Pupils interpreting the material culture of their school

*Tamás Péter Szabó

University of Jyväskylä/Department of Teacher Education, Finland

Educational anthropologist Kara D. Brown was the first to propose the term schoolscape to cover "the physical and social setting in which teaching and learning take place" (Brown 2005:79). Combining material and social aspects, Brown has pointed to the role schools as institutions play in socializing children to various ways of visual, or more broadly speaking, object-mediated communication.

School community members play a significant role in creating, interpreting and adjusting schoolscapes. In this presentation, I ask how pupils construct their own role and agency in the design and use of the material environment of their school.

I analyze data from a school ethnography project I conducted in Hungary in 2015. In this case study, I present 4th grader pupils’ (aged 9–11) interpretations of their school environment. Data come from fieldwork in a boarding school for students from families experiencing economic challenges. Pupils’ accommodation is on campus, they do work practice in the school farm, eat in the school canteen, and they need special permit to leave premises in their spare time. That is, the school campus constitutes a complexity of "landscapes of being" (Clark 2010) to them.

To generate data, I used tourist guide technique (Szabó and Troyer 2017), a method that combines walking through the campus, talking about the material environment and taking photos en route. In this paper, I analyze 5 walking tours with pupils (c. 2.5 hours, 326 photos) with a combined Conversation and Discourse Analytical approach.

Reflection on the schoolscape resulted in various narratives of practices. Talking about what they regularly do in the very spaces we encountered together during the walking tours, pupils constructed accounts in which they and their peers as well as teachers were protagonists. Personal interpretations of community practices (e.g. classroom routines, celebrations), conceptions of knowledge and locally negotiated norms of behavior were told while pupils demonstrated how they created and used artefacts that could be found on premises. Further, pupils also evaluated their school environment aesthetically, assessing for example classrooms and spaces of accommodation from their personal viewpoints. My results foster pedagogical innovation to increase children’s agency in schoolscape design.

Keywords: agency, schoolscape, children, Conversation Analysis