Walking in a New Direction, Listening in a New Key: Exploring Young Children’s Sonic Compositions in a Primary School

Biodata:

Cassie J. Brownell is an Assistant Professor of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning within the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on children’s cultural practices in early childhood and elementary literacies classrooms, with special attention on how young children use play, concrete media, and digital tools to compose. Cassie also explores how children, youth, and teachers engage sound as a tool for writing with and through communities.

Join us on Friday November 9, from 5-6 pm, with Cassie J. Brownell in Room 11-164 OISE
Summary of the Talk

In the current era, listening and walking seem more individual than ever. With the proliferation of earbuds and other devices, few public spaces yet constrain personal listening. Primary schools, however, are one of the last holdouts. Building from a case study design using ethnographic methods, I generated data alongside children in a first-grade classroom and a fourth-grade classroom and explored their school community through a soundwalk. Situating sounds as a means to ground knowledge about ourselves and our world, I was guided by the following questions: How can soundwalks amplify children’s schooling experiences? How might children’s listening attune adults to (school) communities? Adapting Shipka’s (2006) activity-based multimodal theory of composing for analysis, my findings amplify possibilities exist for exploring children’s community experiences with soundwalks. Specifically, I describe how children’s soundwalks evidenced the situated, relational nature of place as they engaged in sensory inquiry. Simultaneously, I discuss how children’s embodied listening highlighted space as social and temporal, particularly as children recorded unplanned sounds. I illustrate how children used their bodies to evoke desired sounds from seemingly static objects and how the rhythms of their walking continually shifted. For instance, children squeaked shoes on tile to recreate frictional sounds in gym. Children also adjusted from cautious steps in the garden to hurried paces as they generated wind. I close by offering a number of relevant insights into public pedagogy as related to soundwalks by focusing on our youngest citizens’ aural experiences to enhance understandings of space and community.

Figure 1. Group of 1st Grade Children Brainstorming for Soundwalk

Figure 2. 1st Grade and 4th Grade Buddy on Soundwalk in School Garden