



# Right to the Classroom: Seeking Spatial Justice in Kindergarten

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## Abstract

This article uses Lefebvre’s concept of right to the city to frame the practices of a Kindergarten teacher and her ability to create a more racially equitable classroom space. It explains how the teacher and researcher collaboratively engaged in racial spaces analysis and critical race theory to develop greater racial spatial awareness. The teacher was able to use this awareness to resist neoliberalism and the racialization space in her classroom. The article explains how framing classroom practice according to right to the city can help teachers and researchers work together towards spatial justice in schools, where the educational rights of students of color are not limited by reductive notions of property based in whiteness.

**Keywords** Spatial justice · Neoliberalism · Racial spaces · Whiteness as property · Critical race theory

## Introduction

Researcher: It was nice to see how kids who stood out as smart were from all different racial backgrounds.

Donna: [grinning widely] That’s my goal. I don’t you be able to walk in and say any one thing about any child because of their skin color. I want you to look at this multicultural potluck and see that we’re all excelling. I love it!

By the time I met Donna<sup>1</sup> at City Elementary, she had already been teaching kindergarten for 19 years. Like any good teacher, Donna knew her students well and had a wide range of strategies in what she called her “toolbox.” An always sharply-dressed

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<sup>1</sup> All people and place names are pseudonyms.

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Black woman, Donna was clearly a veteran teacher and very well trained. At the same time, I will admit that when I first saw her teaching, nothing particularly stood out about her pedagogy other than it being good, solid teaching. She introduced lessons in a clear and vibrant voice, reminding students of what they had done together the day before. She commanded the students' attention and had just the right mix of strictness and warmth that I have seen from many kindergarten teachers.

However, after working with Donna for 4 and a half years, I have come to realize what does stand out about her practice: she is one of the most reflective teachers I have ever worked with. In the time I have known her, she has been able to use her ability to reflect on her practice in honest and critical ways to promote greater racial equity. In particular, unlike in most of the classrooms I visit in integrated schools, it is now hard to tell the academically successful students from those that struggle. Furthermore, in a class that has averaged 9 white,<sup>2</sup> 7 Black, 4 Latino, and 4 Asian students, her struggling students are not discernible by race. As is evident in the quote that opens this article, this is Donna's goal, and one she has repeated as often as she can:

I don't want you to be able to tell who the 'smart' kids are from the others.

I want anyone to be able to come into this room, and if they pull a kid aside, that kid can tell them what's going on with confidence.

Furthermore, beyond the reductive achievement gap discourse (Carey 2014), where I have seen Donna excel is through her ability to center her students of color, giving them equitable access to high-level curriculum and challenging current racialized power dynamics in the classroom. In the later "[Building Racial Spatial Awareness](#)" and subsequent sections, I explain more specifically what some of these dynamics are, but they all relate to how whiteness can affect teachers' views of students' abilities and rights as well as the freedom with which students are able to engage in the classroom.

In this piece, I use a spatial analysis and Lefebvre's ([1968] 1996) concept of the right to the city to frame Donna's practice in order to highlight the value of teachers building a racial spatial awareness. I have been working with Donna as an equity coach (Blaisdell 2018) at City Elementary—a school in a small urban center in the southeast United States. My role as coach was to use a critical race theory (CRT) lens to observe Donna's teaching and discuss her practice so that (1) she could continue to increase racial equity in her classroom and (2) I could develop practice-informed theories that would help other teachers in the school. What is important to note is that our work together was dialogical, where we both shared knowledge and challenged each other in order to grow.<sup>3</sup> So, while this article shares a lot of examples of my own voice, it was Donna's expertise in and understanding of classroom practice and her strength as a reflective teacher—which included her openness in having me come in and critique her practice—that enabled me to develop the critical

<sup>2</sup> I follow Dumas' (2016) practice of capitalizing Black and other racial categories for people of color (Asian, Latinx, etc.) while keeping white in lower case as, in contrast to those other racial categorizations, white a "does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror" (14).

<sup>3</sup> I share more about CRT and the dialogical approach in the "[Setting and Methods](#)" section.

race lens that I tried to bring to our discussions. My intent in sharing our discussions is to add to the conversation on how critical race researchers can work collaboratively with teachers to resist how school and classroom spaces are racialized in ways that limit the education of students of color. I particularly focus on spatial practice and production at the micro, classroom interaction level.

Educational research on the effects of spatial arrangements in and between schools—e.g., classroom level groupings (Santamaria 2009; Park and Datnow 2016), intraschool tracking (Mayer et al. 2018; Oakes 2005), and interschool segregation via policies such as school choice (Lubienski and Dougherty 2009; LaFleur 2016)—focuses on how these arrangements negatively affect the educational opportunities and access for students of color. This piece, on the other hand, will show how perceptions of classroom space negatively affect students of color even when spatial arrangements appear to be equitable—i.e. even when teachers integrate students of color into the same groups and classroom activities. Lefebvre ([1974] 1991) explains that it is important to analyze the distance between peoples' mental construction of space (how we believe space to exist) and the actual, material "space of social practice" (14). This piece seeks to analyze that distance by examining how current spatial *practices* belie the stated logic of spatial *arrangements* intended to promote greater racial equity (e.g. integrated classrooms and mixed-ability groups). In doing so, this piece will extend the work of racial spaces analysis (Blaisdell 2016), which has used CRT and spatial analysis to examine and respond to the way that schools use spatial logic to (often unintentionally) mask racial and racist practices.

## Theoretical Framework

In the following sections, I use both spatial analysis and CRT to explain the how schools like City function to support white students over students of color. Specifically, I use these analyses to explain how neoliberalism and the racialization of space create a dominant school discourse that narrowly frames the function of school space, justifies practices that restrict the educational rights of students of color, and limits how teachers imagine—and thus work towards—racial equity.

### School Space as Social Space

Lefebvre ([1974] 1991) uses the term social space to describe how spaces are both formed by and then perpetuate the relations of economic production and social reproduction. He and later thinkers, like Soja (2010), explain how these relationships cause us to create and organize social spaces seemingly for the sake of convenience—e.g., they facilitate clear familial responsibilities, worker roles, and economic flow—but that they are also based on "political power, cultural domination, and social control over individuals, groups, and the places they inhabit" (Soja 2010, 32). Spaces are therefore "expressive of ideologies and relationships of power, processes filled with living politics and ideologies that shape who we are as people"

(Helfenbein and Buendía 2017, 29). The resulting spaces perpetuate the power relationships they are built on, but their oppressive nature is hidden. Spaces seem to be naturally the way they are. “Thus space emerges consecrated—yet at the same time protected from the forces of good and evil: it retains the aspect of those forces which facilitates social community, but bears no trace of their other dangerous side” (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 34). Therefore, current spatial practices—the way we live and interact in specific spaces—become the only types of practices we can imagine in those particular consecrated spaces, and disrupting those spatial practices can seem almost sacrilegious.

In the U.S., school spaces (classrooms, cafeterias, faculty rooms) become consecrated via a variety of overlapping systems oppression. Like with social space more broadly, the oppressive nature of school space is hidden. Buendía et al. (2004) explain, “what appear as taken-for-granted spatial denotations that circulate in school spaces matter greatly in determining the knowledge and curriculum that teachers and students engage with” (859). These spatial denotations and codes—labels such as “at risk” or that mark the specific part of town that students come from—“obscure the basis of their definition, allowing those who invoke them to denote meanings about race and class without specifically naming those terms” (835). These codes are part of a broader societal discourse that leads to the consecration of school space for specific purposes. Two of the major oppressive forces that consecrated classroom space at City were neoliberalism and the racialization of space.

### Neoliberalism in School Spaces

The paradigm of neoliberalism currently frames public school practice in the U.S. in racialized ways, intensifying deficit discourses of students of color (Baldrige 2017; Rhee 2013). Lipman (2011) explains neoliberalism as “an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere” (6). Lipman (2011) and other scholars (Costigan 2013; Gabbard 2008; Rizvi and Lingard 2009; Sleeter 2008; Taubman 2009) have explained how neoliberalism has funnelled our vision of daily school life into one that is about pre-determined standards and objectives, towards maximizing contact hours and time on task.

...the overarching theme is that schooling is to be dominated by the knowledge and skills privileged in the (stratified) economy, and teachers and schools are to be held accountable to standards and performance targets (Rizvi and Lingard 2009). (Lipman 2011, 15)

This focus affects how we conceive, perceive, and live in—the three aspects of the production of space (Lefebvre [1974] 1991)—school space, resulting in a system that “values concepts such as *performance objectives* over authentic engagement with learning...” (Costigan 2013, 118).

Furthermore, reaching these standards and performance targets becomes seen as an objective measure—often, *the* objective measure—of good teaching.

...the neoliberal paradigm...presumes an “apparent” objectivity and hyper-rationality of what it is to be an “efficient” or “good teacher,” effectively transforming the organisation of the classroom, school goals and, most importantly, the very nature of what it means to be a teacher. (Cuervo 2012, 90)

In a neoliberalism, spatial practice in schools becomes narrowly centered on acquiring very a specific form of property—the curricular standards—and recognizing the acquisition of that capital in very specific ways—standardized assessments. Because the purpose of the classroom is centered on the curriculum as property, the worth of the students themselves is based almost solely on their acquisition of it. If the students do not acquire curricular capital—particularly for reading and math—they are assigned reductive labels (Carey 2014) such as “under-performing,” “low-level,” or “fragile.” Schools may make nods to valuing diverse forms of cultural capital (e.g. different ways of learning) or social capital (e.g. family engagement) but these are ultimately engaged for the purpose of compliance (Lareau and Horvat 1999) and acquiring the standard curriculum. Thus, schools become spaces where property rights, not human rights, are the determining factor in students engaging in more meaningful and engaging curriculum and instruction.

### The Racialization of School Space

In an educational system dominated by white supremacy (Leonardo 2007; Gillborn 2005), neoliberalism exacerbates a system where property rights benefit white students over students of color. Schools like City are racial spaces, where freedom, mobility, and voice are controlled by white supremacy (Calmore 1995; Blaisdell 2016). Racial spaces are similar to what Ross (2013) terms white spaces, spaces where whiteness is over-represented, that send clear messages of belonging or not-belonging based on whiteness, and that perpetuate psychological violence against people of color. Racial spaces, which likewise send messages of non-belonging to people of color and perpetuate psychological violence, normalize white dominance and non-white subordination in both symbolic and material ways. School spaces become racial spaces via spatial arrangements in which whiteness itself functions as a form of property. Harris (1993) explains that, as status property, whiteness carries with it the right for its status to be protected. Whiteness as property allows white students to get away with the behaviors that students of color get reprimanded for (Skiba et al. 2011; Skiba et al. 2002) and affords white students greater access to the curriculum. Even in desegregated schools, students of color already have less access to educational resources because of spatial arrangements—established via practices such as racialized tracking (Mayer et al. 2018; Tyson 2011; DeSena and Ansalone 2009; Dixson and Rousseau 2005), homogenous ability grouping (Huang 2009; Lleras and Rangel 2009; Modica 2015), and gifted education (Ford et al. 2013)—that sustain in-school school segregation. In each of these practices, students of color are disproportionately separated into different school spaces (i.e. different

classrooms) or different classrooms spaces (i.e. separate groups). In either case, these spaces most often offer less rigorous forms of curriculum and instruction.

Neoliberalism is itself an inherently racial project (Baldrige 2017; Lipman 2011) that exacerbates the racialization of space by exploiting and augmenting the status property of whiteness. Neoliberalism causes schools to value students who are seen to have acquired more of the standard/official curriculum, what Apple (1994) calls official knowledge. Basing access to further curriculum on already acquired curricular property sustains the spatial arrangements mentioned above, which in turn allow white students to further accrue curricular property. The result is an accrual of property for white students and a divestment of resources for students of color. Furthermore, whiteness itself causes the cultural resources of students of color to be seen as inferior. If a school does not value a students' cultural resources, those resources do not function as capital in that setting (Lewis 2011). Therefore, because whiteness as status property helps white students in navigating the kinds of capital that are valued in school, the racialization of space in turn exacerbates the negative effects of neoliberalism for students of color.

### **Distributive Justice**

The racialization of space in the neoliberal paradigm also limits how schools intervene in—or supposedly intervene in—racial disparity. Because neoliberalism values individual notions of merit (Costigan 2013), schools often seek for solutions to racial disparity that are de-raced (Stec 2007) in that they attempt to address a systemic issue that affects groups of racialized people by focusing on the individual, often in the form of interventions that do not address underlying structural issues (Nieto and Bode 2012). At City Elementary, classroom-level solutions to racial inequity in literacy often included resource teachers pulling students from class to work on reading skills; using tutors, reading buddies, or other adults to help students gain more guidance in accessing the content; or “double dipping” (when groups of students performing below grade level in literacy would get access to reading “at their level” at one point of the day and grade-level reading at another). While these solutions did involve funnelling resources towards students of color, they were also confined by an achievement gap discourse that relies on “technical and quick-fix interventions as solutions to problems that require far more complex understandings than what is implied and discussed in the public education reform debates” (Carey 2014, 443). Instead of looking at the deeper structural roots of racial disparity, these interventions utilized reductive labels that become fixed on students, leading teachers to further restrict them from more meaningful curriculum and instruction. These solutions also concentrated on one form of justice: distributive justice.

Distributive justice focuses narrowly on giving individual students equitable access to educational resources, but it does not include a critique of the systems in place that make access inequitable in the first place or how those resources have become to be seen as the most valuable (Cuervo 2012). Distributive justice in the context of schools like City is reduced to acquiring the standardized curriculum. Therefore, school space itself continues to serve a limited purpose. Even when

teachers want to use students' cultural capital, by relying on only distributive justice the purpose of using that capital is still narrowly focused on acquiring curriculum. A distributive justice frame does not account for the types of knowledge and interaction that are predetermined as worthwhile and valuable in the class.

Furthermore, despite the intent of refining spatial arrangements so as to increase the access that students of color have to the curriculum, schools continue to enact micro/classroom level spatial practices that are governed by a hidden curriculum of whiteness (Leonardo 2004), where notions of white supremacy regulate how students engage with learning in the classroom and display knowledge. Therefore, even when spatial *arrangements* appear to be equitable—e.g. integrated classrooms and student groupings—the spatial *practices* within those spaces are still dominated by neoliberalism and whiteness as property.

### **Right to the City and Spatial Justice**

In contrast to distributive justice, spatial justice involves understanding how the “biases imposed on certain populations because of their geographical location” lead to “the creation of lasting spatial structures of privilege and advantage” (Soja 2009, 3) and using that understanding to create spaces in which the people who occupy and operate in them have more control and dignity. “The reason to move away from distributive justice is that it is focused almost solely on outcomes and not on the structure that produces those outcomes” (Soja 2010, 78).

Lefebvre's concept of right to the city is useful to frame this search for spatial justice. In *Right to the City* ([1968] 1996), Lefebvre imagines the city as a collective and on-going process rather than a static produced place. This reimagining allows for a reframing of rights in terms of spatial rights.

For Lefebvre, the urban dweller, by the very fact of urban residence itself, has specifically spatial rights: to participate openly and fairly in all the processes producing urban space, to access and make use of the particular advantages of city life, especially in the highly valued city center (or centers), to avoid all forms of indisposed spatial segregation and confinement, to be provided with public services that meet basic needs in health, education, and welfare. (Soja 2010, 99–100)

If we substitute “urban” with “classroom”, we can examine how students of color do or do not currently have spatial rights and begin to imagine the what open and fair participation in classroom space might look like. Lefebvre ([1974] 1991) explains that spatial production involves perception, conception, and lived practice. By first being able to perceive how school practices confine the rights of students of color—via the racialized and reductive discourse of performance objectives and the achievement gap—we can begin to conceive of classroom spaces where these students have fuller rights and can more fully benefit. To produce this more equitable space, we can establish more racially conscious norms of interaction and participation.

The idea that space is produced, and as such can be produced in more equitable ways, has been taken up by education scholars. For instance, Helfenbein and

Huddleston (2017) explain that spatial analysis helps “problematize the world’s taken-for-grantedness allowing for deeper examination beyond the usual, tired solutions that are often presented” (6). They argue that spatial analysis is particularly useful to critique and think past the reductive notions of neoliberal education reform. Ares (2017) argues that adding spatial dimensions to analyses of schools can increase our understanding of how geography and place affect “how policies are appropriated differently and have material consequences for how teaching, learning, and reform are translated at local levels” (6). These local-level analyses rooted in context can help researchers better understand how education policy is affected by scale, geography, and the particularities of place. By organizing around a vision of what a particular space is, should be, and could be, teachers and administrators can imbue their school spaces with a different meaning than the one intended by broader educational policies and discourses. “To think in this critically spatial way, both ontologically and epistemologically, means to encode space with a certain meaning” (Huddleston 2017, 114). As this encoding is not static but rather a process, and as the meanings that spaces hold are based on social practices that are always changing, spaces themselves can be reenvisioned into spaces of possibility (Wozolek 2015; Helfenbein 2012).

Lefebvre ([1968] 1996) calls the process of analyzing the possible *transduction*: “transduction elaborates and constructs a theoretical object, a *possible* object from information related to reality and a problematic posed by this reality. Transduction assumes an incessant feedback between the conceptual framework used and empirical observations” (151). In other words, if we can imagine the classroom as a collective work, we can compare and contrast that imagined classroom to actual classroom space and then begin to alter how we see and use that space. This framing is actually evident in Donna’s comments about her desires for her classroom space:

Donna: I feel like if I can tap into their love and curiosity [pauses to think], we can all be engaged in this learning process together [smiling broadly].

Donna could imagine the classroom as a space where broader notions of justice were possible. Her goals were not only for equitable distribution of the curriculum. Furthermore, in her imagining, racial justice was centered.

Donna: The work on racial spaces we did, it was helpful because it had me self-reflect. How am I serving all kids, and by all I mean an attention to Black and Brown kids? I want their voices heard.

In the next section I describe a bit more about City Elementary and explain the methods Donna and I used that allowed us to engage in transduction and work towards spatial justice in her classroom.

## Setting and Methods

City Elementary was located in a small urban center in a metropolitan area of the southeast United States. With a student population of about 500, City had a racial makeup of 44% white, 22% Black, 17% Asian, and 14% Latino students.



In 2013, I started working with City on a larger, critical ethnographic project to increase the school's racial literacy (Guinier 2004). I started working directly with Donna as part of that project in the Spring of 2014 and have continued that work up through the writing of this article. To date, I have spent over 40 hours with Donna, which has included interviews, team planning, and observations of classroom practice. I audio recorded and then transcribed all interviews and planning sessions and took fieldnotes for all observations.

In the data collection process, I used equity coaching (Blaisdell 2018), a method of research and professional development rooted in critical race methodology (Solórzano and Yosso 2002) with a goal of fostering critical race praxis (Yamamoto 1997). Equity coaching centralizes race—and white supremacy in particular—and uses concepts from CRT with teachers directly. Equity coaching is also rooted in performance ethnography (Madison 2005), where researchers work dialogically with teachers and administration. As a former teacher, I made a commitment when becoming a researcher to always use a collaborative approach to research with teachers, to use the research act to draw on teacher knowledge and expertise. As a CRT scholar, I have also made a commitment to try and address the endemic nature of racism in U.S. society and schools. In a dialogic performance ethnography approach, researchers and participants put their epistemological understandings into conversation with one another in order to co-construct critical understandings about and also potential interventions into mutually agreed upon issues related to culture and power (Madison 2005). This approach has allowed me to preserve my commitment to teacher agency while also maintaining a critical stance on issues like race and racism. With this approach in mind, I asked Donna what she wanted me to focus on when observing her class and what questions she wanted to discuss in our interviews. The larger study already had a focus on whiteness, so much of our discussion focused on how her specific classroom practices were either resistant to or unintentionally complicit in white supremacy. Together, Donna and I critically examined the examples that I observed and that she shared with the intent of working together to pursue her goals for racial equity.

To conduct this co-examination we drew on racial spaces analysis. Racial spaces analysis is very similar to critical race spatial analysis (CRSA), which focuses on “how structural and institutional factors divide, constrict, and construct space to impact the educational experiences and opportunities available to students based on race” (Vélez and Solórzano 2017, 20). The focus with racial spaces analysis, however, is on the discursive process by which space become racialized at the micro (classroom, student-to-teacher, student-to-student) level. It uses CRT to examine the connection between racial and spatial discourses normalizes that oppression (Blaisdell 2016). Very early in our discussions, we found concepts from racial spaces analysis—such as culture of segregation (Calmore 1995) and redlining (Blaisdell 2017)—useful in analyzing in detail how even well-intentioned teacher practices could unintentionally perpetuate white supremacy. From this analysis, we were also able to discuss the broader questions (1) How is my classroom a racial space, and (2) What would it look like if my classroom was an equitable space?

To represent our discussions of these questions, I again relied on the performance ethnography, and dialogical performance in particular. “Dialogical performance is a way of having intimate conversation with other people and cultures. Instead of speaking about them, one speaks to and with them” (Conquergood 1985, 10). In the sections that follow, I try to represent that performance, one between me (a critical race researcher) and Donna (a veteran teacher). Furthermore, my intent is to honor performance ethnography’s focus on unsettling dominant narratives by sharing specific and local accounts of possibility (Denzin 2003). Therefore, I present our conversations as a collaborative co-construction of knowledge—a transduction (Lefebvre [1968] 1996)—around race and space, one that purposefully critiques and unsettles dominant narratives on race (especially those seemingly taken-for-granted narratives) and presents the possibility of constructing more equitable space within the racialized space of U.S. schools. Towards that end, I first show how we built a racial spatial awareness and used the equity coaching approach to challenge current spatial practices rooted in neoliberalism. I then show how we were able to broaden our understanding of what spatial practice could look like in the classroom so as to increase spatial rights for students of color. While our work did not always fully move us away from focusing on distributive justice and accessing the standardized curriculum, Donna was able to use equity coaching to develop practices that promoted greater spatial justice in her classroom. The sections below present our conversations in linear fashion, but the actual work was a messier process, where we examined how classroom space is produced from our overlapping perceptions about, conceptions of, and practices within that space.

Also, while the sections below include as much of my own input into the conversations as Donna’s, I do this not to highlight my knowledge or ability but rather to show that our greater understandings about space came from our dialogic discourse. In that discourse, Donna’s expertise—not to mention her actual engagement with students—was pivotal to our understandings. For instance, at times when I tried to push for certain practices (e.g. increased heterogeneous grouping), Donna was able to use her deep knowledge about both pedagogy and curriculum to redirect me (e.g. explaining how sometimes separating students of color to intentionally help them develop certain skills could actually enable them to more fully participate in integrated classroom settings). So, while we were both working towards increased equity for students of color, it was a balance of our perspectives and areas of knowledge that enabled us to develop the praxis necessary to achieve that goal.

## **Building Racial Spatial Awareness**

In one of my early observations of her class, Donna asked me to pay close attention to how her Black students were engaging in writing groups. In racially mixed groups, I noticed that her 3 Black boys did not engage very much with their group mates. They did their work, but unlike the other students, they worked apart from their peers. When I talked to them, I noticed that they could not (or would not) explain to me what they were doing it. I asked them questions about what they had written and what they were going to write next, but they either did not

respond—looking at me quizzically—or gave responses not related to their work. They could clearly follow the directions and perform the academic skills at a high level. When engaging with me, however, they did not talk about their work. There could be many reasons why they could not or did not explain what they were doing. I was only an occasional visitor to the class, so they might not have trusted me. When I discussed this with Donna, however, she corroborated my observation, that these boys were clearly capable of doing the work but that they could or would not explain what they were doing. While she was able to see how capable they were, she feared how other teachers might interpret their reluctance to engage in academic talk.

On other occasions, Donna and I had talked about how students of color were silenced in classrooms. Either they had learned that adults often fish for right or wrong answers (even when asking open-ended questions) or had learned that their voices are not as important.

Donna: My Black kids have learned that what they want to share is not important, that their white partner probably has something more important to say.

Researcher: What is that about?

Donna: A lot of my Black and Brown kids in this group are literally focused on a right or wrong. Like if we do the stem “this reminds me of,” they get stuck because they think I’m looking for a specific answer. I tell them, “This is your opinion. Whatever it reminds you of, it doesn’t have to sound like what it reminds him or her of. It’s what it reminds *you* of.” It took me at least a good three to four weeks to get them out of the mindset that I’m looking for a right or a wrong response. That has been very challenging.

Researcher: I wonder where that comes from. If it was a student not in kindergarten, I could see it because schools are doing that to kids.

Donna: But before kindergarten what does that look like?

Researcher: Right. At some point they’re already thinking that the function of the question is different from what you intended.

Donna: Yes! Even posing “I wonder” or “this reminds me of” questions... They wouldn’t say a word! And usually within a week, students can do that. This year it took so much longer.

Previously, Donna and I had done work together on understanding how whiteness as property (Harris 1993) can impede the voice and belonging of students of color. We used examples from City where both white teachers and teachers of color used whiteness as property to privilege white students’ ways of engaging in group activities and ignore or even reprimand the engagement of Black and Brown students (Blaisdell 2017), a process that silenced students over time. In the case above, perhaps other teachers or even Donna herself had unknowingly silenced these students in the past. It is possible that these three boys perceived

our attempts at interacting with them as breaking the hidden curriculum of whiteness they had been taught. So, Donna and I talked about what it would mean to create a classroom that was not a racial space dominated by whiteness.

Researcher: What would the classroom look like if these boys were centered? What would it mean to make your classroom a space for students of color, and for these boys in particular?

Donna took these questions to heart almost immediately. During whole-class discussions and sharing activities, she began to prompt these students to speak first. If they had finished a piece of writing, she would use it as an example of good work to discuss with the class. Her intent was to forefront these three boys as experts in the class, to present them as capable classmates who other students could go to for answers.

Several months later, Donna told me the effect this had, that these boys could better explain their work to adults and classmates, would more readily answer questions and share during class discussions, and interacted more during group work. Another teacher might have labeled these students as deficient in some way and subsequently enacted practices that limited how other students saw them. Doing so would have allowed the spatial norms that dictate engagement to constrict the function of classroom space. Donna, on the other hand, recognized their ability and could conceive of a different—and more racially equitable—function for classroom space, one that uplifted these students' academic self-esteem and bolstered their classmates' view of them as them as fully capable classroom subjects.

Donna: I want it to be where every kid is an expert in something, where if they have a question, I can tell them, “Well did you ask Steven?” or “Why don’t ask Maria?” or “Did you ask your group mates?”

By reimagining the purpose of her classroom—who it served and whose rights were fore-fronted —Donna started conceiving of and building spatial practices that did not allow the hidden curriculum of whiteness to dominate. In the next section, I show how she was able to use her spatial awareness to intervene in the neoliberal discourse that maintained a classroom space driven by white students' white property status.

## **Coaching Conversations to Challenge Neoliberalism**

Developing spatial awareness helped us break down current school discourse on students' rights and to reimagine what classroom space could look like beyond neoliberalism. The following conversation occurred right after a two-hour observation of a class where Donna was using heterogeneous ability grouping for reading. I share it as an example of how spatial awareness can intervene in neoliberal discourses that specifically privilege white students:

Donna: I feel like in that group, one higher-level white boy was waiting for me... Another [white boy] in that group who wasn't here today always says, "We're waiting! Why am I waiting? What do you want me to do next?"

Researcher: So, is your concern the students who are performing at a higher level are not getting...

Donna: They're waiting a lot of times when I'm guiding other students, I'm not saying that's good or bad, but I don't want it to become a problem.

Researcher: Have you noticed with those students that there's been any drop on their performance? If it's not hurting them...

Donna: It's not hurting their performance at all... So, it's not an issue; I'm making it an issue [question in her voice].

We see above that Donna's immediate reaction to white students having to wait involved believing they had a right to not wait, and she began to question that framing. We then began to discuss how to handle the situation of white students waiting.

Researcher: ...are there things they could be doing while they're waiting that's not just off separate doing something but that helps the group?

Donna: I could have some of the next step and the manipulatives for them ready, so they could move on while we're waiting for me to help another student.

Researcher: Or instead of only thinking about them moving on or doing more or moving to the next level...

Donna: It's not even then next level. We just practiced three words; they could practice five words.

Researcher: Or if there's one kid you are working with, can two of them work together? Can you have one that you're working with...

Donna: Can they practice with a partner?

Researcher: Yes, if we go back to the presentation [earlier in the year about heterogeneous ability grouping], remember how the kids were really working together...and it was hard to tell who was performing at the higher or the lower level...you are giving them all everything and they're using the talk you're giving them to practice the literacy skills that they're working on.

Donna: That's good!

At first, Donna's responses centered on still giving the white students, who were performing academic tasks at a higher level, additional access to additional educational resources in the form of additional practice or higher-level curriculum. Through dialogue, we were able to begin to conceive of classroom space differently, and Donna was able to imagine new ways to envision group work as a space where students at different levels of performance could engage together.

It was through these kinds of conversations that Donna and I tried to engage in racial spaces analysis. The lens of racial spaces helped us see how white students' white property and curricular capital have given them more resources and helped us uncover how the neoliberal paradigm of performance objectives could influence teachers to enact practices that continued invest more in white students. Ongoing conversations like this one helped Donna reframe the concept of student rights in her classroom. We revisited this topic several times.

Researcher: Last year, you had a group of white students who were at a higher level and you were worried: "What do I do with them?" "What do I give them?" "Maybe they can go and do this." It was numbers and you thought, "Maybe I can give them more numbers." I said, "Rather than giving them more, how can you make it interactive?" We talked about shifting to instead of getting more, what if they're interacting, what if one kid is teaching another one, what if they're doing something together? You had pointed out that those kids who were waiting sometimes, it wasn't actually hurting their progress. They were doing fine.

Donna: That's right, my thinking was always giving them more, more, more.

Researcher: We are taught to think they always deserve more, and you were able to shift. Have you been able to do things differently since then?

Donna: Yes. More so than anything it's really pairing students at different places together. I give them language to help them talk together. In my guided groups, I ask them, "How can you explain this?" I'll push a problem over to them and it's a big question and they have language to work it out together. Even the kid who might be a non-reader, a picture helps them understand. So, if they're waiting because I'm working with two friends over here, I'll push a problem to them and say, "Ok, how can you explain this?" It's never a point of anyone doing more. It's about depth, but both of them are talking together... So, no one's looking at anyone as to having more skill than another because we're all doing the same thing.

Donna was having students work together across race and performance levels. She was being intentional about disrupting the discourse typically used to frame students' rights to access and was making group work a space where students worked together regardless of the property of the sanctioned and standardized knowledge they had acquired. We discussed her shift directly in terms of neoliberalism and the racialization of space.

Researcher: Schools are under this framework of neoliberalism. The idea is individual achievement and performance objectives and that those build up as a form of property. When you have more of them, you get access to more things. And it's reductive on what education looks like... it's particularly hard on kids who don't have whiteness as property. So, to me it sounds like you've developed an intervention into what counts as property. You've shifted the focus of your classroom... What has the effect been?

Donna: It has given students voice... When it comes to when we're working and talking, no one sees another classmate as, "Oh, he's an excellent reader; Oh, I can't read like him." Our reading [level] is not the focus, it's the conversations that we're having about the reading, so people don't stand out like they have in the past.

Donna was purposefully using her understanding of how schools are racial spaces to counteract how whiteness affected students' access to curriculum and negotiated student-to-student interaction. In doing so, she was resisting the neoliberal discourse that establishes "polarizing labels and categories as a means of making sense of what students do and can do" (Carey 2014, 462), labels based reductively on the acquisition of performance objectives and performance on high-stakes tests. Rather, she was creating a classroom space where her students of color were framed as full "residents" with the all the rights of participation in every classroom activity.

### **Beyond the Standards: From Distributive Justice to Spatial Rights**

Donna and I tried to use this re-framing to envision what more full and authentic engagement in the classroom could look like. For example, Donna and I talked about an Asian student who was at an extremely high reading level. I had noticed that, when asked, he was very good at showing other kids what to do [they were working on iPads]. The other kids actually wanted to do what he was doing. So, I asked Donna how much she fostered that kind of cooperative work in the class. She explained that he was usually encouraged to be part of his group as much as possible but was also allowed to go off and read on his own. I tried to use the example of this student to point out how schools use certain types of property to give some students more freedom than others.

Researcher: We have some students—disproportionately Black and Brown students—being redirected to do predetermined tasks, and others—like this boy—who have more freedom and mobility.

I had noticed that over time Donna was able to intervene in how certain forms of property were used to award more freedom in the classroom, so I asked her how she was able to make that shift.

Researcher: I'm taking a look at what kind of space this classroom is. Who is allowed to shine in this space? Who is allowed to be themselves? Who's challenged when they need to be challenged?

Donna: I give everyone the tools. If they use them, great. If they don't use them, they're still going to see them every day, so if they ever feel like they need them, they'll be able to pick them up. Everybody's exposed to everything. Even if you're not ready to use it today, as we continue to practice, practice, practice, when you're ready to use it, I'll see it. I'll see when you're ready to apply the information in your own way.

Donna was talking about giving the supports normally given to the students performing at lower levels to all students so that they could all engage with the same high-level curriculum together. Donna was able to transform her classroom into a space where lack of one form of curricular property did not limit access to other forms of curriculum property or engagement between students with different labels. She was normalizing spatial practices in a way that resisted the reductive neoliberal framing of students that often led to the in-class segregation of students of color.

Being racially focused was important in Donna's being able to resist the reductive framing of students and to create classroom space built more on more holistic spatial rights.

Researcher: It sounds like it means that even for kids who have not gotten the grade-level reading level yet, they will not be held back on something; but it also means for the student that are performing at a higher level, who are typically white, it doesn't mean they should get something extra.

Donna: Right. And to be honest, the white kids decoding at such a high level, most of them don't have the depth of conversation that my quote "low-level" kids do a much better job with—talking about the story, the pictures, all of that. Because they don't have the reading ability, they're forced to do that. When you put all the kids together, both ends together, you have a dynamic that really builds depth and a richness in their understanding of language, their reading strategies, their ability to make connections.

To a certain extent, one could interpret Donna's comments as still being bound by notions of distributive justice—of creating a space where all her students got equal access to the standardized curriculum. Her focus on access to the standards, however, was rooted in increasing the voice of student of color, and she was moving to creating a classroom space that where students' worth was not based in those standards.

Donna: Moving to heterogeneous grouping has helped me provide all students with the standards. It doesn't matter what you came in with; everyone gets the standards. It helps me meet the needs of all learners and helps me keep the playing field equal. Even if I look at your [official test] score and it says you're reading at a first-grade level [i.e. above grade level], I have not taught you [the specific content from my class]. Maybe with your reading level, there will be an aha that I can use to push all kids forth. So, it has helped me make sure that all of the students will get the standards.

Researcher: To me it sounds like while, yes, it is about getting them the standards, it is also a bit deeper than that. If I go back to your comment about you are all learning together, that you're engaging, that that's also part of the goal. You've articulated well how it helps you in that distributive way—everyone's going to get the standard—but it's not just limited to that. It's also deeper in that you're empowering all different kinds of students. That's what it sounds like to me.



Through dialogic conversations, Donna was able to elaborate on how she was not allowing performance objectives to limit any of her students from engaging with either the curriculum or their classmates, about her practice about being more than about access to standards.

Donna: Prior to this, I was really focused on where you are today and teaching to where you are today, not even thinking that if I support you appropriately, we can continue to grow and learn together... Take the reading and decoding out, they can still think. They can compare and contrast, they can sequence, they can identify a main idea, they can do all of those things if you read to them.

Researcher: It sounds like you are not actually working for the standards. You make the standards work for you.

Donna: Yes! Now it is about empowering students, building relationships with all students. I used to think about where they are today. Now my view of them is broader, more long-term, and in context.

Our conversations were starting to help us envision a classroom space that did not rely only on distributive justice to pursue racial equity. More and more as Donna and I worked together, she was able to not only give lower performing students access to the higher-level curriculum but also to intentionally give her students of color more voice in the classroom and their groups. Going back to Soja's (2010, 99) comment on spatial rights, Donna was challenging previous forms of "indisposed spatial segregation and confinement" and creating a classroom where her students of color could "access and make use of the particular advantages of" the classroom.

## **Conclusions: Moving Towards Racial Spatial Justice**

At the beginning of this piece, I explained how, when observing Donna's classroom, one could not easily discern by race her academically high achieving students from those that struggled. Over the 4 and half years I worked with her, that pattern continued. Furthermore, in the last year, her students worked together to an even greater extent across levels of performance. This has been particularly beneficial to her students of color, who have been able to engage more fully with the all of the classroom activities and curriculum and to participate in more complex and meaningful conversations with each other and their classmates. Donna has even started to coach other teachers in the school on re-structuring their own classrooms in similar ways.

By framing Donna's practice and successes through the lens of the right to the city, I hope to show that while the racialization of space is exacerbated by neoliberalism in the current U.S. educational context, space is also not something fixed in place. Rather, space is produced (Soja 2010); it is "dynamic and volatile" (Ares 2017, 8). Therefore, spatial analysis does not just offer us a way of critiquing spatial arrangements. It also involves the realization that school space is "malleable over time" (Rodriguez 2017, 990) and that critical analysis can change spatial practices.

Furthermore, I hope to show that by engaging in spatial analysis that explicitly centers race, teachers can gain a greater understanding of how neoliberal discourse has exacerbated the racialization of space via reductionist views of valued knowledge and capital. In my work with Donna, we have tried to examine how schools and teachers can be unintentionally complicit in racial and spatial practices that turn classrooms into racial spaces, where white supremacy dictates students' rights. Using principal concepts from CRT like whiteness as property (Harris 1993) to specifically examine the daily reproduction of and teacher complicity in white supremacy was key in our analysis.

Framing her practice according to the right to the city dialogically through the coaching approach also helped us imagine not only spatial justice but specifically *racial* spatial justice—seeing what is possible for people of color in contexts governed by the overlapping systems of oppression of neoliberalism and the racialization of space. Donna was able to reflect on questions such as, “How can I make this a space for my students of color?” or “How can students of color shine in this classroom?” to open up possibilities in her own classroom. These questions helped Donna transform her classroom. Her students of color were perceived more frequently as experts, engaged in more authentic student-to-student collaboration, and exhibited more confidence and joy in the classroom.

## Implications

Schools are consequential geographies, spaces which inherently have negative consequences for students of color (Soja 2010; Annamma 2017). Recent educational research has taken up critical race spatial analysis to uncover how the oppressive nature of these spaces is both racial and spatial (e.g. Morrison et al. 2017; Vélez 2017; Annamma 2016, 2017; Solórzano and Vélez 2016; Blaisdell 2016). Importantly, these methodologies are not only analytical but also praxis-oriented. When conducted collaboratively, they are an intervention into the way space is produced in racially inequitable ways. I argue, therefore, that engaging in critical race spatial methodologies directly with teachers and administrators can develop the racially-focused spatial awareness needed to transform schools from being consequential geographies and to achieve greater racial spatial justice—a form of justice where the right to the city or the classroom is not based on neoliberal understandings of capital or whiteness as property but on more meaningful integration and collaboration.

Furthermore, because racialized spatial oppression occurs at the macro, meso, micro, and even interpersonal levels (Mills 1997; Soja 2010), a next step for educational researchers is to focus on the micro and interpersonal levels. Helfenbein and Buendía (2017) assert that we must ask the question, “How are larger spatial forces such as globalized economic shifts affecting the lived experiences of schools?” (29). More specifically, Annamma et al. (2017) explain that critical spatial analysis must ask questions such as, “How is power reinforced and reinscribed in the bodies of white children and removed from the bodies of Children of Color by using the treatment of the white student as the standard?” (4). Said another way, how do schools

spatially reinscribe white supremacy on the bodies both white students and students of color?

Grounding racial spatial analysis rooted in critical race theory at the micro and interpersonal levels in school contexts can help researchers answer these questions so as to better realize the imaginative possibilities of the right to the city. Lipman (2011) explains that the right to the city is not just the right to participate in space as currently constructed but rather, “It is the right to transform the dirt, to make it the city we wish to live in, and in the process transform ourselves and how we live together” (5).

Donna and I could not completely get away from standardized performance objectives in a school like City, but she was able to use spatial CRT-based analysis to intervene in the control those objectives had over students’ rights. Further research on microlevel spatial analysis can uncover similar interventions in other aspects of schooling. It is my hope that racial spatial analysis can also be more than an intervention. I believe that, at times, Donna was able to not only intervene in the discourse that constricted her students’ rights but also make her classroom one where her students of color could fully engage. For teachers like Donna, the next step towards racial spatial justice could be finding new ways to build on the more equitable student-to-student engagement she has already been able to foster. It might mean an even more critical analysis of the discourse of standards and broadening how she frames valued knowledge in her classroom. Carey (2014) explains, “[E]ducators must continually question how we assess what students know, in addition to questioning what we do with this information. It is essential that educators consistently critique taken-for-granted notions of what counts as knowledge and how we respond to students” (462). For researchers, we must use the privileges of our positions to help teachers in this effort by documenting successful efforts at classroom-level reframing and creating the research conditions that enable teachers to shift their practice.

Framing human rights around the right to the city—around who has a right to thrive in, enjoy, and have a say in the production of space—can open up possibilities for researchers. Questions such as “What makes somewhere a good place to live?” (Coleman 2013, 259) can direct spatial research in ways that open up possibilities for envisioning community space in different ways. Similarly, framing educational rights around the right to the classroom can open up possibilities for researchers and teachers to work together to re-conceptualize school space. Asking simple questions such as, “What makes this classroom a good place for students of color?” can help direct educational research towards envisioning school and classroom spaces in ways that lead to greater racial spatial justice.

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