

Bodies In A Classroom Space

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Introduction:

As I came to work in early childhood education at Yale, I also began my practice of photography. The photographic format and process served as tools with which to understand the young children I was working with at Creating Kids Daycare. Through photography, I could see just how aware and how pensive young children could be and, in this, I saw myself and I saw them. Through this Capstone project, I have used the photographic medium to explore how my first grade students at Columbus Family Academy navigate the classroom space. To photograph children, for me, means to respect young students as experts of their world who are constantly developing and growing. In this way, my photographs do not aim to capture any one child as I do not think it is possible to encapsulate a child in one photo. Photographing children is a practice in attempting to photograph the un-photographable, because a true child cannot be made an art object or ‘captured.’ This is a practice in making room for the viewer to enter into the complexity and growth that defines early childhood.

On Working in the Classroom and the Columbus Curriculum:

Located in the New Haven Public School District, Columbus Family Academy is a K-8 public school that has a bilingual education program which focuses on teaching students in their most dominant language, Spanish or English, throughout their elementary years. I came to enter the Columbus community as a Public School Intern under Yale’s Dwight Hall. Starting in my junior year of college, I worked as a teaching assistant in the first grade Spanish and English classrooms. My work consisted of working one-one-one with students who needed more support

in either classroom, particularly during the hours when students would switch into their non-dominant language classroom. Working individually with students I learned how some of them feel insecure in the classroom space, how difficult it is for them to find a voice or space for themselves in their large class of fifty-two students. Students are often asked to perform discipline by sitting in tightly packed carpets or to control their voices and bodies so that a crowd of twenty-six students is easier to navigate. Discipline, I have found, is an idea that these students have to translate onto their bodies or risk being punished. It is a difficult concept to make sense of because on the one hand, discipline is seen as necessary to the teachers' goals of creating an efficient classroom environment where students can learn what they need to in order to succeed at their standardized tests but, on the other hand, discipline in the classroom environment, when it asks students to conform their bodies to a militaristic or rigid construct of bodily expression, may neglect the richness of knowledge that students gain from using their bodies as research tools. Students may be prompted by requests such as "control your voice," or "control your body," which asks students to conform their body movements in such a way that minimizes their presence by silencing themselves or stopping their movements. I have come to wonder how these disciplinary moments relate to the larger social justice curriculum that Columbus seeks to promote in their school environment and the values they seek to engender in their students.

Of course, the need for this type of discipline does not exist outside of the rest of the classroom environment. Unlike the other early childhood centers I have had the opportunity of working at or observing at, Columbus does not have the privilege of maintaining small classrooms where a teacher is assigned to four students or six, instead the two first grade teachers at Columbus have to teach, supervise, and observe 26 students each. The layout for the classrooms consists of four big round tables, tables with computers along the sides of the room,

cubbies for students' belongings, a bathroom and a door that connects the Spanish and English first grade classroom behind the teacher's desk. Entering the classroom, immediately are the cubbies, which lead to the class rug located in the center of the room. The classroom rug is where a lot of the large-group instruction is done and the students will usually split off into numbered tables to work on their projects and individual work. A typical school day is kept to a regimented schedule which often proves difficult for the teachers as they don't feel like they have enough time to work with each student and ensure that they do the work they need to do for the next class lesson. Often, my work as a public school intern and teaching assistant in the first grade classrooms consists of helping students catch up on work that they did not complete the day before. The class tends to feel tight and too full for the quantity of students that use it, and the days tend to feel tight and too full for the quantity of work that needs to get done.

On the walls, teachers hang up phonics posters, alphabets and number scales, pictures of animals and plants, school rules, schedules and many other print outs of instructions and curriculum material. Due to the high volume of things hung on the wall it is hard to focus on any one given thing and posters get lost behind new posters or next to other colorful posters. The student tables and chairs are generic classroom furniture of beige and yellow tones. The teachers' desk are piled high with papers and there is no empty room on their shelf spaces. There seems to be an abundance of information and supplies but not enough, at the same time. Teachers often seem to run out of space for themselves and for students.

However, even amongst the deficits that these students and teachers experience there is an abundance of love and care that I feel when I enter the classroom space. Working one-on-one with the students I have seen just how boundless their minds are, just how much they crave to imagine and create space for themselves. While it doesn't always work out perfectly, there are

such positives to the students being able to learn and work in their native languages and be surrounded by students from similar backgrounds (Columbus is primarily Hispanic identifying). There is an element of social justice in the larger school curriculum as Columbus tries to empower its students in speaking Spanish and embracing a Hispanic heritage. Speaking to Dr. Benitez who was the previous principal of Columbus it was clear how student empowerment was key to the bilingual education. Dr. Benitez spoke of the need to believe in growth and how she was inspired by children she met through her travels that were multilingual at a young age. Her philosophy was that as an educator you should use all the knowledge students have when they come in to school and work with that. So, teaching students in their dominant language is so key at Columbus because it allows students to use all of the knowledge they have in a given language. Another key element to the larger Columbus curriculum is the focus on science as the center for cross-language learning. Dr. Benitez emphasized the science curriculum at Columbus and as science is taught to students in a mixed classroom (students change halfway through the day and may be taught science and math in their non-dominant language) students are meant to learn vocabulary in their non-dominant language through a hands-on science curriculum. Dr. Benitez also emphasized grassroots research and focused on practitioners performing research as a way to understand their students and share what they were discovering with co-educators. So, Columbus has a history of trusting in its students to grow and seeking to empower both educators and students alike.

The question for me, then, as I have entered the classroom space is how the past of Columbus and its present intermingle and how students learn in a school that has so much potential for great teaching. Specifically, through the lens of the camera I come to look at how these students learn to inhabit space. How does the curriculum and teaching style at Columbus

translate onto the student body? I came to wonder this as I noticed differences between Columbus and the other early childhood centers I entered, as Columbus does not have the same resources as these private institutions and has a different teaching style. Noticing things like the duct tape that delineates each student's spot on the class rug in the English dominant classroom, or the way play is seen as separate from the class curriculum, caused me to wonder how Columbus can continue growing in their mission to respect its students and trust in them to grow.

On Bodies in Classrooms:

Within the classroom space, students learn to maneuver their bodies for self-exploration and control of the body. A student may explore their own body by stretching on the classroom carpet, moving their limbs to find a comfortable sitting posture which a teacher may see as benign but distracting to their instruction. On the other hand, a student may demonstrate what teachers see as aggressive or insubordinate behavior and ask students to “control” their bodies by changing their behavior. One of the factors that influences a student’s movement in the classroom space is the physical memories from home environments. Travis Wright (2013) describes the ways a student may carry forms of resilience from home into the classroom space. Wright describes a student named James who exhibited aggressive behavior (hitting teacher repeatedly and running away). James tells Wright, “I keep me safe” and Wright is able to discover, through counseling how James has had to develop self-protective behaviors such as never turning his back to teachers or hitting to protect his body because of the dangers he fears in his neighborhood space. Wright points at a misunderstanding of the resilient behaviors students adapt to survive in traumatic home environments. In this way, teachers can fail to understand the ways a student moves their body in the classroom space.

In addition to understanding the physical memories students carry from the home space, it is important to consider how the indoor class environment performs the role of a third teacher in the teacher-student relationship. The classroom environment can heavily impact how students choose or do not choose to move their bodies. Thinking about best practices surrounding the classroom environment, Coralee McLaren writes about the importance of movement and gesture as it pertains to children's development. Specifically, McLaren (2014) observes how disabled and non-disabled students make sense of their bodies via movement in the classroom. McLaren uses "Deleuze's premise that nothing can be known about bodies until they demonstrate what they can do (1988)" and "Gibson's theory of affordances, which posits that people and environments are inextricably related (1979)" to analyze students' movements (2014:ii). Ideas such as these have influenced how I observe the movements of the students in the first grade classroom at Columbus Family Academy. I have wondered about how the classroom space enables students to take ownership of the space around them and allows them to explore their body knowledge. I have also thought about ways that curriculum can be improved by focusing more on student directed learning and room for exploration through play and movement.

On Images of Children:

Entering photography, I quickly discovered that the black and white medium and photos of children were the mediums and subjects I wanted to explore. The first time I photographed children I found myself working with all the observation skills I had learned as an educator and all the love I have for the work of teaching and the care I have for my students. Photography became the way I could understand my students and find their moments of self-reflection, thought, quietude, and tranquility. The photographic medium allowed me to capture movements

and glimpses of thought which were indicative of the ways students were learning with and from their bodies in relation to the people and spaces around them.

To begin, two photographers greatly inspired my image-making and photographic eye: Judith Joy Ross (1946-) and Helen Levitt (1913-2009). Both photographers captured images of children and their creations in a way that showed a keen understanding of how young bodies inhabit space. Helen Levitt's work, preceding that of Judith Joy Ross, focused on the street drawings children made and how they lived in a city space on its streets. One image comes to mind, where two children dance and Helen Levitt captures them in the midst of movement making. The children are in the middle of a street and are exploring their bodies. This photograph, that captures movement and the range of expression children have, has prompted me to look for gesture and movement as it reveals the thought and intention children have about



Helen Levitt / New York, c.1940 (kids dancing)



Judith Joy Ross/Hazleton, Pennsylvania, 1993
(Randy Sartori, First Grade, A. D. Thomas
Elementary School, Hazleton, Pennsylvania)

making shapes and moving through space. An image from Judith Joy Ross taken in a Hazleton Public School stands out for me. Judith Joy Ross's photos which are so rich in the detail that the view camera affords have a distinctive purplish grey tinge. In this photo from Judith Joy Ross, a student appears so small in size in comparison to his desk. The way the student bodies are represented in the classroom space reveal how uncomfortable and daunting that space can be and how students accommodate their bodies to the classroom space.

Other photographs like Diane Arbus's photo of a child with a toy grenade and Henri Cartier Bresson's photograph of a young boy carrying wine bottles have allowed me to think of how children's bodies can be humorous, adult-like, disorderly, and swift. In Bresson's photograph the child seems so small in comparison to the wine bottles yet he is able to hold these bottles and walk with what seems like swiftness and leisure. Arbus brings to mind how children can change



Henri Cartier-Bresson/Paris, 1954 (Rue Mouffetard, Paris)



Diane Arbus/New York, 1962 (Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C)

their bodies to make unique shapes and expressions. The viewer does not know what the child in her photograph is thinking, the viewer can only interpret this bizarre photo of a child with a toy grenade in their hand. In many ways, this photo exhibits how portraits of children ask the viewer to do the work of understanding as children are always shifting, changing, learning, growing, and forming new neural connections that scientifically and socially change who they are.

Aside from some of the photographs that Judith Joy Ross created in public schools, my work diverges from the existing repertoire of photographs of children in that I am focusing on not just documenting children but understanding how they learn to inhabit their bodies via school curriculum and the school space. I don't follow students outside of the school so the images are more focused on the classroom space and how the school experience influences students. Additionally, my photos add to the representation of children of color, immigrant children, and specifically Hispanic children in the black and white repertoire.

On Photos of Columbus:

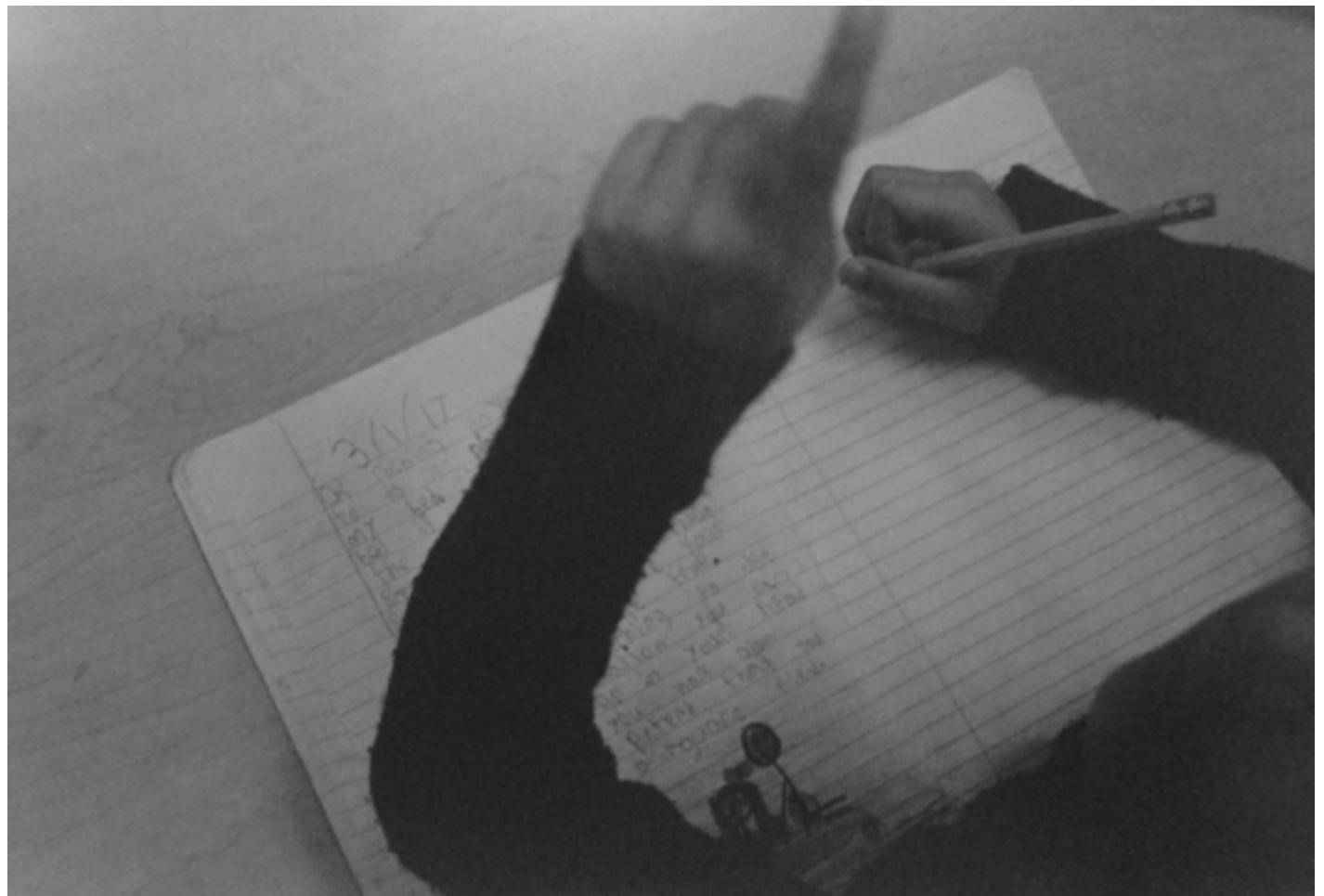
Creating the photos at Columbus was a collaborative experience between the students and myself which was only able to happen in the way that it did because of the trust I had built with these students over a semester of teaching. I began photographing the students after gaining approval from their parents who signed a photo release form. On the first day I brought the camera into the classroom, I presented the students with the camera tool and taught them about how it works; how you load film in the camera, how it captures light, and how I develop photos. I explained to the students that my black and white film camera was unlike their various digital cameras because of the process it takes to make a photo. Additionally, I told them that I would be photographing them while they worked, that they would see the camera hanging around my neck but that they should continue working with me as before. The students were highly enthusiastic

about beginning the project and remembered a great deal of detail concerning what I taught them about the camera and developing photos. When I presented the final photographs to them they all recalled that I had mentioned the darkroom and film strips at the beginning of the semester. Looking at photos of themselves, the students giggled at first and after I gave them a directive to think in silence and observe details or think of stories about the photos, the students began to make observations about what they saw in the photos. They loved seeing themselves and would I would have loved to have spent a whole day looking at photos with them.

Through the lens of the camera, I looked for the moments when students used their bodies to explore and learn. A student might be in a moment of reflection or using their body movements to focus and I would try to capture some of these moments. I was also interested in capturing the way the students' bodies fit into the classroom space such as how they compared in size to teachers, chairs, tables, etc. Other moments I focused on were the details of the classroom environment and how these created shapes around the students. Discipline is observed through my images in more subtle ways like the duct tape on the carpet that asks students to control their bodies, or the rigidity of shapes and textures in a frame. I did not seek to capture a picture of discipline but rather capture how students work around ideas of curriculum and discipline and find ways to be themselves and explore themselves through movement. Through the black and white medium I was able to distill the information that a first grade classroom can contain with its full walls and bright sounds. The images I created I hope can offer an entry point into huge quiet worlds contained in small frames.













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