

RESEARCH ARTICLES

# Here, There, and Elsewhere: Ethnicity, Identity, and Global Orientation at an Indian International School in Singapore

Emma Grimley<sup>1</sup><sup>a</sup>, Orlando Woods<sup>1</sup><sup>b</sup>, Lily Kong<sup>2</sup><sup>c</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of Integrative Studies, Singapore Management University, <sup>2</sup> School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University

Keywords: international education, ethnically affiliated schools, placemaking, mobility, placelessness

<https://doi.org/10.24043/001c.126671>

---

## Folk, Knowledge, Place

Vol. 1, Issue 2, 2024

---

International schools are somewhat ‘place-less’ in that their denationalised educational systems and nationally diverse student bodies are typically removed from the physical context in which each school is located. However, this placeless internationalism is complicated by international schools that also affiliate themselves with a national system or enrol a significant number of students who aspire to remain in the ‘host’ country. This paper develops the example of the Global Indian International School in Singapore to illustrate how the feeling of place is impacted by its dual orientations as both ‘Global’ and ‘Indian’. The school attempts to (re)create an Indian schooling environment in Singapore, cultivate a sense of Indian identity, and prepare students for internationally mobile futures. Drawing on qualitative interviews conducted with students and teachers at the Global Indian International School in Singapore, we explore placemaking practices in educational spaces and consider how they are impacted by the potentially conflicting goals of grounding students in their ethnic or cultural identities whilst simultaneously equipping them for internationally-oriented futures.

### Introduction

When asked why her parents chose for her to attend the Global Indian International School (GIIS) in Singapore, Saira had an immediate and succinct answer: “because they’re Indian. They would want some Indian stuff to be taught to me as well, about the history and the culture (...) [they thought it would be] similar to what I could have learnt in India.” Although she was studying in Singapore, her parents sought to replicate the learning environment and content that they would have expected her to be exposed to if she was schooled in India. This made GIIS a more attractive option than a traditional international school that may be more likely to emphasise its denationalized environment and curriculum (Resnik, 2012). Saira’s parents’ desire for her to be educated in an Indian environment raises

---

a emmagrimley@smu.edu.sg; corresponding author

b orlandowoods@smu.edu.sg

c lilykong@smu.edu.sg

important questions concerning the manifestations and co-constructions of place and identity in educational spaces, especially in international schools. Schools “are a key site for an array of interventions intended to shape the knowledge, identities and behaviours of children” (Collins & Coleman, 2008, p. 288), and are presumed to have significant lasting influence on the lives of their pupils. The process of learning becomes more complex in situations of global childhood mobility, where international schooling is also widely seen as a process of ‘becoming global,’ equipping children with the social and cultural capital needed to become internationally mobile adults (Suresh Babu & Mahajan, 2020; Weenink, 2008). This paper investigates the placemaking practices of GIIS in Singapore, and how the sense of place cultivated by its administration, teachers, and students is complicated by its dual orientation as both global and Indian.

International schools are largely associated with denationalized educational environments and curriculums. Their popularity has been increasing worldwide due to their purported globally oriented outlook and emphasis on adaptable skills (Resnik, 2012). The growing prevalence of international education has led some scholars to postulate the role of these programs in cultivating a transnational elite class (Brown & Lauder, 2009). Especially in situations where the children attending international schools are separated from the local community through linguistic or cultural barriers, these schools have also been criticized as promoting inward-facing expatriate social enclaves that practice an “our-kind-of-people cosmopolitanism” (Van Bochove & Engbersen, 2015, p. 297). Despite their emphasis on cultural openness, international schools and their associated expatriate networks can insulate students (and other school stakeholders, like teachers) from the surrounding environment, leading to patterns of socio-spatial exclusion (Kong et al., 2022). International schools are nodes in a network of spaces of international education and mobility, yet through their positioning as denationalised spaces they often strive to produce a sense of global citizenship (Molz, 2017) rather than a sense of allegiance to a particular national or cultural identity. Alongside traditional international schools and their focus on global citizenship, there has also been a growing prevalence of non-traditional international schools. Non-traditional schools may cater to either local populations aspiring to international futures, or specific groups within expatriate communities who seek an education like that found back home. These schools can sometimes create a sort of ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ (Wright et al., 2022) where national identity is linked to global orientation. The intertwining of global citizenship and particular ideals of national or ethnic identity in non-traditional international schools reveals how “neither ‘international’ nor ‘global’ are monolithic entities” (Suresh Babu & Mahajan, 2020, p. 3) and can co-exist alongside nationalist identities.

Singapore has long been an expatriate hub in (Southeast) Asia (Yeoh, 2006), and as a result has over fifty international schools that cater to the children of these mobile professionals. Most of these schools can be

viewed as traditional international schools in that they offer a curriculum like the International Baccalaureate (IB), Cambridge-IGCSE, or the American Advanced Placement (AP). Other than the intentionally globalised IB, these programs may have a national association, but schools which offer these curriculums can still be traditional as they are marketed as internationally accepted curriculums for post-secondary education and attract students from a variety of backgrounds. To cater to Singapore's diverse expatriate population, schools have also emerged that target specific national demographics. There are multiple Indian schools, which offer the Indian Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) or Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) curriculum, often alongside an international option. These schools are non-traditional as their teachers, administrators, and students are predominantly (although not exclusively) of Indian origin regardless of the curriculum stream chosen. Although there is a complex multiplicity of cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity contained under the umbrella of Indian, being Indian is nevertheless an identity category that can be used to unify an internally heterogeneous population. Through our focus on GIIS, a non-traditional school with a particular ethno-cultural orientation associated with national identity, this paper complicates the amorphous international placement of the international school, revealing the careful balancing of the various places that the school attempts to create, replicate, and aspire towards.

This paper draws on qualitative interviews conducted with students and teachers at GIIS to explore the everyday interactions that constitute the learning of identity for students at international schools. Following Massey's influential conceptualisation of place as "articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings" (1994, p. 154), we explore the multiple places contained within an international school with an overt ethno-cultural orientation. The student body at GIIS is positioned between three distinct registers of place – physical, emotional, and aspirational – which are produced and articulated through the day-to-day operations of the school, where the aspirations and affiliations of teachers, administrators, students, and parents come into intimate contact and sometimes conflict. The school is physically located in Singapore, and many students may wish to remain in Singapore for their university education or return to live there after completing their degrees. Singapore is therefore conceived as both a destination and a stepping stone for further migration. Further, as an international school, GIIS also emplaces students in an aspirational future trajectory of participation in global flows of education and work. Finally, as an Indian school GIIS actively cultivates a connection to India through festive celebrations which hope to generate and reaffirm ethnic identity in the diaspora (Banerji, 2019). These placings simultaneously locate students here, there, and elsewhere in ways that render India (or the idea of it) a tangible

place on which to build their conceptions of self and encourage them to imagine themselves as already implicated in global currents of elite mobility that are envisioned to define their futures.

### **(Non-)Place, International Mobility, and Places of Learning**

Ideas of place, non-place, and placelessness are not simply or easily defined, and often exist as uneasy coalitions of each other. Nevertheless, a sense of place (or its absence) is a key determinant in how people navigate and understand their worlds. There is, therefore, an important relationship between the process of education and its associated locales in establishing and understanding a sense of place. Place influences education, and yet the process of learning can also help to constitute a sense of place. This is of particular relevance in the context of international schools and the expatriate flows of mobility that they service, as well as the aspirations of future mobility they cultivate. International education involves a multiplicity of places, but may also involve a sense of placelessness, of lack of connection to any particular place.

### **Identity Formation in Places and Non-Places**

A sense of place is created by individuals' understanding of their relationship and connection to a location "through complicities of language, local references, [and] the unformulated rules of living know-how" (Augé, 1992/1995, p. 101). It can be established through the "functional pattern of our lives" (Tuan, 1979, p. 418) as people navigate the nodes and established paths that make up their everyday routines. Place is therefore personal. Although a place may have a character of its own, it does not have a "seamless, coherent identity, a single sense of place that everyone shares" (Massey, 1994, p. 153). Instead, place is constituted by a "particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" (Massey, 1994, p. 154). Place is often understood as based on connections to personal or group identity, relations, and history, yet there has been a growth of physical locations that do not generate these connections, such as international airports, supermarket chains, and motorways. Anthropologist Marc Augé (1992/1995) coined the term "non-place" as a way of interpreting these functionalist locales of global modernity and how societies adapt to these changes. Non-places create an environment of "solitary contractuality" (Augé, 1992/1995, p. 94). A non-place "demands participation by generating a feeling of contractual reciprocity, not a feeling of free choice" (Gregory, 2011, p. 245). Rather than interacting with other individuals, someone in a non-place primarily interacts with institutions or entities such as a government body, an airline, or a corporation. Yet non-places are still implicated in identity formation as they temporarily create a shared, functional identity within the confines of the non-place. Even as someone in a non-place is "relieved of his [*sic*] usual determinants," they may experience a sense of freedom as they become "no more than what he does or experiences

in the role of passenger, customer, or driver” (Augé, 1992/1995, p. 103). Place and non-place exist in a state of opposition and attraction – the possibility of non-place is never entirely absent from place.

The relationship between sense of place (or lack thereof) and the practice of education in spaces like schools has largely been studied from the perspectives of environmental psychology and place-based education. Environmental psychology views sense of place as a factor on people’s wellbeing in certain spaces and evaluates the connection between physical environment and identity (Devine-Wright & Clayton, 2010). In his thesis on teachers at rural Australian primary schools, Hughes (2014) found that teachers employ placemaking practices to facilitate their own teaching styles and connection to their workplace, but also envision a positive place relationship in the classroom as a key component of their students’ learning journeys that will enable them to grow into conscientious, confident citizens. Place-based education is an “educational approach dedicated to instilling place-consciousness and, correspondingly, pro-ecological attitudes and behaviours, by rooting education within the local environment” (Bertling, 2018, p. 2). Bertling (2018) discusses how this approach must adapt to address the challenges posed by the subversion and reconfiguration of socio-spatial relationships with the rise of non-places. Educating students to have a sense of place is to allow them to “see themselves as part of a continuous line from the past to the present,” which in turns allows them to “visualize and value their role in the future” (Sanger, 1997, p. 5). In this case, a sense of place is viewed to be acquired through intimate engagement with the history, natural processes and community of the place that they live. This is contrasted against the detachment seen to be produced by modern schooling, which constructs individuals as rational independent actors and prioritizes abstract, general knowledge from textbooks over local wisdom (Sanger, 1997).

An interesting case of the explicit linking of education and non-places can be found in Gregory’s (2009) thesis on domestic non-places. He argues for the suburban high school to be understood an emblematic non-place, where civil relationships between large groups of teenagers are only made possible through the transformation of identity into individualism facilitated by the non-place environment of the school. For Gregory, the non-place high school promotes individualism but “offers no path through the experimentation towards identity. A non-place cannot offer a clarification of our identity” (Gregory, 2009, p. 43). Through their disconnect from identity, relations, and history, the non-place “drops the ‘me’ and ‘you’” and operates only with “disconnected, isolated individuals not identities” (p. 60). However, Gregory’s argument is limited by his empirical focus on the prototypical North American suburban public high school. Public schools that follow a national curriculum are concerned with promoting a civil consciousness and the responsibilities and knowledge associated with citizenship, but they may be less concerned with the cultivation of a particular kind of personal identity beyond the national affiliation. Although they may strive to cultivate generic

characteristics such as leadership, empathy, or at the very least rote knowledge, there is not a focus on individual identity. In comparison, the growth of international education, whether in international schools or internationally oriented curriculums like the International Baccalaureate (IB), illustrates a concern with cultivating a certain kind of person: these schools, in their marketing and mission, seek to create internationally oriented students equipped for globally mobile lives. In other words, students should learn to ‘feel global’ (Molz, 2017). This has ramifications on the sense of place in the school, as it attempts to construct the global as a single place on which to base their schooling. But each pupil is inhabiting their own “articulated [moment] of social relations” (Massey, 1994, p. 154), influenced by not only their school environment but that of their family, their social networks, and the previous places they have lived. For students, the amorphous globalised environment of the international school is not placeless, or a non-place, but rather a multiplicity of emplacements that often pull against one another.

### **Placeless Internationalism and Sticky Mobility**

The intersection of education and place is of relevance due to the growing prevalence of internationalised education. Students may be being educated to be globally oriented in the future, but through their daily practices they are also firmly situated in the here and now. They are students at a particular school, from particular families, and experiencing particular circumstances both within and outside of school as they navigate the process of growing up. It is here that the multiple registers of place come into fruition, yet also where placelessness haunts. No one wants to be entirely placeless, yet to completely embrace their potential mobile futures they must surrender to a relentless exposure to a stream of Augé’s non-places (1992/1995). In the words of Yi-Fu Tuan, “to be always on the move is, of course, to lose place, to be placeless and have, instead, merely scenes and images” (1979, p. 411). This thinking associates a sense of place with familiarity, intimacy, and prolonged physical presence, contrasted to the brief, shallow understanding of locations experienced while in motion. Global mobility is often described using metaphors of fluidity and speed (Costas, 2013), and modernity itself can be seen as ‘liquid’ (Bauman, 2000). This is especially relevant for those in the global knowledge economy, whose privileged mode of migration often carries a sense of excitement and exhilaration - those who move often and by choice can be seen as “tied to a shooting star” (Walsh, 2006, p. 268) Although these individuals of course may face challenges of visa regimes or familial tensions related to migration, they are largely seen to navigate the process of migration with ease.

This type of mobility can also lead to the actual localities of their lives becoming less important, as they may move in expatriate “bubbles” (Cranston & Lloyd, 2019, p. 479) or socialise with people of similar backgrounds to practise an “our-kind-of-people cosmopolitanism” (Van Bochove & Engbersen, 2015, p. 297). There is a sense of floating above the localities in which they live. This may be especially pronounced for children of

these professionals who are attending traditional international schools, as the environment of the school marks a firm boundary between their lives and the ‘locals’ (Kong et al., 2022), as well as promoting the sort of easy movement between schools where the actual location does not matter. A child going to an English-speaking international school in Cambodia could easily transfer to one in Egypt if their parent’s career required it, and although the social environment would change the fundamentals of the school would not. By necessity of catering to this potential for movement, traditional international schools attempt to cultivate a sort of amorphous, placeless internationalism that prioritises allegiance to a global sense of community that transcends national boundaries (Sander, 2016). Yet the formation and experience of this community is nevertheless individual, as “factors such as cultural background, nationality, ‘race’ and class do not become irrelevant, instead they continue to shape the subjectivities of those with a transnational upbringing” (Tanu, 2015, p. 26). Experiences of mobility become integrated within the personal narrative of internationally mobile children, but this mobility is composed of experiences occurring within particular schools.

The situations and environments encountered as a child or young person may be recalled with surprising intensity later in life or hold an outsized importance on the formation of identity relative to the time-passed (Bartlett, 1991). This makes global mobility amongst young people a particularly interesting focus, especially for studies of place and identity. There has been increasing attention on how despite prominent metaphors of smoothness and flow, global mobility can nevertheless be “sticky” (Costas, 2013), “striated” (Lysgård & Rye, 2017), or can result in feeling “stuck” (Cangia, 2020). These studies have primarily focused on adults. But young people are known to imbue immense richness in unremarkable spaces, forming meaningful connections with the mundane spaces of their everyday lives (Matthews et al., 1998). It is in these connections and attachments that a general place becomes transformed into a place of personal meaning (Knez, 2014). Even for those who remain in motion throughout their lives, they still have moments of pause. These pauses will often “involve place-making” in these locations which can “generat[e] imaginaries of roots and return, senses of place, and belonging” (Salazar, 2023, p. 585). Therefore, despite potential physical mobility between countries, internationally mobile children can become ‘stuck’ or grounded in the important places of their past as they navigate the complexities of becoming globally oriented adults. This dichotomy of motion and stickiness is clear in the aspirations of ethnically-affiliated international schools as they attempt to create a sense of cultural identity amongst their students while also preparing them for a life of mobility; they strive to create stickiness, while also serving as a launching pad for global, fluid aspirations.

## Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative interviews conducted with 28 students and 17 teachers at the Global Indian International School (GIIS) in Singapore. We are grateful for the school's collaboration in allowing us to distribute our call for respondents amongst students, and their help in arranging interviews with teachers and staff members. To participate in the project, students had to self-identify as Indian, whether that meant they held an Indian passport or were of Indian ethnicity and holding a different passport. These interviews were conducted as part of a larger project investigating Indian international students' sense of belonging in Singapore, and how different educational spaces may impact that sense of belonging. The larger corpus of interviews also includes students at traditional international schools, although they are excluded from this analysis as we sought to build a case study of the multiple emplacements of GIIS specifically. The interview protocol was approved by Singapore Management University's Institutional Review Board. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. The interviews followed a base set of questions intended to get participants talking about their family backgrounds, migration histories, and experiences of Singapore. For example, students were asked about where else they had lived before coming to Singapore, what activities they were involved in both inside and outside of school, and what types of places they and their friends like to go to for fun. Student participants were between the ages of 14 and 18, so care was taken to make the interview environment relaxed and welcoming in order to minimise their potential worries about speaking to adult interviewers. One way in which this was done was arranging for students to be interviewed in pairs or small groups. The group interview setting allowed for the students to respond to each other's points or share anecdotes that they had experienced together. Importantly, this allowed for the students to guide the direction of the interview through their casual conversation, elevating their voice in the research. Teachers were interviewed one-on-one, and although the base set of questions focused on their observations of their students, we often found ourselves discussing their personal journeys and aspirations for their own children. There was no ethnicity or nationality requirement for teachers and staff members, but apart from two language teachers from European Union countries, all held Indian passports, reflecting the general staff make-up of GIIS. The semi-structured nature of the interviews was vital as it allowed for interviewers to explore emergent themes and new angles of inquiry if prompted by an unexpected or particularly evocative response.

Interviews lasted between 30 to 90 minutes and were recorded with participant consent. They were then transcribed and anonymized as soon as possible upon completion. As the project progressed, the team identified preliminary themes in the transcripts through manual coding. This iterative process of theme identification helped to shape the project as each interview was guided by the emergent themes of the ones before. In particular, the articulation of GIIS as creating a different sense of place than traditional



international schools emerged through discussions with students who compared their school to others in Singapore even when the interviewer did not prompt them to do so. This feeling of difference was then followed up in further interviews with students and staff members.

### **Ethnicity, Identity, and Global Orientation**

GIIS was founded in 2002, with the intention of catering to a growing number of Indian expatriate families moving to Singapore. Accordingly, the school retains a predominantly Indian student body. As of 2024, it offers the CBSE, Cambridge-IGCSE, and IB curriculums for students from kindergarten to Grade 12. There are three registers of place in play at GIIS: physical, emotional, and aspirational. These are produced and articulated through the everyday interactions of students and teachers, emplacing them simultaneously here, there, and elsewhere. In the section that follows, we illustrate how these three registers are developed and contested. Singapore is important as a grounding point for important relationships in teenage lives; it is where the everyday living of education and becoming is carried out. India is rendered as a place in which to root students' identities through cultural celebrations and tacit knowledge transfers from Indian classmates and teachers. Finally, the appeal of a globalised, interconnected world is enacted through the cultivation of a global outlook and made tenable through the aspirational benefits of an international education. However, the tensions between a meaningful ethnic identity and a truly global orientation are revealed through the disparate conceptions of becoming a 'global Indian.'

#### **Here: Singapore**

When catering to expatriate communities, international schools form part of an enclaved experience that mediates exposure to local cultures, to the extent that a young person attending an international school who has lived most of their life in a city may still regard it as "foreign" (Kong et al., 2022, p. 13). Herein lies the essential dilemma of a sense of place in an international school. It is physically located in a certain locality, but the students may have very little actual contact with the people or culture that surrounds them. Instead, their generation of a sense of place is informed by the bounded "school culture" (Allan, 2002, p. 80) in which they spend most of their day. A sense of place is created through daily practice and interaction, the repetition of actions and the "functional patterns of our lives" (Tuan, 1979, p. 418). For young people, their daily patterns are dominated by the environments of home and school. The sense of place in these environments is associated with both physical places and relationships that create a "field of care" in which an individual is enmeshed (Tuan, 1979, p. 411). It is well established that adolescence is the life course stage in which friends and independent relationships begin to take precedence over family (Bunnell et al., 2012), and the importance of these connections was echoed by teachers, parents, and students alike. Speaking about the challenges of new students coming to Singapore and starting at GIIS, a teacher stressed that "it's not

about Singapore. If a teenager comes in, they're more concerned about the friends whom they're gonna make." Forming new relationships is crucial to developing a sense of belonging and familiarity with a new environment, and they are indeed the very thing that begins to constitute a sense of place. This is illuminated in the following brief exchange between the interviewer and Priya, a student at GIIS.

**Interviewer:** You said that, you know, you live in a condo which has lots of Indians and you come to this school. Those are the two main places in which you spend your time. Do you feel that you live in Singapore?

**Priya:** But what is Singapore, you know? Like (...) I think I live in Singapore

For Priya, the Singapore that is important to her, that has meaning to her, is created by the relationships she has that occur there. She has a sense of being emplaced in Singapore not because she interacts with Singaporeans, but because she has important relationships that happen to occur in Singapore. This is not necessarily unique to globally mobile children but becomes especially apparent as they become increasingly entangled in a web of relationships that spans vast distances.

Students in general felt that GIIS "doesn't feel like it's very different from India" (interview with GIIS student, 16 Oct. 2023). Yet for GIIS as a school, its physical location in Singapore emerged as an important way of framing their educational mission and increasing the desirability of its offerings. A teacher who has been with GIIS since its inception stressed the importance of Singapore:

The chairman, in his address to all the parents, has always maintained that he loves Singapore. And his son was also in the local school. But this pressure of the PSLE [secondary school placement exam], you know, that's very early in life, it's at the age of 11 or 12 (...) which was very unsettling for most of the Indian parents because they're not used to it (. ...) So the intent was to give, *in a country like Singapore*, an education that you're familiar with from back home.

In terms of attracting parents to send their children to the school, GIIS benefits from the association with Singapore's reputation for high quality education, safety, and political stability (Cranston & Lloyd, 2019). Ms. C, a social studies teacher at GIIS, said she attempted to "bring Singapore into the classroom" through discussing current events, using examples based on Singaporean cases, or taking her classes on field trips. Rather than Singapore being a passive force that naturally permeates the classroom, this quote illustrates the active nature of rendering Singapore as a component of GIIS's sense of place. It must be intentionally brought in. GIIS is attractive to

parents as a school to send their children to because it is located in Singapore, and by virtue of this association with a global city was seen to have an international outlook. However, it also, importantly, has an “India-based curriculum, teachers, and all of that” (interview with teacher at GIIS, 16 Oct. 2023). By tactically ‘bringing in’ Singapore, GIIS balances parents’ desire for a cosmopolitan education with the desire for their children to have an Indian education.

### **There: India**

Parents’ desire to cultivate a sense of ethnic or cultural identity in their diasporic children is a concern that resonates throughout existing scholarship (Ramachandran, 2020; Somaiah, 2022). By rendering India a tangible presence in their children’s lives, they seek to establish a sense of ethnic identity that ‘sticks’ to young people regardless of where they are living. The school environment is a key node in the educational infrastructure (Grimley et al., 2024) that informs young people’s navigation and formation of their own identity, so the appeal of ethnically-affiliated international schools lies in both the potential familiarity of the curriculum and in the school’s ability to assist in encouraging an identity grounded in cultural affiliation. In the words of Ms. P, being sent to GIIS was seen as a way to “keep them closer to home, grounded to their Indianness.” Returning to Saira’s quote that opens this paper, she speculated that her parents chose to send her to GIIS because they wanted her to be in a place where she would be learning about Indian “history” and “culture,” like if she was being educated in India. It’s useful here to turn to Saira and her family’s migration history. She was born in Kolkata, the family moved to the USA when she was a young child, they then moved to Singapore for two years, returned to India for one year, and have been based in Singapore since she was around nine years old. These international moves were because of her father’s job opportunities. Her parents, like many parents of international school students, make their lives in the global flows of capital as skilled professional workers (Kunz, 2016). Saira described her parents as “liberal” in their expectations of her behaviour, and accepting of her lack of Bengali language fluency, including speaking with them in English, as an expected outcome of her largely non-Bengali social circle. The desire for a predominantly Indian school environment can be seen as a way of ensuring the overall cultivation of Saira’s Indian identity, regardless of her social circle outside of school or her parent’s global outlook. Eshan, a current GIIS student, similarly said that the environment of the school, in particular the celebration of a wide variety of festivals, creates “a sense of belonging. And it won’t let you forget your culture.”

The cultivation of cultural identity in diasporic and expatriate contexts is a matter of great concern. The educational environment has an important role in either promoting or hindering cultural identity amongst students. Cultural identity is complex, involving the potential coexistence of multiple identity ‘layers’ that may become relevant at different times and situations (Campbell, 2000). For example, the behavioural norms and expectations for

a child from a minority background may be very different in school and in the home, resulting in tactical performance of certain aspects of one's identity to suit the situation (Sarroub, 2005). Despite the complexity and individuality of cultural identity, it is also often seen as something innate, essential to the proper development of oneself as a certain type of person. This can lead to a simplified understanding of what cultural identity can and should mean, especially in relation to cultivating cultural identity in the next generation. Ms. H, a teacher at GIIS, described the cultivation of an Indian environment at the school as being facilitated by the fact that the teachers are mostly Indian, bringing in similar general values as the parents because of the "culture that all of us are brought up in." She also stressed that "although they [the teachers] may be staying here [Singapore] for a long time, and they may have changed their citizenship and all that, but essentially, they are native Indian." Also, given Singapore's relative proximity to India, there is a constant circulation of people. Many students and teachers discussed returning to India over most school breaks, and GIIS offers a generous scholarship that brings in highly competitive students from India to complete their studies at GIIS. One 10th grade student, Arjun, spoke about his experience:

I don't think my parents specifically push Indian culture to me. It's kind of always already ingrained in the household (. ...) Or the places we go, like obviously we go back to India every year. But I think the school choice does play a big part because, there's Indians in other schools. And you can just notice, it's like a strong cultural difference, like they don't exactly feel like Indian people anymore. It's like they've adapted more to the Westernised or like, a globalised philosophy.

The other Indian students to which he referred are likely to have a not dissimilar home environment, yet in the eyes of Arjun "they don't exactly *feel* like Indian people anymore." Something intangible has been lost or traded in favour of a more amorphous global orientation. Arjun was born in India and moved to Singapore approximately two years before the interview, so his frame of reference for the "feel" of Indianness is informed by his own experience of migration. However, he expressed that his classmates at GIIS did feel Indian, especially in comparison to Indian students at other international schools, even if many of them had spent a significant time overseas. This reveals an understanding of a correct or authentic way of being Indian, in comparison to students who have become too Westernised. Cultural authenticity is a subjective assessment, informed by an observer's personal experiences, but it is nevertheless an important marker of difference within communities. Especially in diaspora or expatriate groups, the performance of authentic cultural practices is a way of demonstrating the retention of group identity (Banerji, 2019; Ramachandran, 2020), but there is no singular marker of authenticity. Arjun's emplacement of his own identity and what he views as authentic is based in India because he spent his

childhood there, but he credits the school environment of GIIS for doing the same for his classmates. In comparison to students at traditional international schools, he deemed his classmates authentically Indian, appropriately grounded in their identity.

The tension between the ‘authentic’ manifestation of Indian identity and the desire for students to be prepared for and encouraged to embark on globally oriented futures is illustrated by the two choices of diploma streams offered at GIIS. The first is the Indian Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum. For parents educated in India, this is the familiar curriculum. Ms. H also noted that it would cause less “disruption in the child’s education” if they were transferring into GIIS from India or if they would be moving back to India. The second curriculum is the International Baccalaureate. This is the curriculum commonly associated with international schools and is popular as a globally recognized standard for university admission (Gardner-McTaggart, 2014; Resnik, 2012). For the upper secondary students at GIIS, teachers estimated around 60% were enrolled in IB and 40% in CBSE. Teachers strove to emphasise that the choice of curriculum was a personal one, and although there were some pedagogical differences that the outcomes were largely the same. However, in speaking to students it became evident that choice of curriculum was largely dictated by the extent to which they viewed their futures as being based in India. IB only begins in Grade 11, so prior to that students are separated into CBSE and Cambridge-IGCSE curriculums. A common choice was to enrol in CBSE until Grade 10, before switching over into the IB classes. Two examples of the reasoning for this choice are:

**Aadesh:** It was just more internationally recognized, I feel, because the other choice was CBSE. And I felt like it wasn’t as rigorous or as good.

**Rishabh:** And from what I’ve heard, if you take CBSE you only get the opportunities to like Indian universities. So, I mean, considering, you know, it’s a globalised world, I want to travel, I want to get the best university possible, then IB is obviously a better choice.

Curriculum choice was implicated in the types of futures that the students deemed to be possible. It also led to a separation between groups. Sandip, a student in IGCSE classes, spoke about the social separation that results from curricular separation:

So, we never really go to the CBSE side and the CBSE side never really comes to us. And yeah, over time, you know, the relationship, the friendship has also like been, I guess, affected by that. Because we tend to stay in our IGCSE area.

The CBSE students are presumed by their peers to have aspirations firmly grounded back in India, whereas the IGCSE and IB students envision themselves as full participants in the “globalised world.” Arjun, an IGCSE student, categorised CBSE as an “outdated” curriculum that would offer limited opportunities. It is important to note here that Arjun is the same student who decried how students at traditional schools did not “feel like Indian people anymore.” He expressed a strong preference for the international curriculum over the Indian national one, and did not see this as a less authentic choice. He believed that the international curriculum would offer him better opportunities, but as it is still being taught at an Indian school, he and his classmates were not at risk of losing their connection to their cultural backgrounds. Those who choose the CBSE curriculum and may aspire to go back to India are not necessarily perceived as more authentically Indian by their peers. Both curricular streams are offered under the same umbrella of the Global Indian International School - even for those who did expect to return to India, they still sought a global education. Ms. K stated that the ethos of the school was “the Indian culture will remain (...) But they also want to enjoy what the International has to offer. So, the roots remain, we ensure that the [value system] is not disrupted.” She also elaborated that a student should be an “international, global citizen in short, when he walks out that gate.” India is where students should be rooted in their identity and values, but they are also taught to envision themselves as global citizens who have been equipped by their education to embark on successful futures.

### **Elsewhere: Global Futures**

Regardless of their curriculum stream, GIIS envisions its students as being firmly rooted in Indian values while also becoming responsible global citizens. An internationally oriented secondary education is intended to launch them into adulthood as capable, mobile, and adaptable individuals. They are expected to navigate the currents of global mobility with ease thanks to their education, but to do so with a distinctly Indian perspective. The presence of international curriculums is one way of instilling this orientation, with Ms. R speaking of how the “international exposure” of IGCSE and the IB assists in creating “responsible citizens” of the world. Students echoed this desire for participation in a globalised culture and found it to be exemplified in the celebration of a wide range of important dates. For example, Singapore’s National Day and Indian Independence Day are celebrated less than a week apart. Singaporean National Day is a public holiday, but GIIS students are also given Indian Independence Day off school. In the words of Shalini, a CBSE scholarship student,

Both of these days were holidays. And a day before that we were told to wear certain attire. So, on the 8th and 14th [of August]— on the 14th, we’ll be wearing authentic Indian wear. And on

the 8th, we were wearing red and white attire. Okay, so I think GIIS teaches us to help carry both the identities and like to be a human rather than being a particular citizen.

The ability of educational environments to shape the perspectives and aspirations of young people is quite clear, especially when it comes to how they see themselves and their potential pathways in the world. An international education in Singapore was seen as a way of launching them into futures of mobility and success. Kavita and Swarna, both attending GIIS as scholarship students brought over from India, emphasised the importance of the school as an enabling force for their future dreams. Kavita hopes to move to the USA for her undergraduate degree and viewed GIIS and Singapore as a “good stepping stone.” Swarna used a similarly evocative metaphor when describing her family’s discussion of her decision to accept the scholarship.

My dad was like, you should move to Singapore. It’s a good opportunity. It’s like you’re pitching in an international forum. Right now, currently, you’re just in India. Your dreams would be just, you know, limited to the Indian perspective. But right now, you’re at an international level where you’ll be studying with international students.

Of course, these “international students” at GIIS are also of primarily Indian origin. However, they have become imaginatively international through their location in Singapore and their competitive aspirations to remain overseas. Education is a way to expand their dreams, to make them ‘feel global’ (Molz, 2017). As Ms. H described, “they know that if they can make it here, then the scope for them opens-up. The door opens-up.”

Schools with international curriculums targeted towards local students have become increasingly common in India, driven by similar desire for students to be equipped for a globalised marketplace (Suresh Babu & Mahajan, 2020). However, those schools are limited by their physical location, they are seen as unable to be ‘properly’ international so long as they are in India. Ms. R described GIIS as different from international schools in India not in the curriculum, but in *how* students are taught. In her opinion, “they follow the curriculum but in a very much local way. Like you have to teach it, you have to conduct the exam, and you have to assess it, that’s it.” This distinction between Indian and international, and the proper way to be both, illuminates the fundamental challenge of an ethnically-affiliated international school. By attempting to cultivate both a grounding in India and an orientation towards an amorphous international community, students find themselves somewhat removed from both. The boundaries between being appropriately Indian and being ready to “appeal to globalised cosmopolitan sensibilities” are both blurred and sharp (Suresh Babu & Mahajan, 2020, p. 14).

Students and teachers at GIIS gravitated towards a more encompassing definition of Indian, not divided amongst India's many distinct linguistic, religious, or cultural groups. One teacher, when probed about the potential for such divisions, clearly separated her students from the motherland. She insisted that "nothing that happens in India, you know, has an impact here. So, [if] there's some religious tension or some other tension happening back home, absolutely not." Despite the constant insistence that students should graduate from GIIS with strong Indian roots, they are also nevertheless seen as maintaining an appropriate distance from India to properly embody a globalised outlook that is not influenced by domestic disturbances. Not all Indians can be global Indians, but this identifier can be threatened by not maintaining the careful balance of either word. This seems to echo scholarly concerns regarding the formation of a transnational elite class produced by international education (Brown & Lauder, 2009), but with tighter boundaries drawn along cultural lines. The experience of an international upbringing can lend itself to the creation of bonds based on the idea that there can only be true understanding amongst those who share the experience (Tanu, 2015). However, the added dimension of a shared cultural identity can tighten those boundaries and exclude those who fail to meet both criteria. There is the potential for the development of new hierarchies of difference between those who can successfully balance their ethnicity and their global orientation and those who find themselves too deeply emplaced in only one.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has illustrated the multiplicity of emplacements encountered in an ethnically-affiliated international school, using the case of Singapore's Global Indian International School. The different registers of place support and contradict each other at various times, as the notions of what exactly it means to be global, Indian, and both of those markers at once are constantly in flux. Importantly, a sense of place is personal and often tangible, but it is also often marked by nostalgia, disorientation, or destabilisation of identity when coupled with mobility (Arefi, 1999). Everyone experiences place differently. Turning to the multiplicity of places allows for a new conception of how identity can be based on 'place,' regardless of where that individual may physically be. We have chosen to focus on the voices of students and educators to elevate young people's voices in their conception of their own lives and identity, while also benefiting from the institutional and pedagogical insights of the teachers. However, this means that our perspective is limited to a certain period in young people's lives, oriented towards their imagined futures, situated in the school environment. There is further work to be done on conceptions of place in diaspora groups, especially as it relates to processes of education both within and beyond the school (Samson, 2019). This could include retrospective analysis of those who experienced international schooling, extra-curricular provision of cultural activities like music or dance, and parent decision making and advocacy within their



children's education. Parents who are raising their children in a different place than they were raised are often faced with challenging choices surrounding how to make their ethnic or cultural identity salient and impactful to their children, and the associated values and moral systems that may be associated with these choices (Qureshi, 2014).

Focusing on non-traditional international schools illuminates the complexities and intricacies that are contained within being and becoming international, especially as this intersects with national or ethno-cultural identity. This paper brings attention to the tensions between internationalism and emplaced identity practices, an area of research that should be attended to carefully. Even in traditional international schools, studies should remain attuned to subtle articulations of difference within a supposedly global environment. Taking the view of multiple emplacements contained within international schools can open new pathways of inquiry into the performance and experience of individual identity. The pasts, presents, and futures of international school students are encountered in their everyday lives, both enlivened and constrained by the placemaking practices of their schools.

---

### **Funding declaration**

This work was supported by the Singapore Ministry of Education under Grant 22-CIS-SMU-040, "Education Infrastructures and Migrant Un/Belonging: Indian Students in Singapore."

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Terence Tan Wei Jian for his assistance with fieldwork, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on the article.

Submitted: July 23, 2024 CST, Accepted: November 08, 2024 CST



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

## References

- Allan, M. (2002). Cultural Borderlands: A Case Study of Cultural Dissonance in an International School. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 1(1), 63–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240902001001269>
- Arefi, M. (1999). Non-place and placelessness as narratives of loss: Rethinking the notion of place. *Journal of Urban Design*, 4(2), 179–193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809908724445>
- Augé, M. (1995). *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (J. Howe, Trans.). Verso Books. (Original work published 1992)
- Banerji, A. (2019). The Social Drama of Durga Puja: Performing Bengali Identity in the Diaspora. *Ecumenica: Performance and Religion*, 12(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.5325/ecumenica.12.1.0001>
- Bartlett, S. (1991). ‘Kids Aren’t Like They Used to Be’: Nostalgia and Reality in Neighborhood Life. *Children’s Environments Quarterly*, 8(1), 49–58. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41514768>
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press.
- Bertling, J. G. (2018). Non-place and the future of place-based education. *Environmental Education Research*, 24(11), 1627–1630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2018.1558439>
- Brown, P., & Lauder, H. (2009). Globalization, International Education, and the Formation of a Transnational Class? *Teachers College Record*, 111(14), 130–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810911101408>
- Bunnell, T., Yea, S., Peake, L., Skelton, T., & Smith, M. (2012). Geographies of friendships. *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(4), 490–507. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132511426606>
- Campbell, A. (2000). Cultural identity as a social construct. *Intercultural Education*, 11(1), 31–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980050005370>
- Cangia, F. (2020). (Im)Mobile imagination. On trailing, feeling stuck and imagining work on-the-move. *Culture & Psychology*, 26(4), 697–712. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X19899070>
- Collins, D., & Coleman, T. (2008). Social Geographies of Education: Looking Within, and Beyond, School Boundaries. *Geography Compass*, 2, 281–299. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2007.00081.x>
- Costas, J. (2013). Problematizing Mobility: A Metaphor of Stickiness, Non-Places, and the Kinetic Elite. *Organization Studies*, 34(10), 1467–1485. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840613495324>
- Cranston, S., & Lloyd, J. (2019). Bursting the Bubble: Spatialising Safety for Privileged Migrant Women in Singapore. *Antipode*, 51(2), 478–496. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12433>
- Devine-Wright, P., & Clayton, S. (2010). Introduction to the special issue: Place, identity and environmental behaviour. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 30(3), 267–270. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(10\)00078-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(10)00078-2)
- Gardner-McTaggart, A. (2014). International elite, or global citizens? Equity, distinction and power: the International Baccalaureate and the rise of the South. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 14(1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2014.959475>
- Gregory, T. (2009). *No alarms and no surprises; the rise of the domestic non-place* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of New South Wales]. <https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/19569>
- Gregory, T. (2011). The Rise of the Productive Non-Place: The Contemporary Office as a State of Exception. *Space and Culture*, 14(3), 244–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331211412264>

- Grimley, E., Woods, O., & Kong, L. (2024). Educating Indians, Learning ‘Indianness’: Navigating pluralistic educational infrastructures in diasporic Singapore. *South Asian Diaspora*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2024.2358599>
- Hughes, S. J. (2014). *Teachers as Placemakers: How Primary School Teachers Design, Manage, and Maintain Learning Spaces as Part of their Daily Workflow* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Southern Queensland]. <https://research.usq.edu.au/item/q3143/teachers-as-placemakers-how-primary-school-teachers-design-manage-and-maintain-learning-spaces-as-part-of-their-daily-workflow>
- Knez, I. (2014). Place and the self: An autobiographical memory synthesis. *Philosophical Psychology*, 27(2), 164–192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2012.728124>
- Kong, L., Woods, O., & Zhu, H. (2022). The (de)Territorialised Appeal of International Schools in China: Forging Brands, Boundaries and Inter-Belonging in Segregated Urban Space. *Urban Studies*, 59(1), 242–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098020954143>
- Kunz, S. (2016). Privileged Mobilities: Locating the Expatriate in Migration Scholarship. *Geography Compass*, 10(3), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12253>
- Lysgård, H. K., & Rye, S. A. (2017). Between striated and smooth space: Exploring the topology of transnational student mobility. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 49(9), 2116–2134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X17711945>
- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, Place, and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Matthews, H., Limb, M., & Percy-Smith, B. (1998). Changing Worlds: The Microgeographies of Young Teenagers. *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie*, 89(2), 193–202. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9663.00018>
- Molz, J. G. (2017). Learning to feel global: Exploring the emotional geographies of worldschooling. *Emotion, Space, and Society*, 23, 16–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2017.02.001>
- Qureshi, K. (2014). Sending children to school ‘back home’: Multiple moralities of Punjabi Sikh parents in Britain. *Journal of Moral Education*, 43(2), 213–226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2014.893866>
- Ramachandran, V. (2020). But he’s not desi: articulating ‘Indianness’ through partnership preference in the Indian-Australian diaspora. *South Asian Diaspora*, 12(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2019.1562634>
- Resnik, J. (2012). Sociology of international education – an emerging field of research. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 22(4), 291–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2012.751203>
- Salazar, N. B. (2023). Mobile places and emplaced mobilities: problematizing the place-mobility nexus. *Mobilities*, 18(4), 582–592. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2023.2226358>
- Samson, M. G. M. (2019). Krav maga and chicken soup: symbolic Jewish identities within and beyond the Jewish school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 40(6), 742–758. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1583550>
- Sander, M. (2016). *Passing Through Shanghai: Ethnographic Insights into the Mobile Lives of Expatriate Youths*. Heidelberg University Publishing.
- Sanger, M. (1997). Viewpoint: Sense of Place and Education. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 29(1), 4–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00958969709599101>
- Sarroub, L. K. (2005). *All American Yemeni Girls: Being Muslim in a Public School*. University of Pennsylvania Press. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812290233>

- Somaiah, B. C. (2022). Affiliative Emplacement: Festival Foodwork Among (Im)Migrant Kodavathee Mothers. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 43(1), 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2021.1997952>
- Suresh Babu, S., & Mahajan, A. (2020). Branding an ‘Inter’national school: Fusing ‘Indian values’ with a global diploma. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 30(3), 287–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2020.1853589>
- Tanu, D. (2015). Toward an interdisciplinary analysis of the diversity of “Third Culture Kids.” In S. Benjamin & F. Dervin (Eds.), *Migration, diversity, and education: Beyond Third culture kids* (pp. 13–35). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Tuan, Y. F. (1979). Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective. In S. Gale & G. Olsson (Eds.), *Philosophy in Geography*. Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-9394-5\\_19](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-9394-5_19)
- Van Bochove, M., & Engbersen, G. (2015). Beyond Cosmopolitanism and Expat Bubbles: Challenging Dominant Representations of Knowledge Workers and Trailing Spouses. *Population, Space and Place*, 21(4), 295–309. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1839>
- Walsh, K. (2006). ‘Dad Says I’m Tied to a Shooting Star!’ Grounding (Research on) British Expatriate Belonging. *Area*, 38(3), 268–278. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2006.00687.x>
- Weenink, D. (2008). Cosmopolitanism as a Form of Capital: Parents Preparing Their Children for a Globalized World. *Sociology*, 42(6), 1089–1106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038508096935>
- Wright, E., Ma, Y., & Auld, E. (2022). Experiments in being global: the cosmopolitan nationalism of international schooling in China. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 20(2), 236–249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1882293>
- Yeoh, B. S. A. (2006). Bifurcated labour: The unequal incorporation of transmigrants in Singapore. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 97(1), 26–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9663.2006.00493.x>