

Cultivating Urban Literacies on Chicago's South Side through a Pedagogy of Spatial Justice

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Although justice-oriented literacy scholars have long examined the complex intersections of literacy, identity, and community, “a celebration of the language and rhythms of everyday life . . . has continued to elude our educational institutions” (Ball & Lee, 2011, p. ix). Explorations of urban literacy have attempted to extend “the focus on literacy from school-sponsored practices and events . . . to situate and resituate literacy across political and educative conditions and situations that involve children, youth, and/or adults of color” (Kinloch, 2011, p. 2). Such research tends to highlight family and community literacies, as well as popular cultural and digital media literacies (e.g., spoken word poetry; see Fisher, 2007; Hill, 2009). Kinloch (2011) argues that urban literacy research reveals important stories about *what* young adolescents do (e.g., inquire into policies, negotiate identities across spaces) as well as *how* they do it (e.g., engage in critical talk, refigure identities, assert agency; see Kinloch, 2010; Kirkland, 2008).

Adding to this body of work, we suggest that a *pedagogy of spatial justice* can support urban literacies. Spatial justice can be understood as being premised on the idea that “justice, however it might be defined, has a *consequential geography*, a spatial expression that is more than just a background reflection or set of physical attributes to be descriptively mapped” (Soja, 2010, p. 1). Urban spaces, for example, are dense ecologies with complex networks of materials (both “natural” and human-made) and histories of race, class, and power dynamics (e.g., changing neighborhood demographics, systemic housing discrimination). Acknowledging these dimensions of urban environments disrupts notions of place as “external to the social world” (p. 2) and suggests the importance of attending explicitly to space and place in justice-oriented pedagogies. Soja describes spatial justice in urban contexts as “fighting for the right to the city” (p. 6). Central to this idea is marginalized community members demanding “greater control over how the spaces in which we live are socially produced” (p. 7). A pedagogy of spatial justice, then, supports the

development of urban literacies, including the ability to “read” the city and to assert agency to “talk back” to pervasive negative discourses about urban spaces and people. Many young adolescents already possess these abilities; however, as with other urban literacies, this knowledge is not typically cultivated in schools.

We examine Chicago South Side middle school teacher Kara’s food justice unit through the lens of a pedagogy of spatial justice. We consider the ways that Kara cultivated her students’ urban literacies by encouraging them to draw from their local knowledge of self, culture, and place; to critically situate their local knowledge in broader sociopolitical contexts; and to craft counter narratives.

Context: A Food Justice Unit

Kara, a Black woman, has taught eighth-grade English language arts at Reynolds School, a preK–8 school on Chicago’s South Side, for five years. The school’s demographics comprise 98.2 percent Black, 1.1 percent Hispanic, 0.5 percent White, and 0.2 percent Asian students. It is situated in a community encompassing multiple neighborhoods where there has been little construction or infrastructure updates since the 1930s beyond a large public housing project constructed in the 1950s. At that time, the population shifted from 6 percent to 86 percent African American. It is now 99 percent African American, and over half the population lives at or below poverty level.

In a food justice unit, Kara addressed the food industry and obesity through a critical lens examining race, power, and place. Components of the unit included

- Writing and performing a spoken word poem describing their neighborhood.
- Discussing access to quality food across neighborhoods and sharing their own challenges to accessing healthy food.

- Reading *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (Pollan, 2006) and watching the documentary *Super Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004).
- Analyzing graphs of obesity trends and informational articles.
- Collecting and analyzing neighborhood data to determine whether they live in a food desert.
- Writing position pieces on how to address obesity in the African American community.

Andrea and Becca (both White women) observed eleven lessons in the 2016 implementation of this unit. Our work together has continued through a teacher inquiry group focused on cultivating culturally sustaining ELA pedagogy (Paris, 2012; see also, Bomer, 2017), where Kara implemented a second iteration of the unit in 2017.

Cultivating Urban Literacies through a Pedagogy of Spatial Justice

Kara supported a pedagogy of spatial justice by promoting an examination of food access and equity in students' lives. Her students built on their urban literacies, including reading their worlds through personal reflection and neighborhood examination. They considered the global forces contributing to their local spaces and asserted agency by counter narrating as they "[fought] for their right to the city" (Soja, 2010, p. 6).

Drawing from Local Knowledge

Throughout this unit, Kara asked her students to make use of their knowledge of their own neighborhoods, positioning them as experts about the places they inhabit. In one of the first activities of the unit, students wrote and performed spoken word poems about their neighborhoods (e.g., important/noteworthy intersections). However, they also complicated negative stereotypes of the South Side; for example, one student, Malcolm, wrote of his neighborhood:

... If I said I was from chiraq, where there a lot of violence, and gun shots
Everywhere boom, boom, bang, bang would you know where i'm from?

Further in his poem, he continued:

... If I said I was from chiraq, where you see kids playing on the swings in the park on a hot summer day so much silence you could hear the ice cream truck that has the ice cream that tastes like it comes from a fresh cow, would you know where i was from?

Malcolm's complex description of his city accounts for both violence and kids playing on swings. This assignment positioned students as experts with insider knowledge about their local environment (Machado, Vaughan, Coppola, & Woodard, 2017)—knowledge that often differs from outside perspectives.

Kara also required her students to explore food options available in a one-mile radius around their school to determine whether they were part of a food desert. In the five blocks around the school, Kara's students found one grocery store whose selection was "not great," three gas stations, a drugstore, a corner store, and a bulk candy store. Through an explicit examination of these places in the community, Kara foregrounded her students' local knowledge alongside other mentor texts and asked her students to "read" and interpret these places in their neighborhood in the same way.

These examples resonate with Kinloch's (2011) concept of urban literacies, including community knowledge that may not be valued in schools or as part of the official curriculum. Kara's pedagogy of spatial justice recognized and valued the work her students do every day to make meaning from their surroundings, as well as empowered them as actors able to interpret and perhaps even to change the places they inhabit.

Situating Local Knowledge in Broader Contexts

Nespor (2008) problematizes an extra-local focus that can be part of some pedagogies of place for the ways in which it "obscures the critical questions of how places are constituted and connected to one another" (p. 481). Kara situated students' lived experiences and knowledge within a larger national, even global, context. For example, the primary mentor text for her unit was *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (Pollan, 2006), which describes the food industry and its impact on the environment (e.g., the carbon emissions spent transporting food), the economy (e.g., political lobbying by agricultural businesses), and the animals we eat (e.g., how animals on industrial farms actually live). This larger context explaining how food goes from farms to our plates helps to elucidate the ways in which "actual settings—whether ecosystems, schools, towns, or states—are continually interacting with what is 'outside' their recognized boundaries" (Nespor, 2008, p. 480).

Kara also provided her students with research and news articles that discussed the national disparity between predominantly White and predominantly Black neighborhoods in terms of access to supermarkets with fresh food, suggesting that systemic racism of the same kind that pushed Black families in Chicago further

and further South over time plays a role in access to healthy food. Malcolm framed his final essay around the question, “How can we as people stop obesity in Black neighborhoods?” Malcolm identifies some of the social consequences found at the intersection of race and obesity when he writes, “Most people that are obese are not treated fairly and can’t do certain things. This is not only cause your[sic] . . . obese but also because you are Black.”

About the impact on her students, Kara told us in an interview, “I think this helps them with their critical consciousness. I don’t think they’ll walk away saying ‘I won’t eat McDonald’s anymore,’ but I want them to be able to challenge social structures, I want them to understand systemic racism, and I want them to be able to see themselves as change agents.” These examples demonstrate Kara’s efforts to help her students critically examine place and see themselves as actors in creating a “consequential geography” (Soja, 2010, p. 1), particularly of the spaces they call home.

Providing Counter Narratives

Ultimately, Kara built on her students’ knowledge of larger sociopolitical contexts in order to counter prevailing notions about place, food, and obesity—including that obesity is the result of personal failings and that overweight people are responsible for doing “better.” As part of this unit, Kara taught a lesson on body mass index (BMI), in which students learned their own BMIs as well as the parameters of the “normal range” for people their age and height and then discussed the question of “whether or not that’s realistic for you.” By presenting the achievement of a BMI in the “normal range” as perhaps unrealistic, Kara countered the idea that everyone is equally positioned to reach defined standards of health. If you live in a food desert, don’t have access to transportation outside your neighborhood, and/or don’t have the financial resources to purchase

fresh food, then perhaps it isn’t your “fault” that your BMI falls in the “overweight” or “obese” range.

One research article Kara used to prompt discussion in her class presented obesity as similar to drug addiction—something that a person may be genetically predisposed to and unable to “just stop” without intervention (Heads Up Scholastic, 2005). As Kara told us in an interview, “A lot of [my students] think people are obese because people can’t put down a fork . . . [In this unit] we do research about things like genetics . . . [to counter that notion].” In addition to the information about the availability of healthy food in their communities, this challenged the idea that obese and/or overweight people are just lazy: they may be responding to larger forces outside their control.

Finally, Kara invited students to participate in composing counter narratives through their culminating project: a position paper in which they synthesized information throughout the unit and proposed ways to address obesity in the African American community. These responses allowed students to position themselves as agentive actors in the complex network of local and global dynamics contributing to food quality, obesity, and equity in their neighborhoods.

Conclusion

A pervasive negative national rhetoric has been constructed about Chicago’s South Side and the people who live there as dangerous and violent (e.g., Donald Trump’s 2017 tweets describing Chicago as “totally out of control”). Kara acknowledges the reality of her students’ lives but also helps them develop urban literacies to reposition the South Side of Chicago as a place *to which* violence has been systematically done—by denying access to basic necessities such as healthy food—not merely a place *where* violence occurs.

As teachers like Kara cultivate urban literacies through a pedagogy of spatial justice that asks students

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Bronzeville Boys and Girls by Gwendolyn Brooks is a collection of poems that celebrates the joy and imagination of a community of children. Obtain a copy of the book and share several poems and illustrations with your students. After students have read and discussed several poems from the collection, ask them to create a poetry anthology for their own family, neighborhood, or classroom. Students can create a collection themselves, or they can each contribute one poem to a class collection. Be sure to have students include illustrations to accompany the poems they compose.

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to draw from their local knowledge and situate that local knowledge in broader contexts, they make visible the unseen historic and systemic forces that produce places and determine access to resources within them. Equally as important, these teachers offer urban middle school students opportunities and tools to counter narrate—simultaneously critiquing and reimagining the places they inhabit and the often-negative stories told about them.

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