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CONTEMPLATING 'GREENING' THROUGH THE GO-ALONG APPROACH IN SCHOOLS OF INDIA

ABSTRACT

Teachers have a lot on their plate. Research with teachers, particularly interviews, may be time-consuming. Combining the 'go-along' method with 'visual aids for interviews post go-along', this article offers a novel approach to doing research with busy individuals, specifically within the context of urban school greening. How can we understand the phenomenon of school greening through go-alongs with teachers? The first part of the article contextualises the aspects related to research engaged with go-alongs, while the second part presents a detailed analysis of issues and possibilities specific to research with teachers and school greening in suburban Mumbai. The go-alongs were carried out at four government primary schools. This article is a reflective examination of how mundane elements such as time, weather, and daily interruptions reveal intricacies of school life and teacher negotiations. These learnings are built on to investigate effects of such elements on the research design, affective responses, and people-place relations. As part of the process of greening schools in the midst of audit cultures and discourses of environment awareness, the methodology applied in this research provides a new perspective on the performativity that are required of teachers. The study concludes by shedding light on the value and limitations of go-alongs, and that of visual aids for interviews post go-alongs. The article's contribution to advancing qualitative research methodology lies in the unique blend of the two techniques and the way it accounts for the hitherto marginalised aspects of wonder and humour in teacher response to perceived adversities. These aspects further reveal contradictions and complexities related to school greening. This research is relevant for future studies tackling similar ethical and other challenges in a variety of urban settings.

Keywords

Go-along; Schools; Teachers; India; Urban.

1. Introduction

Teachers are key in realising visions for green schools. However, research with teachers is challenging since they are busy people working in surveilled environments. Hence, research designs need rethinking. Fatigue related to qualitative research designs is well-known. Doctors, teachers, and attorneys are harder to access for qualitative researchers (Clark, 2008). Teachers' workload and time restrictions make semi-structured, sit-down interviews difficult to navigate. As such, the current research shows an innovative method while being mindful of these concerns.

As a socially significant and pedagogical endeavour, school greening focuses on creating opportunities for sustainable futures. Greening schools requires several alterations to school systems, and it poses various challenges for school members. The research inquiry focuses on understanding what it means to 'green' schools, as well as teacher negotiations and aspirations related to it. The study is based on data from four government primary schools in suburban Mumbai, India. Participants were teachers from primary grades. They all taught Environmental Studies (EVS) in addition to other subjects and were often part of non-teaching Environment Education (EE) activities. In Mumbai city, an urban municipal school building is a four- or five-story structure shaped like an "L" or "U," with a courtyard, a ground, and 50 to 80 classrooms per building (Juneja, 2001). The schools have a science and a computer lab, a library, an activity room for primary grades, staff rooms and headmaster cabins.

The paper demonstrates how combining diverse interview techniques with daily observing creates a comprehensive interview strategy that is ethically informed regarding participant needs, and sensitive to context-specific temporalities and atmospheric affectivities. This study presents a new way for enriching cultural geography and related disciplines: combining go-alongs, with visual aids post go-along.

The value of go-alongs is discussed hereon. This paper talks about a type of go-along wherein participants were fully accompanied by the researcher, they determined the route, the walks were interspersed by many activities which teachers were part of, conversations took shape around loosely framed questions, the researcher sometimes participated in activities with teachers, and the content of conversations was influenced by many situated factors.

Walking interviews help participants relax, and establish an ethical, and non-interrogative setting (Langford & Crawford, 2022). They are better than sedentary interviews to expand our understanding of socio-cultural phenomena (Carpiano, 2009). Movement can enhance recall (Law, 2019). Langford and Crawford (2022) when researching teacher wellbeing used go-along to change power balance between the researcher and interviewees. They did not explore atmospheric affectivities in teacher-place relationships, and merely noted 'cons' of such elements as weather. The current research aims to explore such affectivities in greater detail.

Walking and conversing yield a possibility for interviewees to engage in more spontaneous dialogue (Anderson, 2004).

Conversely, pleasurable walks could result in a sense of wellbeing due to which participants may provide overly optimistic portrayals of their circumstances (Miller & Krizan, 2016) thereby potentially skewing the collected data. Nonetheless, it may also enable people to communicate more openly, which was observed in the current study. The guided approach (Kinney, 2017) was employed, which involves participant-led go-along interviews, wherein the participant assumes the role of the expert guide, leading the researcher, to and through specific regions in the school.

The value of visual aids post go-along is discussed hereon. Post go-along interviews are common in school research. However, use of visual aids post go-alongs is less common. Systematic reports on using sketch-notes and/or photographs recorded by researchers as part of go-alongs to enhance interviews in school contexts is even scarce.

In general, researchers have employed photo go-alongs wherein the participants are asked to take photos while on walk (Barron, 2021). Researchers often take photos to document and recall processes of go-alongs (Duedahl & Stilling Blichfeldt, 2020). In studies that use stimulated recall, the researcher records portions of teaching sessions and then asks teachers to comment on what was going on (Nunan, 1992, p. 115). The current approach is different to these techniques.

Graphic elicitation techniques complementing verbal interviews are considered for triangulating data (Copeland, 2012). However, such methods have some limitations. During the pilot phase of current research, teachers were requested to express their feelings through drawings and photos about 'greening' practices. Teachers perceived the task as an extra burden over and above their usual school responsibilities. Another issue was the variations in participants' abilities to visualise. Some of them asked many questions due to a fear of 'committing mistakes.' Their behaviour can be traced to the disciplining environment of schools, and performance pressure. Collecting data through such formats could complicate analysis. Also, these techniques are less mindful of teacher comfort. Collecting audiovisual data at schools was not permitted. As schools are inhabited by children, it was ethically unsound to have teachers do photography. Instead, the researcher sketched, or took photos of specific artefacts only, whenever the teacher started talking about the artefacts or elements of the school space.

The visual aids post go-alongs contain photos of place and structures or objects within it; sketchnotes, drawings and annotated scribbles of gestures, actions, and so on; speech bubbles, notes on atmospheric conditions, routes walked, documentation of ambient voices and sounds, and so forth. These visuals were shared with teachers post go-alongs as anchors to build on aspects they may not have expressed earlier due to constraints – weather, mood, presence of other people, pressure of maintaining “teacherly” behaviour, and other reasons. The aids were typically used to open discussions when the teacher was relaxed – during breaks, or when teachers were filling in for an absent teacher. In such cases, they would narrate their experiences of the day, and often verbally and/ or physically re-approach school situations. The aids were not used to seek validity of responses. Rather, the hope was to welcome discomforts, pauses, fragments, contradictions, wonder, and humour.

2. Methodology

The broad research question guiding this paper is: How can we understand the phenomenon of school ‘greening’ through go-alongs with teachers? The study follows a qualitative methodology under the constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This article stems from a comprehensive data corpus collected over a year, utilising various methods influenced by qualitative ethnographic techniques. 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. Data consisted of audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and go-along talks with 10 teachers, alongside participant observation. Informal discussions were held with administrative personnel and some students. The volume of recordings, field notes, and sketches fluctuated according to time spent with each participant and in specific activities, events, exhibitions, and locations inside the school such as staff rooms, classrooms, corridors, courtyard, and grounds. Artefacts such as murals, displays, models, installations, signages, and spatial elements were photographed when teachers referenced them during go-along discussions. The researcher also made sketches, doodles, scribbles accompanied with writings; and drew maps of the routes of go-alongs. These were examined in connection with teacher talk. Interviews were conducted in Marathi, Hindi, and English language. All interviews were transcribed and subsequently translated into English prior to analysis.

Walk-along interviews have been utilised in studies across organisational research (Bilsland & Siebert, 2023), health research (Carpiano, 2009), community research (Marcotte et al., 2022), and among students in academic institutions (Holton & Riley, 2014); however, there is a paucity of such studies with teachers. There is a small but growing recent body of qualitative research works with teachers using go-along or walking interviews such as those about teacher well-being and careers (Langford & Crawford, 2022); and those in tourism research (Blichfeldt, 2023). Research on teacher perceptions of effects of a green school employed focus group discussions (Kerlin, et al. 2015), wherein researchers acknowledged limitations in that there was an uneven participation of teachers. Similarly, teacher participation was a limitation for researchers using digital survey tools to identify teacher perception of outdoor learning (Rojo-Ramos, et. al. 2021). Go-alongs address such limitations, and afford other unique possibilities.

No time restriction was imposed on the go-along interviews, and teachers directed the walks. Most sessions lasted a minimum of thirty minutes. The interview questions were about teachers’ approaches for negotiating ‘green’ displays, and their perceptions of ‘greening’ their school. Talks were influenced by what interviewees deemed relevant. This approach arose from the need to follow teachers as they traversed the school’s landscape as part of their daily school life. It helped them engage cognitively with artefacts they were seeing, creating, present next to, or walking toward. Walks assisted teachers in momentarily detaching from their responsibilities and classroom concerns – aspects that would normally dominate sedentary interviews.

Teachers selected specific areas to signify their preferences for particular exhibits or to identify spots where they felt safe to express themselves. Consequently, go-along aided in understanding teachers' ideas, emotions, and motives that inform their relationship with greening schools.

The following paragraphs pertain to addressing limitations of the methods. Go-along interviews tend to be time-consuming. Interviews supported by visual aids, if performed independently of any other method, do not take long but may leave out relevant information. By fusing the two approaches, it is possible to make an interview method that is rich in context and more accessible.

One prominent drawback of go-long interviews is that it makes note-taking quite difficult. Maintaining mental engagement with the interview is also challenging. In this study it was found that rapid sketchnoting, and photo documentations require minimal compromise on attention toward the participant's talk while on go-alongs.

The process of visual note-taking and photo documentation by the researcher could be distracting for the participant to look at. But this issue can be taken care of by openly discussing with the participant about the role of keeping visual notes, prior to the go-along. When combined with a go-along interview, visual note-taking can reveal how teacher narratives may be impacted by constraints related to time, atmospheric conditions, and other aspects that may otherwise remain unnoticed.

As teachers may be conscious of themselves during go-alongs, especially when they encounter the school principal or a colleague suddenly, they might conceal some information from the researcher. They may however reveal such information when shown visual aids post go-along, as it helps them continue their line of thought, when they are by themselves, away from distractions.

Data analysis is discussed hereon. Schoolscape researchers have employed methods ranging from content analysis (Meiboudi et al, 2011), semiotic analysis (Mendes, 2020), mixed-methods to study teachers' perception of schoolscales (Chimirala, 2022), and many other methods. But these studies focus solely on the artefacts or the texts, rather than direct interactions between teachers and schoolscales; and hence their analytical approaches are not appropriate for the current research aims. Data analysis on the field notes and interview transcripts was done through inductive coding until data saturation was achieved. After coding, an inductive-deductive method for analysis was followed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The entire analysis has been conducted by one researcher. In the first phase, key aspects of activities which the teachers described were coded. The subsequent phases were conducted as open-coding to generate sub-themes based on teachers' ideas, feelings, and negotiations related to school greening. The main dimensions of analysis were time-people-place relations, and atmospheric affectivities. The result of the analysis is discussed across these categories: valuable disturbances; temporalities and spatialities; and negotiating atmospheric discomfort.

3. Key Learnings

This section elaborates key learnings in the form of narrative vignettes.

3.1 Valuable disturbances

Go-along combined with visual aids post go-alongs, enabled teachers to delve profoundly into politics embedded in the choreography of their interactions with various entities of the school. A teacher revisited the same spot thrice during a walk with the researcher as he felt the need to add to what he had been narrating, now as an observer from a distance. The teacher was shown a sketch of the space after the first walk, which helped generate a continuity in interactions with the teacher. In the next walk, the teacher revealed various interconnected instances of realising the artefacts in that spot. Storied moments however pose challenges for participants as they find themselves stuck in a loop of fresh thoughts about places they have come to inhabit and associate with. When going through post go-along interviews with the help of visual aids, teachers are momentarily defamiliarized to their usual environment. These moments could feel new and disturbing for the respondent, as was evident in long pauses the teacher took while speaking about a mural showing children playing around a tree.

Defamiliarization offers participants new ways to approach the place, making the disturbance valuable. On subsequent visits to the same spot, the teacher expressed frustration at not being able to involve students in mural creation. Artefact-mediated defamiliarization can destabilise teachers in the research event bubble, post which they must "return" to the normative state and manage the effects on their conduct. Participants may need to put efforts to regain their comfort and sense of belonging. When this happened, the teacher quieted down and stopped talking to the researcher. Quiet moments (Bissell, 2010) were recorded in field notes for future reflection. The researcher was unsure whether to continue accompanying the teacher (which could affect data quality and the researcher's methods could be seen as highly intrusive by teachers) or wait it out.

The researcher found that time gaps between go-alongs and regular follow-up conversations with teachers to address concerns are helpful. Some participants may enjoy this process, but others may struggle to express their discomfort and therefore avoid articulating their thoughts. Such unknown terrains (Duedahl & Blichfeldt, 2020), and participants' emotional labour (Fisher & Monahan, 2023) must be acknowledged. Post-go-along visual aids preserved conversations and revealed teacher digressions. Teachers sometimes invited the researcher to paint murals. Their talk about relevance of murals came to an abrupt end when the principal arrived. When the principal was away, teachers joked and sang while painting. The researcher sketched moments of disruption when teachers would put their brushes down, pause, and discuss illustration content with the principal. Go-along conversations with sketch-notes revealed teacher challenges of negotiating education policy guidelines and personal EE ideologies. Visual-aid post-go-alongs also help with difficult conversations.

A teacher was to make a physical model representing biodiversity. Mud was to be collected to simulate forest soil. The teacher was reluctant to ask the researcher to do ‘lowly/dirty’ work and asked her to take a break while she collected mud from the school grounds. Distance between the researcher and teacher is a valuable disturbance in this study. The researcher lingered around and sketched teachers’ facial expressions, hands gestures, and other body movements. Annotated drawings included atmospheric details. By the later months of the study, teachers were already accustomed to the researcher’s presence and actions. The school principal advised teachers to involve the researcher, but they were hesitant. After the researcher showed comfort and interest, teachers let her collect mud and build the model. Teachers spoke less and avoided eye contact with the researcher, indicating anxiety. The principal often asked the researcher for feedback on teachers’ ‘performance’ and ‘creativity’, reflecting education system’s accountability cultures. The sketch-notes facilitated difficult conversations between the teachers and the researcher. Teachers felt more comfortable asking the researcher about her research goals through visual aids.

3.2 Temporalities and Spatialities

This narrative vignette will discuss how temporal and spatial dimensions affected teacher responses. The teacher is thinking about setting up a garden-themed selfie booth in the playground for Annual Day. She walks toward the playground and gently asks a few students to stay away from the booth’s location. She continues by discussing the booth’s benefits for fostering environmental awareness in children. Her childhood love of gardening resurfaces occasionally. Later, she sighs and looks at her wristwatch when asked about the school’s ‘revitalisation efforts’ to promote gardening. The teacher cites ‘time crunch’ and ‘very few teachers’ as obstacles. Her walk is relaxed, especially when she describes a garden. Her expressions are calmer than in the staffroom or classroom. However, she is alert when passing the principal’s cabin window. She gestures across the window grills to a golden trophy on a principal’s cabin shelf and says, “We won this for the dream-school model competition”. The teacher emphasizes the ‘green’ school vision, infrastructural constraints, and the time and effort required to make models and complete the syllabus. As shown in the vignette, spatialities and temporalities affected study design and teacher responses. Walking with teachers reveals how time and space interact in the school. Children are encouraged to engage in physical activity during playtime and lunchtime, but if they disrupt infrastructure, they are disciplined. Teachers walk through the corridors in between classtime. The principal’s cabin overlooks the playground, and the assembly ground is usually in the central courtyard surrounded by classrooms. A teacher whispered, “One can see from many places as to who is where, doing what, during what time, and for how long, in these grounds.” The public-privateness of these spaces changes with school events like annual days, parent-teacher meeting days, days of national importance, and science exhibition weeks.

3.3 Negotiating Atmospheric Discomfort

Walking methodology literature describes weather as a challenge (Carpiano, 2009), but some researchers (Vannini & Vannini, 2017:6) view it as a normal part of the walk-along method. Current research explores weather as a stimulating dimension, unlike such studies. Another narrative example follows to illustrate this point.

It's lunchtime. Children seek relief from April heat under a shade shelter. Some visit the watercooler. They splash each other with water and hide from the teacher. The teacher and researcher enter the shelter. A brick-lined grassy area is nearby. Researcher asks the teacher if grassy patches have always been there. The teacher then hears a student crying, and runs to comfort the child who fell near the watercooler. Thoughts of grassy patches fade in the chaos. More teachers arrive. With sweat on their foreheads, one says, "It is too hot for students to have some outdoor time."

Teachers struggle with weather. This is especially true in Mumbai before the monsoon. In contrast to teachers speaking of the weather as a barrier, they also spoke of it as a source of humour during the discussion initiated through visual aids post go-alongs. The researcher sketched a melting Earth "ice-cream" scoop-on-a-cone from a poster on a soft-board while walking with a teacher. Teacher laughed as she passed the large poster. The researcher noted this expression. The teacher was about to share some details at this point, when the walk was interrupted by a staff-member who approached the teacher for a signature on some documents. The sketch-note was shared with the teacher to restart poster discussions.

The researcher learnt that students created the melting-sad-Earth poster for an inter-school art competition. The teacher laughingly mentioned how children would often gesture as if they were 'melting' in the summer, after the ice-cream image off the internet was shown to them before the competition as an 'concept/ idea' reference. "They look funny, and it is a fun way to beat the heat. It is a serious matter though ... this heat and climate change', said the teacher". The teacher noted that competition-winning posters often had humor. Such narratives showed human-atmosphere relationships' affective aspects. Learning about these intricacies was made possible through a combination of go-alongs and visual aids post go-alongs.

4. Discussion

The go-along method combined with visual aids provided contextual insights on school greening that may otherwise be inaccessible through conventional qualitative interview techniques. The data is relevant in developing a richer understanding of primary teachers' lives and labour through specific instances such as weather as well as broader aspects such as social expectations.

The above discussion elucidates how go-along interviews facilitated insights into school greening as situated within physical and social environments, the temporal aspects of engaging in these activities, the significance of specific greening activities, their prominence in participants' lives, and the considerations pertinent to employing the go-along methodology.

A go-along interview is a process of navigating unknown physical and social terrains, and the researcher must be open to unexpected events (Duedahl & Blichfeldt, 2020). For instance, being in the hot weather, being sensitive to participant anxieties, and effects of other people's presence around the teachers on the teachers' conversations and behaviour. As schools are surveilled entities, participants may at times not be able to go-along, limiting the accessibility of the method.

Next, some considerations related to using visual aids for interviews post go-alongs.

While the methodology used in the current study benefited from existing literature on the potential of ethnographic drawings (Kuschnir, 2016), experiences with go-along combined with research through visual aids brings forth certain aspects to be considered by researchers. One is about ethics, the other about representation, and the last one is about researcher bias.

There is a possibility of participants overindulging with sketches. It happens due to many reasons such as curiosity about the researcher and research objectives; being conscious about presence of a researcher in school, and of perceiving the researcher as a performance evaluator; the urge to present an ideal persona in front of an 'outsider'; or anticipatory longing to know oneself better through someone else's impressions or documentations of one's behaviour. The tendency can be kept in check by openly discussing the purpose of maintaining sketches. When participants are made aware of reasons for sketching or note-taking, it is less intimidating for them.

Representing and comprehending the field in visuals is a debatable topic explored by many researchers and interesting to explore but is beyond the scope of this paper. However, one of the key learnings from using visuals as aids for interviewing post go-alongs is to remind oneself of the ambiguities of this approach. One of the reasons for ambiguity is the chaotic nature of the field, and the distance between vastness of the inquiry theme and limitedness of the practices that one can pursue on field. Researchers need not think of visual aids as finished work. The visuals function as aids when set in motion through dialogue with participants.

Finally, it is important not to impose researcher bias. Researchers can keep a check on the content of their sketch-notes through segregating personal reflection notes from the observational annotations linked to the sketches. This allows maintaining organised records, and prevents possibilities of breaching trust with the participants.

5. Final Considerations

When paired with other research approaches, go-alongs offer greater insight into the time constraints of busy urban workplaces.

This novel approach challenges conventional research approaches and offers a better knowledge of the sometimes-disregarded aspects of urban schools, therefore contributing to the discourse of 'greening'. In suburban Mumbai, it offered a fresh perspective on the performativity required of teachers as part of 'greening' schools amid audit cultures, and discourses around EE. The study illuminates the importance of attending to teacher-student wellbeing within education policy-making. The analysis offers researchers some important considerations when using go-along with follow-up interviews assisted by visual aids.

The integration of go-alongs, and visual aids post go-alongs, facilitates insight into lived experiences within organisations. Urban workplaces are often inaccessible environments for academics, due to which they remain a neglected social and cultural field. This is particularly relevant in primary schools, where there is an urgent necessity to attend to children. This dynamic creates a frenetic environment for teachers, particularly those working with young children. The methodology that evolved during this research facilitated connection with teachers inside their professional environment – a significant cultural and social domain for comprehending dilemmas of school greening.

In using visual aids for interviews post go-alongs, it was discovered that the contextual and conditioned temporalities as well as spatialities, coupled with atmospheric factors such as the weather, bring to fore the messiness and affective processes of school greening. Schoolscape researchers can benefit by considering these aspects to study social, material and visual cultures related to climate change.

EE is a subject that many teachers were hesitant to talk about due to its peripheral position in the curriculum and assessments (Sonowal, 2009). Go-alongs combined with visual aids helped in addressing challenges that arose due to this reason. In densely populated schools, researchers encounter several problems, including time limitations; yet, by adapting to participants' schedules as demonstrated in this study, it is possible to ethically elicit rich accounts with minimal interference in their routines.

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