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A comparative study of students’ engagement with their school grounds through a lexicon of emotions

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Abstract

This paper reports a lexicon of emotional associations made by 10-11 year old students with their school grounds. Colour and symbol associations were used as a stimulus for getting students to engage with their school grounds, describe their feelings about them, and produce a lexicon of ‘emotional words’. The method was developed with students in Finland and then repeated with similar aged students at a school in the UK. The lexicon associated with the school grounds in both schools was overwhelmingly positive. The detail of the most frequently used emotional words is reported and similarities and differences between the associations in the two different cultural settings are discussed. The educational implications of supporting students in engaging with learning environments are briefly discussed.

Keywords: children's perceptions; school grounds; learning environments; emotions

1. Introduction

The work reported in this paper is part of a wider research project conducted during the renovation of school grounds (outdoor areas) in two primary schools, one in Finland and one in the UK. The Finnish-based research originates in the renovation of the school grounds at Joensuun normaalikoulu in the late 2000s. The research is for the PhD of one of us (PV). The UK-based research originates in an Arts Council of England Creative Partnership project into how transforming the grounds in a school in north-east England altered the way teaching and learning took place. This project brought together a landscape design company and researchers working in co-participant action research with staff and students at the

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school (Dillon et al, 2007). In both schools the grounds were planned and built as physical environments to support students’ holistic development. In the report that follows, the Finnish school will be referred to throughout as Länsikatu, the UK school as Peases West.

Student tasks were connected to developing learning environments in the schools during renovation processes. Colour and symbol associations were used as a stimulus for getting students to engage with their school grounds, describe their feelings about them, and produce a lexicon of ‘emotional words’. The method was developed with 10-11 year old students in Joensuu and then repeated with similar aged students at the school in the UK. The research questions addressed were:

- How students use colour and symbol associations as a stimulus to expressing their perceptions of and feelings about their school environments.
- How the perceptions and feelings may be a foundation for actively engaging students in designing and managing learning environments.

In this paper we report one aspect of the research: the largely positive lexical associations made by the Finnish and UK students with their school grounds, highlighting similarities and differences between the associations in the two different cultural settings.

Although the practical context of this work is students’ engagement with the processes of designing school grounds (and limitations of space permit the reporting of only one aspect of the research) the wider theoretical framing of the research is at the interface between child development, environmental affordances and community structure. It thus builds on, for example: Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecology of children and their surroundings; Gibson’s (1979) notion of affordances as qualities of environments which mediate the actions of individuals; Barker’s (1968) notion of behavioural settings as the interplay between environment and behaviour; and Soja’s (1996) notion of ‘thirdspace’ where structure and agency, mind and body, subject and object, abstract and concrete, real and imagined etc. come together.

2. Method

The ‘lexicon of emotions’ was developed as follows: Students associated colours and symbols with their feelings and emotions about meaningful places in the school grounds and annotated these onto photographs of those places. The colour association is a development of Horelli’s (1992, 1994) work on how students express their feelings by colouring photographs of their residential areas (Horelli & Vepsä, 1995, 12-13). The symbol associations were developed at Länsikatu collaboratively with 10-11 year old students by assigning symbols to collectively agreed vocabulary representing their feelings and emotions about the school grounds. Working in cooperative peer groups, the students named an array of feelings with adjectives (e.g. excitement, exciting). This resulted in approximately 110 words. Next, in peer groups again, the students assigned a symbol to each word. Next, they associated a colour with each symbol to best characterise the emotion of the feelings they had first described with adjectives. Finally, the coloured symbols were consolidated in a ‘symbol chart’ alongside the corresponding words for feelings and emotions.

Each student identified one or two places in the school grounds that were meaningful or important to them. Using the photographs of the places, students were asked to imagine being in those places or to recall memories of times they had spent in them. Then they used the symbol chart to make associations with the feelings they had about the places. Finally, they wrote subjective, explanatory descriptions elaborating their associations between places and symbols. The explanatory descriptions by Länsikatu students (n=18) constitutes one part of the data in this study.

The Länsikatu symbol chart was consolidated and condensed from 110 word+symbol+colour associations to 26 associations. This was done by the students at the School in discussion until consensus was reached. They grouped together words conveying similar emotions, assigning to each grouping the
most suitable emotional words from the original collection. The Finnish author of this paper translated the symbol chart into the English language. In cooperation with an English colleague, she applied the process of photographing, symbol coding and exploring associating feelings and emotions with students (n=10) in the UK school, Peases West. The Peases West descriptions constitute the second part of the data in this study.

3. Results

The data were analysed by the Finnish author of this paper. First, a table was constructed showing the numbers of times each emotion was used in the students’ descriptions. Next, the students’ descriptions and the emotions expressed were analysed in more detail and comparisons made between the two schools. The word groupings assigned by the students to each symbol (e.g. the symbol for feeling lively had associated words energetic, feeling fit, enthusiasm, refreshing) were used in the comparative analysis. In this paper we are presenting only the word associations, i.e. the ‘lexicon of emotions’, not the symbol and colour correlates.

Figure 1 shows the comparative incidence of words in the lexicon of emotions associated with school grounds at Länsikatu and Peases West.

![Figure 1. Comparative incidence of words in the lexicon of emotions at Länsikatu (red) and Peases West (blue)](image-url)
In the analysis that follows, direct quotations from students are in italics and are given in English translation for the Finnish students and verbatim (i.e. uncorrected) for the English students. Word associations are in brackets.

The most frequent emotions at Länsikatu were ‘joy’ (happiness, happy, merriment), ‘lively’ (energetic, feeling fit), ‘peaceful’ (peacefulness), ‘excitement’ (exciting, tense, strain) and ‘friendship’. The array of feelings with Peases West students was quite diverse despite the novelty of the task. The most frequent emotions were ‘excitement’ (exciting), ‘joy’ (happiness, happy, merriment), ‘love’ (fascination), ‘friendship’, ‘sad’ (sorrow, grief or regret), ‘lively’ (energetic, feeling fit) and ‘peaceful’ (peacefulness). One student exclaimed: “joy means that everyone is happy”. Taking both schools together, feelings of excitement, joy, friendship, livelihood, peacefulness and enthusiasm belong to the joint group of emotions with a high numbers of associations. This suggests the emotional climate in both school grounds is generally positive. But some sadness and pain was also felt in both schools.

Joy, synonymous with happy, happiness or merriment, was expressed in various ways in the students’ descriptions. A great majority of them had experienced happiness in their school grounds. In both schools social action in certain places brought happiness. Enjoying and having fun in various games and activities were the most frequent sources of joy. Climbing, jumping, playing football or tag were mentioned especially in Länsikatu. In addition, Länsikatu students also explained feeling happy because of their friends. Having friends as such was sufficient for feeling happy. Students found support from their friends important, helping them believe in themselves. Happiness was felt in actions, for example, with the personal success in making a goal or getting a high score in a game.

There were special places in the school grounds which brought a great deal of joy to the students. Expressions like “everything is happy there” or “I often feel joy there” were quite general. There were some nature targets, like a tree beside the football pitch in Länsikatu, or built environments, like the stage and the amphitheatre in Peases West, which were often mentioned as places of joy. Place-based happiness was intertwined with other emotions in various ways in both schools. Happiness was mentioned often as a result of some other feeling, say excitement, as, for instance, in the statement: “I feel joy and excitement in the football pitch, because we either are winning or losing. Feeling joy is quite strong”.

At Peases West happiness was strongly intertwined with memories. For example: “I am still talking about the stage. It is a wonderful place and another bad but also good feeling is that I always think of my sister and other people who left [the school].” A strong ‘togetherness’ with previous student generations, including siblings, was often expressed. There were a great many places in Peases West school grounds which reminded students of former students, especially the amphitheatre, the stage and the totem poles (these are all constructions that were made over several years as part of the Creative Partnership project in which the students were heavily involved). The connections between different generations of students at Peases West were strong. There was no sign of this phenomenon in Länsikatu.

A student at Länsikatu mentioned feeling joy because of an unusual opportunity to enter the stone area before an outdoor activity lesson in sports because of a special agreement between the sports teacher and the students. This minor flexibility with rules was felt positively and is a reflection of the importance of the subtle interplay of power relations between school adults and students.

In the symbol chart, ‘feeling lively’ was synonymous with related feelings which are open to a great variety of interpretations: ‘livelihood’, ‘energetic’, ‘feeling fit’, ‘enthusiasm’, ‘refreshing’. In Länsikatu, feeling lively may include a message of feeling energetic in a psychological sense, meaning feeling refreshed or empowered. In Peases West, energetic is explained from the physical point of view: “football is a sport and it takes a lot of energy to play any sport, but it takes quite a lot to play football.” Nevertheless, the two dimensions, psychological and physical, are basically interrelated.
A challenge for Finnish-English translation is the array of words expressing the feelings for ‘enthusiasm/enthusiastic’. For Länsikatu students, symbols for feeling enthusiasm were used as synonyms for excitement. Peases West students did not relate enthusiasm so closely with excitement, rather, they associated, implicitly at least, the psychological dimension of enthusiasm with feeling lively or energetic. They explained enthusiasm as belonging to diverse activities and also promoting motivation or making one more self-confident in special situations. They considered themselves enthusiastic, for example, “always when playing football”. Enthusiasm meaning empowerment with raising motivation was expressed in one statement: “Enthusiasm because for instance if we were performing a dance and we forgot the dance moves or did something wrong, others would encourage you to carry on and it makes you more positive. Also when you do it again it makes you more determined and enthusiastic about it”. Both physical and social environments were considered motivating in this context.

Peases West students described feeling liveliness mostly from their personal points of view. So did the students in Länsikatu, but also from the viewpoint of the place, as well. Person, place and activity together contributed to the feeling of liveliness: “the place is lively because people like to run around the amphitheatre” or “the place is lively with all flowers and trees”. Some students in both schools found themselves taking an active part in making outdoor spaces ‘lively’ in one way or another.

Similarly, interrelated processes shaped the transactional relationships between Länsikatu students and their places. There was only one student, whose explanation included her personal action, saying “I often feel energetic in the tiny forest because there are a lot of things to do”. The rest of the explanations were written from the viewpoint of the action or place into which the person was implicitly included. The psychological interpretation of feeling energetic appeared in explaining the place as nice or refreshing. For example: “feeling refreshed because of the cool wind on the top of the wall which makes you feel refreshed during the next lesson, too”. One of the students explained the place as lively because it gives possibilities for diverse activities and social contacts.

There were several expressions in Länsikatu students’ descriptions by which the relation between the writer and his or her surroundings was based on the individual’s own activity: Descriptions which place students in the middle of action, energy and excitement which altogether created “the pulse” or atmosphere of the special places. The football pitch was a typical stage of ‘liveliness’: “It is lively when 20 students play football” or “There is hustle and bustle when running after the ball.”

In the symbol chart, ‘feeling excited’ was synonymous with ‘exciting’, ‘excitement’, ‘tense’, ‘strain’. Feeling excitement was coded with the same symbol as feeling enthusiasm among Länsikatu students. In both schools, feeling excitement was described in a positive way, as a resource for empowering an individual’s action or place. But there were also differences between the schools.

Excitement in Peases West had the dimensions of activities and social and emotional connections between people and places. Excitement in Länsikatu school was explained either as enjoying the feeling itself in action or games, or in connection with an individual’s self-regulation, self-image or personal trait. In Peases West both physical and creative activities were considered exciting. Places were strongly connected with excitement. The various activities in special places were felt exciting: “I chose excitement because we play football here and there is normally a lot of excitement” or “excitement because I like running around”. Creative activities like drama or musical performance were also exciting. Individuals sometimes described themselves either in the role of a performer or in the audience; both were ‘exciting’. As one of the students put it: “Excitement because you are excited to find out who’s going to perform and what they are going to do for you.” Or “Excitement because of making songs for the band, selling tickets for the performance and feeling like a star!!!”

Social and emotional connections appeared in Peases West in three different ways: (i) intertwined with empathy for the younger children; (ii) associated with shared moments; and (iii) intertwined strongly with a wide array of feelings expressed directly and indirectly when describing experiences in special places.
There was an expression of empathy when one student reported experiencing nursery children finding the amphitheatere an exciting place: “the place is very exciting for our little friends”. Feeling excitement about chatting to a best friend made a shared moment special because of being “excited about what you’re going to talk about today”. Here excitement was linked to both ‘the moment’ and ‘curiosity’. Special places stimulated some creative writing at Peases West. One student used a wide array of feelings as a source for her creative writing. She produced a description of a rich entanglement of diverse emotions in which place, social relations and meaningful events were interconnected. Time and place were closely linked in her description. First, in the past tense, she recalled special moments in the special place with creative art work. Then, in the present tense, she described the place in her daily life drawing on a wide spectrum of feelings. Excitement was coded into her photograph and subsumed implicitly into her explanation. She was one of two students in Peases West who generated a great many symbols for their feelings.

The explanations of feeling excitement in Länsikatu were slightly different when compared to Peases West. There were two wider themes through which excitement was explained: (i) excitement as an enjoyable part of action, and (ii) excitement understood as a change in an individual’s mood, excitement here being equated with something stimulating or making the individual more enthusiastic or refreshed. Excitement, to a large extent, was an important element of various activities. The game itself or personal and mutual efforts contributing to a positive result in the game were exciting: “I feel excited which team will win and how much” or “I feel excited whether I get caught in tag”. Feeling excitement was sometimes directly connected into action in some special places, for example: “the swings are funny and exciting, meaning quick and I enjoy the high speed” or “the other strong feeling was excitement because there is always a lot to do”. In terms of excitement understood as a change in an individual’s mood, the response of one student is typical of those who used a special place as a means of self-regulation: “When I am bored I go there and the place makes me feel more cheerful”.

Excitement as a personal trait was expressed, for example: “I am often excited about things/matters-affairs”. For this student excitement or enthusiasm was part of her general orientation to life or a feature of her personality. An example of feeling excitement in connection with self-image is the following in which an individual’s reputation as a football player was dependent on his responsible to the whole team when taking a penalty kick. He feels excitement both for himself and for the result for his team: “it is exciting in football if you succeed in making a goal or not, especially if I am responsible for the free or penalty kick”.

In the symbol chart, ‘feeling peaceful’ was synonymous with ‘peacefulness’, ‘feeling calm’, ‘restful’ and was reflected in both schools, often in similar ways. The theme of explaining peacefulness in relation to specific places affording the possibility of rest or withdrawal into privacy was similar in both schools. In Länsikatu the peacefulness of a specific place was connected with self-identity, whereas in Peases West it was connected with social interaction.

The most frequent explanation in Länsikatu was relating place with resting. In addition to the calm atmosphere, students found the special place pleasant because “it is possible to rest there” or “because no one makes a noise there”. Some students reported possibilities for diverse functions or emotions relating to special places, like “I feel satisfied beside the tree. The place is also peaceful and nice”. Another reflected both calming and stimulating features of the place; she had had these feelings since her earliest days in the school.

There were places in both school grounds which the students used for private purposes. In Peases West someone described the barrel (part of the playground ‘furniture’) “a very peaceful place because if you want to be on your own this is the place to be”. Another student took her photograph of the roots of a tree in the playing field and explained: “at my favourite tree it is peaceful because there is only me”. A place for thinking alone was important for a student in Länsikatu: “peaceful is my choice for another strong
feeling, because it is a peaceful place for thinking by oneself”. A unique climbing frame at Länsikatu, named ‘Mother Bird’, was often mentioned, for example: “calm but stimulating at the same time as well”. Privacy in a peer group with very best friends was mentioned as a source of peacefulness: “there are not very many other people than us”. Other expressions of peacefulness at Länsikatu included: an atmosphere was calm or convivial because of the attitude of the players in the game, e.g.: “all the players take it easy”; familiarity made the atmosphere calm in special places, e.g.: “because we play with our own classmates”. Moreover, privacy in the sense of acting in a small peer group was also included in these explanations: “I chose feeling calm third because the atmosphere there is peaceful and convivial”.

There were some differences between the schools. Referring to other people was expressed differently in Peases West. One student connected very strongly people and place in the sense of remembrance. She explained choosing her meaningful place: “because it is quiet, calm place that reminds me of all people that have now left but were very good friends. We made our part of the totem pole with love and care”. Her writing includes echoes of devotion connected with the two meaningful sites she had chosen. First, explaining peacefulness in the memory of her friends when passing the totem pole. Second, the symbol of peacefulness on a photo of a pile of autumn leaves where a tiny pet had been buried. The place allowed her to cherish the memory of her pet.

Connections between place and self-identity were described in some Länsikatu students’ work. One student referred to his position as a school beginner and yearned to play the games and activities that would identify him as grown up. The theme of growth emerged in another student’s description. She explained her own physical growth as the reason for her peacefulness: “nowadays I feel calm because of growing up. My legs are long enough to prevent me from falling totally down like what happened when I was a small school beginner”. She felt calm because of feeling more self-confident.

There was also a place in the school grounds which represented a site for changing roles. The bicycle stand was associated with a wide array of feelings. One Länsikatu student explained feeling peaceful there because “it is convivial to leave school for home”. The place functioned for her as a mediator between the pressure and duties at school compared to freedom and relaxing time at home. Her explanation includes a wide range of feelings highlighting the difference between domestic and school circumstances.

In the symbol chart, ‘feeling friendship’ was associated directly with the explanations of the symbol of friendship or, in many cases, indirectly from the explanatory descriptions. Feeling friendship was intertwined with other feelings, happiness, for instance, and a whole text could be interpreted as an explanation of an individual’s friends as an array of coded feelings. This was the case in both schools.

However, some differences were still found. The explanations of Peases West students constructed a picture of friendship within time and place. Many of the students used two tenses when describing their feelings of friendship. Friendship was explained as a phenomenon of present daily life. Various activities in special places for friendship were described. Friendship was highly valued in connection with present moments, for example in an explanation: “friendship because me and my friends sit and chat or play there together. Also we perform shows and others perform back and by this we make new friends and it makes our friendship stronger”.

Friendship was also understood and explained without time limits, as a value and a process which is continuously reconstructed. New friends are made, others move on: “I really love the barrel because when my sister was in this school she built it and that gives me memories of when she was in school and also because I always sit there with my friends... I always feel joy when I walk past. Weirdly it also makes me feel lonely as lots of people have left”. Friendship between the older students and the nursery children was also mentioned: “I have had lots of friendship in the barrel. I think it is an exciting place to be in and a lot of big people play and help the little people”.


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Many of the explanations described activities in friendship groups. There were places which were
considered important for maintaining friendship. In Länsikatu these places were located in peaceful areas
in the school ground. Sometimes a group was expressed either by using plural first person as the writing style or naming individually all the persons belonging to the group. The intertwined character of emotions could be recognised in the
students’ descriptions of feeling friendship. There were explanations with feeling happiness because of
acting in a special place with friends. Friendship was thought to generate creativity in special places like
the swings, the tiny forest area or in the climbing frame: “I feel happy in the climbing frame with my
friends. There is a lot of action with a possibility to create various kinds of games - and if not, one is still
capable to speak”. Last, there were two explanations by Länsikatu student’s describing the influence of
friends in building self-image: “I played foot ball and talked with my friends; I am happy when my
friends support me and I do not feel myself a poor player”.

The most frequent feelings in both schools with the themes that emerged in the students’ explanations
are summarised in table 1.

Fundamentally, the school grounds were sites of joy and happiness. Happiness was explained quite
similarly in both schools. Social activities in special places in the school grounds were sources of
happiness in both schools. The interconnected nature of people and their feelings and actions were
explained in different ways in the two schools. In Peases West feeling joyful interconnected strongly with
memories, especially those of previous students and friends, whereas in both schools happiness was
intertwined with a variety of other feelings, some contradictory. In Peases West happiness was considered
also as a state of affairs. In Länsikatu moments of happiness were connected with the school culture, its
prohibitions and permissions.

School grounds were characterised with liveliness and energy to a large extent. The pulse of a place
was an explanation for liveliness in both schools. Länsikatu students’ expressed their own activity as the
basis for creating the pulse or atmosphere in certain places. Liveliness meaning energetic was understood
as an activity both taking and giving energy. The physical and the psychological dimensions were forcing
and re-inforcing each other.

Table 1. The themes in the explanations for the most frequent feelings in Peases West and Länsikatu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>Explanations in Peases West</th>
<th>Explanations in Länsikatu</th>
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| joy (happiness, happy, merriment) | * in social action  
* because of the place itself  
* intertwined in memories and contradictory feelings  
* as a state of affair | * in social action  
* because of the place itself  
* intertwined in contradictory feelings  
* minor flexibility in the rules |
| lively (energetic, feeling fit, feeling refreshed) | * the pulse of the place  
* activities taken and given  
* physical and/or psychological  
* transactional relations | * one’s own activity in making the pulse of the place  
* activities and social affordances  
* psychological refreshment  
* transactional relations |
| excited (exciting, excitement, tense, strain) | * in activities  
* in social and emotional connections  | * as part of personal characteristics  
* in activities |
| peaceful(peacefulness) | * relating place and privacy  
* relating place and resting  
* relating place and people | * relating place and privacy  
* relating place and resting  
* relating place and self-identity |
| friendship | * in present daily life  
* with no time limits | * reciprocity  
* mirror for self-image |
Feelings of excitement appeared in explanations of student’s activities in the grounds of both schools. Excitement was explained in connection with social and emotional relations in Peases West but not in Länsikatu. At Länsikatu, excitement was considered to be part of the personality of the school. The explanations in both schools for feelings of peacefulness were quite alike. Calm and peaceful feelings were very strongly related with special places, after which the purpose of the place was clarified. There were places for resting and privacy in both school grounds. In Peases West also people created peacefulness in contrast to Länsikatu, where peacefulness was sometimes related with personal knowledge and self-identity resulting from a grown self-confidence.

Friendship was expressed implicitly when explaining the other feelings. As a separate phenomenon, friendship appeared in quite different ways in the two schools. Friendship was strongly related with time in Peases West, whereas in Länsikatu it was explained more from the individual viewpoint.

4. Discussion

First, a methodological critique: The students’ construction of emotions does not completely correspond to an adult classification of emotions but the researcher took trouble no minimise intrusion into the process through which the students prepared the symbol charts. There was some ambiguity in translating emotional words from Finnish to English. This was minimised as far as possible by ensuring that the translated words were within the lexicon of a ten-year old. In the analysis, the symbol associations with their explanations were maintained as far as possible just the way students’ expressed them. The explanations of each emotion were contemplated in the context of the whole description. The option to interpret the descriptions differently in both schools was consciously kept open, without forcing the interpretation into any particular shape. The purpose, though, was to maintain the students’ original expressions during the whole interpretation process as far as possible. Finally, the Peases West students had to begin the process without the benefit of the cooperative discussions about understanding emotions. The starting point for them was the readily-made symbol chart. In spite of that, the array of feelings used by the students does not differ quantitatively from those of the Länsikatu students.

In this study the terms ‘feelings’ (meaning an emotional reaction) and ‘emotions’ (meaning a strong mental or instinctive feeling) have been used interchangeably. These definitions suggest a strong link between emotion and cognition which typically in research on learning have been separated (Rantala, 2006, 132-133). Moreover, when emotions are studied in an educational context, the emphasis is usually on negative feelings (Rantala, 2006, 137). Further, according to Tuovila (2005, 148), the ‘emotion words’ in Finnish people’s mind are more negative than positive. The small number of negative feelings expressed in this study serve only to emphasize both the educational and the cultural importance of positive feelings and the study as a whole reinforces the fallacy of separating emotions from cognition.

Tuovila (2005, 83-84) identified seven categories of emotions described by Finnish people: (i) something good happened or will happen; (ii) something bad happened or will happen; (iii) one does not want this to happen; (iv) one wants this to happen; (v) thinking good or bad about oneself; (vi) thinking good or bad about others; and (vii) one knows or one does not know. Länsikatu students gave more explanations based on the individual stances, for example thinking good (or bad) about oneself, whereas there were more reasons concerning places or happenings in the Peases West students’ explanations. Students in Peases West explained their emotions as strongly connected with people. In contrast to this, there were more explanations at an individual level with Länsikatu students, for example expressions of self-image and self-identity.

Perceiving emotions as sociocultural structures means thinking about them in their historical, cultural and social contexts with local peculiarities (Forsberg, 2006, 30). The elements of emotions are universal, but the way individuals experience them are mediated through cultural context, language, social norms,
gender etc. and, in this study especially, the school context. This study reveals how intricately bound are the feelings and emotions of students with the educational spaces they inhabit and thus makes an indirect but strong case for the proactive engagement of students in the design of those spaces. The study also reveals the effectiveness of appropriate tools and pedagogies in supporting students in engaging with their environment, especially where they have had a part in developing the tools.

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References


