

Marissa Bellino
marissabellino@gmail.com
www.marissabellino.com

RESEARCH STATEMENT

My research interests are expansive but are situated within a sociocultural framework of urban education, particularly in STEAM fields, with a commitment to social justice. My coursework, my dissertation research, and my close affiliation with the Center for Advanced Studies in Education (CASE) have exposed me to a range of education research that spans from youth investigations of local environments to documenting the impact of implementing large-scale standards and new curriculum.

My dissertation work sits at the intersection of urban environmental education, human geography, and critical youth studies, investigating the impacts of a critical pedagogy of place curriculum on youth in an urban environmental science class and the ways in which that curriculum was expanded through the introduction of participatory action research (PAR) methodologies. My research interests began to emerge as a doctoral student in the Urban Education program at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Here I was exposed to critical theory and pedagogy (Friere, Greenwood, Giroux, Anyon) as well as critical and youth participatory methodologies (Fine, Cahill, Morell).

At the time I began the doctoral program, I was working at an environmentally themed, urban public high school in New York City, teaching an introductory environmental seminar for freshman, environmental science research, and a college-credit environmental science course. Conventional environmental education has often been conceptualized in formal learning environments with a dichotomy between the global and local. At the global level, courses focus on an understanding of the science of macro environmental issues like climate change and deforestation and at the local level, measuring biodiversity and planting trees in parks. Little connection is made between the global and the local, and even more misleading is that urban environments are usually given one chapter in a multi-chapter textbook. As I began to develop my own critical consciousness through exposure to education theory and research I found problematic the manner in which the ways I was teaching environmental science tended to ignore the people in these places and the relationships people had to place.

Participatory methodologies like photovoice challenged me to begin to reimagine a new type of classroom that was rooted in the lived experiences of my students and could broaden our understanding of “environment” to encompass the social and built components as well as the natural. I was also introduced to participatory action research methodologies, like photovoice and mental mapping, and I felt like these would be the ideal way to co-construct knowledge about local environments with my students. Drawing heavily from participatory research in education I have incorporated the epistemological and methodological assumptions of PAR into my research and pedagogical praxis, including how all people have deep knowledges about their lived experiences and that everyone has the right to engage in research for the production of knowledge.

The research tools I introduced to students were all rooted in these tenets of PAR and included an array of qualitative methods that were used to investigate the relationship young people living in urban environments have with their local neighborhoods. We introduced and adapted photovoice and mental mapping methodologies to investigate our collective research question, “what are the relationships youth have with their local, urban environments?” Additionally youth engaged with critical discourse analysis and content analysis to study the types of messages embedded in local advertisements. All data were generated and collectively shared and analyzed by the entire class using a course website and blog. Throughout my research I have drawn on other forms of data collection and analysis including participant observations, interviews, focus groups, narrative analysis, as well as audio and video analysis at the micro, meso, and macro levels, as well as organized and ran large scale participatory analysis sessions.

The above outlines my dissertation research but I have also been involved in multiple NSF grant projects utilizing mixed methods approaches to data collection and analysis. One project focused on the informal science identities that teachers bring to their formal classrooms, and I introduced multiple PAR methodologies to help teachers better understand the ways their own life experiences have marked them with many assumptions about what it means to teach and work in urban science classrooms. Teachers investigated their own experiences in schooling and informal learning environments and data were collectively analyzed to uncover common themes across teacher experience.

I also work closely with the Center for Advanced Studies in Education on multiple large-scale education research projects. One recent study looked across New York State school districts to build case studies of the impact the Common Core Learning Standards have had on students, teachers, administrators, and districts. As part of this study I conducted interviews and focus groups with K-12 teachers and administrators and utilized NVivo to analyze data with predetermined codes. Another current research project involves looking at the impact of an online and hands-on engineering program introduced at Boys and Girls Clubs across parts of New York. This work involves creating and implementing surveys to club facilitators and students in order to assess engagement, teamwork, and STEM learning. My role is in both managing and organizing the project evaluation in an effort to write up case studies about how middle school youth are engaging with this informal STEM program. A final project I am working on with CASE is how to best write science curriculum for Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) entering the United States with low literacy in both their native language and English. This work has been rewarding as these students are often the most marginalized in schools.

I see my research interests as an ecological system, connecting diverse topics, but coalescing around the theme of social justice. My dissertation is entirely dedicated to bringing a critical, social justice curriculum to youth through participatory research methods. The investigation of standards implementation and writing curriculum are working towards better understanding the differential impacts that education can have on school communities when they are marginalized due to unequal funding or inequitable access to resources. My subjectivity as a critical urban environmental educator informs my research lens across these multiple interdisciplinary areas of interest and I look forward to being supported by an institution that values the intersections of pedagogy and research.