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A Critical Geographic Approach to Youth Civic Engagement: Reframing Educational Opportunity Zones and the Use of Public Spaces

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Abstract

The article draws on work in Critical Geography Studies and Photovoice methodology, to illustrate the ways in which youth in an inner city conceptualize neighborhoods and public spaces. We utilize youth's photographs, narratives, and maps to tell a story of youth's lived experiences and argue that these experiences are vital sources of knowledge about how an unequal distribution of resources affects them. It is important, we argue, to not only hear student voices but also prepare them to become critical, independent thinkers, who can use multiple literacies as affordances for creating changes that help nourish them. This means fundamentally rethinking how as educators we listen to and walk with youth as they reframe the ways in which we might use public parks, neighborhood schools, community centers, and sidewalks as pedagogical and political spaces.

Keywords

race, identity, cultural responsiveness, social, urban, literacy, urban education, youth development

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Stuart: Do you think that people who design neighborhoods have kids in mind?

Danny: Kids don't have much of a say and so people want to make things more tempting for adults.

Stuart: What would be different if kids designed things?

Danny: Probably parks, places to run. Places for sports. Soccer fields . . .

Stuart: If developers were to listen to you, what would you tell them?

Isaiah[1]: [We need] somewhere where kids can go to play so they can play outside. And if they want to play outside, they can play and be safe. Maybe you'd have a funhouse or something for kids and teens so they could keep out of trouble. You'd probably need metal detectors because kids like to bring guns and then we'd know it was a safe, free zone for kids and teens.

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Kevin: You both talked about people. How do you think you help children learn how to be outspoken or involved in their neighborhoods and communities?

Ariel: By asking them if where they live, they want to make a change. Before this [project] no one else ever asked me about how I felt about where I lived and came from. So if we gave [kids] the opportunity to make change, by talking about their experiences, they might.

Kevin: You don't get to talk about that in school?

Ariel: NO. Not at all.

Kevin: Could it fit into school?

Ariel: I don't think that it would be a top priority. Because so much of what we do is testing. I just don't think they would really care. [But where you come from] makes everything in school . . . it makes you who you are. And if they don't care, you're not going to care. You can talk all day till you're blue in the face; if they don't care, it's not going to change.

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Introduction

The youth whose voices we hear above convey three important ideas that we develop in this article: Children's voices should matter in the ways educators and civic leaders conceive of space; youth provide an understanding of

inequality and its effects on youth's lived experiences, particularly in low-income neighborhoods; and youth have the capacity to make positive changes in their neighborhood. During a period of two years, we have conducted interviews and focus groups with middle and high school–aged youth such as Danny, Isaiah, and Ariel, who volunteered to participate in a neighborhood–university partnership designed to promote youth civic engagement (Greene, Burke, & McKenna, 2013, 2014). We describe specifics of the project below, but note here general themes as an entree into the research: We have walked with youth through parks and along city streets, listened to their stories, and encouraged them to take photographs to document what they understood as both assets and problems in their neighborhoods. In turn, we asked youth about why they chose the pictures they took, exchanged ideas about what they wanted to change, conducted research with them on the histories of the spaces they had photographed, and collaborated with youth to write proposals that youth presented to the members of local neighborhood associations and even the mayor. Youth also exhibited their photographs in local community centers where they had the opportunity to talk about their work with members of the surrounding community, including other children, and explain the composition of their photographs.

As a result of the students' wisdom and insistence, our goal has become increasingly focused on promoting change through examining how youth have experienced inequities in a rust belt city that has experienced little economic growth during the past 30 years. A powerful university actor has slowly acquired abandoned houses and rental properties within a mile of its borders. In doing so, the university has, to our minds, gentrified a portion of the city at the expense of public spaces and poor kids. New housing developments and commercial properties have fragmented a sense of community among long-time residents, erased histories of meaningful spaces, and threatened the existence of neighborhood schools. Despite these changes, city leaders and those speaking on behalf of the university argue that increased growth in housing, high-end shops, and restaurants raise the tax base for city schools and services. There is a distinctly neoliberal cant to the rhetoric that puts faith in new markets to provide broad prosperity for the poor through investment in services meant to draw the affluent. Although we cannot suggest that this city is necessarily metonymic for all American cities at this historical moment, we do feel that the themes we take up in the following pages represent those facing urban youth of color nationwide.

It is important to clarify just what we mean when we use terms, in the text, like "inner city" and "urban" (Watson, 2011). These words are often used interchangeably and refer to poor youth of color whose social and economic circumstances place them at risk. Unfortunately, such explanations lead

educators to draw inappropriate conclusions about family background and inform deficit theories of teaching and learning (e.g., Greene, 2013). For the purposes of this article, we use them literally to place our study in the heart of a former industrial hub in the Middle Western states and to distinguish our meaning making through spaces from those that might have occurred had we asked our subjects to wander our local college campus, or the winding streets of the suburban developments north of the university.The youth and the stories they tell in the pages that follow are literally of the city and make arguments for its public spaces; in that sense, they are youth who are urban, youth from the inner city.

What we have from Ariel, Danny, and Isaiah above are trenchant observations about the nature of youth, schooling, power, politics, and the use and design of space in a city. To the extent that there may be a genesis of/for community-based reforms in education (and schooling) in America, we want to argue that engagement with youth voices should be vital in reimagining not only a "broken" system, but just what and who gets to count in any debate about school closings (or openings), privatization, curricular narrowing, and so on. We follow others in their efforts to document youth voices in efforts to identify inequality in schooling (Bautista) and housing (Kinloch) in an effort to "explore . . . how young people . . . understand conditions of social inequity and negotiate these stresses psychologically and politically" (Fox et al., 2010, p. 3; see also Roberts, Bell, & Murphy, 2008). However, few researchers have provided a window into youth's multiple uses of literacy—poetry, photography, proposal writing, research, and performance—and their participation as engaged citizens in the communities they inhabit. Without such an understanding, those of us committed to equity will fail to make changes that matter to the people for whom the consequences of economic development in urban environments will have the greatest impact.

In this article, we also seek to build on and develop our own work in the field of critical youth engagement, particularly through the use of Photovoice (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice "is a participatory action research method that involves placing cameras in the hands of community people so that they may visually represent and communicate to others their lived experience" (Lopez, Eng, Robinson, & Wang, 2005, p. 326). As a methodology, Photovoice "builds on a commitment to social and intellectual change through community members' critical production and analysis of the visual image" (Wang & Pies, 2008, p. 181). Long used in health policy research, Photovoice provides youth with the opportunity to use their photographs to reframe how others view who they are and where they live, to represent their social worlds and name the experiences that matter to them. It is also ripe for expansion beyond the photographic realm to complement the

multiple artistic affordances of, for example, writing poetry, drawing maps, and making presentations. While the photographs taken by youth in neighborhoods can bring into focus the major issues affecting their daily lives, both educationally and socially, so too can experiences in research gathering, data coding, narrating walking tours, drawing maps, writing poems that connect identity, family history, and community, and analyzing literary texts that focus on place. Our use of Photovoice serves as a jumping off point toward a broader arts-based curriculum aimed at literacy development (Greene, Burke, & McKenna, 2013, 2014). In turn, listening to children tell their stories enabled us to think differently about how policy had begun to alter the lived and perceived realities of children; this listening, in various spaces, allowed us to more fully conceive of educational opportunity zones as well.

Importantly, Delgado Bernal (2002) explains that the stories youth tell in various media not only affirm youth as both "holders and creators of knowledge" (p. 113) but also serve as tools that enable youth to navigate obstacles in their day-to-day lives in school and in the community. For Solórzano and Yasso (2009), these stories might be construed as counter-stories, which enable youth to reframe identities that others often attribute to them. Thus, counter-stories are "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" where "the counter-story is a . . . tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging" false assumptions about who kids are (p. 139). In the case of Photovoice, the counter-narratives of youth are strengthened by the visceral nature of physical imagery where youth and their audiences (we authors, community leaders, the mayor) are affected particularly by the transitional object of the photograph which, for Lasch "occupies the borderland between subjectivity and objectivity" (as cited in Pinar, 2004, p. 249). Photographs hold a certain embodied meaning that is translatable as a space for youth and adults to come to a shared sense of narrative, where kids are seen more easily as "expert" because they have produced an intelligible object through which to narrate their experiences in the photographs they have taken. Thus, youth use art as a means for giving legitimacy and value to experiences that might otherwise remain invisible to those who ignore the lack of safe spaces and access to material resources in poor communities.

Elsewhere (Greene, Burke, & McKenna, 2013, 2014) we have discussed the possibility for reimagining literacy by using multiple artistic affordances as activist tools for neighborhood and political engagement in the hands of youth. Here, we refocus the conversation of this research by using the voices of youth to think through something akin to Miller's (2012) mapping of "educational opportunity zones" (p. 189). Educational opportunity zones exist not only in the presence of specifically and traditionally elucidated spaces for

pedagogy (e.g., schools, community centers, libraries, etc.) but particularly in the imaginaries of kids that are often ignored, devalued, or simply missed for never having been accessed by adults. We wish, in other words and with respect for Ariel's wisdom to care by making where kids are from and how they construct spaces "a top priority." As Ariel suggests, it is important "to ask [youth] where they live, [what] they want to change and [give them] the opportunity to make change, by talking about their experiences." To do so departs from conventional ways of identifying and assessing educational opportunity zones apart from youth's lived experiences (e.g., Miller, 2012).

Like Miller (2012), we agree that it is important not to limit the notion of educational opportunity zones to "school-based efforts" for reform or to ignore how youth perceive the assets of a community in their day-to-day experiences:

> Researchers and policy experts have put forward wide-ranging school-based strategies and programs aimed at increasing achievement for broader swaths of students . . . there is a wealth of research suggesting that school-based efforts are only part of the solution to highly discrepant levels of social and educational success among youth. (pp. 189-190)

Indeed, we know that communities matter (e.g., Heath, 1983) and social class matters (e.g., Lareau, 2000; MacLeod, 1995), race matters (e.g., Ferguson, 2001; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009), culture matters (e.g., Delpit, 2006; Willis, 1981), and all of the intersections of these factors matter in the achievement, retention, and attainment of students in schools in America. What we might better understand through listening to youth is how these intersectional experiences come to inform their thinking about how spaces in an urban center teach, are taught, form, and are reformed by youth to educational ends. Thus, we provide a window into a project that asked kids, outside of school, to think through the spaces of neighborhoods, to critically reimagine their lived spaces, and to help us understand their own educational opportunity zones.

Consistent with Aitken's (2001) concerns, we too are concerned "with the endless carving up and claiming of space by different individuals and constituencies and how this process disenfranchises young people. On the other hand [we are also] concerned about the connectedness of all spaces" (p. 11). That connectedness, we think, can be thoroughly reimagined through the words, maps, ideas, and stories of youth. We call this aggregation of data, the Adult–Child Imaginary. This Adult–Child Imaginary "acknowledges the particular ways that social forces, time, and space shape youths' experiences differently than the ways these factors influence the adults with whom they

interact." Further this concept "reminds us that language, identity construction, and actions are deeply contextual" where "children often hold a vision that is more actionable for the good of self and others than the adults they are working with in any given time and space" Greene, Burke, & McKenna, 2013). We base this concept on a recalibration of Lipsitz's (2007) Black spatial imaginary, which Lipsitz sees as a result of generations of state-sponsored exclusionary policies, as men and women of color coming together to "increase the use value of . . . neighborhoods by turning 'segregation into congregation' and fashioning ferocious attachments to place as a means of producing useful mechanisms of solidarity" (p. 11). We find, in our work, that youth imagine neighborhood spaces, to which they have become ferociously attached (parks, surely, but urban public schools, in particular), as having inherent value. They attach history and personal narrative to the spaces that surround them and perhaps imbue meaning into what might otherwise be seen as empty spaces (at times, sidewalks passing through neighborhoods); in this sense, as they taught us the reparative stories of their neighborhoods, they were often producing their own learning experiences. They were, in other words, imagining educational opportunity zones all the time in the spaces of their lives in the city.

Critical Geography Studies

Critical Geography, or critical policy studies, can be an interpretive frame through which to recover "hidden histories" in racially coded spaces and landscapes of everyday life (Apple, 2012 ; Feagin & Feagin, 1998; Harvey, 2007; Soja, 2010). Indeed, history is a witness to the economic policies and political processes that have influenced the resegregation of urban neighborhoods and schools and exacerbated inequality by limiting families' access to material resources and social capital (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Critical Geography helps us see that inequality did not just happen naturally as a result of individual decisions or market forces. It was created. One result has been to marginalize the voices of low-income families of color in decisions that affect their children. However, by focusing on these processes, such a framework does more than map out the material conditions of physical attributes of a particular geographical area. As Schein (2006) observes, "Cultural landscapes . . . are material artifacts, with traceable and documentable empirical histories and geographies that we can use to ask questions about race in American life" (p. 5).

For us, Critical Geography helps explain how and in what ways youth, or any of us, perceive the built environment. They understand space differently, inevitably, based on their prior experiences and the relationships they have

developed in and through community with peers, families, and others. Thus, youth also imagine space in any number of ways—as spaces of comfort, belonging, and inclusion. For others, these same spaces can threaten their sense of well-being. We also turn our attention in this piece to the ways in which social space "becomes" educational through the experiences and imaginations of youth in an inner city where material resources are not, to our mind, distributed equitably (Greene, 2013). For "just as geography is integral to power, any reframing of power is an inherently geographic project" (Katz, 2005, p. 19). In our research, we seek to create a "dialogic space of encounter . . . engendered when emancipatory claims contest policy" (Peace, 2001, p. 37). From the standpoint of methodology, then, this work echoes that of Paris (2011) in the ways it seeks to create "humanizing research" characterized by "dialogic consciousness-raising" and relationships characterized by dignity (p. 140).

Schools and Neighborhood Spaces

Within the framework of Critical Geography, it is also important to think about the relationship between schools and neighborhood spaces, especially in the context of opportunity zones. We agree with Nespor (1997) that "educational settings" such as "schools, classrooms and so forth" don't have "clear boundaries" but are rather "extensive in space and time, fluid in form and content." They are, instead, "intersections of multiple networks shaping cities, communities, schools, pedagogies, and teacher and student practices" (p. xiii). The history of a neighborhood, its very shape, surrounding the school will have an effect on the students who attend, the teachers who work there, and indeed the perception of the school itself in the city at large. In the same way, policy changes (consolidations of schools, voucher implementation, high-stakes testing, bussing, etc.) will buffet a given school, providing stories about its success or failure. Similarly, the orientation of families to the school, and vice versa, will alter the experience of cooperation with or resistance to teacher-led initiatives regarding homework, parental involvement, and so on. Acknowledging the imbricated nature of overlapping influences (Connolly, 2008) has implications for education policy, particularly in light of mass closings of neighborhood schools in minority neighborhoods in cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, and New Orleans. What happens to community networks when schools become targets? What happens to these networks when where kids live becomes disconnected from where they are schooled? And should this happen, how might we think about recovering memory and connectedness in non-schooled spaces through the creation (or rather, examination) of different kinds of educational opportunity zones? Our work here

does not answer these questions directly, but does suggest that the experiences of kids in spaces beyond schools will profoundly affect their experiences in schools. As such, if we are to think about the above questions seriously, we might think about listening to the narratives of kids as they make meaning in the communities around schools.

For us, the entanglement of schools (buildings and people) with student lives is worth noting and perhaps and probably preserving. From a critical geographic standpoint, such preservation would require "listening to frequently overlooked activities that are hidden away in the label of the mundane, the banal, the quotidian: in other words, in the colloquial" (Harris, 2006, p. 99) or one might say, in the childlike. Still, Nespor (1997) suggests, even before the most recent wave of high-stakes accountability which has narrowed the curriculum of American schools to that which is imminently testable, that "kids see their work as being meaningful mainly in terms of its exchange value not only because of tests and grades but also because what they do outside of school is often given no place in school activity" (p. 67). Disconnecting schools from the lives of children in the spaces beyond the bricks and books of a building strikes us as inherently problematic, particularly for kids who infer a great deal of meaning from the lived spaces of their everyday experience.

Spaces of Inclusion and Exclusion

Space lives and breathes, just as it includes, excludes, defines, and refines. Gentrification is not beautification for the people being displaced. Ariel takes up this theme when asked in a group interview (2013) about her ideal neighborhood, asserting,

> I would like homes that are close together and a friendly group of people in the area that are welcoming and warm. I don't think a neighborhood is truly a neighborhood if houses are so far away that you can't walk. I feel like the closer you are to people the closer you'll get and the better you'll feel going home every day.

Ariel sees more possibility in the community of close-set spaces where even private homes are sharing space. It may not be private, but it's beautiful for her because of the relationships that become possible.

When Kal, a middle schooler with whom we worked, entreats a local neighborhood council to help upgrade a park—to save it, in his words, from being torn down or incorporated into the amoebic expansion of the nearby

university—he suggests a deeper knowledge of the movement of gentrification through his former neighborhood:

> I used to have a house on Eddy street in this neighborhood and it got torn down a couple of years ago and I don't want to see this happen to the park where a lot of good memories have happened.

Kal may not know why his house was torn down, that is, to make way for larger, newer houses with private yards, to be owned rather than rented, in the shadows of a new mixed-use upscale retail development subsidized by the city and the university, but he does know that the neighborhood he loved, the neighborhood embedded in memory, is being changed. That the park might be next does not escape his notice and that the loss of memory might well ensue is important precisely because "the process of remembering" though difficult in some cases "is nonetheless an extremely important and valuable one in that it helps us to learn and grow as individuals and as a society" (Hoskins, 2006, p. 109).

The threat of the loss of the park becomes a teaching moment for Kal and his peers who resist, under the auspices of a community center, in ways that are public and powerful. We might ask, as Kal asserts his desire for the park to remain, "What are the implications for society as a whole . . . if there are no longer spaces for children that are not conceived as at least partially autonomous from the market and capital-driven forces?" (Aitken, 2001, p. 117). For the kids we discuss in the remainder of this article, a park to-be-saved (or small homes to be preserved, rented, or owned) is not just a park; a house torn down is more than just insulation and sheetrock (indeed for Kal, it was in a poignant poem, the space of memory of simple spaghetti dinners that meant "childhood" to him); and a redesigned community, rendered in architectural blocks, is not just play. Rather, all of these are educational opportunity zones effected through an imaginary often neglected by adults and well worth considering in ongoing research.

Method

The Photovoice project we describe grew organically out of a community–university partnership with a local neighborhood advocacy group. In meetings with the advocacy group's leaders, we formulated the research questions and discussed means of evaluating the efficacy of our work. We placed specific emphasis on Photovoice as it applies to spaces and objects within the participants' neighborhood for safety and philosophical reasons. Meetings with stakeholders, including the youth participants, reinforced a sense of reciprocity and mutual benefit, a key element in community-based research.

Context

The study we conducted took place in a Midwestern city affected by suburban sprawl and the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy in the mid- to late 20th century. The loss of a major car maker in 1963 was devastating for blue-collar workers. Since that time, the city has experienced slightly more than 8% growth in housing, increased unemployment, and a loss of goods and services in high-poverty neighborhoods such as the ones where most of the participating youth live. Almost 28% of residents live below the poverty line and more than a third of children live in poverty. Within the local public school corporation, 76% of all children receive free or reduced lunch (www.sbcsc.k12.in.us). One in five children experiences food insecurity. Moreover, high numbers of families are exposed to unstable employment possibilities and the risks that come with not having health care, insurance, childcare, or social benefits (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Furstenberg et al., 1999; Katz, 2005). Resegregation of schools and neighborhoods coupled with disinvestment in high-poverty neighborhoods locally has created spatialized inequality in a city that makes it difficult for low-income families, but especially low-income families of color, to gain access to material resources and social networks.

Participants

Two groups of students participated in the Photovoice project. The first group, recruited by a neighborhood organization for their geographical proximity to each other (i.e., they technically lived in the same neighborhood, though in very different contexts racially and socioeconomically), comprised four local students. One, an African American female was enrolled in an arts magnet public high school. A junior at the time of the study, she was active in competitive dance and the local Upward Bound TRIO program. Two of the participants in this group were twin African American brothers enrolled at public charter middle school. They were quiet young men, physically large for their age and introspective. They were often tentative in speaking, concerned, we think, because of the onus on testing at their school, with providing the "right" answer to questions early on in the project. With time and trust, their voices got louder and their personalities more pronounced. The fourth member of this group was a White, middle school–aged boy; the son of university professors, he attended a local Montessori school and was active with his basketball team. He had moved recently from a different city and his connection to neighborhood ran first through his family and the bike rides he was able to take around the city.

Approximately once a month for six months, the researchers and neighborhood advocacy group members met with the youth participants for interviews and group conversations focused on various aspects of their daily life they wanted to follow up on. Interviews and conversations focused primarily on (a) the conceptual maps participants created to represent their neighborhoods and the extent to which these maps pushed the boundaries of the neighborhood as defined by the city, (b) descriptions and stories that helped situate the photographs they had taken of their neighborhood within a given context, (c) explanations of the priorities among the issues the participants identified, and (d) contextual information about the participants' family, friends, school, cultural, and extracurricular lives. Students were also asked to, with building blocks, conceive of their ideal neighborhood structure, narrating their choices for the researchers. In addition, they drew, on whiteboard meeting walls, aural and sonic maps of their neighborhoods.

The second group met twice a week for 7 weeks. These 12 low-income African American youth, 3 boys and 9 girls in fourth and fifth grades, participated in various programs at a community center that developed out of a university–community collaboration. For the past 12 years, the center has fashioned a gathering space for learning and building relationships through cultural and academic enrichment, arts education, and youth development. As one of the children put it,

> The center is . . . about inspiring other people to do great things . . . the people who work at the center really care for the kids, they're not here because it's just a job that they have to do.

The 12 fourth- and fifth-grade students with whom we worked were participating in a 12-week course that combined an oral history project of local residents with photography that the city's Center for History now includes in its archives. The children's photographs are also displayed on the walls of the community center. As one child put it poignantly, their photographs "tell a story with a beginning, middle and end—without words." We collaborated with the instructor, a long-time resident of the neighborhood surrounding the center, and a local not-for-profit neighborhood organization, which has sponsored a Photovoice project to enlist youth in community engagement and social change. The children in the photography class agreed to participate in the Photovoice project and the two projects overlapped a great deal.

The children in this group used their artwork, including collage, drawing, map making, and whiteboard art to help adults understand what the children saw as assets in the neighborhood surrounding the center, as well as some of the problems they felt city planners could help solve. They worked at length

in the coding of their own data about the changing face of the immediate space around the center. This informed the proposals they made to the city regarding needed changes in the neighborhood.

For both groups, to document the children's stories, we audiotaped and then transcribed focus group discussions in which the children explained the thinking behind their art, writing, and photography. In addition, we collected and analyzed children's writing, mapping, and artwork samples.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Data collection occurred in a variety of ways. Youth participants used disposable and digital cameras to take photographs in their neighborhoods to capture both those things and spaces they deemed "good" and those that "needed improvement." Participants also engaged in semi-structured interviews and group conversations in which they produced writing about their experiences, drew conceptual maps of their spaces, and coded data they had collected in their time out in the neighborhoods.

All interviews and conversations were recorded and transcribed by the research team. As with all qualitative research, data analysis was an ongoing iterative process, especially as new categories emerged. We used both conceptual and relational content analyses to understand collected artifacts and transcripts. Youth participants worked, primarily verbally, to describe the meaning behind the photos they took, created captions for each photo, and told the story of their neighborhood and/or family. Of particular interest were the youth's reflections on the following questions: (a) What did youth see and learn when taking pictures? (b) What did the pictures prompt the youth to think about in their lives? and (c) How did the pictures or meanings relate to their everyday lives? Creating space for this level of analysis with children was not only methodologically and ethically sound but also pragmatic. It allowed for the authenticity of the work from the vantage point of the participants. Independent of one another, researchers analyzed the photographs, maps, poems, collages, and transcripts for core themes.

As researchers, we then worked alongside each other using relational analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) to understand the implications of the inevitable interconnectivity of the themes that emerged (e.g., the importance of safe spaces, the importance of relationships, community, and a sense of belonging). We discussed our interpretations about specific themes and identified categories while ensuring that we retained the nuance of the individual stories youth told in their photographs, writings, interviews, and focus groups. Discussing our varied interpretations was an essential feature of the analytic process, especially in coming to some consensus about the dominant themes

we discuss in our findings. We hold to the sense from Holstein and Gubrium (2002) that interviewing (and the coding of data from such dialogic moments) encompasses "social encounters in which knowledge is constructed," suggesting "the possibility that the interview" and its interpretation "is not merely a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but is instead a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge itself" (p. 112). We are, then, creating the text of the interview both in the presence of the subjects, but in conversation with each other and ultimately the reader.

Results

Emerging from our analyses is youth's identification of school as an institution that has the potential to create cohesion in a neighborhood. However, such a view depended on their lived experiences and the extent to which they saw schools as places of possibility, nurturing, and care. This is an idea to which we will return in the implications section of our work. Youth shared a collective focus on the value of safe spaces where they each envision a sense of community and relationships, particularly in parks that have the potential to bring diverse groups of people together in a spirit of egalitarianism. Still, they were also aware of the disconnect between their efforts to preserve the memories and history they attached to places and developers' acquisition of these same places as sources for accumulating wealth. Importantly, youth's perceptions of public spaces call attention to their role as cultural critics whose lived experiences help reframe educational opportunity zones and reveal both the uses and abuses of neighborhood spaces.

Parks as Educational Opportunity Zones

There is hope in a park just down the street from Ariel's house, even though her parents do not allow her to play there (for fear of danger) unless it is raining. Occasionally she sneaks out to just *be* amidst the tall cottonwoods, but Ariel laments her inability to bring her little sister and wishes for a space in that park where the neighbors she knows by sight, but not name, might gather, commiserate, and build community.

On a guided walk, Ariel takes a picture at the base of one of the trees, looking up into the spidered light as it drops through the canopy of leaves. While there, near the playground equipment, she finds the leavings of a (perhaps) homeless inhabitant on a bench. Amid the detritus of a tenuous imagined life (the odd blanket, a disheveled rucksack, some spare toiletries), she chooses to take pictures of a Bible left to blow open in the breeze. She notes,

> This could be someone who just needs a little time out here. Maybe they were rich and just lost their job and are trying to get back on their feet. I think the Bible says that there's hope for [this] person. The park gives them somewhere to be, to sleep, and to get back on their feet.

Without any backstory, nor a person to confirm or deny such a gauzy narrative, we are left to ponder the notion that it is perhaps just this person from whom Ariel's parents (the specter of a man, in the dark at the park) hope to protect her by denying her access to the public space. More to the point, however, we are returned to the lament Ariel repeats: that the space is not perceived as safe because the community—and adults in particular—has failed to claim it.

When taking pictures for the project, the twins are driven around by their mother who helps guide their decisions about what photographs they take. She makes a point to take her sons, Ezekiel and Isaiah, to the river where she makes them take pictures of some trees. Although this space is within a mile of their house, they are unable to walk there and when the boys speak of the river and the park attached to it, they are both uncomfortable. It is clear in the pictures they take of the spaces around their house that there is no park for them.

The closest space for recreation, aside from video games in their respective rooms, has become rife with conflict and challenges our understanding of how play has the potential to nurture youth. In the exchange below, Ezekiel and Isaiah tell Maria the extent to which they associate play with argument and fighting if not fear and loathing:

> Ezekiel: This picture of the garage . . . used to be a basketball rim and kids used to come to play basketball and when they had to use the restroom, they'd come in and go and pee and the ball would get all wet. The boy who owned the rim moved.
>
> Maria: Do you miss the rim?
>
> Ezekiel: Sometimes, but kids used to go there and fight over the rim.
>
> Isaiah: Adults fight there too. People were always arguing about it. I don't want to say all the time, but sometimes and they'd try to be the boss cause they're older. We'd be like "we were here first" and the older people would be like, "so take the ball away from us, then."

When Maria asked if they ever got the ball back, the boys just looked down.

As we discussed more photographs, the boys contrasted the abandoned houses on their immediate street with others that are being rehabbed by the

local neighborhood association. They try to capture more hopeful, soothing images. In one instance, Isaiah explains, "I took this picture of a peach house because I never saw a peach house before. I like this one because they have taken the time out to fix houses and [re]make the neighborhood."

Later, when Isaiah speaks about a picture of trees he has taken near his house, he suggests that an abandoned field could be turned into a house but also says that it reminds him of the sun setting at his grandmother's house in Michigan. "My grandma bought a house with a big old field where the sun sets and it was beautiful to see. It makes me happy, I would say." There is a stark contrast between that beauty in open spaces, and the danger of glass, urine, and adults fighting in the closed-in streets of these boys' photos. They are not devoid of hope, of course, but they are ready critics of a space that offers them very little by way of freedom to move. The river is too far to walk on their own, and the only recreation that was relatively safe and in walking distance has been first befouled and second taken away. Absent other options, they dream, with their mother of a house where sunsets feel different; the neighborhood association cannot rehab houses fast enough to keep them in the city.

Unlike Ariel and the twins, Danny lives in short walking distance from a "safe" park. He comments,

> I like Leeper Park because it lets you . . . it's a place where you can just get your energy out and run around and do whatever you want. It gives us a place to play sports and things like that.

When asked if he feels safe there, he nods.

There is a great deal to unpack from the above, but of particular importance is the reality that the three students of color who come from lower socioeconomic status (SES) than Danny do not have open, public spaces that are safe for them to "run around and do whatever" they want. This limits the civic cohesiveness of their neighborhood; the kids are duly aware of that fact, something that comes out in the discussion of saving a park from the threat of private takeover.

For example, Kal recalls not only the house he had lived in, torn asunder but also his concern that the park in his former neighborhood might be bought up and converted into upscale housing. As we mentioned earlier, Kal asserts that "I don't want to see this happen to the park where a lot of good memories have happened." To address this concern, the students at the local community center developed a proposal for upgrading the park, which they then presented not only to the local neighborhood association but also, later, to the mayor of the city. In preparation for the meeting with the mayor, they thought

about marshaling resources. Remembering that the neighborhood association and the community center had previously expressed support, Jan explained, "Well, we can tell the mayor that we have a little support." Going further, the kids debate what support means and who has power over the spaces of their city. Kal pipes up,

> This is my concern. I'm concerned about [the University]. What if they are going to buy the park and turn it into house land? We need the support of the mayor just in case [the University] tries to buy it. And now they're trying to buy all the east side.

Joseph, his friend, opines, "The park is a space that brings people *into* the neighborhood." In that sense, it is an asset that loses its communal draw if privatized. Other students worry that in the absence of the park, their peers will have to cross a dangerous highway to get to the next nearest public recreation space. In all, when kids are asked, they suggest not only the traditional function of a park (a place for play) but also more existential benefits tied to community (it draws people to the neighborhood) and safety (it keeps kids local where they can be protected from traffic). When asked, youth are adept at letting us know that in the absence of organized city programs, "young people . . . respond by forming their own communities which offer protection, a 'family,' and a livelihood" (Aitken, 2001, p. 155). Children engaged at a park, in other words, are not just playing at playing, they are playing at the serious work of forming and maintaining community.

Sidewalks as Liminal Spaces

In this section, we consider the opportunities for movement (and redefinition) provided by the pathways through cities, through neighborhoods. Here we consider sidewalks, unnamed and often ignored alongside the streets they bulwark. We suggest that the ways in which young people move through spaces help them come to define those spaces, and one way to tap into this alternative creation of space is to walk cities with kids, to make side-walking, a mobile, fluid educational opportunity zone. Listening to youth narrate stories based on their experience and youth's perceptions of space allows youth to draw experiential maps for adults, while speaking about their perception of the use and abuse of the spaces around them. For example, as we walk with disposable cameras in hand on a brisk February day, Ariel teaches us about the things that adults fail to see. Along the way, she focuses on the stories we need to hear. She says of the park near her house that adults "would feel disgusted" about the space, while she does not "think that way because there's

somebody who has to sleep here and why can't we find somewhere for this person to sleep?" She continues, "You can't really help what fate has handed to you. You just need to strive to get out of that situation."

When we suggest that perhaps taking photographs is her way of striving to get someone out of that very situation by raising awareness, she turns us onto the street where she lives in the shadow of the park; as we walk further from the park and her home, the lots and houses get bigger and further away from the street. She comments on this transition:

> People might see this picture and say this is a nice neighborhood. People might drive by and these are big beautiful houses. And someone might see and not know what happened [there was an assault]. Like, you start coming down Wilber and you see these big houses and you see then these little houses and you wonder, well, what do they do with these tiny homes with little yards. People might think, that there's a money difference. But some of the big houses are going up for sale because of foreclosure and some of the people on our block own their houses. But people don't know that.

As we walked, the contour line of the street and sidewalk beside it took us from what might have been a nondescript park, through a tidy block with houses jostling for space, onto older brick and stone homes with long driveways and all the outward trappings of wealth. But we did not know the history, the context. Ariel did and our sense of the space came to be contextualized through her narration.

As we walk in a different section of the neighborhood, Danny emphasizes the problems he sees with graffiti:

> . . . that's the thing I don't like in my neighborhood. The graffiti. It makes the neighborhood not as good to look at, you know? People who go by see it and . . . they, like oh, that's an old building and it's got graffiti on it and they stop thinking about what it really is.

The point is not, of course, that adults miss the significance of graffiti, but rather that youth recognize its problematic nature in surprisingly mature ways: Not only does it affect, perhaps, safety (if these are gang markings) but also the perception of visitors. Will this mean that fewer people will live in the area? Does it make it easier to take over and convert, then, for different and private use? It is not clear what the answers are, but Danny has more of a sense of the potential problems than we adults might otherwise recognize. He sees a map of his space, and it is outlined by graffiti, parks, and public schools more than it is by official neighborhood demarcations and historic designation markers. We were constantly reminded, as we walked with the

youth in this project, as they narrated their lived experiences, of Antonio Machado's *Proverbios Y Cantares–XXIX*: "se hace camino al andar," we make the road by walking. Youth are making and remaking sense of the neighborhoods through which they traverse (or are not allowed to traverse) constantly, it matters that we listen to the meaning they make precisely because the roads they are making in their (not) walking can give us profound insights into what they need from the spaces of their lives.

Schools and Community Centers

One of the underexplored aspects of school choice policies remains the way in which neighborhood cohesion in cities, in particular, is disrupted, when the notion of community as manifest through a local neighborhood public school is eliminated. In the midst of an exercise with architectural blocks, where the youth were asked to design their ideal neighborhood, we became part of a discussion about the value of schools in spaces.

Danny, discussing his ovoid construction with circular and bisecting roads, observed the essential elements in his space: "Th[e]se six right there are houses because I didn't want to make too many. That would be a bank, a restaurant, and a store. This was going to be a school and a playground and a pool." Stuart wondered why there was a school—it was the largest structure by far—in his space, particularly because his parents drove him to a private Montessori, bypassing the neighborhood public school on the way. He replied, "I would say [it's] pretty important" to have a local school "because adults don't want to drive far to take their kids there . . . and if they meet their friends in the school, the friends would be close by, if it was in a neighborhood."

We call attention to the civic sensibility of Danny's take on public schooling because he seemed to develop a sense that perhaps he was missing out on something by not attending the local public school. But we also note what he says in light of comments made by Ariel whose friends from high school are both afraid to spend time in her neighborhood and shocked that she lives on a street with abandoned houses. When local public schools fall by the wayside, local relationships (and civic cohesion) suffers. As a consequence, relationships become impossible for kids who, like the twins Isaiah and Ezekiel, rely on their parents for transportation and would have to rely on kids coming from outside their immediate context to visit them.

Ariel offers an expansive vision when she explains that she "would have a school that's walking distance, not necessarily private, but public. And stores and libraries, recreation centers and gyms . . . " All of these spaces are, by our measure, educational opportunity zones for Ariel. She does not, in any way,

view them as atomized nor interchangeable but, rather, is exploring the sense that a neighborhood becomes a community when there are certain publicly provided spaces; private enterprise plays a role (stores) but a small one. Ariel goes on to talk about how peers at her high school refuse to visit her at her home because they view her neighborhood, which is distant from the campus, as unsafe mostly because it is foreign to them. She loses, in the absence of a community school (and a community gym, and a community recreation center), amenities through which to create a neighborhood and the relationships that might sustain her learning. She is not hopeless but rather locates hope in a public sphere where an urban public school anchors a healthy neighborhood.

Isaiah and Ezekiel are much more concerned about physical safety than their peers. Although the twins live a half-mile from Danny, they often hear gunshots on their block and lament the drinking and carousing that can turn to fighting in the street. In their imaginary spaces, the twins focus on community centers, which provide structure and the screening mechanisms to ensure that violence remains on the streets, without the disciplinary and punitive associations they make with their daily experiences in school. Isaiah tells us,

> I want to talk about this [structure]. It has a rope hanging down from the bottom and it's like a gym and playground where you climb the rope to get in and there's a ladder on the side to get in. These two are two twin towers with a lot of jobs. When you graduate from high school you could go there and see what job you will do. And this one is a mall and it has a lot of stores in it so you don't have to jump place to place.

The ladder and the rope are retractable into the buildings. Although they are whimsical structures (it's play, after all, to have to climb up a rope to get into a place), they can be turned into fortresses if necessary. Later, the brothers revisit this inward looking theme when asked to imagine a dream home, which they both place on the ocean with lots of windows that are tinted and also one-way mirrors. They can look out, in other words, but not be looked in upon. And there is a moat.

Clearly, safety matters for these boys in particular. Although they do not locate safety and engagement in a centralized school as Danny does, they still crave spaces for play in a gym or playground. Isaiah says as much:

> I would have a neighborhood where kids could go to a park without getting into trouble and parents watched their children so they won't get in trouble; I would have a community center where parents and kids could go so they have, like family time and that's it.

We note the consistent focus from all four of the youth here on publicly maintained, civic spaces. As well, their continued focus on recreation centers returns us to the notion that for students, the main concern is safety to, in essence, *be childish* without facing danger.

Schools, Nespor (1997) reminds us, "have social histories" (p. 23). These social histories are not internally bound as, of course, schools exist in policy networks as circuits through which interactions between curriculum, people, and policies are routed. To forget that schools are products and producers of community means that we forget all of the ways in which schools are connected to the stories of the spaces around them, to the people around them, to the sidewalks, the parks, and community centers that might or might not exist in proximity. What our students have allowed us to envision here is the creation of "life histories" (p. 198) of neighborhoods and public schools, through the conceptual maps built by children literally with architectural blocks but also through photography, drawing, and most importantly discussion.

Conclusion

Photovoice, as a methodology, provides the beginning of a conversation with children about the ways in which educational opportunity zones might be reconsidered. Asking youth to take pictures, to narrate maps, to collect data, and to propose changes to an audience comprising public officials expands on the photographic base of the method and it also engages kids in a more robust practice of literacy outside of school. The key from a research standpoint is listening to students while using the art they create as a transitional object through which to tell counter-stories. That listening, of necessity, must consider broadly where education happens for kids. Although schools matter, the life histories of those schools and of neighborhoods are uniquely constructed through the varied experiences of youth.

We believe our work helps challenge dominant narratives, derived from power and racial privilege, that ignore the reality of youth's day-to-day lives and their capacity for contributing to positive change. Indeed, we challenge who gets to speak and in whose interests, whose voices matter, and whose voices are silenced. Unfortunately, as Danny tells us in the introduction, "Kids don't have much of a say" in how developers conceive of urban spaces.

Youth's stories prompt us to reimagine the spaces that we inhabit, the histories that are sedimented in a racialized landscape of fragmentation and decay, and the capacity of youth to see significance in what we have referred to elsewhere (Greene, Burke, & McKenna, 2013) as the Adult–Child Imaginary. Thus, we have sought to create a space in the Photovoice project we describe to hear youth's voices. Given the opportunity, youth become

cultural critics who deliberate, analyze, and critique education and educational spaces. Their explanations reflect an accumulated knowledge of the worlds they inhabit, and they reveal the capacity for leadership that their teachers may simply be unaware of in schools that emphasize test preparation and standards. Ariel believes that teachers "just don't really care" about what students know, who they are, or where they come from despite Ariel's insistence that all of these things "make you who you are." We know that teachers care profoundly, but there has become something about the structure and curriculum of schooling that makes that caring much less obviously manifest in the lives of a great many students.

Documenting their neighborhoods through Photovoice and the stories that accompanied their pictures, however, youth challenge a reductive view of children as needing testable skills. Instead, they provide powerful interpretations, preserving history and attributing dignity and humanity to the people who live around them. Indeed, as they read, write, draw, and present their work, they provide critical reinterpretations of the realities of their experiences which, for most, remain on the periphery in the minds of developers who seek to attract wealth to an economically troubled city. Tearing neighborhoods apart for the sake of, say, putting in a charter school or new housing misses the ways that children use these spaces to extend their educations. We argue for the value of spending time walking with kids in our research, seeing "on the ground level" where they learn and how. Acting on what we hear youth tell us can enable city planners to design space, community, neighborhood with them in mind.

We have learned to listen to youth's stories, but we have also learned that it is not enough to provide opportunities for analysis and critique of the discursive tensions between what is and what could be (Weinstein & West, 2012). Art is the discursive space through which to examine these tensions and the structures that stand in the way of a more equitable distribution of material resources that would enable youth to flourish. These resources include safe spaces to do the hard work of creating relationships. But while helping to give voice to the tensions that exist between what is and what could be, we would be remiss if we did not also take responsibility for helping kids navigate the economic and institutional barriers that they confront each and every day (see also Weinstein & West, 2012). The youth we have worked with need support in the process of using art and language to become agents of change as they return to the realities—and disappointments—of their day-to-day lives in under-resourced schools and neighborhoods. Low (2011) puts it well when she observes that teachers and after-school programs can forge connections between home and school to foster children's emerging sense of leadership, creativity, initiative, and civic responsibility as a

form of social action. It is important that these things are "recognized and supported in both places" (p. 151). Of particular importance is creating multiple spaces where youth's voices and identities are given legitimacy.

In the end, we echo Kinloch's (2013) sense that research should continue to examine how children, youth, and adults

> make sense of our own spaces, how we come to, or are taught to, question the meanings of the spaces we occupy, and how spaces help to foster our sense of agency, of power, and of belonging to something or someone or to somewhere.

In turn, she asks,

> How might a focus on place, particularly in low-income gentrifying communities, awaken not only a sense of belonging to place, but a sense of urgency for community and university partners to insist on safe and equitable learning and living conditions?

This is a significant question. After all, as we have argued elsewhere relationships are necessary for telling stories in safe spaces, for learning to foster connections to community, and for cultivating an ethic of civic engagement.

As Greene (2013) pointed out, children and families in low-income neighborhoods are adversely affected by policies that limit their access to adequate resources in the neighborhood where they live, and by power that determines how resources are distributed. For example, shifts in the economy during the past 30 years have helped some families flourish, but economic factors have also hollowed out the core of urban neighborhoods with the departure of factories, limited opportunities for employment, and the loss of essential goods and services. In turn, urban renewal and gentrification (Greene, 2013; Lipman, 2011) have had the effect of spatially isolating and marginalizing low-income families of color who do not have access to material resources, such as bookstores or libraries, proximity to stable sources of employment, public transportation, and safe spaces where children can grow and develop. A changing urban landscape has also fragmented low-income communities, so that parents can no longer rely on social networks as significant sources of capital to ensure that they might have a voice in the decision-making process that affects their children in schools. Disinvestment and funding disparities map all-too-neatly onto the racial and ethnic realities of schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The youth whose voices we hear want well-maintained open-access spaces where they can *do* and *be* without fear. Aitken (2001) warns of educational cycles of disruption (or reform, say) meant to "prepare children for . . .

uncertainty with increasingly short cycles of radical reform in an attempt to engender a sufficiently flexible body of human capital" (p. 142). It is possible to close neighborhood schools, en masse, in other words if we see children as largely faceless and interchangeable, just as we see space and buildings as ahistorical and geographically disconnected. The imposed and/or assumed need for grist to an increasingly efficient economic mill fails to account for the very real ways in which "spaces and places . . . embed and contextualize children" (p. 116) and are embedded and contextualized by children most especially when thinking about the symbolic and cultural value of a school or a community center and their attendant social networks.

In the end, we argue that engaging youth in the multiple affordances of literacy can help complicate both the visible and invisible signs of inequity within schools and communities that mask seemingly democratic principles of equal opportunity and access. Youth need the educational and rhetorical spaces that value their experiences (see also Roberts et al., 2008), give them the ability to engage in critical, creative analyses of their lived experiences, and resist others' constructions of who they are. These, we think, are educational opportunity zones and we can find them in conversation on sidewalks, in public parks, really anywhere where youth are engaged in discussions about what they value and where they find inspiration and truth.

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