What Can I Change Where I Am?
A Cross-Cultural Photographic Exchange on Social Justice

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My Lived Experience
My initiation into urban teaching was one that I will never forget. The feelings of excitement and anticipation quickly dissipated as the first group of students entered the classroom. One by one they swept in, faces twisted into hateful glares, cackling in disapproval of my presence. That was how it seemed to me on that day. My thoughts of empowering underprivileged urban kids quickly vanished as the classroom became a whirring kaleidoscope of noise and raucous activity. The students were eager to push me out of the door, just as they had the other seven art teachers over the past four years. As I looked out at the drawing tables, now moving like souped up cars on hydraulics as the students lifted them off the floor, I realized I was in for the biggest challenge of my life. Never before had I been met with such opposition. Tears welled up in my eyes. I swallowed hard and began a journey that would almost break me.

I faced violence on a daily basis for an entire year. Children hurt me physically and emotionally. I feared for my life every day I went to work. I was misunderstood and judged by teachers, administrators, and students. Every challenge imaginable was literally thrown my way. I was threatened, my room was repeatedly vandalized, kids cut my hair, and a bullet went through my classroom while I was teaching. The list goes on and on. In my mind, I arrived there to help but was broken by the resistance I faced. I was a cultural outsider. I was not to be trusted, like most adults my students encountered. Still, I would not quit. I wanted to teach. It wasn’t about me. I know this now.

This is a story of how I fell in love with urban teaching by using photography and social justice as a pathway to understanding a culture outside of my own. Looking back, I had no idea how much I didn’t understand about my students’ lives, or them about mine. Hindsight has opened my eyes to this hazing ritual, allowing me to see why they reacted in this way. Adults usually leave them. Teachers rarely stay. They had little faith in education, let alone educators. Once they realized I wasn’t the enemy, things changed.

Living in fear for a year leveled the playing ground for me. I learned what it was like to be afraid, a sort of shared experience that has made me more empathetic with the struggles my current students encounter in their daily lives. I have since transferred to a different urban school where my love of teaching has endured. I realize that if my first year had been idyllic, I would not be able to listen now and truly hear what my students are going through.

I used my experiences to study ways to empower students, which led me to create an after-school photo club for a group of six fifth-grade students. I challenged the kids to consider issues of injustice they see in their world, using photographs and words to tell a story through their eyes. To do this, I had to create trust, be empathetic, and share my own experiences. It was a collaborative, reflexive space where I learned about their lives and they learned about mine through discussions of social injustice.

I share my story with hope that it may encourage other art teachers struggling to connect with stu-
students from a cultural standpoint. After describing the theory that informed my practice, I will discuss how the photo club worked and then focus on one of my student's stories to show the positive progression of events the research inspired for both me and my students.

**Urban Educational Insights**

One of the most important insights into urban educational theory I have gained is the importance of listening to and learning from students (Weiner, 2006). Too often, urban teachers are disheartened by challenging working environments and cannot see the beauty in their students nor the significance of their jobs as teachers. Discovering what happens to urban students outside of the classroom is integral to realizing their strengths (Delpit, 2006). My research has helped to open my eyes to the reality of urban life, and in so doing, has enabled me to see the strength and resiliency within my students, who often face unmentionable hardships on a daily basis.

I realized a need to create a more progressive, student-centered approach to teaching in order to connect with my students. Brent Wilson (2008) suggests working collaboratively in small groups with students in an informal pedagogical setting. I wanted to work with a small group of students on a central project in order to learn more about their culture. I decided the best way to achieve my goal was to create an after-school photography club.

**Empowered Photography 101**

Olivia Gude (2009) speaks of the urgency of coupling art making with social justice as a means of student motivation and empowerment. I built the foundation of my study upon that belief. My goals were to teach students about photography, to engage them in discussions about social injustice in their lives, and to empower them to communicate such issues through photography. I asked my students to consider the following question: “What can I change where I am?” Each student chose a social justice theme to support with a photographic essay. Not only did the students learn how to use a camera and ways photography has been used as a medium for social change throughout history, they also became articulate about their chosen social justice cause through photography and words.

Programs like after-school photography clubs provide important opportunities to connect with and learn from students in small, informal settings. Urban teachers are bombarded by large class sizes and hectic schedules, which can make forming rapport with students difficult. The small group of kids I got to know during my study is a perfect example of creating a progressive solution for urban art education. We worked together discussing big ideas of social injustice and brainstormed ways of taking pictures to execute them. While I taught the kids how to use a camera and the ways photographers have used their medium to shed light on social injustices, the kids taught me about their lives.

I had a group of hard-working, passionate girls and boys who were eager to talk about issues of injustice within their community. Each student chose themes of injustice close to home. Martha, an asthmatic, chose to speak out against her mother’s smoking habit. Jack worried about the dangers of the street, specifically being followed. He photographed scenes from the hip, providing the anxiety and tension one would feel being chased down the street (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Ghost](image1.jpg)

Figure 1. Ghost

![Figure 2. Outside Surprise.](image2.jpg)

Figure 2. Outside Surprise.
Donna was concerned about stray animals and appreciated the safety of her home. Her father, a single dad, raised her sister and her on his own. She photographed him cooking dinner. Additionally, she snapped images of pit bulls and cats in the alleyways. Rose and Sarah Jane felt disgusted by the imposing litter problem within their neighborhood. Rose focused in on the trash littering what would be a beautiful stream, if not for all of the garbage. Sarah Jane looked outside of her window and on her street for evidence of trash in her environment (see Figure 2).

Finally, John chose to address the issue of bullying. His story, which follows, illustrates the power of my research in full detail.

**John’s Story**

“Why me?”

“Why are you picking on me instead of worrying about yourself?”

John often asked himself these questions, wondering why he was so frequently bullied. Understandably, he struggled with a lack of self-confidence. Larger in stature, John resembled football player Michael Oher, even at the young age of 10. It was hard to comprehend why the kids constantly picked on him. If he wanted to, he could flatten them. I would come to discover that John had a gentle heart and a history of being bullied from a very young age.

I had taught John art for two years. During the first year, he did all he could to get attention, good or bad. Often he would tell me what others were doing wrong, while seeking my approval at the same time. He struggled academically but had a drive for the arts, though initially his skills were rough. I didn’t know him very well because at my school students only come to art once a week. This makes forming rapport difficult, in addition to the fact that I knew little about his culture at home.

However, I could relate to his sense of bewilderment at being bullied. Seeing the pain in his eyes reminded me only too well of my first year teaching in the city. I wanted to do something more for him. He was the first of six kids to join my after-school photography club, and he was the first student on my doorstep every Wednesday at 2:25 pm.

When I initially asked him what social justice theme he wanted to investigate photographically, he was quick to respond. “Bullying!” he said. “Kids in my class, they are bullying each other and stuff.” At first I tried to dissuade him, thinking that bullying did not fit the mold of my study. I was looking for ground-breaking social justice themes, and surely bullying was too passé. Yet something about the issue wouldn’t die. I kept reading about empowering the student voice and the importance of student-centered art making, yet I was not quite convinced.

I have always operated under a principle of mutual respect in my classroom. It is important for the teacher to demonstrate respect for her students, and vice versa. When you find yourself teaching in a culture outside of your own, developing a respectful learning environment is vitally imperative. As important as respect is for the teacher, having respect is ever as important for urban students. You see, respect may be the only thing they possess. It is sought after, fought for, and held onto from childhood. Perhaps that is why bullying was such an issue for John. What makes a child act out against another? Is it due to insecurity? How can the victims of bullying speak out without negative backlash? I thought of Haroon Khariem’s insight about urban teachers and the urgency for our awareness of student hardships:

To know the importance of listening to the voices of our urban students caught in the quagmire of poverty and racism is essential to being and becoming an urban teacher. Every urban teacher must understand the violence, fear, and sense of indignity that students bring to the classroom. (2007, p. 100)

John was adamant about exploring the theme of bullying. I had not witnessed him being bullied yet heard talk of it amongst the kids and my fellow teachers. A good friend of mine was John’s third-grade teacher. We talked about how he struggled with being bullied even as a third-grader. I worried that if choosing bullying as a theme would cause trouble for him in the classroom and/or socially, I didn’t want him to be perceived as a snitch behind the lens. Nor did I desire him to be hurt physically or emotionally due to a photography assignment. How could he take the pictures safely? I wanted him to feel empowered, not targeted.

The longer we worked together, the more comfortable we all became as a group. I had created a safe place where the students felt free to talk about their concerns. One day during a discussion, Donna
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showed us a picture she took of her dad.  
“I don’t know what it’s like to have a father!” John shouted. The kids were a little off set by this announcement.  
“What, you don’t know your father?” said Martha.  
“No. I live with my mom,” said John.  
“You don’t gotta put your business out like that,” said Martha.  
The next part of the conversation made me smile despite John’s sad revelation.  
I was happy that he was at ease enough to share this information with the group and pleased at Sarah Jane’s confirmation of our safe place. I wondered if growing up without a father had an impact on John’s self-esteem.  
Let’s jump ahead a few weeks. Today everyone is handing in their cameras. I sent them on their way a week earlier with solid themes and cameras in hand, and I’m excited to see what they have done. It’s 2:45. No one is here yet. I worry that no one will show. What if they forgot? What if someone stole their cameras? Where is John? He’s always early. I hope he’s okay. Finally everyone arrives except John.

**John’s Revelation**  
“The most successful urban teachers regard their students as people from whom they have much to learn as well as much to teach” (Weiner, 2006, p. 70). John would soon teach me why bullying was such a pressing issue. I had not understood why it mattered to him so much because I wasn’t in his shoes. I thought he didn’t come to photo club that day because he didn’t have the work done. I was concerned that I had put too much pressure on him to succeed. I waited until the next day to pursue it.  
“What happened yesterday?” I asked John, almost accusingly.  
“My neck was hurting.”  
“What was wrong?”  
“Someone had threw ice at it,” he explained. “I was getting on the bus and they threw ice at me as they were running across the street.”  
That was why he missed photo club. He hadn’t come to school because his neck hurt. I inquired if he knew who did it and if there were any consequences. The boy who threw the ice was a key player in the bullying scene at our school. The result of his actions: a phone call home. His penance was writ-}

ing an apology letter to John. I could only imagine the uncomfortable situation John found himself in. Now, even more worried about his confidence, I called his mother. She too was concerned. She said he’d been bullied from a young age.

At that moment, I was sold: bullying would be John’s theme after all. Motivation for making artwork needs to come from life experience to be relevant to students (Gude, 2008). My study was deeply rooted in critical pedagogy that “focuses on critiques of social injustices and inequalities and calls for the empowerment of students” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 5). How had I not heard John for all of those months? He had been talking about being bullied, and I had not listened.

**John the Photographer/Activist**  
John decided to share his bullying experience with first- and third-graders. His former third-grade teacher set it up. John spoke to the kids and then opened up the floor for conversation. As the kids discussed tales of being bullied or bullying, John snapped candid photographs. Though I wasn’t there to hear the conversation, the smile on John’s face the next day showed evidence that his confidence was on the rise.

Looking at John’s photographs, it is obvious that he was able to get the kids talking about his important issue. Can you imagine being a tiny first-grader looking up to a big fifth-grader who is not embarrassed to tell you about being bullied? To a little kid, that must have been a big breakthrough. Yet, when I look at one of John’s photos, I see culture shock in the face of the one young white girl in the crowd. I remember what that felt like and am happy that these days it seems that the only time the kids notice my skin color is when it’s flushed from the heat. I’m thankful for John and all of the kids who have seen past the color of my skin.

**John Shows Confidence and Respect**  
John’s fifth-grade class was always my most challenging class of the week. Every Tuesday, I worried about what crazy event I would face with them. Frequently I would have flashbacks to my first year of teaching. I related to and often reread Lisa Delpit’s (2006) writings on cultural tension in the urban classroom. She speaks bluntly about Caucasian teachers and African American students, shedding light on inherent power struggles as teachers learn that asserting power by being bold and direct, rather
than indirect and polite, earns respect.

I'll never forget the pivotal Tuesday morning when I saw a big change in John's self-esteem. One of the boys was wholeheartedly enjoying derailing my teaching, much to my dismay. During my demonstration he kept chiming in with rude, disrespectful commentary on my every move. Rather than feeding into his negative behavior, I ignored him. John did not. I could see that it upset him. He rose from his seat and moved towards the front of the room, bypassing the very bully who injured him with ice. John didn't engage him in a confrontation, but he did show his support for me in front of the class. In any way he could, he helped me. He gathered materials, swept the floor, all the while not caring how his classmates perceived his actions. It seemed he was learning "the power of the good, and one's own power when doing good" (Errante, 1997, p. 375). This was a big moment for me because it showed how much he cared. I had earned John's respect.

**John Takes the Issue Further**

Worry About You, Not Me. That was John's response to an anti-bullying tag line (Figure 3). I can hear him say it plain as day. Due to a pressing school-wide insistence on bullying, I urged the photo club to take a stand against bullying. We looked at examples of Barbara Kruger's work and asked each student to compose anti-bullying tag lines, a project inspired by Olivia Gude's Spiral Curriculum. Then we worked together as a group, taking pictures to support each tag line. Since John's theme was bullying, I gave him a key role in the group. He was able to get his peers to talk about their bullying experiences and used those feelings to communicate real emotions stemming from real-life experience and captured in photographs. His confidence boomed as he called and framed the shots. I laminated the finished projects and hung them in the front hallway of the school. The school-wide response to this project was unbelievable. Little kids made rhymes from the tag lines. Kids danced as they rapped another tag line, "Broken Up Inside, But You've Got A Light You Just Can't Hide" (Figure 4). Administration, faculty, and staff gushed over the photographs, saying that they drove the anti-bullying point home like a well-timed advertisement. Looking over the work, I heard John say, "I'm gonna be famous!" In my mind, he already is.

**Conclusion**

Being a positive influence on my students is as important to me as helping empower them through photography. One of the most frustrating things about my early days of teaching in the city was my inability to be accepted and to connect with the students I cared so much about. I believe that forging connections with students is the key to increasing motivation, empowerment, and success for all involved. I've found this entire process to be tremendously healing. It has helped me unlock the doors of cultural misunderstanding, which have in turn opened up a new world of teaching and learning for both me and my students. "These days, teachers rarely come from the same community as their students. Photographs can give them a glimpse into their students' lives" (Ewald and Lightfoot, 2001, p. 13).
References


