



How beauty affects education: a case study of educators and children's engagement with the aesthetic projects and environments of an international kindergarten and elementary school

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Abstract

At [The City School](#), an international kindergarten and elementary school in Bangkok, Thailand, creativity and critical thinking are made visible through beautifully designed spaces

and visually rich, child-informed educational projects. This qualitative case study explores our understanding of beauty in education. Conversations with project educators and an annotated photo-essay illuminate how beauty is perceived as an integral part of the school's pedagogy, culture and community. By presenting an aesthetic approach to teaching and learning, and discussing how we co-construct purposeful and artistic places and projects, we aim to contribute to the dialogue on the importance of the visual arts in early childhood. Through a detailed investigation of our case we share a novel perspective on the significance of aesthetics in educational settings. Our findings suggest that beauty not only enhances the visual appeal of our spaces but also positively impacts the quality of our relationships and elevates the value of our learning experiences. Beauty matters and with intentionality and commitment, it can become a vital component that enhances education for both teachers and children.

Introduction

Schools face competing priorities when it comes to designing learning spaces and school facilities. How important, for instance, is it to make a campus beautiful? What benefits does investing in beauty create for learning? How much effort should we make in presenting the work of children in a curated and aesthetic way? In this paper we seek to investigate the benefits of aesthetic environments and visually rich learning projects through the case of one international kindergarten and elementary school in Bangkok, Thailand. This qualitative case study explores the understanding and practice of beauty in education at The City School, part of ELC International Schools Bangkok. Conversations with project educators, a qualitative questionnaire and an annotated photo-essay illuminate how beauty is perceived as an integral part of the school's pedagogy, culture and community. By presenting an aesthetic approach to teaching and learning, and discussing how purposeful and artistic places and practices are co-constructed, this paper contributes to the dialogue on the importance of aesthetics in schools. Through a detailed investigation of this case, a novel perspective on the significance of beauty in educational settings is shared. Findings suggest that beauty not only enhances the visual appeal of spaces but also positively impacts the quality of relationships and elevates the value of learning experiences. It is argued that with intentionality and commitment, beauty can become a vital component that augments education for both teachers and children. Over time beauty can become a transformative force, offering potential for greater relationships, student engagement and high-value learning experiences.



Figure 1. *The school entrance is designed as two oversized bamboo creatures of a parent bug with the baby bug nestled in next to them*

Literature Review

The existing literature on beauty and schools reveals three major themes: the relationship between aesthetics and well-being, the impact on engagement and academic achievement, and the role of inclusive and culturally responsive design. The physical environment of schools plays a critical role in shaping children's learning experiences. In kindergartens and elementary schools, aesthetics can significantly affect children's emotional, social, and cognitive development. Since 2010, numerous studies have examined the aesthetic qualities of school environments, emphasizing their influence on children's well-being, engagement, and learning outcomes. A prominent theme is the association between aesthetically pleasing school environments and positive student outcomes. Research indicates that children are sensitive to their surroundings, and a well-designed, aesthetic environment can foster productive learning.

The field of contemporary art education is shaped by a blend of foundational philosophies and emerging post-humanist and socio-material perspectives (Grumet, 1995; Rousell & Fell, 2018). Figures such as Maxine Greene (1995) are still widely referenced for her work on imagination, social imagination, and the connection between the arts and social justice, which continue to influence arts educators today. Similarly, Loris Malaguzzi, the driving force behind the Reggio Emilia approach, remains a highly influential figure, with contemporary literature exploring his emphasis on the child as a competent and creative agent, and the value of non-verbal, visual languages in the atelier (Alkudhair, 2014). More recent scholarship has seen the rise of new materialist and posthumanist frameworks applied to art education research (Rousell, 2022). Academics like David Daichendt (2010) and Madeleine Grumet (1995) have also contributed significantly to discourses on the artist-teacher identity and the postmodern politics of art education, advocating for a curriculum that is socially relevant and challenges traditional structures. The field also sees ongoing discussions around practical pedagogies such as Choice-Based Art Education (TAB) and Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE), with scholars exploring how different educational approaches

impact pupil engagement and aesthetic judgment (Acer & Omerolu, 2020; Savva & Trimis, 2020).

Barrett et al. (2015) explored the relationship between classroom design and children's academic progress. They found that natural light, intentional color palettes, flexible layouts, and displays showcasing children's work positively influence children's sense of ownership and improve academic outcomes. They asserted that "the scale of the impact of building design on human performance and wellbeing can be identified and that it is non-trivial" (p. 130). A 2019 investigation, which considered the priorities of architects and teachers, reaffirmed that natural elements such as light, noise, and air quality, along with flexible spaces, were important (Young et al., 2020). However, the beauty of these spaces was not explicitly evaluated.



Figure 2. *Building entrances of The City School - a mixture of traditional Thai houses and modern architecture*

While Barrett et al. and Young et al. focused on internal spaces, Islam et al. (2020) examined the effect of access to green spaces and nature on early childhood development. Their systematic review confirmed that access to green spaces benefits children's health and well-being, especially in urban settings. Conversely, Evans (2006) emphasized that adverse noise levels, air quality, and spatial organization contribute to children's stress levels and discomfort. Thus, aesthetically pleasing environments can be linked to reduced stress and improved learning, facilitating a positive school experience. Taking an innovative approach, Coburn et al. (2017) explored neuroarchitecture, identifying the neuro-biological elements of aesthetic experiences as "sensorimotor, knowledge-meaning, and emotion-valuation systems" (p. 1522). These elements interweave to create unique aesthetic experiences within more universal responses to beauty. Coburn and colleagues suggested that neurophysiological data can inform our understanding of these phenomena and expressed hope that further neuroscience research could reveal how to improve human experience and well-being by optimizing built structures.

Focusing specifically on the emotion-valuation system, Barton (2023) argued for the significant role of positive experiences of beauty in fostering resilience and tolerance among children, especially given the uncertainties of the modern world. Other scholars have focused on inclusive and culturally responsive design as a critical aspect of school aesthetics. Dudek (2011) argued that school environments can reflect the "spirit and vitality which is expressive of children themselves" (p. 111) and called for a vibrant approach to

school buildings as community epicenters. Dudek's examples included schools that incorporate cultural symbols, diverse artwork, and accessible spaces for children with disabilities. Inclusive design also involves creating environments that are physically, emotionally, and cognitively accessible to all children, regardless of background. However, the literature reveals a gap in studies addressing how schools can systematically implement inclusive design principles. Further research is needed to explore how aesthetics can foster a sense of belonging and identity among children from diverse cultural backgrounds and support equity in educational experiences.

Aesthetics need not be limited to the physical beauty of a school but can also be integrated into the learning process. Researchers using a geopolitical lens have prompted calls for rethinking aesthetic education as a vehicle for cultivating empathy, creativity, and collaboration. This holistic view emphasizes the development of "human becomings," where education nurtures personal growth and ethical responsibility (Zhang & Peters, 2022). Aesthetics become a symbol of human potential and imagination. Zhang and Peters argued that "aesthetic education should not be ornamental to the 'hard curriculum' in schools, rather, it should help individuals feel, perceive, reflect, and understand the self and the world so that an open and creative relationship can be built between the individual and the surrounding world" (p. 329). This perspective has been influential in our understandings of aesthetics within the context of The City School.

This in turn aligns with John Dewey's concept of aesthetics, where life itself becomes an artistic process of growth and self-transformation (Dewey, 1934). Some research suggests that blending art with other subjects enhances cognitive and emotional learning. For instance, aesthetic responses in science, such as using artistic practices in data modeling or environmental studies, have deepened children's responses, judgments, and intentions (Hannigan et al., 2021). This interdisciplinary learning helps children connect the aesthetic dimensions of various subjects, reinforcing engagement and expanding creative capacities. Eisner (2003) reminded schools of the effect of aesthetic experiences, stating, "aesthetic forms of experience are memorable. We travel long distances to have them and pay much for the opportunity to undergo their magic. The arts help us secure experience that is valued intrinsically" (p. 343). Ideally, children and educators should have opportunities to weave aesthetic experiences into the foundations of their learning environments.

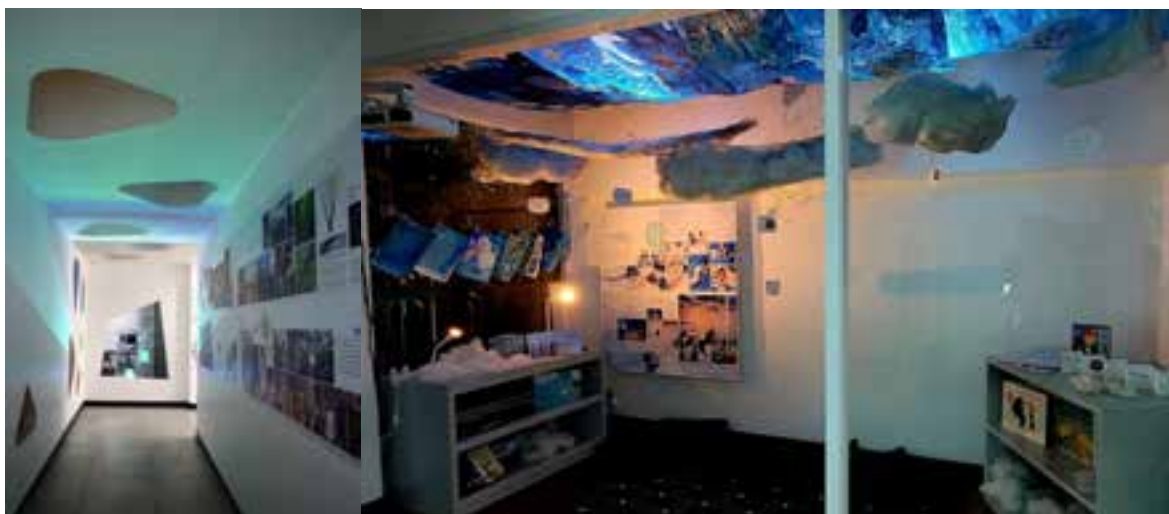


Figure 3. A group of Y1 children, interested in the ever-changing skies of Bangkok, aim to bring the sky inside: designed projections in the corridor, and a complete takeover installation in their classroom reading space.

While the literature provides valuable insights into the importance of aesthetics in elementary schools, several areas remain underexplored. First, the subjective elements of beauty and how definitions of aesthetic environments may differ between settings and communities need further consideration. This includes capturing unique and universal experiences of beauty within socio-cultural contexts and from the perspectives of educators and children. While among the participants of this study, there was a collective understanding that the school is beautiful, a further research study could examine and make visible why the school is considered beautiful. Another is further defining what we mean by affect - how is this measured beyond qualitative data and how do we arrive at a holistic understanding with wide applicability to other contexts.

Additional research is needed to explore the long-term effects of aesthetic interventions and the structural forces that define access to aesthetics. Education systems worldwide face multifaceted and persistent challenges related to cultural and socio-economic factors, teacher capacity, student inclusion and resource limitations (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). Cultural and socio-economic status (SES) profoundly influences student access to educational resources and shapes their learning styles, with students from lower-income backgrounds often facing significant barriers compared to their wealthier peers who benefit from superior facilities and materials (Considine & Zappala, 2002).

These challenges are further complicated by significant budgeting and funding disparities across different regions and even within school districts, which create inherent inequities in resource allocation (Roza et al., 2004; Cardona, 2024). In many instances, financial constraints limit the ability to adapt to student needs and invest in necessary programs and personnel (Omodero, 2023) such as our project coordinators at The City School. Finally, practical issues such as spatial limitations within school environments and time constraints within the curriculum often restrict the implementation of innovative pedagogical approaches, such as collaborative or project-based learning activities (Bufasi et al., 2024; Jolley et al., 2024).

Along with a need for practical guidelines to help educators implement evidence-based aesthetic improvements democratically and cost-effectively, more research is required to understand the experiences of low-income or marginalized communities and how aesthetics might mitigate or exacerbate educational inequalities. Lastly, aesthetics need to be considered from a holistic perspective, integrating psychological, aesthetic, neuroscientific, and cultural lenses to understand their overall effect on children and adults in educational settings.

Methodology

For this research we chose a bounded case study to qualitatively explore the phenomenon of beauty within a real-life educational context. Case study research, as described by Stake (1995) and Yin (2018, 2023), involves in-depth exploration using various data collection methods. This approach emphasizes understanding the individual context, including social, cultural, and historical factors (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). While case study research offers a deep understanding, it has limitations, including limited generalizability, potential for researcher bias, and resource intensiveness (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2018). We also acknowledge the positioning of the researchers as encultured within the context as their

place of work and therefore carrying innate lenses of interpretation. To mitigate these biases we have triangulated data to identify recurring themes. Triangulation, a core strategy in qualitative research, enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of a study by incorporating data from multiple sources or using multiple methods to study the same phenomenon (Patton, 2015; Stake, 1995). In this bounded case study, data from interviews, observations, and document analysis were systematically compared and cross-verified to develop a comprehensive understanding of the central case and to validate findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process reduces bias by ensuring that conclusions are not based on the interpretation of a single data source, thereby strengthening the overall robustness of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Data collection included an open-ended questionnaire followed by a focus group interview with the project team as well as a photo-essay to provide a historical review of projects and environments from the school.

Setting of the case study

[The City School](#) is an international school located in the heart of Bangkok, Thailand. The campus is distinctive because of its extensive, lush gardens and canopy of trees that create a curated and intentional natural environment in contrast to the very urbanised, concrete streets of central Bangkok. This natural setting is enhanced by contemporary buildings which are distinctive in their white washed walls and glass palette allowing for natural light to stream into classrooms. These modern architectural elements are situated alongside traditional wooden Thai houses that evoke the cultural beauty of Thailand. The school has evolved over 40 years and now educates about 310 children from over 40 nationalities, including Thai nationals. The school implements Canada's Ontario Curriculum and utilizes the Reggio Emilia approach to authentically guide its child-informed, project-based learning, alongside discipline-based subjects like Mathematics and Language Arts. Internationally qualified teachers lead homerooms, supported by teaching assistants. Class sizes, ranging from 12-15 children maximum, facilitate personalized learning and the co-construction of interdisciplinary, bespoke projects. Each year, in every class from K1 (3 years old) to Y6 (11 years old), children co-construct a tailor-made project with their educators. Teaching teams, comprising homeroom teachers, project coordinators, and atelieriste (artist-educators), collaborate with children to design unique projects that investigate theories or phenomena of the world around us. To make thinking visible, children utilize Reggio-identified modes of expression using visual and artistic media, such as graphic representations, 3-D designs in clay or wire, or working with found objects or elements of nature. Project inspiration often stems from the intentional aesthetic environment in the ateliers (studio spaces) or gardens within the school. While the process of thinking and creating is paramount, projects frequently result in an intervention or product that further aesthetically enhances the environment. Examples of these aesthetic responses are presented in the photo-essay throughout this article, such as the Bee Hotel, which a group of children designed and developed following their constructed Bee Cafe - a place for bees to snack and refuel. In preparation for this hotel, the children embarked upon scientific research into how bees rest and rejuvenate, before working alongside the school handymen to bring their plan to life. Another group of children, captivated by the wind — first as a force, then as a friend — designed a playful sculpture of windmills, mirrors, ribbons, and Thai-inspired instruments, blending science, engineering, culture, and imagination, to offer the wind an opportunity to

frolic and play, just like they do. The bee hotel and the wind sculpture are displayed in our campus gardens.



Figure 4. *Outdoor environments of The City School*



Figure 5. *A bee hotel in The City School playground for the bees to come and safely rest, after visiting the bee café.*

'Whispers with the wind', a gift of a playground space for the wind, from a group of Y2 children

Data collection

Three methods of data collection were deployed: a qualitative questionnaire; a focus group discussion; a historical photo-essay of projects and physical spaces in the school. A qualitative questionnaire is a research instrument employing open-ended questions to gather in-depth, subjective data from participants (Flick, 2014). It enables researchers to explore participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences on a specific topic. These questionnaires often include questions that encourage detailed descriptions, narratives, and personal reflections. The objective is to gain a rich understanding of participants' perspectives and to uncover underlying meanings and themes in the data (Guest et al., 2012). An open-ended qualitative questionnaire was distributed to The City School's project team. Responses were collated and analyzed for recurring themes.

Themes identified from the questionnaire were then presented to participants, who were invited to elaborate and reflect further on these ideas while looking at a photo essay of past projects in the school. The live focus group session provided an opportunity for participants

to reflect and connect their ideas with other team members. Focus group interviews serve as a valuable qualitative data collection method in case studies, facilitating a deep exploration of shared experiences and perspectives among participants (Merriam, 2009). Their primary strength lies in fostering dynamic interactions that can reveal collective understandings and nuanced discussions, often beyond what individual interviews might yield (Guest et al., 2012). However, focus groups are limited by potential researcher bias, the influence of dominant voices, and challenges in generalizing findings to broader populations (Flick, 2014).

The authors conducted a review of projects completed by classes in previous years, selecting those that best exemplified the elements of beauty as defined by the participant questionnaire and compiled these into a photo essay. The photo essay was then used to guide the focus group discussion. This archival review allowed for the identification of consistent elements across projects, specifically through the lens of beauty. A limitation of this data collection method is that only projects accessible through archives could be selected, representing the last few years of work rather than the school's entire evolutionary span. We prioritized projects that showcased diverse components to present a variety of interpretations of beauty to the audience, including both cultural and natural foci. As these projects were completed in prior years, the children's voices can be considered 'frozen in time,' and we did not interview the same children to understand their current perceptions of their projects.



Fig. 6. *Exploring such concepts as flow, force, volume and movement; the physics of water, in the atelier of water.*

Reviewing archives as a data source is a valid qualitative research method, enabling in-depth exploration of historical contexts and the evolution of phenomena over time (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2023). This approach provides rich, pre-existing information, mitigating potential reactivity from participants (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). However, limitations include the inability to directly interview or observe past subjects, potentially 'freezing' their voice, and issues with material accessibility, which may not represent the full historical span (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Flick, 2014).

Results

Based on a thematic analysis of the qualitative data, two major themes emerged. The first is that physical and visual beauty impacts the quality of relationships within the school in connection to self, others and the physical environment and secondly that beauty elevates the value of learning experiences through intentionality and depth. These themes are discussed below.

Theme 1: Beauty is relational and enhances the quality of the relationship to self, to each other, and to the natural and curated environment

The data analysis revealed how beauty is transferred into the quality of interactions, fostering empathy, understanding, and a sense of connection with oneself, between individuals, and with the natural world and the built environment of the school. With regard to the quality of the relationship with nature Chiara, one of the project coordinators, noted of the bee hotel in the photo essay that “I also love the relationship between humans and insects and... the fact that the architecture, it still looks like a human house, but the little spaces and the design...accommodates the bees [and] is more tailored towards their needs’. This relational aspect was also noted by some of our parents when Sam recalled a parent saying to her, ‘You’ve given the children this opportunity to see these insects that some people look at as pests, but that you’ve given them the opportunity to turn their mind frame around and see that actually they’re super helpful to the world. We need them in this world and that they are a really beautiful addition to our world.’



Figure 7. *A provocation in the atelier of light and design at The City School*

This relational stance with nature also surfaced with the wind sculpture. Sam recalled that ‘the children noticed the wind because the trees were moving but the trees weren’t moving very much. So they thought that perhaps the wind was a bit bored and they wanted to design

something to allow the wind to have some fun, to play.’ Here a second element of the concept of relational beauty was found when the children considered the needs of the wind, and sought to help the wind, including a mirror in the sculpture as they thought the wind, like them, might want to see itself. This idea of self interacting with something beautiful resonated also in responses to the questionnaire. When asked to define beauty one participant responded ‘Beauty is respect. When we truly respect something, we naturally seek to present, preserve and share it in a way that reflects its beauty. When we respect a person, we recognize their beauty.’ Through the wind sculpture the children gave respect to the wind and were able to think about how the wind might want to be in relation to itself and they also enhanced the beauty of the gardens by creating a sculpture.

A third element to this Project was the beauty of relationships with others. Our Atelierista Mike focused on human relationships when he noticed the photo of the allied staff helping make the wind sculpture with the children. He noted that ‘the maintenance staff are working with [the children]. I think of that in terms of beautiful relationships’. These three aspects of relational beauty - with self, others and the environment - created an upward spiral of purpose, fulfilment, and respect for oneself, each other and the work that we do in the setting of our school. As one of the participants wrote, ‘beauty is a process filled with good intentions that hits your soul and sparks inspiration, wonder and/or gratitude. It's a 'cause & effect' relationship’.

Theme 2: Beauty is experiential and elevates learning experiences through intentionality and depth

This theme emphasizes how beauty is intrinsically linked to the value placed on learning, particularly when it is authentic, meaningful, and interdisciplinary, going beyond mere skill acquisition. This theme identifies depth and intention as an underlying current that permeates all aspects of beauty, from deliberate design choices to the purposeful structuring of learning experiences, to the time and care taken in creating bespoke documentation of the projects. All of which lead to more elaborated understandings.



Figure 8. *The Hatchery (The City School library)* Figure 9. *A classroom space at The City School*

For the children, the time and effort taken to facilitate these learning experiences matters greatly. When children are presented with beautiful materials, a beautiful space, beautiful documentation - beautiful learning environments in general - they realise the significance of these things, and the importance of their education as a whole. They see that their educators have carefully thought out each aspect of their environment and their learning journey, they begin to see their education as a precious thing, worthy of care, time and respect. In this way children feel seen, honoured and inspired to contribute their voices. One survey response noted 'It is evident in the celebration of the PROCESS of learning that is displayed all over the school in complete respect of children's work in all of its aspects (graphics, ideas, writing, photographs, thoughts, evolution)'. While another participant added 'Beauty nurtures a sense of respect for the process and sparks a state of heightened appreciation and inspiration that can only benefit the acquisition of new knowledge. If your environment is filled with beauty, it creates an atmosphere in which it feels like you are already more open and receptive to learning and welcoming new knowledge'.



Figure. 10.

The City School consists of both traditional Thai buildings and modern purpose-built spaces. The time and effort it takes to create beautiful environments, learning experiences and documentation was acknowledged in the focus group. Mike stated, 'There's a reason we have project meetings regularly. There's a reason we have chats on the go all the time. That you're being intentional about the questions you ask, the situation you put children into, the way you group them, which children you're putting together intentionally to, foster the right kind of impact you want in a beautiful way'. This statement illustrates the deliberate time, care, and collaborative effort that is made by the project team working together with the classroom teachers to create intentional materials, provocations, questions, documentation and spaces. With time being in short supply in many schools this is not an element to be overlooked. At The City School, the project team works alongside classroom teachers so that there is the capacity to create and curate beautiful projects and environments. It reflects the inherent values of the school over decades - to dedicate the resources, funds, staff, time and effort to be aesthetic in all that we do - because we see a tangible benefit to the lived experiences of educators and children.

Discussion

The above findings suggest that integrating aesthetics into educational design and practice can profoundly influence learning environments. By prioritizing beauty, schools can cultivate spaces that not only foster deeper relationships among individuals and with the environment but also significantly enhance the value and depth of learning experiences. This approach moves beyond a purely functional view of education. It affirms the intrinsic worth of each learner and promotes a more holistic, human-centered pedagogical model. Human centred theorists such as Carl Rogers valued 'treating the individual with respect and reverence' (Shepherd, 2024, p.33), and provide a theoretical context for the promotion of beauty in schools. At The City School, this theory is seen in practice, when projects, spaces and relationships are bespoke, honoring the uniqueness of each learner and each project. By situating beauty as a relational and experiential practice within schools we reflect the humanity of each learner thereby deinstitutionalizing education. Curating beautiful projects and environments affirms for each child that they matter, and that they are connected to self,

others and the environment. Through depth and intentionality of experiences beauty becomes an enticement for the pursuit of excellence. It tells children their work matters and it is worth doing well for self and others. Beauty unifies a community of learners. It makes tangible our relationships and the value of our learning experiences. Beauty elevates our community to our fullest potential.



Figure 11. *The local Thai culture is honoured throughout The City School environment*

This qualitative case study possesses inherent limitations regarding generalizability. While it offers rich insights into the unique context of The City School, the findings may not be directly transferable to other educational settings with different values or socio-cultural or economic considerations. Future research should explore the systematic implementation of aesthetic principles in diverse educational contexts, particularly in low-income or marginalized communities, to understand how aesthetics might mitigate or exacerbate educational inequalities. Further quantitative and mixed-methods research could also investigate the long-term impact of aesthetic interventions on student well-being, engagement, and academic outcomes, providing more comprehensive evidence for the broader adoption of beauty as a vital component in educational practice.



Figure 12. *The atelier of reflection offers a space for children to engage with both cognitive and*

Conclusion

In conclusion, the influence of beauty within an educational setting can be profound. It fosters deeper connections to oneself, others, and the environment, enriching the relational aspects of learning. Furthermore, beauty elevates the quality of learning by instilling depth and intentionality in children's endeavors and to the presentation of their work. The dedicated investment of educators' time, effort, and resources into creating aesthetic provocations, guiding visually rich learning experiences and designing tailored documentation to honor children's educational journeys enhances the experience of being, relating, and learning within a school environment for both children and educators. When children's work is presented aesthetically and thoughtfully - set within a beautiful campus - it conveys the value and significance of our work. Ultimately, the school environment transforms into a dynamic space of beautifully curated experiences, thereby vivifying new thoughts, ideas, and theories through an aesthetic amplification of being and learning. When beauty becomes a right, not a reward, schools are transformed — not only into places of learning, but places of becoming.



Figure 13.

The City School utilises graphic representations created by the children.

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