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**Children as Design Visionaries, Learners, and Socio-Political
Wayfinders: Mapping the Layers, Hierarchies, and Rhythms of a
School Community**

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Children as Design Visionaries, Learners, and Socio-Political Wayfinders: Mapping the Layers, Hierarchies, and Rhythms of a School Community

Natalie R. Davis and Roni Barsoum

The child in each of us
Knows paradise.
Paradise is home.
Home as it was
Or home as it should have been.

Paradise is one's own place,
One's own people,
One's own world,
Knowing and known,
Perhaps even
Loving and loved.

Yet every child
Is cast from paradise-
Into growth and new community,
Into vast, ongoing
Change.

Octavia Butler (2001), *Parable of the Talents*, p. 197



Tracy Jackson (2016). *Everything is going to be alright*
[Mixed Media Collage on Canvas]

Figure 1. Excerpt from *Parable of the Talents* and artwork

INTRODUCTION

Despite the seemingly intractable problems of public schooling, we (as researchers and dreamers) remain encouraged by the persistent efforts to reconfigure and reimagine the socio-political landscape of schools. We begin this essay by recognizing the work of individuals bravely and imperfectly expanding notions of what schools could and should be. We stand in solidarity with the innovators sowing, designing, and reaching toward more just social futures, dreaming of schools for children that are not so distant from the paradise Butler (2001) describes (Figure 1). This liberatory dreamwork coincides with long histories of communal ingenuity (Vossoughi et al., 2016), resistance against normative models of schooling, and practical efforts to enact humanizing education while facing diminished resources and opposition on all fronts (e.g., King, 2006; Rickford, 2016; Tejeda et al., 2003). It is good, worthy work that we hope to contribute to in our own research and practice while asking the important questions: *Are the children alright? What can they teach us about designing transformative schools?*

The perspectives of the children who intimately understand what it means to be learners in schools often get overshadowed by adults' pedagogical imaginations, experiences, and ambitions (Erickson et

al., 2008). Children's processes of *knowing*, *owning*, and *loving* are seldom foregrounded, though they offer vital insight into what schools are and what they could one day be (Butler, 2001). The exploratory analysis presented in this paper is an exercise in seeing the design of schools through the eyes of children. Black students featured here were learners enrolled in an innovative city school with an articulated commitment to empowering elementary-aged children as intellectuals and critical civic actors (Davis, 2017; Davis & Schaeffer, 2019). The school, here referred to as Mission City School (MCS),¹ was also developed with a place-based, communal mission. Children were encouraged to consider the needs of the collective and seek out ways to serve and deepen connections to their socio-political and physical landscape.

As an investigation into children's sensemaking within this context, our study involved asking Black students to respond to a simple prompt, "What is it like here in school?" Obliging our request, participating children produced a range of artful and complex illustrations that served as a window into the "here and now" (Mitchell, 1953). While we expected variation in their drawings, we were struck by children's interpretations of the prompt and the corresponding representations of the design of the school. Children keenly amplified aspects of design and daily practice that were unnamed but nonetheless alive in the schooling environment. The rhythms and relationships in their visual maps sometimes centered patterns, tensions, and dynamics (by-products of design) that might differ from adult perspectives of the space. Most notably, we noticed the creative ways that MCS students represented conceptions and learnings around the meaning(s) of community. We see great value in their representations as portals that might help adults and educators reconcile pedagogical ambitions with moment-to-moment activity in everyday life (Davis et al., 2020). As we show, though children are not the original architects, they are visionaries, learners, and wayfinders, capable of seeing and making sense of nuanced community dynamics (Erickson et al., 2008). What opens up when we consider how children sketch the layers, hierarchies, and rhythms of their schooling experiences?

(RE)IMAGINING SCHOOLS AND LEARNING FOR BLACK CHILDREN THROUGH PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

Largely in spite of unjust and violent systems of oppression, there is a long history of efforts to leverage schools as sites of resistance, communality, and joy. Accordingly, many have treated schools as potential spaces to "act out" visions of liberation (Givens, 2021; Grant et al., 2020; Rickford, 2016) and to pedagogically convey that more humanizing socio-political realities are possible. For Black Americans, the struggle to define and establish "good," dignity-conferring (Espinoza & Vossoughi, 2014) schools for Black children has been especially fraught. In 1865, 230 years after the first public school was established on the Massachusee native lands now known as Boston, Massachusetts, a group of Black American "freedpeople" bravely assembled in Charleston to petition the state of South Carolina to support the establishment of quality public schools for Black children. The assembly's appeal conveyed a long-standing communal commitment to education as a means of self-determination, despite such ambitions being contested or (for a time) punishable by death:

Whereas, knowledge is power, and an educated and intelligent people can neither be held in, nor reduced to slavery... we will insist upon the establishment of good schools for the thorough education of our children. ("Proceedings of the Colored People's Convention," 1865)

In line with this history, contemporary scholars and practitioners have advanced innovative schooling models that in addition to supporting robust forms of disciplinary learning are also designed to support

¹ The school and students have been assigned pseudonyms.

the socio-political and socioemotional development of Black children. Though these schools have taken many forms, they are united in the goal of building solidarity to disrupt cycles of educational inequality. The hope is that with nurturing and transformative school practices, children might also begin to see themselves as individuals who can lead the charge in solving the problems affecting their communities.

As a specific and important example of innovative design that seeks to reorient Black children to their socio-political landscape(s), we foreground place-based approaches to schooling.² This approach is premised on the idea that youth need access to schools that affirm them as social and political actors, deepen community connections, and take into account students’ immediate circumstances(s) (Ginwright, 2004). Place-based approaches allow for this “intensified focus” on people in context and provide a “sense of direction and identity that might power individuals to struggle and to endure” (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991, p. 21). Critical place-based models prompt Black youth to think about how their actions can impact their community and the future world. The place-based model advances a communal orientation rooted in love, appreciation, and commitment to changing one’s neighborhood for the better (Haymes, 1995; Tedla, 1995).

CENTERING CHILDHOOD THROUGH DESIGN, ART, AND ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLES

Place-based schooling models for children require synergistic ways of seeing and evaluating design. In *Design Justice*, Costanza-Chock (2020) offers several principles as guidance to shape communal design efforts. We note parallels between Costanza-Chock’s conception of communal design and the goals of liberatory education. To illustrate these parallels, we developed a visual representation of three principles that are closely tied to the aims of place-based schooling (see Figure 2).

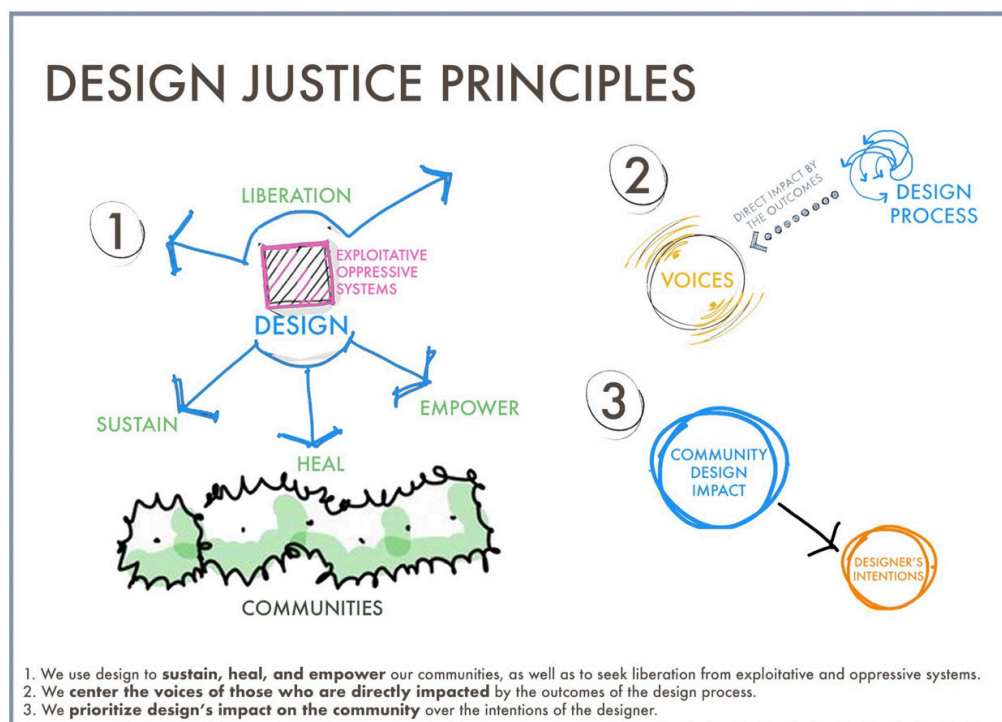


Figure 2. Design justice principles. Text from Costanza-Chock (2022, p. 6), emphasis in the original

² We recognize that place-based approaches have been employed in a number of important contexts (e.g., Indigenous education) and with learners of all ages. Here we focus on the case of Black children and childhood.

Accordingly, elevating and engaging with the voices of children (as those most impacted by the outcomes) should be a core facet of innovative and just schooling models. However, empirical studies of justice-centered schools that foreground Black children’s perceptions remain limited. We worry that even in our best intentions to affirm children, we might be falling short in practicing rich forms of intergenerational learning and research that position children as wise and dynamic in their own right (Akom et al., 2008; Davis et al., 2020; Dumas & Nelson, 2016). This paper is an exercise in exploring what it could look like to engage with Black children’s visions of schooling and design on their own terms.

Arts-based methods, including drawing/illustration, have been offered as a tool for capturing learning that aligns with children’s ways of knowing and doing (Causey, 2017). Koh (2010) and others found the “write and draw” strategy to be particularly useful in helping young students articulate abstract ideas. Similarly, Grover (2004) described the use of drawings in research as a means of allowing children (and adults) to tell their own stories. As a tool for understanding how children make sense of schooling and school design, drawing prompts afford opportunities for children to map the physical space, aesthetics, and normed practices of their school. To borrow language from architecture, a drawing of school can make visible the physical design structures that interact with other factors to arrange socio-political relationships and shape possibilities (Scheeren, 2015). Children’s illustrations can represent school—as buildings and so much more—in form and function and through everyday stories (Charitonidou, 2020) that characterize their learning and experiences.

We are interested in how Black children attending one place-based school understand it as characterized by dynamic hierarchies, rhythms, and relationships. We will treat their drawings as windows into their knowledge and sensemaking. In architecture and design renderings, hierarchy can be implied through size, shape, or strategic placement relative to other forms within a space (Ching, 2007). For a form or space to be articulated as being important or significant, it must be made uniquely visible. In a visual drawing or map of school, we would expect more significant elements to be larger than others in size, unique in shape, and/or situated as a central point of focus. Rhythm is also an ordering principle that can be communicated visually. In design and architecture, rhythm is movement characterized by patterned repetition of formal elements or motifs in the same form or a variation of that form. The movement may be of our eyes as we follow recurring elements in a composition or of our bodies as we advance through spaces. A rhythmic pattern may be continuous and flowing or staccato and abrupt in its pace or cadence. In schools, multiple rhythms may be in play that work together harmoniously or in discord. In schools that are intentional in curating safe, nourishing spaces for Black children, we might wonder if/how students’ illustrations reflect rhythmic attunement.

POSITIONALITY-RESEARCHER CONTEXT

Before describing the research study and children’s drawings in greater detail, we pause to offer abbreviated insight into our own identities and experiences. We write together as a university faculty member (Natalie) and doctoral student (Roni) who have spent the last three years engaging in informal conversation about children’s thinking and learning. We also write as co-thinkers who collaborate within a graduate program focused on innovation and co-developed a podcast focused on childhood.

I (Natalie) am a Black woman educator and critical scholar who has taught Black children in a variety of settings. In addition to teaching third grade in an African-centered school, I served as a volunteer teacher in MCS, the school that is the focus of this analysis. MCS is situated in the urban district where

I grew up and attended public schools. The children whose drawings are at the heart of this study are also near and dear to my heart. I position my scholarship as an exercise in demonstrating reverence and care (Davis & Neal-Jackson, 2022) for young people. I am also deeply motivated by my own personal and professional interests in positioning children as savvy social and political actors who are already *actively* making sense of complex systems and environments.

I (Roni) grew up as a multitalented artist enjoying design and various forms of visual and performing arts. As a child born in Egypt, a lower- to middle-income country, I struggled with the limitations of an education system that did not acknowledge or encourage my broad set of interpersonal and artistic skills. After securing an architectural design degree, I founded an art and culture center specializing in visual and creative arts training programs for children. In collaboration with a team of professional artists and art educators, I designed this space with careful consideration of children's needs. However, dealing with hundreds of children and their families, I saw too many children's creativity stifled and dreams deferred as they struggled to thrive within a conformist, neoliberal, and poorly designed education system.

This project melds together our collective histories of participation as an elementary school teacher and an architect and as researchers, creatives, space designers, and once-children (Ransom, 2017) who often felt misunderstood, stifled, or undervalued in school.

STUDY CONTEXT

MCS was designed as an act of resistance. Its founders and administrators, a team of three women, hold intersectional identities as teachers and local activists. Each was inspired by the work of elders who took part in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The team's top priorities were to create a place-based, solution-driven, humanizing school and to challenge unjust educational norms. Brightly colored murals featuring children collaborating and dreaming adorned the school walls. On any given day, members of the MCS community could be found convening in meetings to discuss recent happenings and determine together the next course of action.

Kisha, a fifth-grader, explained that at MCS, "they teach us different things... they teach us about life too... Like not just math and science and social studies. They teach us life tools like you have to show integrity." Iris, another student, also explained the mission in a manner consistent with the communal emphases of the school. According to Iris, the MCS mission is "to raise children [at this school] who can look at something and say, 'This is not right; I'm going to strive to change this... and I'm going to get my friends together and we're going to brainstorm and change this....'" A thorough analysis of the school design model can be found in Davis (2017). We emphasize that MCS was a school that very explicitly, in its design commitments, included a concern for supporting Black children as critical and communally oriented citizens.

The first author of this paper spent 18 months as a researcher-volunteer at MCS. The nature and structure of her participation varied, an ebb and flow of taking on formal responsibilities and "just being" in the space (Davis & Neal-Jackson, 2022). In this paper, we focus on a drawing task conducted with MCS children as part of the research study. Children were asked, "What is it like here in school?" and provided with a handout, prompt, and blank sheet of paper to sketch on. Children had a charcoal pencil and a full set of color pencils at their disposal. After they completed the illustration, they were asked to describe the composition. Natalie took notes on their explanations. Our analysis of MCS

students' drawings of school was conducted in response to the following questions: *How do Black children map the socio-political learning landscape in a place-based communal school? What do their drawings communicate about the experience, learning, and possibilities/tensions within this environment?*

EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS—SITUATING CHILDREN AS LEARNERS AND DESIGNERS

In this project, we presumed that Black children's illustrations reflected a level of nuance and sophistication shaped by their experience. Our commitments to elevating children's voices and questioning power asymmetries in this study are resonant with Mitchell's (1934/1991, 1953) arguments for seeing children as capable of complex sensemaking. Children can demonstrate sensitivity and savvy with respect to socio-political dynamics in school and more broadly (Davis, 2017; Davis & Schaeffer, 2019; Lee, 2017). Like Mitchell (1934/1991), we reject the notion that "[t]he world is too complicated for them to understand" (p.7) and have structured our analysis accordingly.

Our decision to engage with principles of architecture and design was driven by a few important factors. To begin, the drawing exercise was conceptualized as a tool to aid researchers in better understanding the school culture, mission, and normed/valued practices. Participating children were asked to create visual representations of school design, akin to those that architects or designers might draft to show the intended form and function of a space. Architectural principles also helped to make visible the relationship between spatial and aesthetic features and content that is indicative of the valued forms of learning in the space. Next, Roni has extensive professional training in architecture and design. His scholarly interest in elevating children's voices and understanding them on their own terms (Davis et al., 2020) provided motivation for "seeing" outside of the boundaries dictated by traditional theories of child development. In analyzing students' drawings, Roni could not help but notice the particulars of design elements and consider the significance of scale, lines, and spatial planes as a window into children's understandings.

Finally, for reasons we spell out above, we sought out alternative modalities for analyzing Black children's learning and socio-political meaning-making that could surface the "marginalized or erased stories of the places encountered with young children" (Nxumalo, 2021, p. 1193). In our analysis, we were open to the possibility that architectural principles might create openings for a shift in our thinking about what mattered to the children of MCS about the place-based design of school (Nxumalo, 2021). We are aware of the possible tensions in leveraging the adult-dominant lens of architecture to make meaning of children's ideas. Thus, we consulted research focused on child-adult participatory design in architecture. Drawing from models such as "design with children" and "children's voice" (Lozanovska & Xu, 2013) helped us explore language and mechanisms for centering the perspectives that children were conveying in their illustrations.

We engaged in an iterative process of analyzing 17 illustrations by MCS students alongside any notes summarizing children's explanations. We developed a spreadsheet that contained a scanned copy of each drawing, a caption with context for the image, and related excerpts from children's interviews. Each of us reviewed the illustrations independently and documented our noticings in regard to the following design categories: rhythm(s), hierarchy, social relationship networks, and time/space. From an architectural design standpoint, the expression of various elements, including lines, shapes, colors, perspective view, alignment, signs, and symbols, in the composition were understood as intentional and reflective of children's understanding(s) as experts in their own schooling experiences. We also analyzed each drawing with the intent of discerning patterns of similarity and dissimilarity (Maxwell &

Miller, 2008) in relation to signs/symbols, affective or socio-political dimensions, and the valued forms of learning and interaction represented. Each component of children's drawings was assumed to carry meaning unless otherwise indicated by the child (i.e., by scratching out a drawing and starting over). We then discussed and synthesized our preliminary findings, refining the initial categories and revisiting individual drawings as needed.

In the next stage of analysis, we explored ways to reconfigure children's conceptions of school that emphasized our understanding of the complexity of their ideas. Consider the original drawing below on the upper left in Figure 3, where fifth-grader Jeff depicted his participation in his favorite class, art. (Jeff is seated with the trio of students at the bottom.) Rather than exclusively focusing on art class, Jeff also depicted an understanding of what his primary classroom teacher was doing while the class was engaged in art in another area of the building. Hence, at the top we see the teacher preparing the board for math instruction. In our analysis, we noticed that many children at MCS depicted simultaneous activities and showed awareness not just of their immediate context, but also of the broader happenings within and outside of the school. We also noted the large scale of the math board relative to the one modeling the flower for art. The board was positioned in a central focal location within the parameters of the illustration, suggesting its significance and hierarchical elevation as a core content area of instruction.

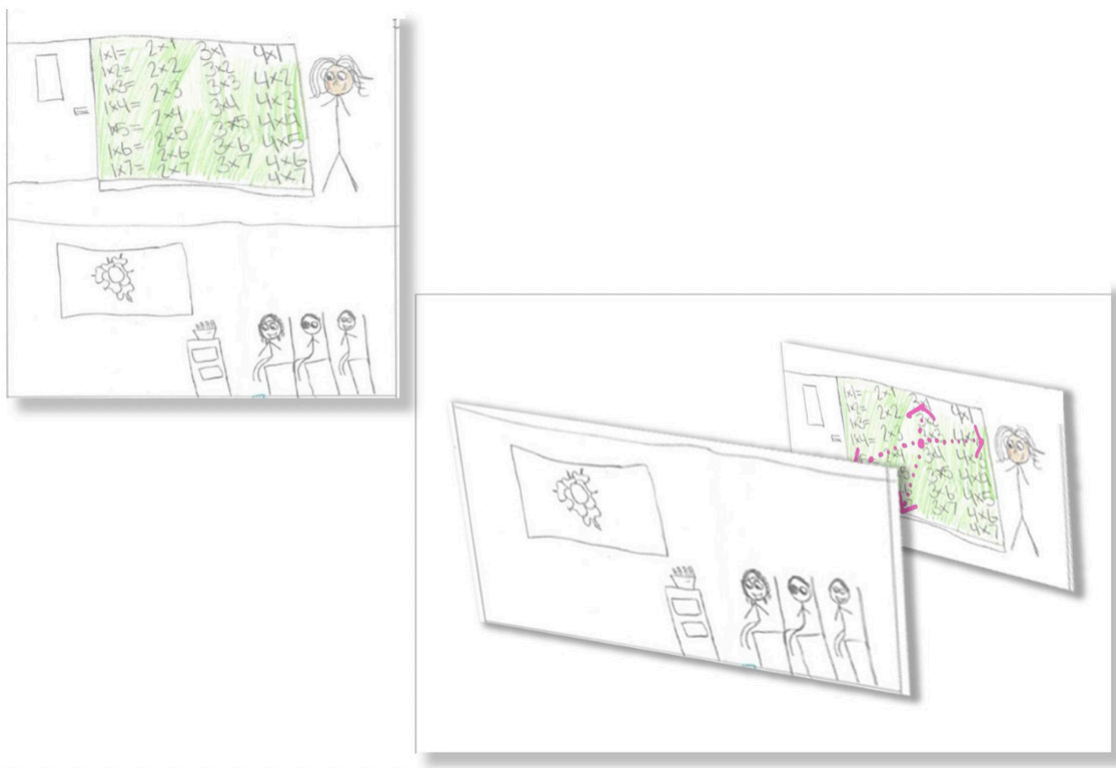


Figure 3. Art class

The rendering on the right in Figure 3 is representative of our analytical process. We used Adobe Photoshop to reconfigure, annotate, and/or deconstruct children's illustrations. As a tool for graphic design, Photoshop's functionality varies but includes the capacity to create layers on 2D images that

can be manipulated or removed. To underscore the concept of simultaneity and parallel space in Jeff's composition above, we detached the scenes and aligned them to appear to be 3D. The final 3D rendering developed in Photoshop is also annotated with symbols. A summary of the symbols utilized in our analysis is reflected in the table below (Figure 4).

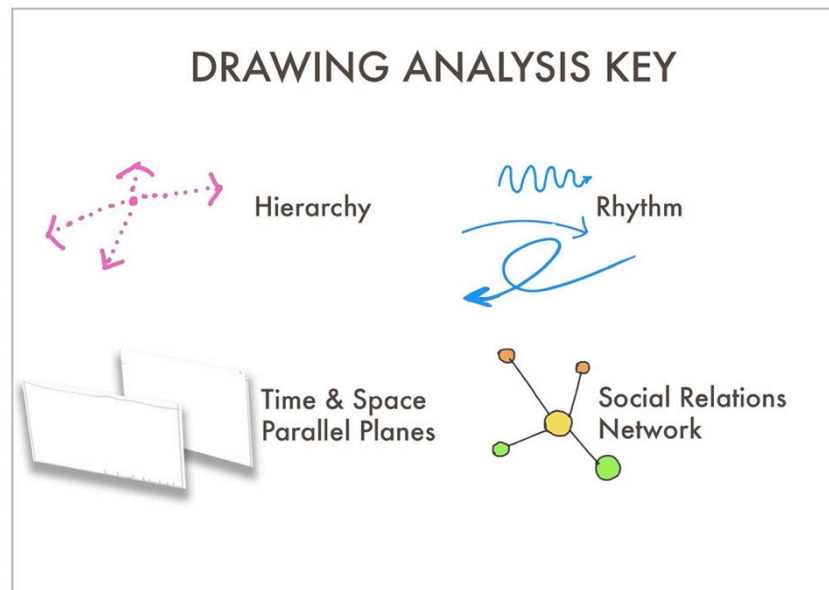
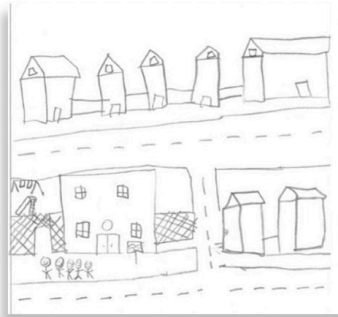


Figure 4. Drawing analysis key

In summary, our preliminary findings were that participating children at MCS created illustrations that reflected the schools' strengths and strivings. While the place-based communal focus was represented on a number of levels and included an accounting of broader context and multiple (harmonious) experiences, children also devoted time/space in their drawings to portraying community discord. We also noticed that children were concerned with the subjective experience of school and offered creative representations of how various people were positioned and were feeling as they navigated the socio-political dimensions of the space. We offer a few illustrative examples in the subsequent sections, followed by a brief discussion. Our goal here is not to be comprehensive, but rather to offer a window into our efforts to make sense of children's sensemaking relative to this particular school design.

WHAT IS IN A SCHOOL COMMUNITY? CHILDREN REPRESENTING HOLISTIC AND HARMONIOUS CONCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY

By design, MCS advanced the values of communalism and connection. "We include people," is how Craig, a student, summarized the school's approach. The founders' theory of change was premised on the idea that by deepening connections of place and practicing inclusion in school, Black children would develop a sense of efficacy, belonging, and responsibility. Our analysis suggests that in some important ways, MCS was succeeding in its attempts to cultivate community. Below we share select drawings that evidence this assertion and that are representative of the larger corpus of data. In the first set of illustrations, Jalen and Darui each depicted a scene with the school building as a prominent element (Figure 5). Instead of a static drawing, children situated the school within the context of a communal environment. In both cases, the young artists represented gathering and greeting other members of the school community at the start of the school day.



"I drew houses [and] the school...in the streets"
(Jalen)

"I drew a picture in the morning time...
there is usually people talking in front of the
school and the grown-up comes out and says
it's 'breakfast time' or time for school like
school's open. And then yeah I see a lot of
my friends walking into the school...."
(Darui)



Figure 5. School and community

Viewing the first image with an architectural eye, we note the representation of school relative to the broader neighborhood setting (Figure 6). The school is situated harmoniously within the city, flowing with the lines and rhythms of the broader environment. Houses in the backdrop are scaled up such that they are not dwarfed by the distinct presence of the school. Through this lens, school is characterized as connected and contextually grounded, enlivened through robust activities and meaningful interactions between people.

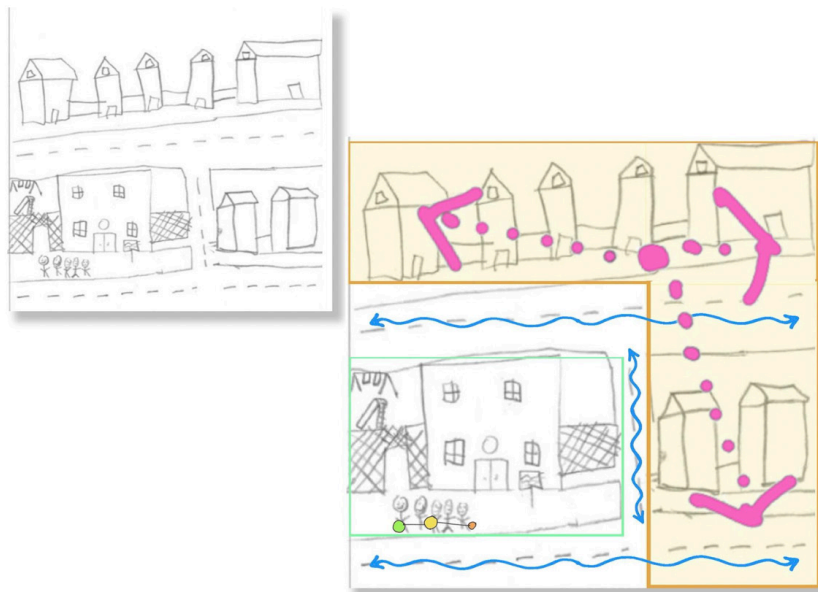


Figure 6. School and neighborhood

Sometimes children opted to represent the school design and community through multiple happenings, or vignettes. In those drawings, children could be seen convening in various spaces within and outside of the school building. The use of vignettes helped to convey a conception of school that was relational, dynamic, and eclectic. No single, static image was sufficient in describing the space. Below, students are depicted socializing with friends, playing during recess, attending class, and even singing the school song (Figures 7 and 8). The positive and comprehensive representation of school activities is consistent with MCS founders' communal design ambitions. By and large, children seem to be content and connected, in sync with the rhythms of school.



Figure 7. Vignettes A

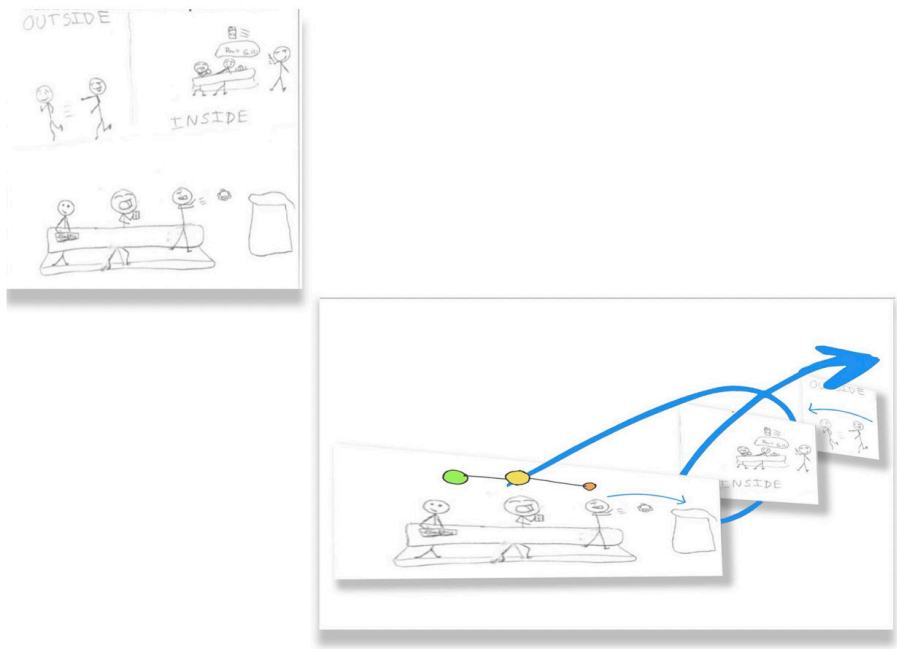


Figure 8. Vignettes B

CHILDREN'S REPRESENTATIONS OF COMMUNITY DISCORD AND POWER DYNAMICS

In this section, we account for the fact that children's schooling experiences at MCS were not always presented as harmonious. We found that although MCS children were very aware of the ethos of community and freedom advanced by the school, they also did not always experience school in this way. There was a pattern in children representing and amplifying sources of communal discord as a by-product of the school design. Their drawings demonstrated a recognition of disruptions stemming from children taking too many individual liberties and deviating from adults' behavioral expectations. There was also evidence of students being attuned to and navigating social hierarchies within the MCS context.

Take for example Starr's beautiful and complex rendering of the experience of attending MCS, which we have annotated below (Figure 9).



Figure 9. School experience

Starr illustrated school as the accumulation of having “good days and bad days” and represented these discordant rhythms as weather/environmental patterns. According to our analysis of the drawing, most (90 percent) of the days felt like sunshine and clear skies, some like thunderstorms (9 percent), and a few (1 percent) somewhere in the middle. We note that, with regard to design, the hierarchies in the composition are more balanced than the numbers suggest. In fact, more circles (used to represent classmates) are situated on the left side with inclement weather and Starr herself (the fully drawn stick person) is standing in the middle. Starr's drawing does not attempt to portray physical or aesthetic school features. Instead, her illustration is more expressionist in nature—a representation of awareness of the variation in students' subjective experiences.

Relatedly, there were many instances where children drew social peer groups, each with their own rhythm and positioning within the school. An example of this is reflected in Mackenzie’s map of daily outdoor recess time (Figure 10). Each pod illustrated represented a group with particular characteristics and behavioral tendencies. For example, the “fancy” group occupied the center of the drawing and accordingly, held an elevated status. Sometimes the groups interacted peacefully and other times contentiously (e.g., by being “bossy,” mean, or judgmental toward others). According to Mackenzie (although it is not obvious from the drawing), some MCS students traversed across social groups and occupied membership in both. Using design symbols, we emphasize the complexity of the relational dynamics outlined in the drawing, including the presence of social discord within the school community.

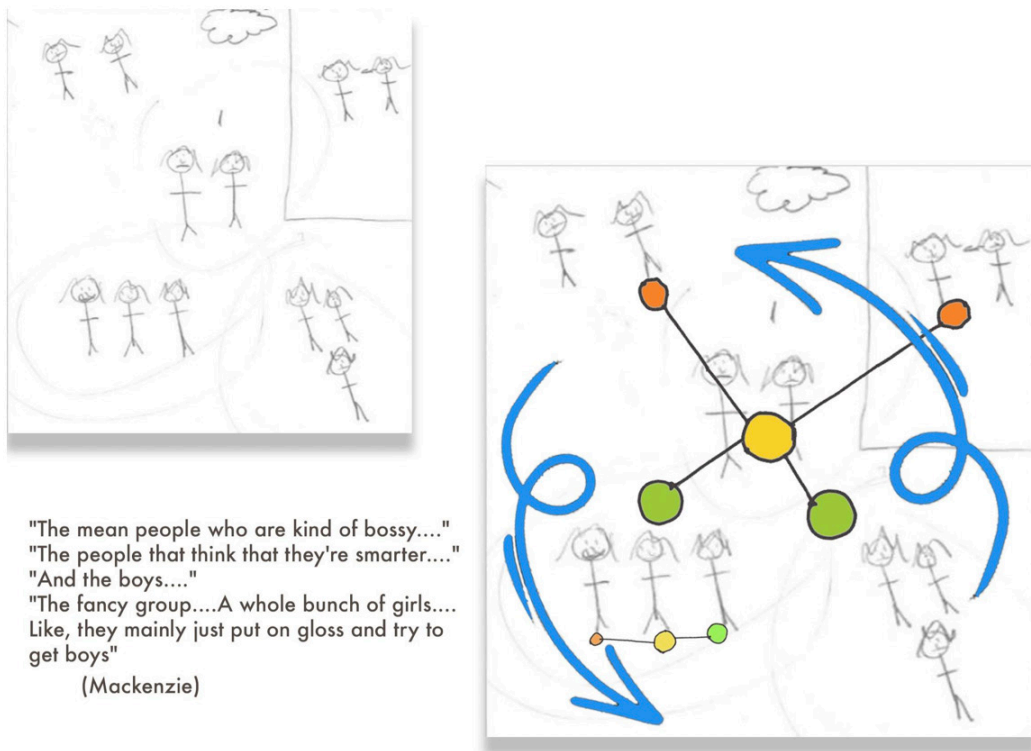


Figure 10. Social map during recess time

Our point here is not that these dynamics are unique to MCS (see, for example, Gholson & Martin, 2014). However, these examples indicate that even within the context of a school that prided itself on cultivating community, social discord and power asymmetries were still a salient aspect of children’s everyday experience of “doing school.” Finally, we offer Kam’s illustration of multiple and conflicting activities occurring during class time (Figure 11).

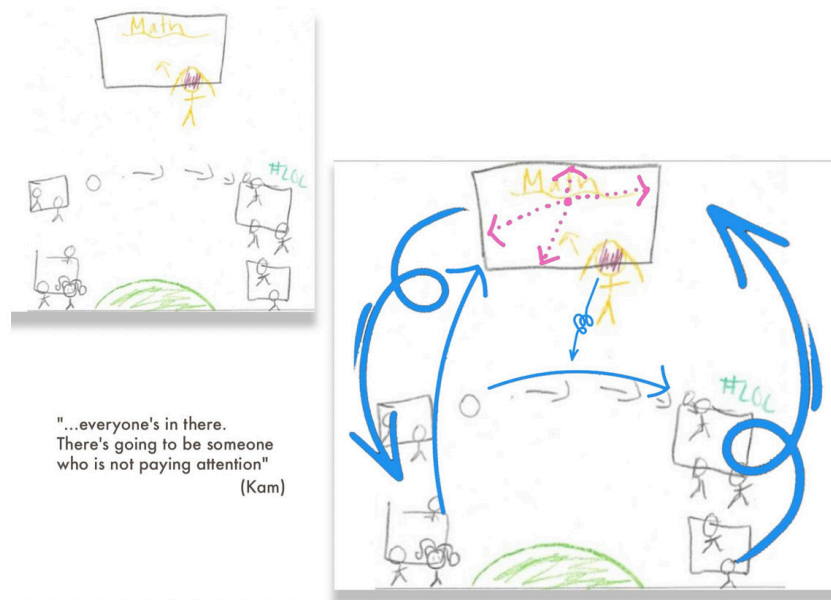


Figure 11. Conflicting activities during class time

Despite a clear understanding that the teacher and whiteboard should be a point of focus, Kam offered a bird's-eye view of both on-task and off-script behavior. As the teacher attempted to teach, much to her chagrin, a paper ball was being tossed across the room. This prompted laughter from some of the children in the classroom. We were struck by the composition, rhythms, and scale in this image. The inclusion of the board was a recognition of it as a symbol of the valued adult forms of learning, and yet the focus of the scene and bulk of the drawing was devoted to depicting the children and what they likely noticed as participants in the classroom environment. There was an obvious tension between the adult and student experience. The distorted facial expression of teacher was intended to convey adult frustration while students are laughing, indicated by "#LOL" in the drawing. Seen through this lens, navigating school is about much more than falling in line with adult expectations. MCS children were navigating a complex community where formal academic learning was not always the primary point of focus.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Our goal in this paper was to explore an approach to seeing schools through the eyes of Black children. Rather than impose adult boundaries of childhood and children's worlds (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Orellana, 1999), our intent was to center Black children's imaginings as key indices of a school's strengths and strivings. MCS, with its innovative design focus on community, socio-political learning, and youth agency, served as an ideal space to practice this experimental method of analysis. The beautiful illustrations created by students remind us that schools cannot be characterized by a single story. While school mission statements are typically succinct and declarative, children frequently remind us that pedagogical ambitions are just that—aspirations that adults design for and hope will come to fruition. Design intention may not always align with students' noticings or everyday subjective experience. Close engagement and kinship with children can create openings to dig deeper into the form and function of innovative schooling.

In the case of MCS, children’s drawings helped us attune to their multi-level conceptions of what it meant to be in community with one another. From their visual maps, we learn that dynamic relationships and an awareness of the collective was what resonated with them about their school. They recognized the ways that actors may be differently positioned in the school environment. They saw connections between people, places, and simultaneous experiences. They understood what held value and for whom. There was a powerful duality reflected in their drawings where harmony/solidarity and discord/acts of resistance lived in the school environment together. As adults and researchers, we could see how children were already engaging in complex sensemaking and wayfinding. Their illustrations challenge flat, deficit constructions of Black childhood (Dumas & Nelson, 2016), melding artfulness and imagination with sharp insight.

As we look across the drawings from this project, we continue to wonder about how schools help children make sense of discord and oppression, even when it may come from within their community. MCS did a phenomenal job of explicitly teaching children about the role of civil disobedience/resistance in society as a valued practice. Perhaps children’s drawings serve as a call to design for increased opportunities for children to describe and analyze the dynamics of their own community as they experience it, not as it is in an aspirational sense or as seen through the eyes of adults. School drawings might serve as resources for helping students make sense of higher order concepts (e.g., community, resistance, justice, agency) in the “here and now” and in deeply meaningful ways. Illustrations and multimodal feedback from children then become tools in assessing where design and intention may be falling short. They also serve as a window into what may be possible.

Principles from architecture and design helped us become more sensitized to the layers, hierarchies, and rhythms communicated through children’s illustrations. This was a fruitful exploratory exercise that allowed us to engage directly with children’s thinking. At the same time, our process raised questions for us about the politics and ethics of annotating, deconstructing, and/or reconstructing children’s creations. In our efforts to elevate their voices and ideas, we worried that we might be distracting from the full impact of their compositions as finished works. We also do not mean to imply that their drawings hold value *because of* their alignment with architectural principles or adults’ viewpoints. The tensions we were recognizing are not unique. Even in the field of architecture, scholars have noted that adults in general—politicians, planners, and city managers—often ignore children’s perspectives and their contribution to the design process (Lozanovska & Xu, 2013). Or worse, adults filter and morph the perspectives of children as a means of legitimizing their own agendas (Yoon & Templeton, 2019).

We maintain that the goal of this exercise was to explore how adults might interpret and use children’s illustrations as resources for understanding the “here and now” of a school community. It is also an exercise in lifting up children’s renderings and seeing them as having the potential to revolutionize how we think about school design in general (Jobb, 2019), including giving attention to the shapes, patterns of movement, and relational practices that characterize Black children’s experiences. As we continue with this thinking, we plan to revisit our drawing analysis key. We also hope to elicit feedback from children to determine how they interpret our analytical approach and what amendments they would suggest for the analysis moving forward. We invite other educators to facilitate similar drawing exercises with their students at various points throughout the academic year as a window into school design. After the illustrations are compiled, the content of the drawings (alongside children’s explanations of them) can be shared and discussed with members of the school community. Our stance is that discussions should be accompanied with a concrete plan for intentional use of the feedback that children provide. This is one of many ways that adults demonstrate intellectual respect (Vossoughi et al., 2021) for children and the expertise they embody.

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