“There is more beyond this place”: Creating Safe Spaces Within Place-Based Education in Lavender Hill, South Africa

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Introduction

What people know about the physical world they inhabit enables them to better engage with, understand, and change it (Slater 1995, Erickson 1982). Place-based education (PBE) roots spatial understandings for young people by situating their local community and surrounding environments as opportunities for contextual learning about their history, their place in the world, and actions for transformation (Gruenewald 2003; Slavkin, Braysmith, and Faust 2010; McClain and Vandermaas-Peeler 2016). It also creates spaces for developing new skills and relationships to one another and the environment, which are valuable pedagogical openings that anthropologists and environmental educators explore (Kopnina 2013, Moll 2010). But what about when those spaces are marked by violence?

In this article, we draw on an ongoing study of a PBE program for young people living in Lavender Hill in the Cape Flats, a region in Cape Town, South Africa affected by histories of apartheid, displacement, racial segregation, and ongoing gang violence.

Etienne Basson runs Envirolove, a nonprofit outdoor learning program for youth aged 14-21 in the Lavender Hill community. Youth participants hike in the Cape Town wilderness and tend to an indigenous fynbos garden at a local school once a month. The program has multiple goals: it focuses on creating a “safe space” for participants living in a community impacted by violence, teaches environmental literacy, and has expanded over time to contextualize multiple local histories. This paper draws from fieldwork and interviews with 22 program participants in the time frame of September 2023 to February 2024. We collectively analyzed these data, along with written reflections, to understand how youth participants experienced the program and their relationship to community.

Drawing from youth voices, we describe the program and the impact of its experiential and critical pedagogies. We identify how the program fosters a “third space” of learning in which young people are able to understand their complex connections to the natural environment (Lefebvre 1974) and explore selfhood as linked to political geography (Bhabha 1994). We argue that place-based approaches in contexts impacted by past and present violence are important in (re)shaping young people’s experiences of history, place, and belonging in their community. In order to do that, they
need to disrupt the idealized notion of place as stable, bounded, and self-sufficient, revealing their constructed and contested nature.

**History of District Six: Displacement and Resettlement**

District Six in South Africa has a tumultuous history, in which race, forced movement, and dispossession are intimately tied. In 1966, it was declared a white neighborhood under the apartheid-era Group Areas Act, relocating 60,000 inhabitants to townships around the Cape Flats. Lavender Hill, our site of study, is a community created as a result of this displacement. Richard Rive writes about this period of displacement in *Buckingham Palace*, a required text in the national school curriculum for high-school students in South Africa:

Many were forced to move to small matchbox houses in large matchbox townships which with brutal and tactless irony were given names by the authorities such as Hanover Park and Lavender Hill to remind us of the past they had taken away from us…District Six had a soul. Its centre held together till it was torn apart (126, 127).

Following democratic elections in 1994, the Restitution of Land Rights Act allowed for displaced residents to return to District Six (Trotter 2009). Those who returned encountered poor housing infrastructure, inaccessible and dispersed resources, and manicured greenery that lacked visual diversity (Burgess 2022). Both forced displacement and return ruptured residents’ sense of place, and these legacies continue to shape young people’s relationships to their community (Burgess 2022).

**Goals and Modalities of the Program**

Today, Lavender Hill is notorious for drug-related gang violence (Kinnes 2014, Brittijn 2013). The violence restricts the mobility of residents, especially young people, making outdoor recreational sites difficult to access (Kinnes 2014). In response to these conditions, the Envirolove program invites youth to participate in monthly group activities, which include hikes up nearby mountains. The hikes are one-day excursions, and programming combines technical skills related to navigating outdoor spaces, ecological knowledge, and museum visits to learn about historical dimensions of Lavender Hill. The program also integrates affective dimensions of learning, recognizing that emotional geographies of education are dynamic spaces where emotions such as hope, fear, love, and anxiety intersect with physical and social environments in which young people learn (Kenway and Youdell, 2011).

Activities are oriented towards personal development, enjoying and completing the hike, with group and individual opportunities for reflection. One of the hiking trips included a visit to the District Six Museum and the Slave Lodge to explore their community’s shared history. Participants were accompanied by Aunty Susan, a community member who shared her experiences with forced removal, and how later she needed documentation to prove that she lived there in order to return. Participants commented that these (affective, place-based) approaches to history were distinct
from what they learned in school, where an official narrative of apartheid emphasizes resolution of racial inequities, overlooking legacies of the past and how they manifest locally in ongoing ways (Dryden-Peterson and Robinson 2023, Wassermann 2018).

**Experiences of Place and Safety in a “Third Space”**

The concept of “third space” emphasizes the hybridity and fluidity that creates different negotiated meanings through changing politics and culture (Bhabha 1994, Lefebvre 1974, Oldenburg 1989). Specifically in educational contexts, it allows learners to draw on competing and alternative ways of knowing (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Tejeda 1999; Gutiérrez 2008) and ask meaningful questions that drive authentic learning, recognizing hybrid and varied identities as important cultural resources in children's development (Cole 1996). We conceive of the PBE program as a “third space,” leveraging the physical space of the outdoors to mediate the sharing of learner identities, as well as knowledge and experiences as shaped by their shared histories of place. Using the concept of “third space” within the framework of PBE, we are able to document learner experiences that go beyond traditional educational outcomes, providing insights into how learners navigate politics, emotions, and their relationships to and within the community.

Our conversations with youth in Lavender Hill support previous studies’ insights on the critical role of outdoor education in addressing environmental and social issues in localized contexts, while supporting a sense of perspective, being immersed in the moment, and mental and emotional sanctuary (Strife and Downey 2009; Taylor and Kuo 2006; Brymer, Crabtree, and King 2021). Participants reflected on the opportunities to broaden their physical environment and build deeper commitments to nature.

Mia (age 17, female) explained that the program “helps children my age… by seeing that there is more beyond this place. We can get out and experience and have fun at the same time. We don’t have to be stuck up in this place that is cruel.” Sadie (age 16, female) affirmed this in her post-hike journal reflection: “As I was walking, I saw how clean and clear everything was, so we need to keep our environment the way we keep our house clean.”

The educational program is fundamentally focused on creating safety, mutuality, and belonging through “third space” pedagogy. We link the concept of “third space” to the idea of “safe space” as described by Djohari, Pyndia, and Arnone (2018), who argue that physical, material, and imagined places matter in children’s lives and relationships. Building on prior work, they conceptualize “safe spaces” as spanning psychological freedom, a freedom from physical harm, and freedom to counter dominant ideologies, while attending to young people’s relational and spatial understandings of safety. In the context of Lavender Hill, as youth actively navigate gang violence, freedom from harm is critical in the construction of safety, as is the freedom of expression to engage with and critique legacies of colonialism and apartheid. The program contends with this tension: learners need to better develop a sense of belonging in their community, and yet this coexists with a need for physical respite from violence that is part of the lives of youth growing
up in Lavender Hill. In this sense, fostering a “safe space” necessitates an educational “third space” that removes young people from oppressive spaces, while building their connections to their surroundings.

During and after the program, participants emphasized the importance of security as a spatialized element of their environment, though the program informed their critical understanding of their community’s history of violence. Dylan (age 18 male), completing his final year of secondary school, explained that the organization “takes us from the streets and puts us in a nice safe place. Like we can learn stuff we never thought we could learn before, learn about the nature. Stuff that we don’t see everyday because [of] where we come from.”

Alice (age 18, female) echoed the theme of safety. She recalled, “There is so much going on in our environment outside and this is really a safe space for us to get out and not be bothered about whatever is going on in the community like the shooting, the gangsterism, the pregnancies, the… everything going on. It’s just a safe space for us....”

These ideas reflect how geography influences understandings of violence as spanning private and public spaces, and unfolding within a wider historical context (Springer and Le Billon 2016). Violence also takes on less visible forms and intersects with multiple identities and positionalities, such as gendered exclusion and challenges to institutional participation for girls. In her written reflections after a hike, Daliah (age 15, female) embraced the experience of enjoying the outdoors without an intrusive or threatening male gaze, noting, “I got to be outside and take a run without being stared at.”

The program undertakes specific safety measures to escort participants from their homes to the hiking site. Even so, spaces designated “safe” can easily shift. On one occasion, participants and leaders learned that they left for a hike from what later became an active crime scene [Video Link]. Safety assurances are a major concern for guardians, and legitimate worries about young people’s safety can hinder adults’ permission for youth to participate.

Much anthropological work has documented how young people living in contexts of insecurity adapt to the routinization of violence, at times participating in violent acts and structures, or restricting their spatial mobility as a measure of protection (Auyero and Berti 2015; Bellino 2017; Swartz, Harding, and De Lannoy 2012). Youth in Lavender Hill describe similar experiences, such as spending prolonged time indoors and engaging in limited interactions even with family due to a lack of trust in order to mitigate daily risks pertaining to physical and emotional safety. Others have had direct, contentious experiences with the criminal justice system.

Harper (age 16, male) reflected on his position in the world and felt newly prepared to take on challenges, while drawing on the language of natural growth and resilience: “As we walked higher and higher up I realized how big the world is and how I am above it all. It made me realize that I am a conqueror and just like the fynbos [local plant] that needs fire to spread and blossom and
grow, after facing my hardships, I too will blossom and grow.” Alex (age 15, male) left the program reflecting in his writing, “after weeks of feeling hopeless I am filled with hope and feel ready.”

Conclusion

In spaces marked by violent conflict, having access to a physical, relational, and interpretive space becomes important for youth to engage with their complex identities and history. PBE fosters safety, hope, and new ways of knowing about themselves and their community, as youth participants emphasize. Our ongoing study reveals the potential for PBE to engage youth exposed to routine violence, which works against forming strong feelings of connectedness to place. We explore how time in protected natural spaces can make small moves towards transforming these relationships. Understanding PBE as a “third space” allows for a deep engagement with a participant’s socio-historical context to understand their current experience of gang-related violence, and supports them in (re)shaping community relationships.

Educational “third spaces” in the outdoors move young people of Lavender Hill from their home and school settings to wider spaces in nature, contrasting their limited physical movements in densely inhabited homes and schools. Young people face the same risks to safety upon returning to their homes and residences after the hikes, though new knowledge of their community can renew commitments to a place, arguably reducing violence in the future.

References


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Positionality Statement

The authors acknowledge that our multiple identities, experiences, and positionalities shape the work that we do and shape our relationships to one another. I, Deepika Ganesh, acknowledge my standpoint as an Indian woman, currently a doctoral student at the University of Michigan. I have not experienced any form of formal education in South Africa, where my research is based. I, Etienne Basson, am a South African entrepreneur and graduate student at Stellenbosch University. I run the educational program we document and analyze in this paper and play the role of a mentor and confidant to participants. Etienne's intimate relationship to the program and region have allowed us to access data where participants express their thoughts and feelings openly. I, Michelle Bellino, am a faculty member at the University of Michigan, and I draw on my experiences in settings affected by armed conflict, forced displacement, and legacies of historical injustice to understand the unique impact of this program in comparative perspective.
Author Biographies

**Deepika Ganesh**: Deepika is a second year Ph.D. student at the University of Michigan, School for the Environment and Sustainability. She specializes in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and is curious about learning in informal education spaces, especially outdoor and digital spaces. She enjoys creating meaningful learning experiences for people to engage with their histories, environments and sustainability challenges.

**Etienne Basson**: Etienne Basson is a Master’s student at Stellenbosch University, Centre for Sustainability Transitions. He is the founder of numerous award-winning youth-focused NGOs in South Africa. His interest lies in the facilitation of transitions to sustainable futures with a focus on the empowerment of youth in violent under-resourced communities through outdoor learning and nature connection.

**Michelle Bellino**: Michelle Bellino is an Associate Professor at the University of Michigan Marsal Family School of Education. Her research centers on the intersections between education and youth civic development in contexts impacted by armed conflict and forced displacement. Across diverse settings, she explores how experiences with violence, asylum, and peace and justice processes influence young people’s participation in schools and society, future aspirations, as well as educational access and inclusion. She has taught outdoor education and wilderness survival skills.

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To cite this article: Ganesh, Deepika, Etienne Basson, and Michelle J. Bellino. 2024. "’There is more beyond this place’: Creating Safe Spaces Within Place-Based Education in Lavender Hill, South Africa." *NEOS* 16 (1).

To link this article: https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol16iss1spring24/ganesh/