

JoLLE@UGA

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Volume 9 Number 2

Fall 2013

Editor
Stephanie Anne Shelton

<http://jolle.coe.uga.edu>

Review of *Crossing Boundaries: Teaching and Learning With Urban Youth*

Kinloch, V. (2012). *Crossing boundaries: Teaching and learning with urban youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.

ISBN: 978-0-8077-5294-4

Pages: 145

Stephanie P. Jones
The University of Georgia

Please cite this article as:

Jones, S.P. (2013). Review of crossing boundaries: Teaching and learning with urban youth. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 9(2), 161-164. Available at <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/>

In *Crossing Boundaries: Teaching and Learning with Urban Youth*, Valerie Kinloch --one of the premier literacy researchers of urban youth -- provides a strong case for allowing student voice to be the impetus for real educational reform and achievement. Kinloch reaches into the dusty corners of teaching and learning to showcase students of color in urban schools and how traditional conceptions of literacy fail to acknowledge “the varied and various ways youth are taking a stand, building a new literature tradition, and imagining a pedagogy of possibility” (Kinloch, 2010, p. 192). Kinloch writes in her introduction:

Undoubtedly, students have a lot to say about teaching and learning, and it’s past time for teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and other interested persons to listen to their opinion in ways that center students in curricular work, pedagogical practices, and educational policies. *Crossing Boundaries* represents one small attempt at centering students and their diverse engagements with literacy in teaching and learning (p. 4)

Where Kinloch starts in her research is where chapter one begins: the pre-service classroom. Framed around a series of questions, Kinloch helps teacher education candidates ask deliberate questions concerning diversity, language, power, multiculturalism, and academic ability. In order to have an authentic discussion, Kinloch invites students from an East Harlem high school to join student teachers in a course at a local university. Both sets of students are challenged with the following question: “In what ways can pre-service teachers and high school students from racially and culturally different backgrounds engage in critical discussions about teaching and learning, and what are the specific lessons that can emerge?” (p. 14).

Using two classroom scenarios, “student interactions” and “students as teachers”, Kinloch encourages thoughtful interrogations of how teachers “interact with urban students in ways that do not silence them or ask them to abandon their critical voices, creative choices, and lived realities” (p.26). These scenarios promote and privilege the idea of a praxis that is simultaneously necessary and messy. Kinloch asserts what kind of professional development is needed by writing:

The type of educational research and praxis that I am calling for privileges the voices, perspectives, and critical insights of teachers (pre- and in-service; novice and veterans) and students, even if those insights appear multiple, complex, contradictory, and divergent (p. 28)

Typically, a methodological study includes an in-depth description of where the study is taking place. Yet, Kinloch offers the approach of how place and context influence how students learn and how teachers interpret that learning. Using a high school site named Perennial High, Kinloch talks about how students observe and interact in school spaces. She writes:

These specific spatial configurations at Perennial, in addition to the absence of certain labeled spaces traditionally found within or attached to school, are important to note, given that students in my class regularly debated about (dis)connections across school-community interactions (p.31)

Kinloch asks important questions and seeks truthful answers while teaching a Senior English course at a high school in Harlem. It seems, from an outsider's perspective, that if researchers, teachers, and teacher-candidates want to know if a school contributes to the literacy practices of its students, one should ask the students. However, Kinloch is doing unprecedented work by going directly to the source, instead of observing and making official reports. The result of chapter two and its impact on literacy research is the forgotten idea that students hold the answer to the best practices that teachers should consider.

Through detailed student vignettes, Kinloch breaks open her idea concerning Democratic Engagements (DE), which is a "situated practice [used] to demonstrate how this learning materialized in classroom discussions and throughout course activities" (p. 56). Damya, a student in Kinloch's high school English course, showcases her own version of DE through a series of written responses. Within these responses, Damya questions the larger arguments of the text while simultaneously pairing those arguments against larger philosophical views of education. In conjunction with written responses, students also had the opportunity to collaborate, investigate, and re-imagine learning in the secondary English classroom.

As we dream, we must work to improve the teaching and learning conditions for all students, and we must remember not to leave behind the voice, lived conditions, histories, and literacies of the very students who walk into our classrooms (p. 70)

In chapters 4 and 5, Kinloch writes about two students and how their interactions with literacy have been shaped over the course of their time in the course. Using DE's as the structure of engagement, along with critical texts, these students had the opportunity to discover how the dimensions of power can shape a student's experience in the classroom.

To move this work beyond my class requires that we interrogate those academic spaces in which power is present, but not explicitly discussed, and where disruptions exist, but are not taken up as texts to be performed and critiqued (p. 112)

I think that the brilliance in Kinloch's work is that she is literally teaching *about* teaching *through* the act of teaching. In so many words, her own reflective practice serves as a model for teachers-- novice or tenured - to explore how their classrooms and text selections help to create a climate in which students feel either empowered or apathetic about themselves as students, readers, and writers.

Kinloch uses the last chapter to ponder the original questions from her research in the high school and collegiate environments. These original questions led to more involved questions that were not able to be answered in this particular text, yet she is interested in how her findings can help the current state of high-stakes testing policy and pedagogy.

Specifically, I cannot help but to imagine rewriting curricular standards in ways that center children's and young adults' voices, perspectives, and literacy lives. Doing so might result in increased levels of responsibility and commitment to education by, for, and because of young people (p. 114)

The type of work that Kinloch is suggesting be done in English classroom is not new. She mentions that Lisa Delpit (1995) and J.J. Royster (2000) have written about the idea of creating classrooms where co-constructions of knowledge are prioritized, and where the concept of power is acknowledged and challenged. I believe that this text is an effort from an academic researcher to keep the pipeline from the ivory tower to the public, urban English classroom, open and relevant. Instead of focusing her research on a deficit model, Kinloch centers her research on the power of student voice when it is partnered with relevant discussions about schooling, community, and democracy. Through this text, Kinloch is exploring the “crossing of boundaries” (academia and high school) -- and in essence, stating that the new English classroom should aim for students and teachers to create their own “crossings.”