

Journal of Folklore and Education



Youth in Community
2015: Volume 2

About the Cover Photo: Skaters performing tricks at the annual Harold Hunter Day skate jam on the Lower East Side of New York City. Photo by Amanda Dargan. See “Kickflip: Expanding Digital Learning Opportunities for Skateboarders and Other Teen Subcultures” for more.

Journal of Folklore and Education

A publication of Local Learning: The National Network for Folk Arts in Education

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The *Journal of Folklore and Education* is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal published annually by Local Learning: The National Network for Folk Arts in Education. Local Learning links folk culture specialists and educators nationwide, advocating for full inclusion of folk and traditional arts and culture in our nation's education. We believe that "local learning"—the traditional knowledge and processes of learning that are grounded in community life—is of critical importance to the effective education of students and to the vigor of our communities and society.

The Journal publishes work representing ethnographic approaches that tap the knowledge and life experience of students, their families, community members, and educators in K-12, college, museum, and community education. We intend our audience to be educators and students at all levels and in all settings, folk culture specialists, and other interested readers. As a digital publication, this journal provides a forum for interdisciplinary, multimedia approaches to community-based teaching, learning, and cultural stewardship.

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Note regarding media: This document has multiple media links throughout. They are often indicated via blue text. To link to unique content that is shared via our *Journal of Folklore and Education* YouTube channel, visit <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKIjpylofFk8NdZzdrz6PAQ>.

Introduction

by Paddy Bowman and Lisa Rathje, Editors

In this edition of the *Journal of Folklore and Education*, our articles feature school and out-of-school programs that connect young people with community. The toolkit of Local Learning (interviewing, observation, documentation, place-based learning, cultural perspectives) proves to be both utilitarian and philosophical when authors looked at the ways our youth work, learn, and play in our communities. While our authors who teach around the globe provide articles and classroom exercises showing how youth can learn in—and from—community, we saw youth shaping the narrative arc of this issue. Not surprisingly, like the interest-driven learning groups of skateboarders in the article “Kickflip” (Bar-Zemer and Forsyth), the theme of “Youth in Community” worked to “flip the script” of engagement, agency, and learning. It is the youth who are taking the initiative to identify needs in their communities—from gender-neutral bathrooms at a museum (Dobkin) to pathways toward creating a sense of home through farming (Kinney).

Hallmarks of featured programs include the following:

- Teamwork
- Collaboration
- Transparency
- Youth as meaningful contributors
- Connection to the larger community
- Public sharing of research and projects
- Pride of place
- Intergenerational connections
- Tapping youth interests and home cultures
- Technology and media
- Reciprocal learning
- Coaching and mentoring
- Authentic immersive experiences outside formal classrooms

As editors, what we recognized as we read the work of educators in K-12 schools, colleges, museums, and community-based organizations is that at the core of an effective folklore in education program are the students and an understanding of how they need to be active participants in bringing information to bear on their own educational experience. Bruce L. Wilson and H. Dickson Corbett are independent educational researchers who conducted extensive research in the Philadelphia Public School District, assessing its “Children Achieving” program targeting inner-city schools and their students. Their conclusion states simply that reform projects must happen with, and not for, students. They noted that in any reforms, students would be better served as “participants” in change, rather than “beneficiaries” (2001:126). They quote M. Fullan at length, emphasizing his points that:

Educational change, above all, is a people-related phenomenon for each and every individual. Students, even little ones, are people too. Unless they have some meaningful (to them) role in the enterprise, most educational change, indeed most education, will fail. I ask the reader not to think of students as running the school, but to entertain the following questions: What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of reform in schools? (qtd. in Wilson and Corbett 2001: 127)

Likewise, education researchers Lois Weis and Michelle Fine note in their edited collection *Construction Sites* (2000), that students need and are constructing spaces “in which they engage in a kind of critical consciousness, challenging hegemonic beliefs about them, their perceived inadequacies, pathologies, and ‘lacks’ and restoring a sense of possibility for themselves and their peers, with and beyond narrow spaces of identity sustenance” (3). They also note that “there are no victims here [in these essays examining student spaces], but there are lots of cultural critics” (2).

The articles in this issue can be characterized in multiple ways. On the one hand, some articles demonstrate how careful, thoughtful investigation of students' home and community culture allows youth to discover uniqueness and experience difference as universal. Realizing the importance of a tradition to self, family, school, or community emphasizes its worth. Preparing young people to conduct ethnography teaches ethics, multiple points of view, and the complexities inherent in diversity. It offers content that deeply engages them as researchers and gives students agency.

Knowing what to ask about a cultural tradition or a cultural group represents why we believe that the tools and approaches of folklore, anthropology, and oral history teach vital life lessons as well as important skills. Such study grounds young people in their personal identity and prepares them to encounter others more openly, less judgmentally. This allows them to serve communities and civic life authentically and sustainably. Ethnography also opens a window onto how communities relate to young people. How are they welcomed into communal spaces, civic engagement, and leadership?

What are the signs and sounds of youth on the landscape? Where are they welcome? How tightly woven is the safety net? How can adults foster relationships and opportunities that value students' intrinsic knowledge and cultural expertise? How can we incite young people's curiosity, support their research, and promote their creative responses to wider audiences?

During a recent observation of an afterschool Mexican ballet folklórico class in a public school on Chicago's South Side, the middle-school principal shared her recognition of the importance of connecting youth with their cultural community. She pointed out that almost all students in the ballet folklórico group are also on honor roll. She said, "You know, it is not just that honor roll students enroll in ballet folklórico. What I see is that participating in ballet folklórico creates honor roll students." She sees in her school that learning about their culture and heritage has a positive impact on students' schoolwork and understanding of their cultural identity. We hope that this issue of the *Journal of Folklore and Education* will illustrate not only the impact that youth engaging with community may have on learning, but also the ways in which this impact resonates in the spaces where we all live and work—making them more beautiful, safe, just, and youthful.

Works Cited

- Weis, Lois and Michelle Fine. 2000. *Construction Sites: Excavating Race, Class, and Gender Among Urban Youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wilson, Bruce L. and H. Dickson Corbett. 2001. *Listening to Urban Kids: School Reform and the Teachers They Want*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

To translate this work more directly to K-16 classrooms we suggest that you look at the Classroom Applications noted in the Table of Contents. These activities promote student agency, call upon students' culture and intrinsic knowledge, and tap family and community connections. Incorporating a folkloristic approach to engaging youth with community helps students use and create primary sources authentic to their place and issues of their concern and interest. Such work addresses especially well content standards in English language arts, social studies, English as a Second Language, media, and the arts.

Some classroom applications use a single session (Lichman), and others provide templates for extended studies using research, literacy, and local learning in youth-centered curriculum (Fernandes, Goldberg, Sharrow, Sommers/Bernard).