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Analysis of Landscape Teaching in the Educational Programme in the Tunisian Primary Schools

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Abstract:

The present work is an attempt at analyzing and evaluating landscape teaching as it is treated in the official documents of primary schools in Tunisia. We will start by checking out the content and objectives of landscape teaching and then we will study the degree of awareness and the assimilative capacity of the young learner concerning landscapes. The work methodology starts by analyzing the content of the educational programme and the primary school textbooks then moves on to collect data from questionnaires given to pupils. The obtained results are a clear indication that the official programme, though containing a certain number of positive facts that can no doubt help the young learner grasp the essence of landscapes,

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has nonetheless an obvious deficiency as to the manner of conveying the concept of landscapes.

Key words: landscape, belonging, perception, comprehending, educational programmes, textbooks, landscape education.

The objective of the present study is to analyze and evaluate landscape teaching in the primary school system of Tunisia. We shall, then, endeavour to answer the following question: "how is the concept of landscape dealt with in the Tunisian basic education?"

To answer that question, let us assume that "the educational programme allows only an incomplete approach to the notion of landscape" and that that approach "is due both to a pedagogical dysfunction when transmitting knowledge and to a certain number of outside factors that influence the acquisition of transmitted ideas."

In order to verify said assumption, we adopted a methodology that is based on a thorough study of the content of the educational programme, on a study of the way knowledge is transmitted by the textbooks and on fieldwork so as to determine the degree of assimilation of the transmitted knowledge. The results obtained are as follows:

The educational programme: tools for apprehending landscape

The educational programme that aims to introduce the idea of landscape to pupils has put in place a certain number of units that focus on this new idea. Due to the cross-curricular teaching and the complex idea of landscape, the official documents have opted to progressively introduce the different aspects of this concept into the young minds.

We base the present research on the theory of development stages devised by Jean Piaget. According to

Piaget, "The origin of human thinking is not born of mere sensation; it is not an innate element either. It is gradually formed when the individual, and in particular the child, comes into contact with the world."

We need, then, to take into consideration the knowledge gained by the learner in connection with their surroundings. However, one has to keep in mind that a lot of those competences and comprehending capacities are mostly due to the school's teachings. To that end, Learning and in particular landscape teaching was highlighted in this paper.

The Piagetian theory breaks up human development into four successive stages, based on the idea that intellectual growth is a continuous process.

The four stages of development described by Piaget are as follows:

1. Sensorimotor development stage: from birth to age 2. During this period, the child's intelligence is built thanks to its contact with its environment via sensation and objects manipulation.
2. Preoperational development stage: it starts at age 2 and lasts up to the age of 6 or 7. During this period, the child becomes capable of thinking symbolically, of picturing things based on words and symbols.
   This stage is about mastering the idea of space and time besides symbolic thinking. The child is still unable to manipulate abstract concepts. On the other hand, he/she is more at home in concrete physical situations.
   This is a particularly interesting stage for our study as it sheds light on the age group of the pupils of the 1st and 2nd year of basic education.
3. Concrete operational stage: it ranges from 6 and 7-year olds to 11 and 12-year olds. The children are then capable of conceptualizing and of making logical reasoning. Their thoughts are more socialized and they

are now able to converse. They reason in a concrete manner drawing on their own experience.

This is the stage we shall most focus on for it concerns the pupils of the 2nd form onward till the 6th form of basic education.

4. Formal operational stage: 11 to adulthood. This period is basically about logic and abstract thinking and a logical reasoning using hypotheses and deductions.

Thus, landscape teaching starts at the first level, precisely at the 2nd year of primary school through the study of trees and the concept of gardens. During that period, the learner, as already explained, is at the preoperational stage. They are then able to tackle concrete physical situations and to comprehend entities of simple landscapes. At this level of their studies, the pupils acquire scientific competences (role of the urban tree, etc.) which will later help them grasp the meaning of much more complex ideas.

Landscape, as a field of study, effectively starts only at the 5th year of primary school, when the schoolchild is capable of understanding ideas that call for their sense of observation, their sensitivity and their capacity to decode a given landscape. In other words, when the learner reaches the stage of concrete operations.

The most recurrent types of landscapes in the educational programme are the rural landscape and the urban landscape. The child has, then, a reasonably rich vocabulary pertaining to those archetypal landscapes that helps them in their sensitive reading.

We can easily conclude then that the teaching of the concept of landscape in the educational programme starts with scientific notions to finally encompass larger fields: geography, culture, arts, etc.

School textbooks at the service of landscape teaching

The content of the school textbooks of the three levels of basic education is in conformity with the objectives set by the official educational programmes. Those programmes offer an attractive and captivating aspect by presenting the pupils with texts and richly coloured pictures with funny characters often taken from known cartoons. The textbooks follow the same logic, that of the educational programme concerning the initiation of the concept of landscape to schoolchildren. In other words, teaching that concept implicitly starts during the 2nd year of primary school through studies of trees, gardens and green spaces.

At this level, landscape is presented only as a special framework of a given situation or as a background of a scene to be studied.

However, in the 5th year of primary school, the concept of landscape is introduced explicitly. At this level, the textbooks become more realistic. Even the pictures are drawn from real life situations in order to give teaching a concrete aspect. We have to analyze those pictures representing a given landscape and study their components and the differences existing compared to other types of landscapes. The obvious question is: "Can this pedagogy create 'fledgling landscapists', children sensitive to the landscape concept?"

Perception of the landscape between learning and belonging

In order to answer the above question, an evaluation was necessary to verify the level of sensitivity of the schoolchildren to the concept of landscape. That evaluation was made in two separate schools, one in Chott-Meriem, an agricultural community and the other in the very heart of Sousse City, in order to check how schoolchildren from different surroundings but with equitable education react to a given landscape.

The results of the evaluation clearly show that rural and urban children react differently to the three types of landscapes they were shown: urban, rural and natural.

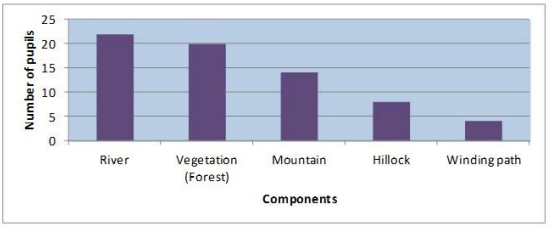

Chart 1: components of a natural landscape noticed by pupils from rural areas

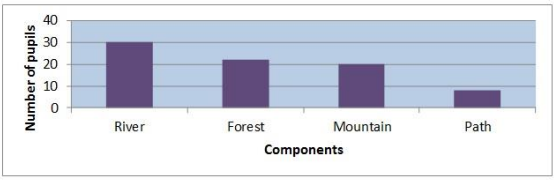

Chart 2: components of a natural landscape noticed by pupils from urban areas.

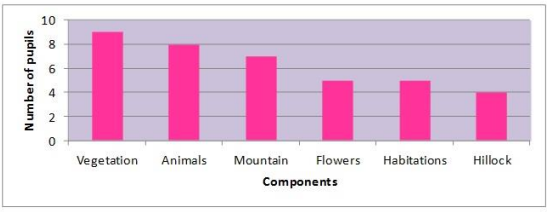

Chart 3: components of a natural landscape imagined by pupils from rural areas.

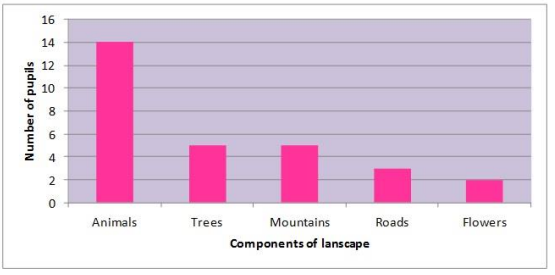

Chart 4: components of a natural landscape imagined by pupils from urban areas.

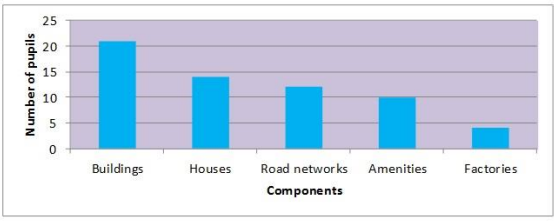

Chart 5: components of an urban landscape noticed by pupils from rural areas.

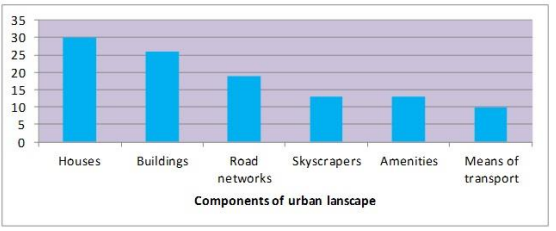

Chart 6: components of an urban landscape noticed by pupils from urban areas.

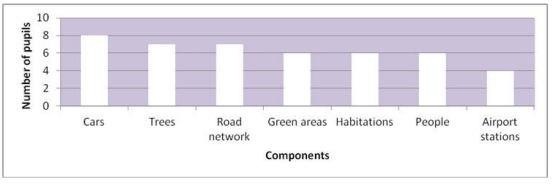

Chart 7: components of an urban landscape imagined by pupils from rural areas.

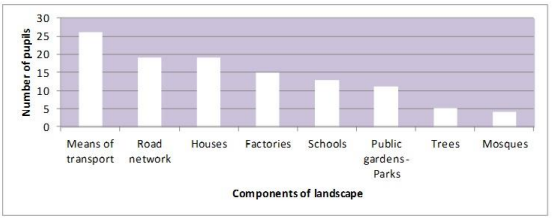

Chart 8: components of an urban landscape imagined by pupils from urban areas.

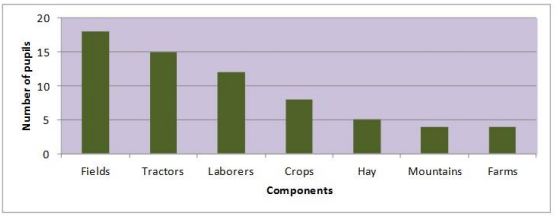

Chart 9: components of a rural landscape noticed by pupils from urban areas.

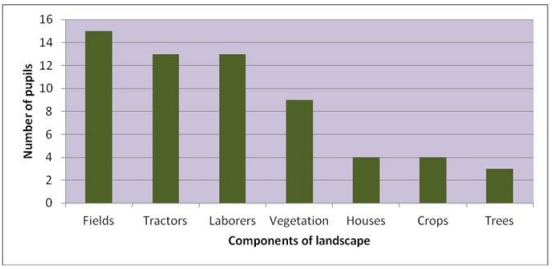

Chart 10: components of a rural landscape noticed by pupils from urban areas.

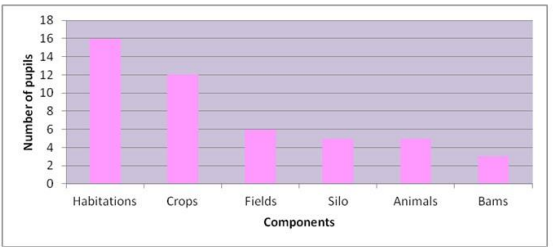

Chart 11: components of a rural landscape imagined by pupils from urban areas.

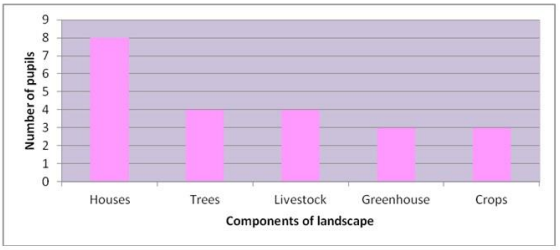

Chart 12: components of a rural landscape imagined by pupils from urban areas.

Results of the study carried out on young learners who were given a questionnaire show that the Chott-Meriem pupil, that is the one from a rural surroundings, has a more elaborate and sensitive reading of the three types of landscapes than the pupil from the Sousse school who lives in an urban area.

This is a clear indication that the natural landscape, much similar to the rural landscape in which he/she lives in, day in day out, does not leave them unmoved. On the contrary, this pupil finds it easier to comprehend than the city pupil. His/her perception of the urban landscape is also fairly

elaborate as he/she often comes in contact with that type of landscape to which he/she, nonetheless, attributes a certain judgment that is fuelled by a feeling of ignorance and estrangement.

On the other hand, the pupils from the Sisters' school produces a rather well elaborated analysis of the urban landscape but finds it difficult to fully comprehend the rural and natural landscape and is found wanting when it comes to differentiate between them. This is easily explained by the fact that those pupils do not get many opportunities to come in contact with those types of landscapes, hence the absence of a mental image that would incite the perception of that landscape.

It is obvious, then, that the educational programme of basic education has its limits as to introducing the notion of landscape to schoolchildren. This is due either to a flaw in the educational programme and/or to outside factors that prevent a perfect understanding of landscapes.

Following the research and the evaluation process, we have noticed certain flaws in the educational programme:

1. The methodology used by the educational programme is based on a course that relies on texts, pictures and photos. The study of those pictures is a mere systematic listing of the geographic components of the studied space but the very essence of the concept of landscape lies in the interrelation between child and space. Studying frozen images is the complete opposite of that exchange logic.
2. Reading a landscape from a photo is not a good way to approach space in a sensitive manner but rather strengthens the feeling of detachment and indifference towards the landscape that is being studied.
3. Studying the landscape rhymes with living the space, observing it, being there, exchanging feelings and establishing a relationship with it. Landscape teaching

as it is treated by the educational programme does not provide such contact with any landscape.

The good assimilation of the notion of landscape is further hindered by the time issue that is the number of hours allotted to it. In fact, landscape is a complex notion that needs an important amount of time for it to be well understood by the pupil. Sadly, the educational programme does not take such a complexity into consideration and only provides one hour per week for the teaching of landscapes.

Trying to better understand the reasons of the educational programme's failure, we cannot help thinking again of the interrelation between observer and space, a primordial condition to the understanding of landscape.

Those findings lead us to assert that the lack of organized outings within the educational system, needed to complement the theoretical ideas acquired in the classroom is yet another reason of the limitation of landscape teaching. Those outings would help the pupils get familiar with the different types of landscapes, enrich their vocabulary and help complete a mental image of a visited place.

Besides the lack of educational outings and to further compound matters, we notice that the pupils are deprived of practical training areas that would enable them to put in practice all their gardening and agricultural skills and be in direct contact with nature. However, the difficulty that pupils encounter when trying to study a landscape also depends on factors that are external to basic education.

It is worth mentioning that primary education is regarded as the "seed" of knowledge which finds its provision in the stratum in which it is implanted: family, living conditions, society, etc.

When the notions are of a sensitive nature, education offers the pupils new information but the elements that concern their living conditions, personal experiences, …. shape up their

perception of the landscape. That is to say that the perception of the landscape cannot be objective and the child cannot help but make judgment connotations.

When studying a landscape, that judgment, influenced by personal experience, can be positive, motivated by a feeling of belonging.

Simply put, the city child sees the town as the symbol of modernity, comfort and luxury whereas the country child believes that the countryside is synonym of fresh air, greenery and serenity.

However, that judgment can also be negative, stemming from a sense of not belonging because ignorance further strengthens the retreat towards a given landscape.

The city child, for example, thinks that the rural area embodies the absence of modernity, comfort and hygiene while the country child thinks that urban rhymes with pollution, overpopulation and noise disturbance.

As a result, teaching schoolchildren the concept of landscape and how to make a sensitive reading does not depend solely on the educational programme but also on a certain number of external factors that influence that perception.

Thus we have verified the above hypothesis which asserts that the educational programme presents certain weaknesses as to making the schoolchildren aware of the importance of landscape. Said weakness is due both to certain faults in the educational system and to a number of external factors that condition a good understanding of the transmitted ideas.

Now, are there any other reasons that stop the child from understanding landscapes in a sensitive manner? Have the teachers themselves followed a proper training that would enable them to transmit knowledge about landscape?

Is education reserved for the sensitive world such as plastic arts or graphic and artistic communications sufficiently developed in the basic education?

Does the obvious misunderstanding of the notions of landscape, environment, ecology and nature in the educational programme as well as in the textbooks and even in the teacher's speech not contribute to the weakness of the teaching of landscape in the primary schools? Etc.

The reason for those questions is simply to highlight the complexity of the treated subject. Those questions simply serve as guidelines to further researches.

When preparing the present work, our ambition was not to offer solutions to the issue of landscape teaching in the primary schools of Tunisia but rather to attempt to open "doors" to potential studies that aim to bring changes to the official programmes in order to create a future society that is aware of its landscape riches and which strives to protect its environment and nature as a whole because today's children are tomorrow's decision makers.

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