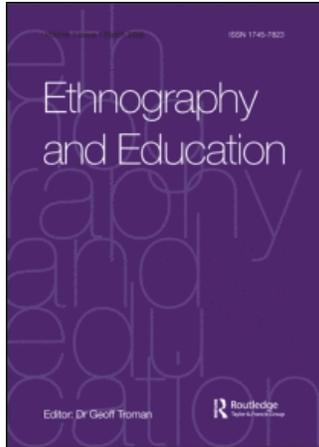


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If these walls could speak: reading displays of primary children's work

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The first thing a visitor notices when entering Hollytree primary school is the art-work displayed on every wall. This paper, based on a three-year ethnographic study of the school, mobilizes field notes and interview and photographic data to probe the meanings of this visual 'display'. We argue that the walls (re)produce and promote normative meanings of 'good work', the 'good student', the 'good teacher' and the 'good school', which serve both internal and external purposes. They are also a means of promoting an inclusive culture which, while true of arts activities, may not always be the case in mainstream classes. In addition, the school walls support aspects of the school timetable of collective work, and also constitute resources for children to construct narratives about their collective and individual histories in the school.

I stand up from the seated area and inspect the artwork that is clearly evident, displayed on the walls as you enter the school... Two plaster of paris figures welcome visitors... One is a female figure and one is a male, both in red school uniform, both of real child-like age and stature.

The deputy introduces herself to me and asks two year 6 girls to give me the guided tour. H and E... take me round each classroom, starting in the nursery. The nursery looks like an adventure play area, full of hidden dens and escape areas. They show me outside, the grassland where they do sports day, the little areas where different groups of children play, and where they get their school photo taken and perform a summer concert in front of parents, near the entrance to the school. They freely walk into the staff room to show me where the staff gather, get cups of coffee and go to the lavatory (I'm struck by the kids freeness, they didn't hesitate to go into the staff room, it wasn't out of bounds!) They point out the collage of a teacher displayed on the staff room wall along with other paintings of faces.

... they point out the various artwork displayed all round the school. They show me the photographs of the annual school trip, they tell me the names of the previous year 6s who have just moved onto secondary school and point out their self-portrait work, complete with their names, on the wall... They also point out their own work that is put on show. H shows me herself in various forms, she shows me a painted picture of her face, a photograph of herself, a drawing of herself and a sculpture. E shows me a plaster of paris outline of her face. They show me the Peter Pan figures hanging near the arts area and I note the Waterstones exhibition self-portraits evident on the wall. There are sculptures, painting and photos of present and previous children everywhere. I'm struck

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by all the artwork displayed in every room on almost every bit of wall! (Lisa's field notes on her first day at Hollytree)

Welcome to Hollytree primary school

Situated in a large Midlands city, the school has 300-plus children on roll and 60-plus in the nursery. Half the children live in local authority housing on the two council estates close to the school. A higher than average percentage of children qualifies for free school meals (24%), and the school has never excluded a pupil. The school has a reputation as successful, and inspection reports which deem it 'outstanding'. Miriam, the head teacher, has been in the school since it started over 30 years ago and was, until her retirement in late 2005, the longest serving head-teacher in England. The school is open-plan, with discrete pods for nursery, early, middle and upper primary, and shared spaces including a gym-dining hall, visual art area and library. Computers are dotted in clusters throughout the building, which is subdivided by furniture and colourful curtains into usable spaces, giving an impression of openness and flow while maintaining barriers between activities, and some protection from noise.

As Lisa's field notes suggest, every available area of wall is covered in displays. The hall, foyer and shared areas are dominated by children's portraits in various media (photograph 4), sculpted figures (photograph 1), pages from an alphabetized poetry book (photograph 5), and mounted pages of autobiographies and biographies (photograph 6). Some of the work, such as the frieze in the hall, is clearly the work of a professional artist (photograph 4). Classrooms typically display mounted collages of children's curriculum-based work, much of it with teachers' comments attesting to its worth. However, some displays are very busy (photograph 5), some work is obviously teacher-developed (photograph 3), and not all rooms are as well-organised as others (photograph 2).

In this paper, we examine the visual environment that makes such a marked first impression. Drawing on a 12-month pilot project and a two-year ESRC funded¹ ethnography of Hollytree which investigated inclusion, pedagogy and the creative arts (see Hall & Thomson, 2005, 2007; Thomson *et al.*, 2006; Hall *et al.*, 2007), we interrogate the taken-for-granted 'good' of primary school display. We make three readings of Hollytree primary school walls. We claim that there are both 'official' and 'local' narratives at work in the school through which the display of children's work meets multiple interests, as well as providing one means for the fabrication of 'whole school' identity and image.

Our corpus of data is large, but here we draw on two sets of individual interviews with staff, focus group interviews with three cohorts of Year 5 children, observation field notes, and photographs of school walls and display areas. The school and staff names have been anonymised. Specific ethical permission for visual research was obtained from school staff, parents/carers and children.



Photograph 1. School entrance: life size seated paper-mache figure holds changing records of school activities

We begin by discussing the orthodoxies of primary school display, and then move to our theoretical approach.

A good primary school looks good

Many primary schools feature displays of children's work on walls, hanging from ceilings and adorning school prospectuses and websites. Display practices are actively promoted through official policy; the support materials for the English primary strategy, *Excellence and Enjoyment* (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2004, p. 56) state:

The physical environment has a significant influence on learning. It gives children clear messages about how we value them and how we value their learning. It can be supportive of independent learning.

According to Brighouse and Woods (1999), the conviction that a school's visual environment was important had its origins in the 1930s. A trio of leading HMIs gathered around them a 'group of primary practitioners who were deeply convinced that artistic expression represented a rich vein of children's talent which could be tapped early'. Their collective and persuasive influence led to 'generations of primary teachers who gave ample rein to artistic expression. Through their training and their practice they learnt the skills and techniques of good display' (p. 19). Such practices were not confined to British primary schools. They were strongly associated with the Froebel movement across Europe, but the artistic progressivism of British primary education was admired and emulated in many other parts of the world (Cunningham, 1988).

In words that show the slippage from an interest in children's visual art practice, deemed to be an 'authentic' expression of creativity (White, 2005), to the contemporary formulation of the utility of an aesthetic learning environment, Brighouse and Woods eulogise

It has therefore become the rule rather than the exception that the primary classroom and the school itself have become a visual delight, often obscure in its purpose; secondary colleagues and a wider public tend to use the perjorative term "decoration". Yet look beyond the camouflage of the primary school and you can see its skills. For example, the entrance foyer will illustrate various themes of the school curriculum of community activity ... the environment is planned to encourage the child to autonomous learning ... Sometimes in the best reception and infant classrooms, the whole room will be transformed with huge models into some strange and exhilarating exhibit which reinforces the children's learning from a visit. (Brighouse & Woods, 1999, pp. 19–20)

Alexander (2000) is less approving. Discussing the 'spatial and mural geographies' (p. 185) of English, Russian, US, French and Indian classrooms, he notes the peculiarly Englishness of 'display'.

In England what is placed in these spaces (between windows, doors, blackboards and furniture) is called "display". This word carries a peculiarly English charge—and an appropriate one in many classrooms—suggestive of ostentation, window dressing or peacockery ... In most of the English classrooms the walls were used very much as a showcase for children's (and teachers') finished work, and in this matter the word "display" fits the function, since high priority was attached to the quality of presentation, and work was rarely attached to the walls without first being mounted not just once but sometimes twice or thrice—a degree of material extravagance which would be neither conceivable or possible in India or Russia. (Alexander, 2000, p. 184)

This is a challenge to the notion that display of children's work, and a rich visual environment, is always purposeful and productive. Through the parenthesis '(and teachers)' and the focus on the ambiguity and unflattering connotations of 'peacockery', Alexander raises important questions about a taken-for-granted habit in many British primary schools. Could display possibly be as much a manifestation of teacher hubris as children's learning?

We consider this proposition and the more general question of possible meanings attached to display through an examination of the specifics of Hollytree primary. We

take up the findings from Cunningham's (1988) history of progressivism, in which he argues that display is used as: the culmination of thematic curriculum projects; to give a good impression to visitors; as a means of communication between teachers, children and parents; to reward children; and to communicate a general philosophy of education. Our findings are congruent with these claims, but we did have one surprise, which we discuss in the final section of this article.

Reading walls: our approach

Our approach is informed by visual ethnographers (Prosser, 1999a; Pink, 2001; Rose, 2001) who suggest that the use of visual display in the built environment can be put into conversation with other ethnographic data (interviews, observations) in order to produce understandings about situated processes of making meaning. Ethnographic 'readings' of the visual environment can be seen, for example, in Veblen's 1912 work on the conspicuous show of artefacts as signifiers of status (Emmison & Smith, 2001, p. 116); Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of objects as markers of distinction; Rose's (2003, 2005) study of family photographs; Goss' (1993, 2004) work on the shopping mall; and Pink's (2004) study of the 'sensory home'. Similar approaches to 'reading' the built environment can also be seen in the semiotic analytic of multiliteracies/design researchers in education (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996; Kress *et al.*, 2005).

We understand the walls of a school to constitute one aspect of its meaning-making system. They are a deliberate construction. Both thought and action are required to fill in Alexander's 'blank spaces' in the built environment. Prosser (1999b, p. 96) notes that what schools choose to 'present and allow themselves and processes of their schools to be represented' are important aspects of school culture. School culture is a vexed term, and is not one we can debate at length: our interpretation is that culture constitutes the semiotic practices in an institution, produced through local actions and interpretations of policies, and positioned by specific local histories, narratives, and combinations of people and communities. But because schools are not hermetically sealed off from the world, such meaning-making systems are always framed by broader social contexts and discourses. Prosser suggests that school representations can be examined for 'the message an image carries, the stereotypes which represent a particular culture, and the political processes inherent in communication' (Prosser, 1999b, p. 92).

School walls and the arts of primary display can thus be seen as a cumulative cultural text (c.f. Weber & Mitchell, 1995), but, as Mitchell (2005, p. 7) warns, the 'acts of textual use and inhabitation and acts of textual production and consumption cannot be separated neatly into functionally distinct categories, but should be understood as parts of the same system of meaning'. Our analysis is, therefore, holistic, and does not seek to atomise or partition specific aspects of the school displays in question.

We read all of our interview data to see where and how school walls and school displays were discussed. We then categorised this data by asking key questions: what was being said about the school, everyday life within it, and what it meant to be a member of the school community. We next went to the visual records of the school and undertook a content analysis, asking what was being represented, where and for whom. Some of this data had also been collected in field notes, and we looked for times when we had observed explicit activity in relation to display. Summaries of these separate analyses have been brought together, and we now report the aggregated findings.

The art of display

Hollytree had a particular school culture which we call ‘the Hollytree way’. This was built up over many years through Miriam’s strong leadership, and through the actions of a core of committed staff who have been in the school for nearly as long as Miriam. The ethos of the school was strongly oriented by a sense of its own uniqueness, expressed as a narrative of its capacity to steer its own course through changing government policies. This involved, for example, an outright rejection of some initiatives, such as Literacy Hour, combined with close attention to the performance indicators that matter for continued autonomy—tests and inspections. The school staff placed high priority on ‘caring’, on ‘safety and security’, and on ‘creativity’ (c.f. Woods & Jeffrey, 1996; Woods & O’Shannessy, 2002). The official policy discourse of display appeared in the school inflected with a discourse of quality and standards.

Setting the standards for display

Miriam was one of the ‘old school’ primary heads whose training, as Brighouse and Woods (1999) suggest, included a sustained emphasis on the importance for learning of the aesthetic environment of the school, as well as a commitment to children’s creative practices in the visual and performing arts. Miriam had a strong belief in display as both the means of exhibiting the school’s long commitment to artistic endeavour and also creating a stimulating learning/working context. This was manifest in a requirement that all staff should receive in-service training in the Hollytree mode of display.

Every year two of my staff, a teaching assistant and a teacher who are particularly good at it, run a course. A morning’s course, and they have our teacher trainees, our new TAs, any new teaching staff. And they do a whole morning’s course with them. First of all showing them round the classrooms, showing them the sorts of displays that we do; giving them strategies for doing it. (Miriam transcript 1)

This in-service came about partly by accident.

... one or two of the new teachers had let the TAs do the displays and they were fine but straight away I thought “Heck! This is not right”. . . they were stilted and they were not

stimulating and they were not backed properly and there was just not enough of them. There were just about half a dozen pictures on a display board with lots of space between. I said to my deputy “These are fine for any other school but they are not good enough for us”. So we took them down and did them again . . . that’s when I decided to do the course. (Miriam 1)

Teachers were expected to maintain the ‘quality’ of display in their own rooms, but they could get help from TA Susan who also took a key role in managing the appearance of the shared areas of the school, including the front foyer and office area. Susan and Miriam worked closely together on display, but this was not a simple top-down relationship.

When I first came up to this area—because I used to work down at the little end - there wasn’t even a display there. It was just white and I thought it was horrible. And I asked for display boards to be put up. (Susan 1)

Miriam put resources and time into display because she saw it as a pedagogic activity which teachers ought not to ‘give away’. She argued, in words that echo official policy, that the learning environment should be both attractive and stimulating.

. . . we’ve never made the school look pretty just for prettiness sake. It’s always had to have a purpose. I’ve always believed that the classroom environment should stimulate children and they should be able to go to it for information. (Miriam 1)

Because what is on the walls is available for children to use as a resource for learning, what goes up has to be selected with children’s autonomous learning in mind, and it has to be ‘suitable’.

So it’s got to be informative. It’s got to be of real quality. . . so that children can go and get information from it . . . if it’s going to be word processed then it’s got to be accurate because word processing gives children the idea that this is . . . a book. . . Either that or you put the correct version underneath so that whoever’s looking at it realizes that because children will use it as a resource. (Miriam 1)

Teachers, however, did not use this argument in interview. Our field notes and photographs show that teachers displayed diagrams, charts and labels (on just about everything in some classrooms), which assumed that children would learn from them through everyday use and exposure. Nevertheless, none of them discussed display in terms of a learning resource, and we observed only one instance in the art room where this was the case.

A has drawn a flower, Dorothy looks at it and suggests she look at the sunflowers on the display on the wall behind her, A does this and finishes up with a much more realistic sunflower that has more detail. When she shows it, Dorothy says, “Much better!” (Lisa’s field notes)

Children told us that classroom activities were strongly teacher directed. Despite its rhetoric of autonomy from national policy, Hollytree is no exception to contemporary, performative pedagogic routines (see Hall *et al.*, 2007 for further analysis).



Photograph 2. Classroom display in preparation: despite inservice, not all displays are neat and tidy

Given the tight requirements of the national curriculum and the press for coverage of material, it may well be that there is neither the time nor pedagogical space in the current educational configuration for the stated policy aims of autonomous learning, supported by display, to occur.

However, the children may have used the displays more if they had input into their design, construction and upkeep—which they did not.²

Miriam also regarded a pleasing environment as important in its own right, and one that was particularly necessary for children who come from large council estates.

... I've always put a lot of emphasis on classrooms looking the sort of places that children would want to walk into. ... I've always believed in providing children with an attractive place in which to work. Never more so than when I was down in [school I started at] because the children came from the most appalling houses. And I used to say to my staff, "This is the nicest place that these children ever go to. The quality that we give these children has to be the best, more than any other children because this is the only place that they will see it". So that is where the idea really bedded down that we have to give children the best not just on the academic side but everything around them. And I still think it's the same for these children. (Miriam 1)

Miriam's attitude might be seen as middle class, with strongly deficit views of working class taste. On the other hand, her views could equally be based in a strong critique of the ways in which council housing has been cheaply and badly constructed, and inner-city communities designed very differently from more middle class areas. We suspect that both have some resonance. Miriam's commitment was certainly to spending public money in her school to provide at least the equivalent of the facilities and environment enjoyed by more middle class pupils. She could control that, even if she had no sway over what happened in the larger neighbourhood.



Photograph 3. Classroom teacher as Spanish display

And the children concurred. Contrary to the growing view among primary teachers that children prefer bare and minimalist environments in calming colours with no distractions,³ one group of children told us

You'd just come to school and think I wish we had art and you'd just look around and it'd be like all black and greys and whites and you'd just think, we need colour!

But luckily we've like come into a school when we've been little that's already got nice colours. (Cohort 1: group interview 3)

And staff agreed that coming to work in a pleasant environment is important, not just for the children, but also for them. There certainly seemed in Hollytree to be an agreed narrative about the importance of a stimulating environment, even if there was less articulation and obvious demonstration that what was put up on the walls was an independent learning resource.

Being 'on display'

We now turn to Hollytree notions of 'quality' and 'standards' of display and follow Cunningham's (1988) pointers that displays are normative. We suggest that at Hollytree they were integral to construction of meanings of good work, the good student, good teaching and the good school.

The notion of 'good', be it work, teaching or the school, is not fixed. There are various views of what makes a good school and what constitutes good teaching. Moore (2004) identifies three discourses about teachers dominant in the UK context—that of the charismatic subject, the competent craftsperson and the reflective practitioner—and a decided pragmatic turn necessary for coping and surviving in the current policy climate. He also suggests that various 'good schools' can be identified; for example, through their strong discipline and uniform, their

emphasis on ‘creativity, independent thinking and self expression’ or by their ethnic composition (p. 35). We suggest, in concert with Prosser (1999b), that these distinctive cultures have visual manifestations/representations.

Hollytree prided itself on its creativity and child centeredness, its positive relations with parents/carers, and its caring and inclusive practices. Something of how this counts as ‘good’ and how this (re)produces particular school practices *can* be seen through looking at displays. We begin with ‘good work’.

Good work

Miriam required work on display to be written in technically correct English. Even when work with spelling mistakes was on show, errors were corrected by the teacher. But it was not only inaccurate or sloppy work that was unacceptable for display. TA Susan recounted an instance of another kind of unacceptable work.

She had written something about me in it that wasn’t appropriate: something like I wasn’t her favorite person. She’d also said that she hated something—hated art or hated her picture . . . I showed it to her class teacher and said that I didn’t think it was appropriate to be put up on a wall. So I told her (student) to go away and have another think . . . I was cross at the time. (Susan 2)

Good work thus had to have acceptable content. It must not be rude or hurtful to other people, nor critical of school activities or policy.

We found similar examples at Hollytree of adult steering of children’s ideas in the creative arts activities we were observing: for example, in the construction of self portraits destined for public exhibition, where one boy was not allowed to represent himself as a violent fantasy hero, and in a writing project, in which children’s stories about a fictitious neighbourhood were not published because they focused too much on gritty subjects and black humour (Thomson *et al.*, 2006). These arts activities were not framed by national curriculum guidelines: the staff therefore had to draw boundaries around what could and could not be put into the public arena.

We suggest that at Hollytree, display supported ‘good work’ that was both technically *and* morally correct, in that it did not violate the school code of ‘niceness’, equated with an aspect of ‘caring’.

The good student

Good work was put on display as a ‘reward’, according to Miriam and some of the teachers. One teacher suggested that work was displayed because it ‘should have a wider audience’ (tr5:1), that is, others should be able to appreciate the child’s efforts. We observed staff using the fact that a piece of work was on display to convince the child or a parent that this meant that the pupil was ‘good’ at science/art/writing. This helped ‘the self esteem of the children, feeling proud about themselves’ (Tr2:2)—another aspect of ‘caring’, the concern for individual children’s self concept.



Photograph 4. The hall with artist designed frieze and children's self portraits

Good work-display-view-approval-feel good constituted a cycle which was assumed to produce more good work: students would want to continue to get their work displayed, and to be seen as 'good workers'. Students whose work was not on the wall could also see what was required and the applause it brought, and aspire to do/feel the same.

Displays thus gave children something to aim for. They were not only a marker of school approval, an extrinsic reward, but simultaneously a demonstration of the kind of work children needed to emulate, and against which they could be compared and judged. Our observation was that children did equate work on view with both approval and with them being 'good students', but we are not sure whether they understood this competitively, that is that having work on display meant they were 'better' than their peers.

Children also knew that there were standards higher than those of the school.

At first I didn't know it (painting) was going to a gallery, I thought it would just hang on the school wall, but ... I tried my best then (when I knew). (Group interview 3)

Perhaps for some children, so much work was on the walls that it was neither as much of a reward or standard-mark as staff hoped.

And, while *all* children were able to exhibit the results of their participation in the arts and extra curricular activities, the artefacts that emanated from mainstream curriculum were carefully selected to present 'the best'. The physical co-locations of out-of-class and classroom visual displays in public shared spaces made equivalences between the kinds of creativity and child-centeredness of arts programmes and field

trips, with work in the mainstream curriculum. The displays thus gave an impression of comprehensive inclusiveness and ‘goodness’ which was actually not the case across the school.

Good teaching

The notion of good work/good students also had a payoff for teachers. Mounting displays of students’ work was one way to show good teaching in action.

Serena, a part time teacher, told us that ‘everything I do each week when I come is actually used somewhere or other’ (Serena 2). The public display of her work with children was a reward, showing tangible recognition of her efforts. TA Susan shared this feeling, saying ‘If I’ve done something with them that I’m really pleased with then I want to put it up’ (Susan 1). Both Susan and Serena were lower in the school hierarchy than full-time teachers and approval and praise were possibly read as statements that they too were capable of helping children produce good work, despite their lower positions in the school.

Throughout staff conversations about displays there was ongoing reference to visibility and scrutiny. There was an explicit recognition of ‘the gaze’ exercised by Miriam, peers and other visitors. TA Susan was refreshingly frank about this:

I explain to new members of staff how we do display and why . . . Because people coming into your classroom only have about ten minutes to decide how good you are and although it’s very unfair to judge you by your displays—but that’s what happens. If you’ve got masses of work that is attractive and well presented then they do go away with a positive image of you as a teacher. (Susan 1)

Here, just as the student with the work on display is a good student, the teacher with the good display was a good teacher. Serena told us that display inservice also helped the sharing of good practice around the school.

We recently did a display, Susan and I for new members of staff, and... we gave them half an hour to walk around the school and go and look in people’s room, because that’s one of things even as a teacher you are so busy that you don’t actually go and see what’s going on in different places. (Serena 2)

Ensuring positive first impressions was also enacted through management behaviours. Primary leadership now includes routinely surveilling classrooms to ensure that they are orderly and attractive. This is taken to equate with a well organized teacher and routinised classroom (c.f. Yellop, 2006). Miriam, for example, conducted a regular morning inspection of all rooms, and would require action if things were not to her liking.

The displays thus had a disciplinary function. They regulated the work of children, TAs and teachers who were literally surrounded by normative expectations of good teaching and learning.

I do put a lot of thought into my displays and I like them to be of a certain standard because I know if I am doing display courses then people are expecting mine to be a good example. (Susan 1)

Imagining the response of viewers to displays produced the desire to do displays that are up to the standards made explicit in the staff inservice. The walls mediated between outside gaze and internal self-regulation.⁴

We also suspect that at Hollytree displays had a reassuring quality. At the end of a hard day, when things had not gone as planned, the displays may well have served as a comforting memory that the class was capable of good work at some time—the evidence was there for all to see, and must mean that generally teaching was good!

The good school

Notions of the good school permeated most Hollytree conversations about display.

It is not simply students and staff who are on show in school displays, but the school itself. As Kershner and Pointon (2000, p. 66) indicate ‘display has potential significance for both *representing* and influencing learning’ (our emphasis). It is clear from field notes that Miriam used the school’s visual display as a sign to visitors and parents, prospective and enrolled, that they were seeing a good school.

The school has a busy day today; there are three to four Spanish students wandering around speaking Spanish to each other and the Spanish equivalent of David Blunkett⁵ was to arrive ... there are a group of women coming from Birmingham to see the school’s outdoor classroom. Miriam has asked Susan to do a Spanish display before their arrival, so she is frantically trying to cut pieces of paper and attach them to pictures.

... during which point the visitors enter our area. The Spanish education secretary of state and some other men dressed in black suits are being shown round by Miriam. They all look round at the art work and seem impressed, as they nod their heads, Miriam introduces Dorothy, Susan and I to them, she introduces Susan and Dorothy as the people responsible for the art displays around them ... She states, “I firmly believe that children need a varied curriculum, not just maths, science and English”, and she shows them the Hollytree book, one man turns a few pages to look. Miriam explains that this goes against much of what the current government is saying, and the Spanish men seem a little astonished by this ...

Miriam comes through the doors showing more visitors around. ... The women praise the art displays ... Miriam explains that it is mostly down to Dorothy and Susan. She explains how she feels the school has progressed their arts projects; from the self-portraits they can see exhibited on the wall they have “progressed” onto a whole school profile. She explains that she saw the nursery being very creative and didn’t feel as though that creativity was following through to the older years and so she wanted to do something about it and this (as she swings her arms round to show the wall displays) is the result. (Lisa’s field notes)

In this tour of the school, Hollytree and Miriam’s leadership were on show. Miriam attributed accomplishment where it was due, showing she was not the kind of head to take credit for other’s work, but of course it was she who encouraged and supported



Photograph 5. Front foyer: seats area for visitors – view through to small group work area

Dorothy and Susan. She suggested that it was through her actions, her concern to spread good work from the nursery through the school, that the school now looked as it did. Through the displays, Miriam identified herself with the materialities of the school; she, her leadership and it were made one through the medium of school display (c.f. Thomson, 2004).

Having the appearance of a successful and productive school was important for Miriam and for Hollytree. ‘Image management’ is part and parcel of the entrepreneurial activity exercised through bidding for awards, grants and special projects, and also has a ‘market’ function (see Whitty *et al.*, 1998; Gorard *et al.*, 2003). The council estate in which Hollytree was situated is declining in population, and there was increased competition for enrolment. Hollytree recruited a number of middle class children from outside the area on the basis of its reputation, and this may come to be increasingly important to its viability. Being able to ‘show’ the learning that children do in ways that are attractive to middle class parents was important. Children’s art practice was harnessed to this agenda, since the presence of large amounts of ‘creative’ work was testament to the nature of the ‘good school’ on show.

There was, therefore, a kind of ‘performativity’ (Lyotard, 1984) embedded in display practice. It is noteworthy that one of the first things that new Heads in failing schools do is to attend to the appearance of the school (see Hampton & Jones, 2000; Winkley, 2002; Stubbs, 2003). This not only makes everyone inside feel better about themselves, but also sends powerful messages about change, control and good performance to those who are watching. Hollytree was/is not a failing school, quite the reverse, but it too must always be shown in the best light because, in reality, it was continually under scrutiny of one sort or another. Like all Heads, Miriam constantly

exercised control of the physical environment, since it was the focus of multiple judgments about success, viability and performance (see Ball, 1998; Gleeson & Husbands, 2001). Display thus played a very important role in the ongoing life of the school.

But there was also, as Lisa's field notes suggest, an internal function for display. It was, in Miriam's words, about creating a 'whole school' profile, and a whole school entity.

Display and everyday life

While the connection with norms of 'good behaviour' are perhaps to be expected, our analysis of Hollytree displays revealed two aspects of the school culture which surprised us. The first relates to what we might call, after LeFebvre (2004), the 'rhythm' of school, and the second to the cumulative nature of the display text.

Display and rhythm

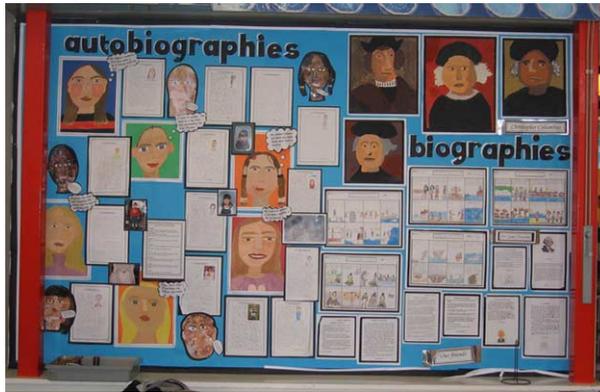
LeFebvre argues that the taken-for-granted temporal patterns of everyday life discipline and regulate, and provide safety, security and comfort. They are interwoven with specific uses of space, and form part of the cultural architecture that constructs our lives. Schools are highly routinised places, with well defined rhythms provided by patterns of holidays, beginning and closing times, dinner time, and scheduled lessons. Classrooms too have their own rhythms which are pedagogically produced through patterns of teacher instruction and individual and whole class work.

Hollytree was no exception. Displays were folded into and became part of the mechanism for maintaining school rhythms and the Hollytree way.

Every September we do a whole school project for a month . . . we decide in July . . . this time it was going to be Biographies, Autobiographies, Portraits. So the main areas of the school now, from the nursery right through to year 6, there is this whole project based on real portraits . . . We have four NQTs (newly qualified teachers) at the moment, and it gives them a focus for the first month. They don't have to worry about the national curriculum or anything . . . then we have the (local holiday) inservice day and we decide who's going to have which areas (for display), either lower, middle or upper, nursery are going to have different display area and together we display it, we decide on the backing paper, the colours. (Serena 2)

In this anecdote, we see an annual pattern of school activity in which there is collective decision making, individual action with classes on a shared theme, and then a collective activity of recording via display. This cycle brought staff together as one, with a single focus. The unity of the school was emphasized through the use of uniform materials, colours and genres of display.

The cycle provided the means through which new staff were enculturated into safe ways of leaving the national curriculum, the rules of joint activity and the pattern of



Photograph 6. Part of the autobiographies and biographies display

the school year. The display of this joint activity symbolised the school as a unit working for common aims, it both represented and brought into being 'we are one school'.

Just as Cunningham (1988) suggests, we also saw display used in classrooms as the culmination of curriculum activities, but this consolidation had a rhythmic character.

We did Plants last half term and they had someone come in and we had this huge banner too on our display. They had to find plants and they cut them out of felt and fabric and they sewed them all on. They loved it. And when they were writing their reports,⁶ lots of them mentioned this as something they really like doing. They don't get to do it that often because it's so hard to try and fit it in because it's so time consuming . . .

This thematic display was arrhythmic, a disruption to the normal beat of national curriculum assignments, tests and other book-work. As such, it became something memorable, and was made equivalent to the extra-curricular and enrichment activities which formed so much of the visual display in the school and school prospectus.

But the use of the displays as records and representations of events that happened both regularly, and unexpectedly, had a particular spin-off for children.

Trajectories, associations and memories

Displays at Hollytree were not replaced anew each year but were cumulative.

Miriam chose to keep some displays from year to year. Layers of school activities were built up over time. In her view 'building things up' provided a history of the school which could be seen, used as a learning resource and appreciated by visitors (not just a new trendy thing, this school has been like this for a long time). Some might see this as poor practice, but retention had an interesting effect. For children, the history on display was personal and associational, it was about them and their web of relationships.

.. when you come in and sit down on them chairs, have you seen all them portraits on the wall, that's what some year 5s did last year (FG 4)
Last year the year 6s had a pavement artist and so they just spent the whole day just doing a picture of themselves and they were put up in the hall. (FG 8)
.. if you look on that side wall there, there's all our sculptures. Mine's there with like you've got to draw them leaning to the side or with like holding a little handbag or standing up straight posing. (FG 5)
... not long ago we had someone famous coming in, you've seen the sculptures outside and he did them with us and one was based on me. At first he said we were going to make a life-size person out of paper, I thought how can he do that, it's impossible, I thought no. But he did and it turned out to be amazing. (FG 8)
... this man came in, I don't know whether you've seen any about the school but there's actually one in the hall, we drew on this brown coloured paper and he drew a picture of himself. (FG 8)
One boy he loves giraffes ..see what he's drawn and it's just surrounded by like giraffes because he really likes them so you can just tell he loves giraffes (FG 4)
Cos if you look in our classroom we've got like all fruit, we've done the fruit ... and we've done things like, I've forgotten her name now, like people like Louis Pasteur and Marie Curie (FG 2)
We did autobiographies and biographies and once we like did some writing about them. We went out to do some like drawings of the person we'd just been writing about and stuff. (FG 3)
... we made like a booklet thing and in that we did lots of art and made moving figures and we made a powerpoint presentation and we got like a really thick folder and it's got all of us as the characters involved and we've got it in our class now, it's really good (FG 10)
...we did these hand things – they're clay and we put our hands in and it was really good and [Artist 6] did one and hers was right next to mine and it just looked like we were best friends. (FG 1)
We used to have a Rolf Harris picture on the wall. That's gone now, I didn't like it. It was a picture of a lady that he had painted and they took it down and put something else up and it was like wow. (FG3)

Figure 1. Display as a theatre of memory

In the beginning of this paper we reported field notes in which children showed Lisa around the school referring to themselves, siblings and friends, and regular school activities. This was not a one-off, but happened regularly. We also found that when asked about the school, children mobilized a common tangle of past activity, association and display. They spoke of arrhythmic events, of memorable activities and people, connections past and present and school initiatives (see Figure 1).

For children, the cumulative nature of the displays functioned in a diary-like manner, as a visual aide-memoire. They made the school a 'theatre of memory' (Samuels, 1994), where displays provided the resources, not for learning 'school stuff', but for the construction of a narrative of experience of schooling which was peppered with excitement, enjoyment and a sense of individual and collective achievement. Children could trace their own trajectory through the school and that of their peers via displays. We suggest that these stories of affiliation created an emotional attachment to the school, which was strongly evidenced in the children's almost unanimous liking for staff and the school itself (OfSTED and interview data).

‘Caring’ and ‘trusting’ were integral to the school ethos. This was evidenced by: Miriam knowing the names and circumstances of every child in the school, and of generations of children who had been at the school, including those who were now sending their children there; parents who were free to come into the school at anytime about almost anything (which they did); and the lack of child-free spaces—staff ate dinner with children, children were free to come into the staffroom, and staff regularly used Miriam’s office.

In the children’s historical narratives, these associational and agentic elements were writ large, constructed in part by their references to actual people and to representations of the human face and the human body in displays (see Figure 1). The humanist culture was made visual and symbolized through portrayal of people.

Face count

110 faces on the wall and on display including the faces of sculptures, photos, on the notice board, the “paper people” and the Peter Pan models. (Lisa’s field notes)

There was no escaping the human face and body when walking through or working in Hollytree primary. The school was person-centred (c.f. Maguire *et al.*, 2006, Ch. 6) and the walls literally said—it is people who are important here, people of all shapes, sizes and colours—all have a place in our school. This was an individualised notion of ‘recognition’ (Fraser, 1997), but one which was highly inclusive of diversity. Hollytree was a school where even the walls suggested that everyone could ‘become somebody’ (Wexler *et al.*, 1992) worthy of notice.

Conclusion: reading walls

We have taken the official policy discourse of the importance of the visual learning environment and held it up against the practices of display in one British primary school.

In so doing, we are not suggesting that Hollytree was a paragon of good display practice nor that these findings can be simply applied to other locations. Rather, we propose that there are benefits in analysing the material environment of schools. While we predicted normative and performative aspects of display, we had not focused on its rhythmic dimensions, and we were surprised to hear the children’s relational/associational stories which were clearly important to their sense of belonging in the school.

We suggest that further analyses of the displays in different schools in different locations might offer more such surprises, and, thus, help our understandings of the ways that schools ‘work’ in and as everyday practice.

Notes

1. ESRC RES-000-22-0834 (2004–2006) *Promoting social and education inclusion through the creative arts*.
2. We are grateful to Bob Curtis, doctoral researcher and a former primary head, for this insight.
3. We have recently encountered this view in schools with new buildings, and from recently trained teachers in our Masters' classes.
4. Our analysis clearly draws on Foucault's (1977; 1982/1997) work on surveillance and the shift from external to internal discipline. We have not developed this argument further here since we are concerned to make the case for the multiple meanings of school displays.
5. David Blunkett was the Minister in charge of education at the time.
6. As part of the annual school report, children write their own page in the official record book about what they learned and enjoyed during the year.

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