

## Language Arts Journal of Michigan

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Volume 29

Issue 2 *Location, Location, Location*

Article 13

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4-2014

# Preparing for Urban Teaching through Place-Conscious Inquiry

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### Recommended Citation

Dietlin, Inga and Carpenter Ford, Amy (2014) "Preparing for Urban Teaching through Place-Conscious Inquiry," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 29: Iss. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2017>

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## METHODS

# Preparing for Urban Teaching through Place-Conscious Inquiry

INGA DIETLIN AND AMY CARPENTER FORD

When I tell people I plan to student teach in inner-city Chicago, they have various reactions:

“Why would you want to do that, Inga?” asked one of my professors.

“Aren’t you scared?” questioned a fellow pre-service teacher.

“Don’t you know how difficult that will be?” queried a current teacher.

These reactions reflect negative media coverage that portrays Chicago as a place stigmatized by the city’s notoriety for gang violence (Nightline, 2011), the school district’s reputation as a political hotbed (McCune, 2012), and racial stereotypes about African American and impoverished communities (Salazar, 2014).

So why have I chosen to student teach in Chicago? My commitment to serving in urban schools has been fostered by teacher preparation coursework in English and English as a Second Language (ESL), as well as place-conscious inquiry that has illuminated the subtle distinctions and commonalities of urban and rural teaching. Field experiences have served as the focal point of this inquiry and prepared me for the practical challenges and opportunities I am likely to face while student teaching in Chicago.

To prepare myself for urban teaching, I have augmented my coursework in teacher education with field observations at an alternative school in Chicago, the “James School for Girls”

(a pseudonym), which serves 6th-12th grade mothers and mothers-to-be. My sister, a nurse, worked at the school clinic and has regaled me with stories of the young women’s resilience and dedication to completing their education while raising healthy children. These stories made me curious about what teaching in such a school would be like.

Based on my sister’s recommendation, I arranged to observe at James in “Ms. Harrison’s” English classroom for two days in 2012, prior to entering my teacher education program. I was struck by how different James was from the rural school I had attended in my hometown in northern Michigan. Initially, I experienced culture shock, and I did not have a way of making sense of the differences between urban and rural schools. Since then, I have sought answers in my coursework and subsequent field experience.

Two years later, I conducted fieldwork as part of an English methods course in another school—one that was located in a small town and served a rural community in mid-Michigan. Unlike James, the students were familiar to me: they looked like me, talked like me, and acted like the students with whom I had grown up. Rather than focusing on the students, I studied my host teacher’s instructional methods, and while this was valuable, it raised questions for me as to how transferable these strategies would be to an urban school such as James, where I longed to return.

To prepare myself for a second observation at James, I sought a faculty mentor, Dr. Amy Ford, with experience in urban schools who guided me through a place-conscious inquiry that allowed me to unpack the distinct challenges and opportunities of teaching in urban schools. This inquiry has been grounded in a Gruenwald’s (2008) conception of a critical pedagogy of place that fuses the concepts of culturally responsive and place responsive education.

Put simply, the culturally responsive lens illuminates how power dynamics related to race, language, and “other forms of ‘otherness’ play out in schools and classrooms,” while the place responsive lens sheds light on how they play out in relation to the particular geographic and broader political context (Gruenewald, 2008, p. 138). Applied to a field experience, culturally and place-responsive lenses focus on classroom participants’ lived experience of place to contextualize cultural and classroom practices and make visible their situated nature and unique qualities. A place-conscious approach allowed me to see the challenges and opportunities that teaching in an urban school affords.

My effort to document my learning through this inquiry process represents my faculty mentor’s initial steps to develop a systematic approach to preparing English teachers with the transferable skills to analyze the subtle distinctions between particular school settings in meaningful ways (Ford &

Haley, 2014). A place-conscious approach is a valuable framework for such analyses because it promotes awareness not only of one's own place, but of others, and the relationships among places (Gruenewald, 2008). My culturally responsive and place-conscious inquiry included five stages: developing a lens through which to view the classroom, envisioning myself as a teacher, viewing the classroom through observation, re-viewing the classroom through reflection, and finally re-envisioning myself and urban and rural schools after these experiences. In this way, place-conscious inquiry served as a theoretical framework through which I analyzed my field experience at James.

### Developing a Place-Conscious Lens for Viewing the Classroom

To prepare for my field experience, I armed myself with knowledge about the James School for Girls by peeling back layers of context Matsko and Hammerness (2014) identified as important features of effective context-specific teacher education for urban teaching. Matsko and Hammerness analyzed the layers of context explicitly addressed in the University of Chicago's Urban Teacher Education Program. These layers included the public school context; the local geographical and sociocultural context; the federal, state, and district context; and the school, classroom, and student context.

Drawing from this model, I have analyzed current literature on teaching English in urban schools to develop my understanding of the public school context, searched the internet for news about the Chicago Public Schools, and learned about the school from my sister, who has worked at the James School for Girls and shares my commitment to serving its students.

When teaching in urban schools, it is important to think about the diverse, pluralistic, and ever-evolving Englishes that thrive variously in urban contexts (Kirkland, 2010). My coursework as an English teacher candidate with ESL certification has cultivated my knowledge of an array of languages and literatures. I have studied the ancient texts of Greece and Rome, Shakespeare, modern British texts, multicultural literature, and today's most popular young adult literature. I am intrigued with sociolinguistics as the way language is used in social contexts (Eckert & Rickford, 2001), especially how African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is used in urban classrooms. I have studied the common grammatical features of AAVE.

But I am also aware that it is important to avoid making assumptions about students' home languages because of their race (Isenbarger & Willis, 2006); in other words, I do not assume a student speaks AAVE at home because they identify as African American or have brown skin. Students' identification with language practices go beyond cultural affinity to include their allegiances to neighborhoods and youth culture (Godley & Minnici, 2008). My knowledge of language, then, serves as a framework for interpreting my observations, not as an assumption I would carry into my urban field experience because place plays an important role in language use.

The need for teachers in urban schools to understand their students' language use is essential to providing effective language instruction. Wheeler's (2005) approach to code-switching pedagogy appealed to me as a method because of its roots in sociolinguistics and ESL pedagogy. Code-switching allows students to choose the language or dialect that is most appropriate for the context. When implementing a code-switching pedagogy, White (2006)

advises caution and thoughtfulness on the part of the teacher because the imposition of code-switching can make students who speak non-standard dialects feel alienated and uncomfortable. Alternatively, Isenbarger and Willis (2006) describe how Isenbarger's attempts to authorize a student's use of AAVE in his writing resulted in his mother's admonishment that Isenbarger teach only Standard American English (SAE). This suggests that teachers need to understand students' language use on an individual level and that teachers' decisions about language instruction should respond to the needs of families and the community. Just as language use is intertwined with place, so effective language instruction is also place-based.

From my perspective, language serves as the foundation for English teaching and learning, so the impact of dialect differences permeates the English classroom. For instance, Labov (2003) suggests that when there is a difference between the language of the classroom and the language of the student, students' reading levels tend to be lower and their academic achievement slower than those of students who experience language congruency in schools. This perhaps partially explains gaps in academic achievement between students attending urban schools and their suburban counterparts.

In order to change this trend, teachers need to be willing to explicitly teach reading strategies to help improve students' fluency and comprehension skills. Beers (2003) emphasizes that teaching students to make sense of texts combined with how to decode the words will result in improving students' reading ability. There is no single perfect strategy that will help all students achieve reading success, but diagnosing the learning needs of individual readers will allow a teacher to design explicit

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reading instruction to support those who struggle. I suspect that determining the role dialect differences play in students' reading process might also be beneficial.

One way that teachers can inspire their students to read, and therefore build their fluency, is by choosing books that students feel connections with. As Lesesne (2003) points out, matching students with texts that capture their interests requires a teacher to pay attention to who students are. This includes their moral and social development and interests, particularly the popular culture students are engrossed in, such as their music, fashion, media, dialect, and slang. She also suggests introducing students to books that promote reading both autobiographically and vicariously so that students who live in urban areas read texts set in urban contexts as well as in rural and suburban contexts. An understanding of students and place can help teachers promote students' engagement in reading.

Literature on the public school context reinforced the importance of the context in making instructional decisions about what books to choose, how to teach reading, and how to provide effective language instruction. With my developing understanding of how decisions about teaching in urban schools are shaped by contexts, I turned my attention to the particularities of place—the geographic, political, school, and classroom context that are pertinent to my observations and student teaching in Chicago.

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have held a prominent position in the news as the city's high profile Mayor Rahm Emanuel wages war with teachers and the community for control of the public school system. In 2012 the Chicago Teachers Union went on strike for seven days over issues that included the

role of standardized testing in teaching evaluations, length of school day, and merit pay for teachers (McCune, 2012). In 2013 the Chicago Board of Education voted to close 49 public schools in the CPS amidst large scale community opposition that argued rerouting children from neighborhood schools would endanger them as they traversed through hostile gang territory (Yaccino, 2013).

Recent lawsuits allege that these school closings violate civil rights laws because they disproportionately affect African American students and disrupt the education of students in special education (Yaccino 2013, Corley 2013). Such allegations of social injustice are amplified by debates about the need for Teach for America (TFA) teachers in CPS, where no teacher shortage exists and corps members move quickly to other professions (Reynolds, 2013).

Most recently, the Chicago Teachers Union passed a resolution opposing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which were adopted by the state of Illinois (CTU Communications, 2014).

Taken as a whole, all of these events portray the city of Chicago and its public schools as a political hotbed for education issues, and I wondered how local politics would affect classroom teaching and learning at James, especially the school's curriculum and student-teacher relationships.

The James School for Girls is an alternative school that serves 6th-12th grade teens who are pregnant or mothers. Located in a primarily African American neighborhood, 68 students are enrolled in the school; 64% were African American, 32% Hispanic, and 4% white or other ethnicities; 100% reside in low income households, according to the school's website. The school's composition is meaningful because the

other schools in which I have observed were homogeneously white and predominantly middle class. Awareness of the school's demographic makeup made me more prepared to recognize my own cultural biases and points of difference that could affect my relationships with students and their learning.

James was originally a transition school for pregnant women, but evolved into a full service support center for young mothers. Impressively, the 6th-12th grade school has a 100% graduation rate, and this is certainly in part due to the support system provided at the school. A local hospital provides a health clinic within the school walls, staffed by nurses and a nurse practitioner employed by the hospital. The clinic's function is to provide general wellness care, but they also provide prenatal care, easy access to routine check ups, and parenting education.

A more recent development at James is the addition of a Head Start daycare for the young mothers' children. The daycare on campus allows mothers to visit their children during school and provides them peace of mind knowing that their children are nearby in a safe environment where they can learn and grow. The daycare and clinic provide an incentive for students to attend school and make James a supportive environment for young mothers and mothers-to-be.

This supportive environment is bolstered by students' efforts to achieve academic success. My sister shared with me an inspiring story about how James' class president organized a phone tree to promote attendance and participation for the standardized test. Receiving a call from a fellow student the morning of the test helped students negotiate the logistics of childcare and long commutes in order to arrive at school refreshed and on time so that

they could concentrate on the test. Students' commitment to encouraging academic achievement is characteristic of James' supportive culture.

### Envisioning Myself as an Urban Teacher

With knowledge about the clinic, daycare, and school prior to my field visit, it was already clear to me that the young women's identities and lived experience as mothers and mothers-to-be would be an important aspect of my field experience. I thought carefully about what it would mean for me in terms of building rapport and relationships with students, which meant envisioning myself and social position in relation to theirs.

The students at James have experiences unknown to me. I am from a middle class family, I have not had a child, and going to college was never an option for me: it was an expectation. Thinking about these crucial differences between me and my future students raised several questions to contemplate with my faculty mentor:

- What would it mean for me to be of childbearing age, but childless, to teach young mothers and mothers-to-be?
- What would it mean for me as a Christian raised in a traditional family that promotes the proliferation of children in a marriage, but not before?
- What would it mean for me as a feminist who has prioritized having a career before taking on the role of mother?

I also needed to do some introspective examination of the messages I have received through the media, such as the societal stigmatization of the "welfare queen," the assumption that young women with children are

promiscuous, the stereotype that African-American men abandon their children. Brutal as they were to admit, these unconscious biases and internalized racist messages buried deep in my mind needed to be unpacked.

My faculty mentor helped me reframe my thinking by posing the question, Why do we judge 6th-12th grade girls who have become pregnant and have babies when they are, in fact, physiologically of childbearing age? Where does this judgment emanate from? While the answers to these questions are deeply complex, we came to the tentative conclusion that society has evolved so that work is exchanged for capital and only work outside the home is valued. Because women who bear children before they can exchange their skills for capital are limited in their means for financially supporting their family, they are viewed negatively by society. Focusing on James as a specific place helped me unpack how power dynamics related to forms of "otherness" were playing out in me.

Applying a critical pedagogy of place led my faculty mentor and me to examine the context of racial and economic power dynamics that contextualize the school and the classroom. I am coming to understand how the stigmas, assumptions, and stereotypes about young African-American mothers perpetuate white privilege by safeguarding the capital of the upper classes, so that wealth is not redistributed to support those in need, such as single mothers from urban communities.

Tracing these messages from the media and elsewhere raised more questions: What would it mean for me as a white, middle class woman to teach students who primarily are of African-American descent and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds? If the students speak AAVE, what would it mean

for me as a white teacher to share my knowledge about their linguistic practices? How might my obvious differences in native language and skin color negatively affect my relationships in this unique school?

Wrestling with these questions with my faculty mentor reinforced how my beliefs and attitudes toward these issues are as important as my practice. To be deemed authentic in my students' eyes, I needed to be authentic. I needed to learn about motherhood from them in order to truly understand their lives and learning needs. I needed to respect their role as mothers in order for them to respect me as a teacher. I wanted to stray away from passing judgment, and instead focus on how much I respect these young women for being mothers and valuing their children. I wanted these girls to succeed in school for the betterment of their lives and also for their children's lives. Making these beliefs explicit helped prepare me for my observations.

### Viewing and Reviewing the Classroom

Based on my review of literature and place-based analysis of the context, I expected motherhood to be a pivotal part of the culture of the school and wondered how much the responsibilities of motherhood would distract from learning. I expected texts that reflected students' lived experiences as mothers to be relevant for them, and wondered if the school's curriculum would allow a teacher to use those texts for whole class reading instruction. I expected students to use some form of urban English, and wondered how teachers would respond to it. I expected the violence and political strife that characterized the Chicago community to seep into the classroom,

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but was not sure how it would manifest. And I expected to be asked about my own status as a mother and wondered how I might respond in a way that did not position me as an outsider. Sharing these concerns with my faculty mentor helped me generate guiding questions for my observations at James:

- What do curriculum and instruction look like? How does standardized curriculum limit possibilities for relevant and engaging English teaching?
- What languages and dialects do students bring to the classroom? How could those languages and dialects be used as resources?
- How do the geographic and political context of Chicago and its public schools affect classroom teaching and learning?
- How do students' everyday lives as mothers impact their engagement?

To answer these questions, I jotted notes and later elaborated them in a field journal for each of my two full days at James. This field journal was transformed into narratives as I told stories about my experiences during debriefing with my faculty mentor.

Questions from my faculty mentor during this debrief elicited my understandings about the school in terms of the contextual features of place that shaped classroom practice. In this way, my inquiry focused on teacher and students' interactions, but also attended to the relationship between classroom practices and the specific geographical and cultural community and broader political context within which those practices occurred. Examining these layers of context entailed juxtaposing my experiences in rural schools where I grew up and where I conducted field observations as part of my English methods course. My faculty mentor prompted

me with questions such as, "How is that similar to or different from your experience in \_\_\_\_." Juxtaposing these experiences fostered my place-consciousness not only of the James School for Girls, but of the similarities and differences between rural and urban schools more generally.

My inquiry allowed me to see how many of the principles I have learned about urban teaching play out in practice, illuminated some of the challenges I would face when student teaching at James, and revealed the areas I need to study more before I begin teaching there. These layers of context are nested and embedded, so the three categories into which I have arranged them—the students, the school, and the classroom interaction—were contrived to help me make sense of my experience as situated in a particular place: the James School for Girls.

### School Culture

"My best moment of 2013 was giving birth to my baby boy because now I have someone that will love me no matter what." This was just one of the many instances where the culture of motherhood was evident and valued. Another girl added, "The best thing that happened to me was giving birth to my son because now I have someone to care for," and the last girl excitedly explained, "The best thing that happened to me was giving birth to my daughter because she motivates me to go to school and move on with my life." The common thread of motherhood among the girls' significant moments was intrinsic and unique to this school community.

When noting this significant moment of the past year, the girls were responding to a journal prompt, a daily writing assignment given at the beginning of class in their writing journals.

By eliciting students' stories as mothers, Ms. Harrison tailored her teaching to the place and culture of her students. Another assignment I witnessed was a poetry assignment: in the beginning of the year, the girls introduced themselves through an "I Am" poem. These poems again shared the theme of motherhood with each girl responding to the final and most important "I Am" statement with some form of, "I am a good mother to my child."

While these assignments were similar to writing assignments I observed at my field experiences in small towns serving rural communities, none of my students were pregnant or had children, and motherhood was not discussed at all, except in regards to the classroom teachers' own children. This reinforced the cultural norm in these contexts that bearing a child was something to postpone. Clearly, the teaching at James School for Girls was rooted in a distinct place that fosters a unique culture of proud motherhood.

The pride of motherhood does not come without disadvantages, however. Understandably, attendance was an issue at the school, and completing homework was often difficult for the young mothers. These two factors presented challenges for the continuity of instruction in classrooms, a problem that at first seemed insurmountable to me, but actually just required creative solutions. For instance, to create an incentive for good attendance and homework completion, the school employed a reward system that allowed the young mothers to acquire goods for their children with "baby bucks" that they could spend at the "Baby Boutique," a mock-store stocked with donated baby clothes, diapers, toys, and books. Baby bucks were earned in various ways in classes and functioned to give the girls a reason to try in school, while rein-

forcing their identities as mothers. The Baby Boutique also addressed the girls' socioeconomic situation and attempted to rectify their lack of resources. Again, it was clear that the school was devoted to fostering this culture of motherhood, promoting the girls' self-worth as mothers, and giving girls living in poverty the chance to provide the best for their children.

Although the girls at James bore adult responsibilities as mothers or mothers-to-be, the school was not immune to the typical drama of any high school. These girls participate in the digital world of social media and conflict ignited from comments made on social media sites. As I sat in the computer lab, I overheard boisterous conversations, noting one particularly expressive girl saying, "What? It says here he is in a relationship with \_\_\_\_ but he just had a baby with \_\_\_\_!"

Relationships are always a hot topic for high school students. From growing up in a small town, I know that in close-knit communities, everyone knows everybody's business, and this can be supportive or debilitating. At James School for Girls, the emotions tended to run much higher. I learned from a security guard that the very week I visited the school, a horrific fight started after a picture from social media was shown to one of the girls, resulting in two girls being permanently expelled and one girl suspended. But because one of the girls who was jumped was eight months pregnant, another girl was criminally charged with attempted murder.

At my rural high school, there were a couple of fights each year, but at James, the stakes were higher and discipline tighter: cell phone use was prohibited, despite the need for young mothers to be in communication with others around childcare. Compared to my previous experiences, the drama at James

seemed more dangerous and distracting and with more dire consequences.

The tendency for he-said-she-said altercations to become volatile is understandable, given the stakes of relationships with children involved and the condition of adolescence. But another factor at James may have contributed to the volatility. Roughly 17% of the student population was classified as special education and had Individualized Education Program's (IEPs). These IEPs were due to emotional impairments, though, not learning disabilities, which I am familiar with from my previous field experience.

I saw firsthand how a student with an emotional impairment who Ms. Harrison described as "extremely bright"

**The reading community was spurred by two additional features that in my prior field experiences would have been considered insurmountable obstacles: students' sparse and sporadic attendance and an insufficient number of books to send home with students. Ms. Harrison turned the obstacles into opportunities.**

presented behavioral challenges in the classroom. I observed "Robin" talking out of turn, refusing to read with the rest of the class, and being insolent and rude to Ms. Harrison. Ms. Harrison's response was to de-escalate the conflict and minimize the drama. She explained to me that Robin does excellent work when alone with her teacher, but lashes out dramatically if she is corrected in front of the group or made to do work she does not want to do.

Instead of giving up on Robin and assuming she was incapable of learning, Ms. Harrison took time to meet with Robin one-on-one. Again, Ms. Harrison

adapted her teaching to the needs of individual students, tailoring her pedagogy to the place and cultural context of the school.

## Classroom Interaction

The curriculum at James was another area that set this school apart from other public schools. The curriculum is extremely open and at the teacher's own discretion, which, for an English teacher, is an exciting prospect that allows for a diverse selection of texts and activities. Ms. Harrison took advantage of this open curriculum and chose texts she thought would interest her students while introducing them to contemporary and canonical literature. When I observed, one class was studying *Night* by Elie Wiesel, and the other class was reading *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold. Other texts in the classroom included *Gang Leader for a Day*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, and *Of Mice and Men*. This array of texts allowed students to read vicariously and autobiographically.

From my observations, it was clear that students and teacher were creating a community of readers. In the class where girls were reading *Night*, students were highly engaged in the text: they expressed excitement to read the story, asked vivid questions about the text, and were eager to read aloud.

But the class that was reading *The Lovely Bones* turned out to be my favorite of the day. Ms. Harrison planned for the class to read a chapter and answer some guided reading questions, but instead, a lively discussion ensued and overtook the whole class. This was not an off-topic discussion; it focused around whether or not the affair of the mother in the novel was acceptable because she was being ignored by her husband, and all of the girls participated. They spurred each other to ask deeper questions, went into the characters' minds, and imagined

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themselves in that same situation. When the bell rang to end class, there were audible sighs as the girls returned their books and continued arguing as they hurried off to the next class. The novel proved to be an excellent way to get the girls invested in reading, to encourage reading outside of class, and to spark lively debates where consideration of others' opinions was necessary. I pondered where I had seen such a dynamic, engaged class discussion around literature and where such text-to-self connections were included in the CCSS. The rewards of choosing texts that matched students' interests were clearly visible.

The reading community was spurred by two additional features which, in my prior field experiences, would have been considered obstacles to lament: students' sparse and sporadic attendance and an insufficient number of books to send home with students. Ms. Harrison turned the obstacles into opportunities. All reading was done in class under the guidance of the teacher, so the girls' progress as readers could be closely monitored, and talk around the literature fostered deeper discussions and engagement.

When a student was absent and missed a day's reading, a classmate updated her on what she missed. I was struck by students' collective animation as one student began explicating the story and soon after, other girls chimed in to fill in the details so that a discussion arose from the act of summarizing the chapter for the absent classmate. Instead of giving the student an overview of the chapter herself, Ms. Harrison positioned the girls to assume the role of "expert," which gave them a sense of pride and desire to read and further established the class as a community of readers within a community of mothers who understood that despite one's best

efforts, attendance was not always a sure thing.

Students' vibrant discussion of literature and writing were infused with AAVE. For instance, I heard the dropped consonants (yo' for your) and double comparatives used for emphasis ("more better"). Ms. Harrison kept the focus of these discussions on meaning rather than language and employed slang, but not the grammatical structure of AAVE, to validate students' language use. This valuing of students' voices contrasted starkly with moments when Ms. Harrison corrected students' language during reading and grammar instruction.

The students I observed at James enthusiastically participated in reading aloud, even if they were less than fluent readers. The first girl who raised her hand to begin the reading of *Night* was very fluent and only stumbled in her reading once or twice. The second girl was not as proficient and struggled over many words. Whether to be kind or corrective, Ms. Harrison did not allow her to struggle with decoding the words and instead used the practice of explicit correction to correctly pronounce the tough words for the struggling reader. While explicit correction is not negative in itself, mere correction of words highlights the overarching problem many of the girls had with decoding words. As a strategy, reading aloud functioned as an opportunity to assess the needs of struggling readers, and tailoring instruction on decoding and comprehension to address their needs could have fostered students' reading skills (Beers, 2003).

Although students did not seem to mind this form of correction, their responses to language instruction were more ambivalent. Ms. Harrison employed mini-lessons that included explicit grammar instruction. One of these mini-lessons was on when to use

"affect" and when to use "effect." Ms. Harrison provided extensive explanations of noun and verb clauses. Some of the girls reacted positively to this mini-lesson; others needed more prodding, expressing distaste at learning the grammatical terms and questioning their purpose. Ms. Harrison's response to students' ambivalence was rooted in college expectations: in order to get into college, the girls would need to write academic papers that are grammatically correct and employ appropriate vocabulary. Compared with the facets of school and classroom culture that responded to the students' more immediate needs as young mothers, this rationale did not seem as motivating. Moreover, the implication was that the students' language use was in need of change.

The second mini-lesson was on eliminating wordiness from sentences. Again, some of the girls participated, but others did not see the need for this activity. Ms. Harrison's admonishment to these girls was, "Remember, the less you say the smarter you sound!" Although students made no audible response to this, I was puzzled by such a prescription. It rang with a sort of silencing that ran counter to students' animated discussions I witnessed around literature and prompted writing.

Moreover, clear and concise language use is valuable in some contexts, but I am not sure it makes someone sound smarter. And what are the implications of silencing, or even censoring, young African-American mothers who need to learn to use words to advocate for resources for themselves and their families in order to survive?

Providing the students with a locally meaningful, real world context for their language use, I speculate, could have enriched this language instruction. In these instances where the grammar was being hammered into the girls'



minds and wordiness was attributed to not sounding intelligent, it would have been interesting to see how discussions about the differences between informal and formal contexts, between academic English and AAVE, could have expanded learning opportunities in ways that were culturally responsive and place specific.

## What the Future Holds

I left James School for Girls absolutely terrified. The place-based inquiry I had conducted made the challenges of teaching in an urban school more vivid to me. I was concerned about the run-down area where the school was located, the reality of gang violence becoming a real threat in my mind. I began considering the turnover of my colleagues that I would experience if I were to become a full-time teacher in an urban school like James. During my observation, I learned that despite the supportive culture and high graduation rate, James is considered hard to staff, as evidenced by a number of Teach for American (TFA) teachers on staff, including Ms. Harrison, who was in her second year teaching.

I surmise that because TFA only requires a two-year commitment, teaching evaluations might look very different for Ms. Harrison than for other teachers who are committed to the Chicago community and a long term career as a teacher. I was struck again by the political nature of education in the city and the challenges facing urban schools more generally.

Then my fears zeroed in on the school and the students. I feared that I would not be able to gain the respect Ms. Harrison had from the girls, that I would be the teacher with the classes that needed supervision from the security guard to prevent violent outbursts over he-said she-said arguments.

I cringed at the thought of all of the extra work required to plan for class that could not complete homework, attend consistently, or take books home due to lack of resources and wondered how students would make noticeable progress. And I also was fearful about the ways my host teacher would look at me if I were to attempt to employ a more culturally responsive method of language instruction in her classroom to include code-switching pedagogy grounded in sociolinguistics. I wondered how I, a small town girl from a rural community, would fit into the urban culture and serve these students.

The challenges that concerned me are not limited to the James School for Girls. Rather, high teacher turnover, the presence of TFA, a scarcity of resources, and the need to provide culturally congruent instruction for students whose attitudes toward schooling may be different than the mainstream are characteristic of urban schools more generally (Matsko & Hammerness, 2014). The decision to complete my student teaching in urban Chicago seemed more daunting, while the prospect of student teaching in my hometown in northern Michigan became more palatable. Students there can take their books home, I would be able to assign them homework, and we speak the same dialect, so I would not step on any toes in regards to language instruction.

However, I may still encounter challenges commonly faced in rural schools, such as staff migration, lack of resources for special populations, and standardization that limits teachers' ability to respond to students' needs and interests (Petroni & Eckert, 2013; Eppley, 2009). These challenges were less visible to me prior to my place-conscious inquiry. Having grown up in one rural community and conducted fieldwork in another, I realize I generalized my

experiences in rural schools to others, falling victim to the apprenticeship of observation (Petroni & Eckert, 2013). With these growing understandings of the shared characteristics of urban and rural schools, I began to look at the opportunities afforded by teaching at James.

As my initial apprehension wore off, I grew more convinced my place was at the James School for Girls. While I was scared for a moment, those feelings subsided, and I was overcome with feelings of inspiration as I remembered the stories told by the girls: the tales of how much their children have impacted their lives and motivated them to succeed despite the obstacles that made them miss school. I want to teach students who are eager to learn in spite of the violent and poverty-stricken environment they reside in. I want to prove all of the naysayers wrong and show them that I can be a good teacher despite political difficulties in the city and a high turnover rate of teachers in the urban public schools.

I want to foster a love of literature with students who can share their love of reading with their children and in turn, create a literacy explosion within their families. I want to educate speakers of AAVE on the linguistic importance of their dialect, but also on the need for the standard dialect in certain instances. I want to cultivate young mothers' voices so that they advocate for themselves, their children, and their community. I want to see girls graduate high school in spite of their roundabout path to achieving a diploma. I want to be an adult who does not judge a part of their lives, but instead focuses on how motherhood can become an avenue for greater learning and literacy development.

I know that I have a great deal to learn in order to become an effective

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student teacher for the girls at James. To overcome the challenges I will face as an urban teacher, I will seek guidance from research on urban pedagogies, such as critical language pedagogy (Godley & Minnici, 2008), place-based pedagogies that foster urban youth activism (Kinloch, 2009), and the potential of drama and spoken word to amplify students' voices (Fisher, 2007, Winn, 2011). I will also explore pedagogical approaches that will use students' roles as mothers as inspiration for learning, such as using children's literature for theme baskets (Richison, Hernandez, & Carter, 2002). I know that I will probably not have an idyllic Freedom Writers experience, and it is possible I will only be at this school for one single semester as a student teacher.

But the next time someone asks me, "Why do you want to teach there?" I have my responses prepared: teaching at the James School for Girls has the potential to transform not only my life, but perhaps the lives of these young mothers, and their children.

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