse their lines too.”, T1: “But they all are busy with stage practice. I will go paint some watering cans. Will you take care of my class until then?”, T3: “Never mind. There is less time. Let us just remember to get the bigger cans and do away the wilted pot-plants. I will paint some small ones at home, just for background decoration, like the ones the principal likes. Photos will have to be posted throughout the year anyway. They better look fresh.”).

The principal had expressed preference for a display of watering cans based on some school photos posted by other school principals on social media. Here we notice the pursuit for referring to exemplar schools to achieve a model ‘green’ appearance. In the search for a model ‘green’ appearance, data is continuously, widely, and intrapersonally captured to be later reconstructed into the exemplar-like. There is an omnipresent possibility of sharing geo-tagged images of school activities, whether carried out at school or at home. Teachers’ negotiation of their time and effort is in service of preserving the watering can as a testament to the celebratory spirit of the school people. There appears to be a preference to emphasise the ongoingness of voluntary-work over one-time event-specific labour. Paradoxically, one of the goals of such installations, which is to encourage children’s participation, as hinted at by teachers several times, remains peripheral. This is not to comment on the need, degree or quality of children’s participation; or to criticise the actions, thoughts, and behaviour of

school adults in the above examples. Rather, it is to do with how the schoolscaping activity imagines school members and the idea of the school becoming a 'green' school.

Members of the school community, including the students' parents, need not believe whether the installations could encourage participation towards environment awareness. However, they must believe or at least pretend to believe in the spectacle and even help maintain it as such, to avoid getting disturbed by potential collateral damage. The process of designing the spectacle of 'green' school necessitates compromises, yet its efficacy hinges on obscuring the remnants of what has been compromised. Tree plantation-drives tend to exude an atmosphere wherein one cannot discern that the emergence of a seemingly transformative and solutionistic endeavour, somewhere necessitates the presence of a compromise. Selective roles, appearance, and specific status of teachers, students, and other-than-humans, such as the 'wilted' pot-plants and the watering cans, emerges from the material-discursiveness of the 'greening' activities. The installation-design process seems to remodel questions of why and what should be 'cared' for and how. Negotiations towards planning the photo-friendly events as well as the everyday documentations of such activities are apparent in T3's quote, "Photos will have to be posted throughout the year anyway. They (watering cans) better look fresh". Equipments become important props to maintain the oasis-like atmosphere, and offer a laboratorial image of the school. Stewards of this oasis – the students, had to "rehearse their lines", as mentioned by T3. Thus, an intense version of reality, the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994) version of the school is revealed through discourses of 'care' and management leaning towards hyperverdance.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In response to the research question of "what it means for schools to become 'green'," the article traces absent presences across the production process of schoolscapes. The findings challenge the common assumption that schools create 'green' installations only for pedagogical purposes. The school's identity formation is seen as an important goal alongside pedagogical aims. Through site-specific installations, schools strive to be 'at their best' as if they are under constant inspection every day. This finding resonates in some sense with that of Clapham's (2015) study wherein teacher responses suggest that inspection is present in their school regardless of the physical presence of inspectors. Performativity is integrated into the everyday life of the school system, rather than solely for exhibition-readiness. However, Clapham's study talks only in terms of performing "lesson plans". In contrast to Clapham's study, the current study articulates how the metaphor of 'mending' helps in uncovering what is perceived as in need of 'care' by the school members even beyond lesson plans, and absent presences therein. Studies of schoolscape design 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, Hall, & Russell, 2007, 381-400). However, the discourse of 'mending' as described in our research has not yet found focus in studies on EE schoolscapes/schoolscaping. Implication of this finding is towards accounting for socio-material tensions between perceived awareness of what constitutes 'green' schoolscaping, and actual shape of absent presences tied to field instances of schoolscaping. Schoolscape discourse seldom includes design processes and negotiations pertaining to 'greening' of schools. The chapter provided an in-depth examination of school 'greening' beyond its educational objectives, specifically by exploring the underlying logics of the production and consumption of tree-based installations in government primary schools in suburban Mumbai. The 'green' projections appear to be more real than reality, or hyperverdant. Their appeal is based on the ostensibly liberating, yet authoritative notion of

‘mending’. In essence, the study of schoolscape production shows that the ‘green’ imaginings unintentionally support the very standards they aim to question, despite their supposedly radical orientation within formal education conventions.

8. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research could build on our redefinition of schools as social practice, and descriptions of the hyperverdant texture of EE activities, to advance existing theories of schoolscape design knowledge. In addition to the lens of absence presence, further studies could examine EE schoolscaping through engaging with ways various materials constrain or facilitate social and pedagogical encounters in ‘greening’ schools.

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