

# Walking the City: Developing Place-Consciousness through Inquiry

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“Ms. Jill! I can see the weather ball! I got a picture!” Noemi, a four-year-old is excitedly pointing out one of Flint, Michigan’s more famous landmarks—the weather ball atop the Huntington Bank Building. The weather ball, which changes colors based on the forecast, is a popular attraction for these preschoolers, as it is near their school. Today, Ms. Jill’s students are walking downtown to the Farmer’s Market, taking snapshots of things they find interesting along the way.

A few blocks later, another student, Bishop, notices “I can still see the weather ball! But we moved!” These students are, through inquiry, building their understanding of important social studies concepts such as “place” and “point of view.” They are developing an awareness of their environment—the city of Flint—that can be an important precursor to civic engagement. Noemi and Bishop each take photos of the weather ball to discuss later with their classmates.

## A New Narrative of Flint

Jill’s 18 students are between three and five years old and will be in kindergarten within one to two years of being in her class. This preschool, situated within the campus of a local university, serves children that live within the city of Flint and surrounding areas. Families living in this area have been impacted by the Flint water crisis. Many mothers drank lead-poisoned tap water while pregnant during 2014–2015, exposing their offspring to lead during a crucial period for



the development of the human brain.<sup>1</sup> Health professionals anticipate that many of these children, especially those entering the public-school system in kindergarten soon, may need extra services—for example, nutrition assistance, behavioral counseling, and possibly special education.<sup>2</sup> Flint has received quite a bit of national attention since the water crisis in 2014 and, in many ways, children here are seen as victims. But do they see themselves this way? Do they see the city as a victimized space?



The perspective of these children directly impacted by the water crisis has not been widely shared. Jill's inspiration behind this inquiry project was to give preschoolers in Flint a voice with which to share their perspectives on their city in the classroom and with their families. In particular, Jill wanted to share the joy that the children have for the city<sup>3</sup> as a way to counteract the victim narrative that is often imposed on Flint residents through media. Jill and the director of the preschool collaborated to expand their annual family night beyond the school walls, to take it into the larger campus community.

Jill's preschoolers took on the job of communicating their perspective on the city of Flint through an inquiry on special places involving photography and mapmaking. I found that when given the chance to speak about their city, the children in Ms. Jill's class have things they wish to say!

### Place-Based Inquiry in Preschool? Of Course!

Young children are naturally curious about their world and—in an environment that encourages them to speak—they will

ask many questions about what they observe. Preschoolers are beginning to develop their sense of place and the sense of belonging that can come from investigating their surroundings. Although two-dimensional mapmaking isn't developmentally appropriate for three-, four-, and five-year-olds,<sup>4</sup> teachers can give children experiences that will prepare them for mapmaking. Geographic skills can be nurtured by taking children on walks around the neighborhood, planning family events together, and helping children pay attention to their environment in various ways—by taking photos, for example.<sup>5</sup> Ms. Jill's inquiry with her class attended to these examples with the goal of building place-consciousness as a precursor to mapmaking and even to possible civic action in the future.

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework advocates building civic competence in all students<sup>6</sup> The C3 Inquiry Arc involves engaging students with compelling and supporting questions, using disciplinary content and skills to have students investigate these questions, evaluate sources they use along the way, and take action with their new knowledge.<sup>7</sup> The C3 Framework is designed for K-12 students, but preschoolers can also engage with inquiry.

Inquiry with preschoolers or kindergartners can begin by tapping into the natural curiosity of children, using their statements to construct compelling and supporting questions. For example, teachers have taken students' interests in one another's shoes to design a project about where shoes come from and the differences in personal preferences for footwear.<sup>8</sup> In a more structured example, teachers asked their students what they would like to learn about their new school, which led to inquiries about where their classroom cubbies came from.<sup>9</sup> The C3 Framework also supports a focus on disciplinary content in human geography for young children.<sup>10</sup> Dimension 2 has a geography focus of Human-Environment Interaction, "Place, Regions, and Culture," in which students in kindergarten through second grade should be able to "identify some cultural and environmental characteristics of specific places."<sup>11</sup>

Preschoolers and kindergartners are capable of evaluating sources,<sup>12</sup> participating in dialogue on difficult issues,<sup>13</sup> and engaging in actions that benefit their classmates and school as well as themselves.<sup>14</sup> In many of these inquiry examples, children explore their community or school in order to investigate their questions, such as trips to a construction site<sup>15</sup> or school boiler room.<sup>16</sup> Whether children are travelling locally or experiencing places further away, they are able to engage with questions, sources, and action-oriented tasks at a young age.

### The Environment Becomes the Teacher

The campus of this preschool was-inspired by the Reggio Emilia movement, which places an importance on the environment as the "third teacher."<sup>17</sup> Reggio-inspired instruction shares many similarities with the inquiry model and is often



done with very young children, making it a great guide for this project. Reggio instruction posits that children are capable knowledge-creators from birth, which is in line with the classroom experiences mentioned above where preschoolers and kindergartners engage in successful inquiry. Ms. Jill’s classroom is multi-age, but the students experience the same instruction with individualized support as much as possible with up to four assistant teachers also working alongside Ms. Jill. A Reggio-inspired approach must be locally-focused, giving attention to the specific contexts in which students live and using that as a basis for inquiry. Being that Flint has such a unique context and the city can’t be disconnected from these children’s lives, the city became the “sources” for the inquiry. Jill began this inquiry by asking students the compelling question, “What are the special places in our city?” Over the course of a school year, the children explored places in the city of Flint and on the university campus to answer this question, as well as related supporting questions (“Where are these special places?” “How can we show people where they are?” and “Who are important people in these places?”)

### Dimensions 2 and 3: Knowledge and Sources

In the C3 Framework, students use disciplinary knowledge to investigate questions and evaluate sources. This may look a little different in a Reggio-inspired preschool than in a “traditional” kindergarten classroom. For example, special places within the city became the “sources” that the students explored. As they walked the city, students took snapshots using classroom tablets, or even using Ms. Jill’s iPhone. When they returned to the classroom, Jill projected the pictures for the entire class. The photographer would explain why the photo represents a special place, or just talk about why they took the photo. With each walking trip, the group was collecting “special places” that helped them answer the compelling question. These discussions gave the students opportunities to practice speaking and listening skills and practice considering others’ point of view (Dimension 2, Civics, Participation and Deliberation, K-2) as

well as content in Human Environment Interaction (Dimension 2, Geography, Places, Regions, and Culture, K-2).

A frequent trip was to the local Farmer’s Market, which became one of the class’s “special places.” Charliese was the photographer for the day and took several pictures of different food stands at the market.

Charliese’s perspective, as shown in the photos, are from the height of a four-year-old. The food signs are at eye level, and the market floor is more noticeable to a four-year-old than to an adult. When discussing her photos with her classmates, she talked about wanting to get a donut at the donut vendor, and noticed the arrows on the ground.

Her classmate Miles excitedly chimed in, “Can we get some jerky next time?” as Charliese showed her photo of the sausage vendor’s sign.

The children also discovered special places on the way to the market. To get to the market, the children must cross a pedestrian bridge across the Flint River. Miles took a photo of the bridge’s shadows “because it looks really cool.” In this picture, the water is not seen and the bridge itself is barely noticeable. But the place becomes special nonetheless through the eyes of a four-year-old because of the colors and lines of the shadow.

The preschoolers also made personal connections to the places they visited. Bishop, whose parents work at the university, had Jill take a picture of him and Noemi standing in the campus plaza. Afterwards, Bishop said he had Jill take the



photo because his parents work on campus and he later noted in class, “I wonder if my mom and dad can see me?”

As they branched out and the weather became warmer, the class took longer walking trips to the city’s performing arts center, the planetarium, and Applewood Estates, a local apple orchard, garden, and historical site in the city. The children’s trips into the community became events that engaged Flint residents and the broader community as well. Traveling to some of these places involved the children crossing a very busy divided highway in Flint. Ms. Jill called ahead to the campus and Flint police to block traffic temporarily so the students would be safe crossing the intersection. Students slapped high fives and waved hello to the police officers holding up cars (where drivers often honked playfully) as a large group of children crossed the street. Jill’s class was often joined by other classes as they ate lunch in the parks nearby and even listened to the community’s live music “Tunes at Noon” outside on sunny summer days.

Having the students explore these special places and talk about them explicitly to others is helping to develop the students’ place-consciousness,<sup>18</sup> an explicit awareness of their environment, in this case, the campus and city of Flint. Before one can take on the work of civic engagement and civic action, one must be aware of their communities where they live and work. This awareness not only makes people more knowledgeable of potential problems to address, but a reflection on place can develop a sense of attachment and belonging so that you want to address the problems in your community. Place-consciousness can be developed at all ages and stages of life, but preschoolers are at an age primed for exploration and reflection.

Because of the water crisis and economic challenges experi-

enced by Flint, Michigan, there are many negative depictions of the city in the general media. Despite living through the water crisis however, Ms. Jill’s students have more positive things to say. For these preschoolers, sharing their perspective on the city is a form of “taking action”—they want to show others what the city means to them through their eyes. The first step was to make a map of their admired, special places to be given out during “family night” at their school. The annual “family night” is always a large event for the center, and it usually features families moving from classroom to classroom within the school. This year, however, inspired by the children’s walks through the campus and city of Flint, families were told to dress for being out of doors, to be prepared to walk and to see Flint through the eyes of their children!

The school decided to use Ms. Jill’s list of special places (popular with other classrooms as well) as points on a tour through campus and part of the city, with family fun and games set up at various stops. Ms. Jill’s class was in charge of making the map for families to follow. At the age of four and five, it is developmentally appropriate for map renderings to look more like pictures.<sup>19</sup> Each individual student drew pictures of a special place, and Jill guided them in thinking about the location of each place in relation to the school. She talked about which place appeared first, second, and third, etc. as they walked through campus to the Farmer’s Market. This gave the students practice in sequencing and representation, working with places they knew so well. The end result was a map of the area that families could follow during the event. The families enjoyed being outside during the event. They enjoyed being spread out instead of crowded inside a building! A dance party erupted in

Willson Park on the university campus, where several families spontaneously congregated at the end of the night.

A few months later, as college students were returning to campus from a summer break, they received a copy of the map from Ms. Jill's students. The joy the preschoolers had while sharing what they love about Flint was infectious! A wonderful result of seeing the city through the preschoolers' point of view is that we adults may start to see the potential for health, recreation, and joy in this city.<sup>20</sup>

### Celebrate: Sharing a Place that is Yours

Exploring your local context can be a great avenue for a social studies inquiry with preschoolers or early elementary-age students. They can practice identifying the assets of the city or town in which they live and begin the early steps of mapmaking in the process. Although your local context may be different than Flint or Reggio Emilia, Italy, expanding your classroom beyond the physical space of your school and allowing your students to document the experience can help them begin to develop place-consciousness. Students will need to be aware of their community—its assets and its challenges—in order to begin to think about their own impact on the community.

The first step is to literally take the first step! Take a walk and give your students a camera! Allow them to take snapshots of what they see, not what we want them to see. Give them the opportunity to talk about these places and identify them in ways that are meaningful to them. For example, Ms. Jill's class didn't refer to Willson Park by its name, but instead as "Gandhi," because there is a statue of Gandhi there. Her students didn't refer to the Fingerprint Mural on campus by its name, but instead, calling it "Rainbow Rock" because of the bright colors and the ease in which they can climb on this piece of art! Using the student-given names of these places can build their attachment to them as well. Once these students have been exposed to their locality, they can begin to have discussions about problems, issues, and things they would like to see changed for the better.

Ms. Jill's class is growing up in a place where the only safe water to drink is bottled water. This is the children's daily experience, and they will need concepts and vocabulary for describing what it is like to grow up in such an environment. Place-based lessons can help with that. Part of being an empowered citizen is being able to describe the place where you live — the land, water, and people.<sup>21</sup>

### Notes

1. In 2014, city and state officials switched the source of tap water for the City of Flint, Michigan, and failed to add anti-corrosion agents, which were needed with the new source. "Almost immediately, residents of Flint — a majority-black city where 40 percent of the people live in poverty — started complaining about the quality of the water. City and state officials denied for months that there was a serious problem. By that time, supply pipes had sustained major corrosion, and lead was leaching into the water. The city switched back to its original water supply ... but it was too late to reverse the damage to the pipes. High blood lead levels are especially harmful to children and pregnant women, and can cause learning disabilities ..." Merritt Kennedy, "Lead-Laced Water in Flint: A Step-

- by-Step Look at the Makings of a Crisis" (NPR, April 20, 2016), [www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378). See Carolyn A. Weber and Heather N. Hagan, "Is the 'Right to Clean Water' Fake News? An Inquiry in Media Literacy and Human Rights," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 33, no. 1 (September/October 2020), 4–8.
2. L. DeVito, "The Number of Flint's Students with Special Needs has Increased by 56 percent since the Water Crisis, according to Report," *Detroit Metro Times* (August 28, 2019), [shorturl.at/fuWX8](http://shorturl.at/fuWX8).
3. Steve Carmody, "Educators in Flint Step Up Efforts to Reach Youngest Victims of Tainted Water," NPR (May 3, 2016), [www.npr.org/2016/05/03/476630689/educators-in-flint-step-up-efforts-to-reach-youngest-victims-of-tainted-water](http://www.npr.org/2016/05/03/476630689/educators-in-flint-step-up-efforts-to-reach-youngest-victims-of-tainted-water);
4. E. Geist, "Let's Make a Map: The Developmental Stages of Children's Mapmaking," *Young Children* 70, no. 3 (2015), 50–55; D. Sobel, *Mapmaking with Children: Sense-of-Place Education for the Elementary Years* (New York: Heinemann, 1998).
5. P. Brillante and S. Mankiw, "A Sense of Place: Human Geography in the Early Childhood Classroom," *Young Children* 70, no. 3 (2015), 2–9.
6. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
7. NCSS, *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
8. K. Artman-Meeker and K. A. Kinder, "The Shoe Project: Meaningful Learning in an Inclusive Preschool Classroom," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 28, no. 4, (Mary/April 2016), 17–20.
9. P. Rogovin, "Kindergartners' Questions become the Curriculum," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 28, no. 1 (September/October 2015), 8–11.
10. Brillante and Mankiw.
11. D2.Geo.6.K-2, in NCSS, 2013, p. 2.
12. A. Savage and S. Wesson, "'What Makes You Think That?' Kindergarten Students Analyze Primary Sources from the Library of Congress," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 29, no. 1 (September/October 2016), 24–26.
13. S. C. Serriere, M. D. Burroughs, and D. L. Mitra, "Kindergartners and 'Philosophical Dialogue': Supporting Child Agency in the Classroom," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 29, no. 4 (November/December 2017), 8–12.
14. K. A. Payne, "Who can Fix This? The Concept of 'Audience' and First Graders' Civic Agency," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 27, no. 4 (March /April 2015), 19–22.
15. Rogovin.
16. S. Jorgenson, S. Howard, and B.T. Welch, "A Trip to the Boiler Room: An Experiential Approach to Human Geography in Kindergarten," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 30, no. 4 (March/April, 2018), 4–11.
17. C. Edwards, L. Gandini, and G. Forman, eds., *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation* (3rd ed.) (New York: Preager, 2012).
18. D. Gruenwald, "Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education," *American Educational Research Journal* 40, no. 3 (2003), 619–654.
19. D. Sobel, *Mapmaking with Children: Sense-of-Place Education for the Elementary Years* (New York: Heinemann, 1998).
20. A. Dorfman and C. Kenney, "Flint, Michigan through Children's Eyes: Using a Teaching Circle and Projects to Re-Envision a City," *Early Childhood Education Journal* (February 6, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01031-x>.
21. Professor Whitlock has worked in Flint since 2013 and continues to be inspired by the city's commitment to activism, justice, and hope for its residents. To hear about her experiences with the Flint Water Crisis and how to approach teaching about Flint through social studies inquiry, listen to her episode of the Visions of Education podcast, <https://visionsofed.com/2020/07/06/episode-147-flint-water-crisis-with-annie-whitlock/>.

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