

KID CULTURE: NEIGHBORHOOD EXPLORATION THROUGH ENRICHMENT CLUSTERS

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Public school calendars of cultural and historical events are a resource for those who want to view cultural exchange at work. Urban environments give students the opportunity to understand folklore through connecting to their neighborhood and describing their experiences. A 2007 enrichment project at P.S. 261 in Brooklyn, New York introduced local lore and solicited students' responses to literature, visual presentations, and neighborhood walks in a study of their own neighborhood. Students were encouraged to record with all of their senses, cognitive mapping, interviewing, photographing, diagramming, and planning food tasting to relate their experiences in their neighborhoods.

How to Get Famous in Brooklyn was used as an inspirational piece of literature to tap students' knowledge and awareness of places in their neighborhoods. Third grade students in the Enrichment Cluster Project had done neighborhood study in grade 1 and the bridge study in grade 2 and so were quite aware of the working environment of their world. Daily travel to school by walking and taking subways, buses and cars provides various levels of awareness and involvement, as does experiencing playgrounds, games, parks, favorite stores and restaurants, gathering places, places they go with parents, street memorials, funeral traditions, and even lost or changing places.

The book *The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey* was used to stimulate conversation about transportation, and harbor life in New York City. Students created a model of New York Harbor, the working home of the historic fireboat that was activated as an evacuation boat on 9/11. The book emphasizes the working fireboat's value as a survivor of an earlier time on New York Harbor. Students appreciate the will of restorers to keep the boat as well as the heroic use of it for a present day event.

Social Outcomes

Visual presentations of street memorials stimulated conversations about death, remembering loved ones, accidents, and funerary practices in families and communities in the city. Students adopted the appropriate moods for these presentations. In fact, the social outcomes of local lore were many, reflecting the importance of recognizing the value children give to their own experiences. Students demonstrated pride in discovering their culture and sharing other students' cultures.

Students shared their interests and concerns about their community, their play spaces, and their safety and illustrated neighborhood planning strategies to implement model neighborhoods. Their sense of belonging was enhanced because they researched and presented material on their own culture, traditions, customs and choices within their living environment. Play was affirmed and

categorized as “just fun,” and serious play as an interesting means to understand and communicate “kid” culture. Lastly, students became skilled fieldworkers and evaluators of their own lore.

What Teachers Learned

Students were less interested in the monuments and museums of Brooklyn than the everyday life within their neighborhood. Their stories were travel narratives of “spatial practice,” as in Asim and Eli’s model of their favorite park before the renovation planned by the Parks Department. They related exactly which activity took place in each space of the park, taking ownership of the space. Other students showed their skills as keen observers and recorders of physical space, showing how changes to that space impact their daily experiences. Emeka and friends demonstrated the use of space where they played games before and during the renovation of their school playground. Although they spoke nostalgically about the loss of particular corners of the schoolyard, they pointed out new small spaces which they had adopted for their games during the playground renovation.

Students recognize ‘folk’ culture and the dynamic clustering of culture as a concept of generative life in the city. They are receptors and communicators of culture, enthusiastic about learning and sharing their own customs. Ali and Raymond’s model of ‘life on the block’ related what Michel de Certeau refers to as “spatial narratives...narrated adventures, producing geographies of actions” signaling where they observe their own culture being transmitted, where they shop, eat and spend time with relatives in the Middle Eastern stores and restaurants on Atlantic Avenue (1984, 115-16).

Students are receptors and transmitters of lore involved in making themselves “famous in Brooklyn,” as the book *How to Get Famous in Brooklyn* suggests. Participation in activities and festivals in their neighborhoods as well as daily travel and use of the neighborhood roots students actively in their environment. They proudly display a sense of ownership, enthusiasm and confidence in knowing their own displays of culture. In addition, students utilize their own cultural codes and ‘kidspeak’ for their neighborhood and playground. These codes are not necessarily understood or used by adults, and that may be the point; students like to own their place in their local environment.

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