Innovative Approaches to Access and Equity for All Learners

Teaching (for) Spatial Justice is Teaching (for) Social Justice

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Toward a Spatial Justice Pedagogy
As teacher educators, our teaching and learning practice aims to center critical and place-based pedagogies. By rooting our methods, foundational courses, and field experiences around the strengths, needs, and context of local place, we provide teacher candidates a model, and an opportunity to learn with and from the community in which they will teach. In this article, we (Kaitlin and Tim) share learning experiences that we used with undergraduate students to better connect issues of equity, place, and social justice to classroom teaching and learning. It is our hope that the lessons will provide an impetus for classroom teachers to integrate issues of spatial justice (Soja, 2010) into student-led projects or activism to deepen their connections to the potentialities of their local communities (Stovall, Calderon, Carrera, & King, 2009).

We root our thinking under the broad conception of spatial justice (Soja, 2010) acknowledging that notions of space and spatial justice vary dramatically from physical place, to learning from the land (Simpson, 2014), to more post-structuralist understandings of relational space (Murdoch, 2006; Rodriguez, 2017). For this particular article we tend to leave more theoretical framings aside to focus on the material inequalities and unequal (power) relations of physical place. In advocating for spatial justice, Soja (2010) argues we should start with the “view that the spatiality of (in)justice affects society and social life just as much as social processes shape the spatiality or specific geography of (in)justice” (p. 5). Generally, we believe (critical) educators are well served by focusing much more deeply on critical and place-based pedagogies that center the life experiences of students and their communities in order to work toward purposeful and relevant learning opportunities aimed at social/spatial change (Guillen & Zeichner, 2018; Popielarz, 2018; Schlemper, Stewart, Shetty, & Czajkowski, 2018). Such a practice challenges traditional methods because the knowledge and cultural heritage of students become the driving force of what is taught and learned in the classroom (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Thus, critical and place-based pedagogies emphasize a more equitable and humanizing education that also emboldens educators to link their teaching and learning practices to the strengths and knowledges of local communities (Katsarou, Picower, & Stovall, 2013).

In this short article, we provide examples as to how future and current teachers can develop an understanding of critical and place-based pedagogies to aid student success and build a sustaining practice within their own classrooms. In this way, engagement in place extends to a multitude of future spaces they will (re)create and (re)encounter (Del Vecchio, Toomey, & Tuck, 2017; Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014). Significantly, this chapter fills a gap in linking a practical understanding of place/space with developing, implementing, and revising critical and place-based pedagogies for current and future teachers (Helfenbein & Taylor, 2009). Acknowledging that our work for socially just and equitable teacher education is always becoming, we share collaborative dialogue about the lessons we are actively learning from in order to model such a practice in higher education for teacher candidates.

While our work is situated within Detroit, Michigan and Columbia, South Carolina, it is our intention to engage the
reader in generative thought about the possibilities and limitations of critical and place-based pedagogies for social justice and equity within all of their own schools and communities (Soja, 2010). Our hope is that this article pushes teachers towards developing critical and place-based pedagogies for their own teaching and learning practices (Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, & Henning, 2016). Our objective is “to simulate new ways of thinking about and acting to change the unjust geographies in which we all live” (Soja, 2010, p. 5).

In turn, we may join with our students and communities in collectively (re)creating more sustaining and humanizing school and community spaces (Ares, 2011; Valenzuela, Zamora, & Rubio, 2015). For through critical and place-based practices, educational opportunities can be a powerful agent to help remake our immediate environments and locales (Taylor, 2018).

Learning Experiences

Kaitlin’s Example

Within a PreK-8 social studies methods course, teacher candidates participated in a community engaged learning experience by taking the opportunity to learn about a specific person, event, neighborhood, community site, and/or social issue within Detroit (Haddix, 2015). The assignment to curate a community asset map prompted teacher candidates to focus upon the community cultural wealth of a particular aspect of Detroit, which correlated to teacher candidates (re)learning of the social studies for elementary classrooms (Yosso, 2005). Following their community engaged learning experience, teacher candidates shared their community asset mapping with their peers in order to engage in generative and reflexive dialogue pertaining to their developing cultural and social awareness. In turn, each teacher candidate was invited to learn how specific people (Motown), event (Detroit 1967 Rebellion), neighborhood (The Heidelberg Project), community site (The Detroit Institute of Arts), or social issue (climate justice and the Great Lakes waterways) in Detroit could be connected to social studies for current and future students in order to make meaningful connections in the elementary classroom. Multi-modal resources — practitioner articles from Rethinking Schools, podcasts such as NPR’s Code Switch, and documentary films like Detroit 48202: Conversations Along a Postal Route — acted as paired texts to the place-conscious learning experiences of teacher candidates. In addition, teacher candidates engaged in adult ally workshops facilitated by Detroit-based grassroots youth organizations in order to connect the identities of students and local communities to the classroom curriculum.

Following this community-engaged learning experience, teacher candidates utilized their community asset map to inspire the curation of a lesson and/or unit plan project grounded in critical and place-based pedagogies. Through this experience, teacher candidates connected the Michigan K-8 State Standards and the NCSS C3 Framework to the community of their students for relevant and justice-oriented learning opportunities. Teacher candidates were prompted to break free from the confinement of traditional social studies curricular and pedagogical practices allowing for students to engage in their role as active community members and citizens (Ladson-Billings, 2003). For example, after learning more about the necessity of climate justice to address the growing concerns of rising water levels in Detroit, one teacher candidate developed a unit plan for second grade students to (1) determine how human activity is causing the water levels of the Detroit River to rise, (2) analyze how rising water levels impact humans and the Detroit ecosystem, and (3) develop and present possible solutions to mitigate rising water levels in Detroit. This assignment was inspiring for this particular teacher candidate as she recently marched during the 2019 global Climate Strike in Detroit, which was led by one of the youth-led grassroots youth organizations that visited our social studies methods course. At the end of the semester, teacher candidates expressed an increased capacity, knowledge, and self-efficacy in developing critical and place-based practices within their current and future classrooms.

Tim’s Example

Within an undergraduate foundations of education class, Schools and Society, students participated in an assignment to investigate how particular places are (re)made. The assignment called on students to visit, and then critically analyze, a (hyper)local place, specifically one with a powerful, although often hidden, history of
uplift, struggle, and/or continual in/justice. The goal being to interrogate what stories are told about places, by whom, and why? Perhaps more theoretically why is this place the space it is at this particular moment in time? Further, how might we as educators include such intentional engagements about the “historical sedimentation of spatial injustice” (Taylor, 2018, p. 189) within the curriculum? Taylor (2018) offers the example of her high school which even as a former school for freed slaves had Confederate flags painted on cafeteria walls and the “Lil’ Colonel” as its mascot. Taylor (2018) then challenges educators to disrupt pernicious place-remaking that “depends on an intentional and false separation between educating young people in the present and histories of race, politics, and power” (p. 188).

To develop a critical eye towards place(re-making), and the long reach of spatial injustice, students read, and the class discussed, a number of accessible articles and media pieces before starting the assignment. Some of these included two podcasts about community and school segregation (Gross 2017; Hannah-Jones, 2015) and Ta-Nehisi Coates’ (2014) longform essay, The Case for Reparations, which highlights the lasting consequences of red-lining. Further, the class tied such readings to South Carolina’s abhorrent funding, and maintenance of public schools, the so-called “Corridor of Shame” (Ferillo, 2005; Wellington, 2004) that serve rural students of color. In final preparation for the assignment, Taylor’s (2018) reflection of place-remaking served as a general framework for students to follow. In an effort to share (critical) knowledge about the places around us, students created a brief five slide presentation to share with peers in small groups. Beside visual representations of their visit, students discussed the place in relation to the critical material we covered in class, and the potential to bring this place into school curriculum. Two examples of student selections include:

- The Carver Theatre, Columbia, SC: Built in 1941, it was one of Columbia’s exclusive African-American theatres during segregation. The student mentioned that although she passes the building every day, she had never taken the time to read the historical marker, look inside, or engage with the lasting legacies of segregation around her.

- Barr Street High School, Lancaster, SC: This high school is an example of a segregated school for Black children that continues to serve as a community center. Not only did the student walk the (former) school, but she talked with her grandmother who attended the school. Through this conversation and visit the student remarked, “although Barr Street was a segregated school, it had quality education, sports, and staff. The people who worked with Barr Street cared for their students, and I think that’s why it was successful.” The student reflected on how place can serve as a way to (re)connect us with those around us and suggested places such as Barr Street can be used in/as the curriculum as an impetus for children to learn with/from their elders in the community.

Growth, Possibility, and Implications for Classroom Teaching/Learning

We contend that critical and place-based practices within PreK-12 and higher education classrooms have the potential to facilitate transformative social change in our local communities. By engaging with our students in learning opportunities rooted in the context of place, we are inspired to push forward new ideas for humanizing teaching and learning. This has required us (Kaitlin and Tim) to engage in active (re)learning alongside our students about the struggle for social and spatial justice in the communities we teach. This is not easy. It is work that we approach with humility and openness, acknowledging that we are often guests in new places. However, both pedagogically and reflexively, this purposeful, slow, and time-consuming work encourages us to ground our teaching and learning in relationships to our shared communities (Ulmer, 2017). In turn, we often find ourselves challenged to move beyond traditional education reforms as we collaborate with community members and grassroots organizations, rather than disconnected bureaucrats, for transformative social change (Love, 2019). Although not immediate, we join our students as we weave spatial justice into our critical and place-based pedagogical and curricular practices for limitless possibilities understanding that we have much to learn and many different people/places to learn from.
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References


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