Experiencing the school environment through ideal school planning: The case of second-generation immigrant adolescents

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This paper adopts an interpretive phenomenological method (IPA) to afford access to student experiences of the school environment. The method utilizes research instruments that guide participants in designing their ideal school and presenting it visually and verbally. We demonstrate the method by analyzing proposals prepared by two adolescents born in Israel who are children of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The results revealed six lifeworld structures that constitute the participants’ attitude towards the school environment. We discuss the potential of our research method to portray a holistic picture of participants’ dialogue with their environment and to illustrate their responses to school and family hierarchical codes. Finally, we consider characteristics of this method that allows adolescents to make their voices heard.

Keywords:

visual research methods; school environment; spatial imagination; second-generation immigrant; inclusion

In this article, we adopt an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) (Alase 2017; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) to explore the ways students experience the school environment. The method entails a process for a participant to schematically design an ‘ideal school.’ For this purpose, we use the Location Task, a tool which guides participants to imagine an ideal school, select and organize its component places on a sheet of paper. Next, participants explain their proposal in an in-depth interview. Although focusing on the physical environment, the emerging meanings are broad and can serve as a useful metaphorical prism to expand accessibility to various issues concerning the school experience (Zur and Eisikovits 2011).

Our research method rests on phenomenological assumptions that places are primary ontological structures in the human experience. A ‘spatial-temporal field that integrates, activates and interconnects things people, experiences, meanings, and events (Seamon 2020, 29). The relationship between people and places is bidirectional. While people create and change places through the process of meaning-making, places affect people by the meanings ascribed to them – meanings that reflect and shape their identities and attitudes toward themselves and the world (Casey 2009; Malpas 2018; Seamon 2015; Tani 2017).

The inspiration for our research method lies in Merleau-Ponty’s (1962/2013) phenomenological philosophy, according to which people learn about the world through the movement of their bodies through space. The body functions as the primary axis for measuring and understanding the world. Being directly connected to the subject and, concurrently, enjoying the properties of the material world, the body can mediate between the subject and the physical world. People, therefore, come to perceive the world through dialogue between their bodies and the physical environment. In this process, they personify objects while attributing meanings to them that originate in their bodies. This primordial body/space interaction is concealed in the pre-reflective layer of the lifeworld. Thus, by focusing on the body-space interaction, the researcher can gain access to the structures and meanings of the fundamental stratum of consciousness. The direct implication of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy for our research method is clarified further in the methodology section.

Our research method falls under the participatory research paradigm that seeks to produce knowledge about environmental experiences with and for children and young people (Freeman 2020; Porter, Townsend, and Hampshire 2012; Woolner 2011). These methods often utilize participant-generated visual tools to explore how students experience their school environment (Guillemin and Drew 2010), such as drawings (Lynch and Wishart 2021; Loxley, O’Leary, and Minton 2011; McHatton et al. 2014), photovoice and photo elicitation (Allan and Jørgensen 2021; Isseri, Muthukrishna, and Philpot 2018; Lee and Abbott 2009; Loxley, O’Leary, and Minton 2011), participatory video method (Heynes and Tanner 2015) map drawing (Loxley, O’Leary, and Minton 2011; Woolner et al. 2010), and model preparation (Burke and Grosvenore 2003).

In previous studies in which we applied the Location Task tool, we learned that it is user-friendly and offers a wealth of compelling data allowing for in-depth insights into fundamental elements of the lived school environment experience. These studies, which implemented cross-sectional and longitudinal design, were conducted with high school students from democratic and regular schools (Zur and Eisikovits, 2015), principals (Zur and Eisikovits, 2016), educators of at-risk youth (Zur and Sigad, 2020), and preservice teachers (Zur and Ravid, 2018).

This article presents the potential of this research method for studying the ways second-generation immigrant students experience the school environment. To this end, we analyze the Location Tasks of two adolescents, both second-generation immigrants to Israel from urban centers in the European area of the former Soviet Union (FSU). Due to their backgrounds, we focus on the participants’ transnational life experience in the education domain. Transnationalism refers to the lifestyle of migrants who simultaneously maintain active and or symbolic connections with their country of migration and country of residence, adhering to the traditions and cultural mores of both to varying degrees (Barwick 2018; Foner 2002). Immigrants to Israel from urban centers of the European parts of the FSU meet this definition and, thus, can be regarded as transnational migrants. Primary values that they instill in their children from a young age are – educational excellence, particularly science education; achievement motivation; pragmatism, and professional aspirations (Eisikovits 2008, 2014; Remennick 2007).

Among parents who are first-generation immigrants, education and scholarliness are telic values (D’Andrade 2008; Fleischacker 2015) that determine whether an action or a way of life is either admirable and inspiring or contemptible and deadening. They perceive scholarship as a central path to a prestigious career and financial security in the instrumental sense, associating scholarship intrinsically with personal growth and self-fulfillment. Over the years, in the transition from first-generation to one-and-a-half generation parenthood, the value of education has remained high, with the instrumental/pragmatic rationale being dominant. At the same time, influenced by the receiving society, parents show an increasing readiness to understand their children’s wishes and choices (Remennick 2014).

This section presents the research method we applied to discover the lifeworld meanings that second-generation immigrant students from FUS attach to school as a place.

## Participants

We present an analysis of two ideal school proposals from Natasha and Alex (names changed to maintain anonymity) – two 17-year-old youths born in Israel, children of parents who immigrated to Israel during the 1990s from European regions of the FSU. Their parents are highly educated professionals. Natasha’s parents immigrated at a slightly younger age and, unlike Alex’s parents, received their university education and married in Israel. At the time of the study, Natasha and Alex were studying in the same class – the eleventh-grade elective science main subject track of a public high school in a large city in northern Israel. The school has an ethnically heterogeneous population and student population of approximately 800 students ranging from 13 to 18 years old. The science class curriculum is centered on math, physics, and robotics and attracts students of high academic ability. We made contact with the participants through mutual acquaintances. After receiving parental consent and hearing an explanation of the purpose of the study, they willingly agreed to take part in the research and signed an informed consent form.

For this article, we chose to present the tasks of Natasha and Alex from the six tasks we collected. There are two reasons for this decision: first, they study in the same educational setting, making it possible to highlight the power of the Location Task to reveal each one’s uniqueness; and second, their tasks reveal very different personal priorities, making it possible to illustrate lifeworld axes of the way these students experience their school environment.

## Research instruments and procedure

The participants designed their ideal school through the Location Task research method (Peled 1999). The Location Task was initially developed to serve architects in their dialogue with clients. We adapted it for educational research by asking the participants to design an ideal school. The design task includes two research instruments: the Location Task sheet (see Figure 1) and an elicitation interview. The task sheet is 24 inches squared, and the design space is 19 inches squared. The thick, oval border on the sheet marks the school boundaries. The broader circle surrounding it (the fourth circle) delineates the outer boundary of the place. The area beyond is defined as the margin and is excluded from the task area.

The task preparation process is simple and requires no artistic talent, thus overcoming the limitations of some instruments used in participant-generated visual methodologies (Mannay 2016). The participants were asked to imagine an ideal school, giving their imagination free rein. They were instructed to decide what to include within and outside the school area and to write these elements down in an attached table. Next, they were asked to copy these onto stickers and place the stickers on the sheet. They could add sketches and use whatever colors they wished. The instructions for performing the task were given orally and in writing (see Appendix).

*[Figure 1 appears here]*

Figure 1: The Location Task sheet.

The dimensions of the Location Task were established to allow the researchers access into the lifeworlds of the participants. Based on Merleau-Ponty’s (1962/2013) philosophy, the underlying assumption of the Location Task is that, if participants design a place that is approximately the width of their bodies (the size of the Location Task sheet), they will tend to personify it. The place personification facilitates a participant/place dialogue at the primordial pre-reflective layer of the lifeworld. In this dialogue, participants project meanings from their own bodily organs and limbs onto the areas on the task sheet described below (Peled 1999):

* The front of the body includes the sensory organs – the area through which individuals establish communication with the world. These are projected onto the front of the task sheet, signifying the meaning of the representation area. In contrast, the back of the sheet, like the back of the body, reflects the meanings of a concealed, intimate, and internalized service area.
* At the body’s center is the ‘heart,’ a vital organ that gives life to the other parts of the body. These are projected onto the center of the sheet, which bear meanings of belonging, control, and representation. The periphery, in contrast, derives its meaning from the limbs, reflecting the desire for freedom and autonomy.
* In the upper parts of the body, the head and the sensory organs bear spiritual and observational meanings. Accordingly, the higher areas of places are linked to revealing an overall picture and awareness of multiple entities and actions. In contrast, the body’s lower parts, including the legs, reproductive, and excretory organs – like the lower parts of a place – carry meanings of practical matters and active involvement in the world.

In the first face-to-face meeting with participants, we assigned the task materials – an envelope containing the task sheet, stickers, instructions, and an empty table for writing down the places inside and outside the school (see Appendix). We asked them to complete the task and return it within two weeks. No later than two weeks from the date of receipt, we met with each participant for an in-depth interview. During that period, we carefully examined the task sheet and prepared an interview guide.

The interview guide included questions designed to elicit descriptions of the school, its places, and related activities. It also included questions about the meanings of components in space and reflective questions about the task preparation process. Although the interview was semi-structured, in practice, each interview was unique in both course and content since the conversation focused mainly on the participant’s Location Task. The standard questions were: ‘When I visit the designed school, where do I enter, what do I see?’; ‘Take me on a tour of your school – how is it organized, and what do the buildings look like in terms of height, materials, and style?’ ‘Describe place X – who is in there, and what type of activity takes place there?’; ‘Does the school have a border? What does it look like, and what is the function of the border?’; ‘What does the school center look like? What is the meaning of the school center?’; ‘What did you want to achieve while designing your school?’; ‘In retrospect, how did you experience the design process?’; ‘Are there things you would have done differently?’; and ‘What is the difference between the school you designed and the school that you currently attend?’

We learned that, while describing their ideal school, the participants made sense of elements in their school experience. Participants even switched from a natural attitude to a phenomenological attitude (Vagle 2018) in the process of reasoning out their core intention. For this reason, we define our method as belonging to the IPA (Alase 2017; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

## Processing the data

In line with the IPA (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009), the Location Task offers a rich and diverse corpus of data with thick description and triangulation, leading to in-depth and reliable findings (Alase 2017; Levitt et al. 2018). The data processing took place according to the following outline.

### A. Holistic analysis of each individual task

* Exploring the task sheet, including examining the number and the type of places, the functions they serve, their distribution, and organization.
* Analyzing the verbal text. We applied the three steps suggested by van Manen (2016): (1) a holistic stage for identifying key ideas; (2) a selective phase in which the text is read several times to identify essential statements; and (3) careful probing of each sentence or set of sentences, auditing their meanings for school experience interpretation.
* Organizing the verbal data into themes with simultaneous configuration analysis of the task sheet so that the verbal and visual texts present a coherent whole. Configuration analysis is a visual-interpretive technique we developed to highlight task areas and identify and abstract their latent structure (see Figures 2–3).

### B. Identification of common themes in different Location Tasks

* The themes were extracted based on two criteria: first, the very appearance of the theme in both the visual and verbal texts; and second, if the theme included elements of both the social-educational and spatial environments (Zur and Eisikovits 2011).

# Results

## Natasha and Alex’s task sheets

Natasha’s ideal school (see Figure 2) has 47 places – 40 inside the school and seven outside. Some of them appear more than once, and they all provide basic physical needs – restrooms (eight), benches (four), food and drink vending machines (three), shaded seating areas (three), and bicycle parking facilities (two). The classrooms are situated on the left, arranged on different floors of the building, with one floor allocated to each grade. On the right is a building containing places for specialized learning, with a particularly large area allocated to science rooms. Other areas are designated for sports and a library. In addition, a prominent entrance area and a shaded seating area are situated at the periphery.

On the original task sheet, Natasha used two colors – brown to mark paths and light green as background to the areas with buildings. She drew the straight lines and the squares that appear in Figure 2. In the configuration analysis, we noted an emphasis on six central characteristics: symmetrical organization; clearly defined spatial areas; figure-ground relationships in which the learning areas are more prominent than other places; division of the space into two areas by a central path; interconnection of places via a secondary path system, and expansive empty areas in the sheet’s third and fourth circles.

*[Figure 2 appears here]*

Figure 2: Configuration analysis of Natasha’s task sheet

Alex’s ideal school (see Figure 3) comprises 40 places – 25 inside the school and 15 in the external area.

*[Figure 3 appears here]*

Figure 3: Configuration analysis of Alex’s task sheet

The stickers are evenly distributed around the task sheet, with no additional sketches or color. Each place appears only once. In the configuration analysis of Alex’s ideal school, we emphasized the diversity of the areas and the circular organization around the center.

On the circular line are three distinct areas, with those closest to the center designated for more cognitive and structured activities and those closer to the periphery designated for relaxation or physical activities. In the second circle in between is an area for active learning. Another conspicuous feature of the task sheet is the two areas designated for student social activities, both inside and outside the school buildings.

## Thematic analysis of the two proposals

This section presents six themes extracted from Natasha’s and Alex’s Location Tasks.

### Reduction versus abundance

In Natasha’s task sheet, two characteristics suggest a tendency to reduce and focus as a way of thinking – the repetitive appearance of places, and the scarcity of places in the third and fourth circles. These characteristics indicate a desire to concentrate on specific activities while restricting the range of experiences. Natasha expressed this tendency explicitly when describing her daily schedule: ‘I don’t have time during the school year. In the summer I started going to the gym...I don’t read books so much. In the summer, I started but then stopped.’ In Natasha’s ideal school, the students act in the same: way ‘Learning in school first and then completing the assignments at home.’

Natasha’s reductionism is manifested in the meaning she attributed to her ideal school’s external environment. The third circle is almost devoid of places and appears as a kind of insulating layer. She stressed the absence of interaction between the school and its environment: ‘There is no connection between the school and the external area.’ The external environment is perceived as a source of distraction: ‘It might be possible to see out over the fence, but I don’t understand why that is necessary. You don’t go to school to look at the view; you go to learn.’ Another expression of Natasha’s tendency toward reduction is apparent in the way she describes the places. For example, the library has one function only – to help the students succeed in their examinations: ‘It will be large. There will be many textbooks there, which will help the students study for their matriculation exams.’

In contrast to Natasha, Alex created an environment abundant in objects, functions, and ideas. His task sheet contains various places of different types, which reflect a multitude of personal interests. His fascination with astrophysics is expressed in the planetarium; his enthusiasm for chess in the students’ room, the youth center, and the library; his involvement in informal education in the youth center and the youth movement; and his passion for music in the music studio, the performance stage, and the conservatory.

Alex emphasized the importance of an environment with color: ‘The first important thing is that the school be colorful. Not like all schools, which are just white and boring. Looking at all that white gives you a headache.’ The frequent use of the expression ‘it has’ also indicated his aspiration for abundance. Alex described the library in the following way:

In the library, you can study quietly and read interesting books. **It has** computers, sofas, poufs, tables. It is built on two floors, and **it has** many books, computers, board games, and mind games.’ In the students’ room: ‘Students can enjoy themselves during break time. **It has** a table tennis table, a billiard table, board games, computers, hammocks, table soccer, poufs, tables, food and drink vending machines; they have fun there.

### Focus on the system versus focus on the parts

Natasha’s Location Task emphasizes the importance of the whole rather than the significance of its parts. The school appears as an organized and hierarchical system –symmetrical, integrative, and dominant. The places included, however, are uniform and square entities. The hierarchy is manifest in the construction of the building on different floors, with a separate floor allocated to each year group. Moreover, the entrance area at the front of the sheet reflects the intention to present the school outwardly as a complete, independent entity, distinct from the external environment.

The verbal texts express the intention to strengthen the school’s institutional prestige: ‘It will not have silly things in it, because, after all, the school is an institution that deserves appropriate respect.’ For similar reasons, Natasha suggested that the students wear uniforms: ‘They say that it eliminates economic differences, but I am more in the direction of respect for the place where you are.’

Alex, however, assigned a more prominent status to the parts within the whole. Each place appears only once, surrounded by empty space. The movement system is scattered and flexible: ‘The school is surrounded by a path, where the dotted line is, leading to all sorts of other paths. The grass is scattered, not in one place.’ Alex’s stories about his childhood also show his intention to strengthen part/place/person autonomy. For example, he reported that he joined a youth movement against his parents’ wishes in fifth grade: ‘I was the only Russian child in the movement. The Russians are against youth movements because of their associations with Communism.’ His description of the daily schedule in the ideal school reflects the importance of student freedom of choice:

In the morning, whoever **wants to** can do yoga/meditation. Whoever **doesn’t want to** can go to the gym or to the students’ room. Afterward, each one can go to their **chosen** subjects. There are projects for inventing patents and including the students in academic study. Students can choose to learn what they **want** (even diplomacy) and **as much as they want**. The school gives every student the space for self-expression and for realizing hidden potential. It does not try to force the students to conform all the time.

Speaking critically, he claimed that in his actual school, the system imposes a uniform curriculum on students: ‘I don’t think that the matriculation certificate is the main thing. I am studying for matriculation, and there are subjects that are totally irrelevant to me.’

### Instrumentalism versus dialogue

Natasha designed the task sheet as an architectural draft, a finished product that was not open to dialogue. The straight path running from the entrance to the school’s back appears, metaphorically, as a fast track to accomplishing a goal. Natasha clarified her goal at the beginning of the interview: ‘I think that these days, money is very important. If you focus on scientific subjects, then later, you earn more money.’ The use of the expression ‘these days’ might suggest the internalization of an adult world ethos. She described herself as a ‘perfectionist’ who works toward future goals out of necessity rather than choice: ‘In the eleventh grade, there are very many matriculation exams, so you study a lot, and need to invest a lot of effort.’

We identified two types of places in Natasha’s ideal school: The first type includes the library, classrooms, and specialist subject matter rooms. These places are designated to accomplishing the goal of academic success. The second type includes restrooms, a cafeteria, food, drinks vending machines, seating areas, and places in the external environment, which support achieving goals indirectly. This division indicates that Natasha’s school experience moves between two poles: studying and recovering from studying.

In Natasha’s ideal school, activity is focused on scholastic achievement: ‘There is everything you need for an optimal learning environment.’ The teachers’ role is to work effectively to advance that goal: ‘The teachers explain things well and keep class control.’ The students are expected to behave with restraint: ‘More severe punishments are needed…even if they are bored, they should sit quietly and not disturb the rest of the class.’ The descriptions of the places reflect a functional approach:

In the [ideal] school, there will be restrooms in every building. Every cubicle will have toilet paper...The bus stops are close by and easily accessible…there is a shopping mall next door to be convenient…there is a central place that sells food if you stay until late.

Alex’s focus is more on mutual and empathic dialogue and less on achievement. He described the staff room in his ideal school in a way that reflects sensitivity to the teachers’ needs:

In my imaginary school, there are computer rooms, where teachers can go to work quietly. By us [in his current school] there is a staff room, and next to it there is a row of booths behind a low partition... During break time, some teachers work on the computers inside the booths, and others talk loudly in the staff room. How is the teacher at the computer supposed to be able to work like that?

Alex described the meeting room as a place to hold conversations: ‘Teachers can talk to a student about how he is doing and about his behavior and about how things are at home.’ In the smart classrooms, ‘seating is in a circle. Not like in our school, where two students sit by a table, and they have no eye contact.’

In addition, the school engages in a dialogue with its external environment. Alex located his ideal school in the center of the community, explaining: ‘If you want the school to be a place where the students come to learn, then it can be in an isolated spot, but if you want something beyond that, it needs to be in the heart of the community.’ When describing the link between the school and the community, he repeatedly used the word ‘connect’:

The school is **connected** to the community. It has projects around religious holidays, food collections for needy people. The students visit old-age homes. There is even a community committee inside the school. The school is **connected** to the youth center, where the students go to informal classes after school. It is **connected** to the youth movement, where students find other students from school and go out on hikes and experience the solidarity of community life.

The description of the school/community connection indicates an orientation toward reciprocity. On the one hand, ‘the goal is that the students will understand that their job is not only learning and self-advancement but to think about others as well and about the community.’ On the other hand, at the youth center, ‘college students come to help the school students with homework, for free.’

### Exclusion versus inclusion

Natasha’s texts indicate a tendency to place her interests at the center and neglect or exclude people who do not fit into her plan to achieve her goals. Evidence of this is that the place allocated to science subjects on the task sheet is larger and divided into more parts than the space allocated to the humanities. As for troublesome students, she favored excluding them: ‘Mainly those with problematic behavior. Speak to their previous school. Ask if they disrupted there and if so, don’t accept them.’

Unlike Natasha, Alex reflected a consistent intention to produce an inclusive school environment. This is expressed in the task sheet’s circular configuration and the abundance of different expressions in the verbal texts. He suggested strengthening a sense of belonging by using the school walls: ‘Twelfth-grade students can draw on them and leave a sign that they were here.’ Regarding the planetarium, he said: ‘There are children who come to school for no particular reason. They vandalize the restrooms and don’t care about school at all…the planetarium will make the students feel connected.’

Alex explained that his insight into the importance of a sense of belonging stems from his experience of exclusion as a second-generation immigrant in elementary school. He shared painful memories: ‘We were three students [of FSU origin]. There was racism. They spoke nastily to us; there were curses. “Smelly Russian,” “Go back to Russia” …they said that to me even though I was born here.’ His homeroom teacher’s behavior made the pain worse:

If a child isn’t friendly, is a bit quiet and doesn’t mingle, then his classmates will say that it is because he is Russian. I felt that with my homeroom teacher. I didn’t notice it at first, when I was small, but in recent years, I have thought about it a lot. I noticed that when the teacher was speaking, and there were children making a noise at the front of the class, she ignored them. But when my friend, who is Russian as well, said one word to me, right away, she would say ‘get out of the classroom,’ or as a punishment, ‘stand up.’

He recovered from this experience through the youth movement. Unlike in school, where the students ‘are not so equal,’ in the youth movement, ‘everyone is equal.’ From his childhood experience of exclusion, Alex developed social sensitivity: ‘I don’t like it at all that in school [his current school], Russians make racist remarks against Moroccans, that they say, “what a stupid Moroccan.’” He also criticized his teachers in his current school: ‘The teachers always come to class and say, “you are the science class, so we expect more of you.” They really exaggerate this point. That is why in the smart classroom, there should be equality among the classrooms, so all the classrooms are identical.’

Alex’s inclusive approach was also manifested in the carpentry workshop description: ‘I think the old-style vocational schools are important. If a child is not good at physics and math, the school should allow him to specialize in carpentry. That way, he will do something that he enjoys.’ It is noteworthy that, while Alex thought about the students who have difficulty with academic subjects and sought to include them in the ideal school, he located the carpentry workshop in an isolated spot in the third circle on the task sheet. This contrasts with the wide variety of places allocated to academic learning and may reveal a lack of coherence between the declarative and latent layers in Alex’s lifeworld.

### Preservation versus change

Natasha’s task sheet includes mostly classrooms organized in a hierarchical, orthogonal formation as is customary for schools built according to the factory model. When we asked her to describe her school, she responded: ‘An ordinary building.’ Regarding the literature classroom, she said: ‘I haven’t really thought about it. Ordinary.’ The media room looks ‘ordinary, like a classroom.’ While reflecting on the process of preparing the task, she added: ‘It made me understand that my school is actually good and that it lacks almost nothing.’

Alex, in contrast, was seeking for ways to utilize the openness of the task to refresh the school experience. The planetarium, at the center of his task sheet, is placed on the upper floor of a two-story building. It shapes the school’s identity as a dynamic, open, and unique environment: ‘A very interesting place. Other schools don’t have one. Putting it there brings innovation.’ The planetarium represents the ambition to open horizons and break boundaries, scientific curiosity, and the need for a place for social gatherings.

Another strategy Alex implemented, expressing a desire to change the school experience, is a thinking pattern that embraces ideas from other places familiar to him. He drew the idea to paint the walls from his youth movement, the design of the outdoor recreation area from the local urban park, and the television screens in the entrance hall from his elementary school.

### Transnational identity

From the interview, we learned that Natasha’s connection to her culture of origin is weak. However, she viewed Soviet culture positively and felt the need to protect her parents from ethnic stereotypes. She emphasized their liberal approach: ‘A lot of parents say, “go and study that,” and expect their children to do as they’re told. My parents never tried to force their opinion on me....they are not like those strict Russians. They encourage us in everything.’

In response to our question about expressions of Soviet culture in her family’s lifestyle, she found it challenging to identify anything except ‘maybe the food.’ She has never visited the FSU and had low proficiency in Russian reading and writing. Her family still celebrates the Christian New Year, as is the accepted norm among FSU immigrants, but with question marks surrounding this tradition: ‘My mom is against this now, but we still celebrate it. I persuade her.’ She prefers to associate with girls from the FSU, but this is not a condition for choosing her friends: ‘I liked being able to speak Russian with friends, but it’s not a problem. I accept each one as she is.’ Her remarks indicate that she perceived Russian culture as superior to Israeli culture: boys of Russian origin are ‘better educated; they are more cultured.’ Israeli youth ‘is not good at all. Someone can throw chewing gum on the floor as if they don’t care. They don’t lift the chairs at the end of the class, even though they have been asked.’

Alex’s ethnic identity is interpreted as more complex and fuller of tensions and contradictions. He talked about pressures related to choosing a career: ‘I’m not looking to become rich, but if you could make money from music, and if they would push me less at home... If they would say, “Be a musician,” I would specialize in music.’ He anchored the family conflict in values prevalent in the FSU: ‘In Russian families, they tell you to cram, to work hard. That everything to do with school is sacred.’ He rejected this approach: ‘Russian education is very strict…my grandfather used to say to me: “I was a 5 student (5 being the top grade).” They don’t relate to people but to grades. People are numbers.’

Alex’s social life comprises people from different circles, school, the youth movement, and musical groups. These circles include FSU immigrants and native Israelis. His closest social circle is his friends with FSU backgrounds: ‘We talk to each other in Russian. There are certain things that only Russians understand. When that happens, we laugh about it.’ Alex claimed that his parents opposed him joining the youth movement since they feared it would distract him from studying. The conflict ended in a compromise: ‘I try to combine them both. If it was really my choice, I would invest a lot more in the movement and less in school.’

Alex’s affinity for Russian culture is profound. He told us that when he was a child, his mother and grandmother taught him to read and write Russian and that he uses Russian when surfing the internet. At the same time, he participated in enrichment activities for children of FSU origin. At age 14, he visited his parents’ birthplace. They encouraged him to maintain his connection to his group of origin: ‘I once came home from school with another Russian boy, and they said to me: “Why are you arguing with a Russian? Russians are supposed to help Russians.”’

# Discussion

In this article, we demonstrated our research method by analyzing the Location Tasks of Natasha and Alex, two second-generation adolescent immigrants from the FSU. These immigrants belong to a socio-ethnic group that places a great deal of importance on education as an intrinsic value and as a means to succeed in life (Eisikovits 2008, 2014; Remennick 2007).

Places are an essential element in adolescents’ world. Understanding their meanings and activating the imagination about them initiates identity elaboration and the development of possible selves (Prince 2013). Natasha and Alex’s Location Tasks revealed how our method’s geographical point of view could generate dialogue with adolescents and enhance their self-awareness of the school experience in their various life contexts.

It should be noted that there are common themes that we have identified in previous studies (Zur and Eisikovits 2015, 2016; Zur and Ravid 2018; Zur and Sigad 2020), which we characterize as fundamental structures of the lifeworld: reduction vs. abundance; focus on the system vs. focus on the parts; instrumentalism vs. dialogue; and preservation vs. change. The uniqueness of the Location Tasks in this study lies in the participants’ emphasis on the exclusion/inclusion axis and its connection to their transnational identity.

The meanings students attribute to the school space reflect a politics of social belonging (Amitay and Rahav 2021; Brown 2017; Allan and Jorgensen 2021). Natasha expressed conformity to the hierarchical code used in her school based on academic achievement. Naturally, her ideal school resembled the school she attended. On the other hand, Alex resisted the hierarchical messages he received from his school and family. As a second-generation FSU adolescent who suffered as a child from social exclusion at school due to his ethnic origin, he used the Location Task as an opportunity to create an inclusive environment free from social stigma and discrimination. Moreover, he expressed the process of overcoming social barriers by locating places in the school’s external environment – places for the youth movement and a youth center that served as a means of bridging differences in social capital (Allan and Jorgensen 2021). These findings illustrate the potential of the Location Task to make the participants’ voices heard and increase their agency to respond to the politics of school space (Brown 2017).

The quality of the findings stems from the following four characteristics of our method:

Discovering lived experience through meanings attributed to places.

Places carry both practical and metaphorical meanings. They are concrete, easy to describe, and an integral part of every experience and people’s identities (Casey 2009; Malpas 2018; Prince, 2013; Seamon 2015). The Location Task is not limited to exploring students’ experience of their school environment. Focusing on other places may offer insights into the meanings young people ascribe to multiple contexts of their geography (Hammond, 2022).

Combination of visual and verbal data.

The visual and verbal data complement one another. While the visual data is embodied and spontaneous, the verbal data is subject to an interpretive process. The interpretation involves both the participant and the researcher, starting during the interview and ending with an integrative and cross-cutting analysis performed by the researcher. Moreover, a triangulation between visual data, including the general configuration of the school scheme, the place’s identity, and the number and location of places, with verbal data that emerged from the interview, make it possible to establish the reliability of the results.

Simplicity of the task preparation.

Performing the Location Task does not require complex skills, so that the challenging task of creating an ideal school becomes inviting and non-threatening. We have not yet conducted studies with elementary school students, but we believe this method is suitable for them, thanks to this task characteristic.

Openness of the task.

The task preparation is an open activity that invites participants to create a world without thinking about constraints or restrictions. Hence, it offers conditions for ‘making the familiar strange’ (Mannay 2016), thereby communicating taken-for-granted lifeworld meanings (Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006). The task preparation involves making decisions about which places to include in the sheet and where to locate them. This decision-making process and the following discussion with the researcher encourage reflective thinking and offer an opportunity for the participants to expand awareness of their preferences, feelings, intentions, and goals. At the same time, the researcher receives a holistic picture of the participant and his/her relevant life contexts. The resulting representation highlights the uniqueness of each participant and produces a fresh and effective platform for dialogue. This dialogue can be developed into a broader move in schools to strengthen students’ involvement in shaping their learning environments.

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