



Building Sustainable Future Cities Through Civic Engagement: A Mid-Project Assessment of Under The Flyover Project in Bengaluru, India

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Civic Engagement to Build Sustainable City:

In 2017, civic organizations in Bengaluru, such as JAAGA, Daily Dump, Teacher Foundation, and a few others partnered to reclaim public/common and green spaces through an education initiative geared toward kids. The project was designed to empower school kids to be stewards of their natural environment and build a sense of place for their city-especially of spaces that were easily dismissed as undesirable wastelands such as under the flyovers. Bengaluru's expansion to accommodate the demands of urbanization has resulted in numerous flyovers and in the depletion of green spaces within the city. The mission of this initiative is to build sustainable future cities through youth leadership and to increase public understanding and community participation in greening urban spaces.

Objective

This research project undertook a mid-project assessment of a sustainable city initiative in Bengaluru, India, called the Under the Flyover project. The focus of the project is to green Bengaluru city by educating school kids about their environment through experiential learning. Our study focused on a mid-level assessment to examine if this project had an impact on how kids interacted with and understood the space under the flyover and nature in their life. We designed our study to determine if a change of mindset had been initiated in the student population in the first 6 weeks of the project in terms of connecting with nature and understanding the role of nature in the city.

Method

We assessed the program by conducting focus group interviews with students from three schools that participated in the initiative and also through participant observation of class sessions under the flyover. Through the focus groups, we engaged with students to gauge their level of understanding of nature, urban environment, public spaces (such as under the flyover), and also, how well they accepted experiential learning compared to classroom learning. The sample studied consisted of approximately 60 students from three schools: Buddhi International School, Jain Heritage School, and Vidya Niketan School. The students ranged from 4th graders to 8th graders between 10 and 15 years old, mostly from middle and upper class backgrounds. Small focus groups in the form of unstructured interviews were held with two to three students at a time, each session lasting 45 minutes to one hour. The meetings typically allowed students to guide us through their learning experience in this program. We also participated in one of their class meetings under the flyover, and this provided us a glimpse into the activities through which the students are taught about the city and their environment.



Photos

Top: Students from the Vidya Niketan School with two members of Daily Dump looking at the foliage of a tree.

Middle: The compost bags that contain seeds that will help to further create more green space.

Bottom: The Flyover



Result

Our small focus group interviews clearly demonstrated that children were grappling with the meaning of nature and were also challenged by the idea of nature and non-nature. They described nature as “living, breathing, and organic”, compost as “gross”, but also “soft, fun, and nice”. “Humans create ‘non-nature’ and contribute to pollution and waste, but we are nature.”

Before the project, most of the students had only driven through the flyover, and none of them stated that they had spent any time there. They thought that it was too noisy and dangerous. During the project, the students recognized the space to be a community of animals, insects and their resources. They were proud of the improvements they made, such as cleaning up the trash, planting gardens, and making the space seem greener.

Experiential Learning: All of our focus group interviews showed that children enjoyed the creative, outdoor, experiential style of learning. They described this as different compared to the classroom learning experience, and something they would love to share with their family and friends. Students talked about experiential learning by making direct reference to the three experiments they were shown in the flyover project: conventional versus local tomato plants, pouring organic versus conventional soap in a fish tank and observation of changing seasons.

Students spoke enthusiastically about compost bags. In our participant observation, we noted the same enthusiasm amongst students. Students hoped and noted the program should include more of their classmates and not a select few.

Recommendation and Conclusion

Overall, our assessment of the program showed positive results.

We noted that community initiatives can lead to beneficial outcomes and these were more participative in nature and hence sustainable.

Our recommendations include:

1. Expansion of the program to include local schools.
2. Encourage boys to participate in the program as in some schools we noticed that the participants were mostly girls.
3. Include take-home assignments that would enable them to do project and assignments with family and friends.