Reconstructing Space Through the Arts

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Abstract: The restrictive structures that constitute the placeness of school oftentimes diminish student potential. Arts integration in after school settings can disrupt norms by using contemporary arts practices to engage sociocultural contexts, shift social order, and foster belonging. This collective, instrumental case study of Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education's (CAPE) after school classes investigated 1) how space was created in arts integrated after school environments and 2) how spatial engagement impacted learning, artmaking, and identity.

Conceptual framework

There are historical patterns of oppression in what and whose knowledge is valued in a learning environment. Students sense the parts of themselves that are extended or constrained, limiting projected possibilities and potential future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This can be compounded in places dually shaped by systemic racism and community resilience, including the parts of Chicago where this study was conducted (Ewing, 2018). In this way, space is relational, historical, and political (Massey, 2005).

Place is what is known; it functions as the implicit structure shaping norms and relations (Bourdieu, 1977). Space is a relational process shaped by power and possibility which is never fully enclosed and spills across environments (Massey, 2005). The era of high stakes testing has contributed to placeness in schools defined by systemic norms of depersonalization that structure evaluation using narrow, assimilative performance measures. Although students may sense bounds within a school's placeness they are not monolithic. By disrupting the placeness of school through art practices, students can recenter themselves in a learning experience inclusive of their ways of being in the world (Paris, 2012).

Methods

This study builds on CAPE's research-practice partnerships wherein networks of teacher-artist partners engage in collaborative inquiry. In 2018-2019, partners explored the idea of space in professional development (see Figures 1a-b) and strategized how to spatially engage students. This collective, instrumental case study investigated the impact of spatial engagement on students in one performance and one dance class which were purposefully selected for comparison (Creswell & Poth, 2018) at two urban public schools serving students who are dominantly Black (over 85%) and meet low income designations (over 70%). Data sources included interviews (5), observations (4), written reflections, memos, artifacts, and digital portfolios. Data was triangulated and analyzed using in vivo, open coding which formed larger themes after multiple passes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings

Teacher and artist partners processed social activity with students to develop critical awareness in their active role in constructing space. Both classes moved students between mental and social processes to make visible what shapes experiences in proximal and distal contexts. Class activities disrupted the placeness of school by recentering knowledge with intellectual practices inclusive of emotional and bodily knowledge (hooks, 1994). The examples below explore how classes recreated space by engaging sociocultural contexts, shifting the social order, and cultivating a sense of belonging.

The dance class situated student concerns as points of inquiry to explore embodiment of social justice through movement. For example, the class examined the role of power in stereotypes and the relationship between stereotypes, places, safety, and body language. Figure 1d displays a student created character from a writing exercise investigating perspectives about safety and belonging across places. Students progressed from mental to social processes by reflecting, dialoging, choreographing, and refining their ability to use their knowledge and organize as an ensemble as awareness of each others' experiences and body language grew (see Figure 1c). The teaching artist described valuing emotional and bodily knowledge: "there's nothing wrong with how you feel… how do we take that and how do we embody that in movement and it almost becomes therapeutic" (*Interview*, 052819). With students driving creative expression by making sense of experiences, normative hierarchies were disrupted and expressive potential was expanded. As a student shared "Here, I just feel like I can open myself up and express myself because the teacher allows it and won't say 'Oh, you're not doing it right'" (*Interview*, 052819). Therefore, space was understood through artmaking as constructed and a reproduction of power dynamics.

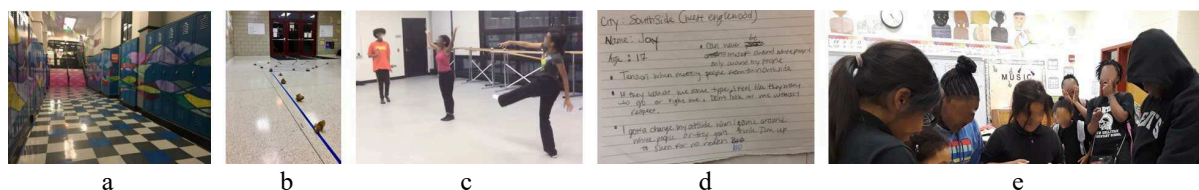| a | b | c | d | e |

Figure 1. Documentation includes site-specific art analyzed (a) and created to embody spatial relations (b) from PD, dance phrase on accountability (c), student writing (d), and a tableau depicting inclusion and exclusion (e).

Art making activated the past, processed the present, and projected students' agency to shape the future in the performance class's inquiry into how students perceive the world and their place in it (Heidegger, 1962). For example, students represented inclusive and exclusionary social activity through tableaus (or frozen pictures) to be read as a text of space (see Figure 1e). The instructors guided students to hear multiple perspectives and used social phenomena as a spatial material to explore and reconstruct. The teacher described how social activity became part of the artmaking: "How do we observe what's happening amongst [students] and making this a different kind of space so they can work through some of the choices that they're making in relationships… or the way that they received certain treatment and not internalizing things" (*Interview* 060419). One student reflected on how conceptualizing space as malleable through art impacted their sense of agency: "I see how it changes my life with my art by using my brain, my knowledge, of what happened in the past and what is happening now. I use those to change my life" (*Interview,* 060419). As students' awareness grew through reconstructing space, the placeness of school was disrupted and gave way to reimagining social relations.

Discussion

As students used dialogic practices to analyze art and social activity, their identities and learning potentials were expanded along with shared creative responsibility. The realization of interdependence between oneself and others leads to a satisfying self-concept as understanding such connections is necessary for agency and relationships (Lapan, 2004). Realizing interdependence enabled students to see space as built from and inclusive of their emotional, social, and cognitive selves—both their responsibility to continually recreate and a space they belong.

By attending to the intertwining and constructed nature of proximal and distal spaces, students made sense of life experiences through artmaking in relation to each other and their communities. When space is understood as constructed, the potential for self-construction of identity and relations becomes possible (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Scholars have discussed authentic relations outside of norms as spatially transformative (Gutiérrez, 2008; Heidegger, 1962; Massey, 2005). Oftentimes, arts pedagogy is sentimentally discussed, however relational ethics are distinctly political (Massey, 2005). Politics and power organize an educational environment which can signal goals of assimilation or interdependent self-determination. Art practices can make relationships between implicit norms and power structures visible. Making such arrangements visible is consequential for self-determination of identity and questioning dominant values particularly in communities that have been socially and racially marginalized. This has implications in how learning environments can deconstruct places, reconstruct spaces, and expand more just possibilities.

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