

Adding Walls: Awareness of Street Art for Critical Literacy in Ras Beirut

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Abstract

This study investigates Grade 10 English teachers' awareness of place and street art in two schools' learning environments in Ras Beirut, Lebanon. Overall, this study aims to demonstrate the gap in and need for teaching critical literacy and advocates street art as a multimodal text to accomplish this. This research employs mixed methods in multiple case studies to address research questions. Teachers were given a mapping activity to gauge awareness and a follow-up semi-structured interview was conducted. This study engages with literature from fields of street art, place-based learning, multimodality, critical literacy, and teacher identities to create a theatre in which to advocate using street art for critical literacy pedagogy. These fields of literature then shaped a discussion, which ultimately revealed low awareness of place and street art and a need for richer cultural connections with place for both students and teachers.

Keywords: street art; critical literacy; multimodality; place-based learning

1. Introduction

This research questions how aware English language teachers are of immediate learning environments in two Ras Beirut private schools. This study considers teacher understandings and prioritizing of critical literacy. Overall, this study aims to address these research questions as well as advocate the need for teaching critical literacy via local street art as multimodal text in Ras Beirut, Lebanon. This study ultimately aims to demonstrate the aptness of street art for critical literacy and its academic potential as alternative text in the language arts beyond the Lebanese context.

Much of street art connotes political messages and histories. For schools, street art surrounding the learning environment is surrounded by silence, as local political discussions are illegal on school campuses. Political implications are beyond the scope of this study. Rather, implications for critical literacy are explored. Also beyond the scope of this study was a discussion of languages and linguistics in street art, as they reflect political power dynamics. This study included six Grade 10 English teachers in two private schools in Ras Beirut (one of Beirut's twelve quarters) where English is a first language. The schools exist in the same learning environment and have roughly similar curricula, allowing teachers' awareness and opinions to be studied in relatively comparable conditions. Only street art in the immediate vicinity was included in the survey of the schools' learning environments.

2. Literature Review

Graffiti is usually perceived as menacing, criminal and corruptive due to its illegal and rebellious nature. Some graffiti, especially spraying a name or insignia to mark territory (tagging) is considered vandalism. However, street art challenges graffiti's condemnation (Randazzo & Lajevic, 2013). When tolerated by police and loved by community, graffiti is produced without time limits, birthing intricate and evocative street art (Shaw, 2009). Street art is graffiti that is planned and meaningful, often for a specific initiative and theme. Four bodies of literature pertinent to this study are:

- learning environments,
- street art,
- multimodality and
- critical literacy.

Each theoretical field frames its successor, interlocked by demonstrating the pedagogic value of street art as multimodal text in learning environments that can significantly foster critical literacy. Political and defacing graffiti will not be considered, as they are not advocated or appropriate for the setting of this research.

2.1 School Learning Environments

All schools exist within distinct environments where the immediate neighbourhood is most influential upon student learning (Beames, Higgins & Nicol, 2012). Design factors manifested in learning environments subtly infiltrate everyday linguistic choices of teachers and students (Marquez-Zenkov, 2003). In such ways, texts enveloping school environments permeate consciousness and inform learning (Cotton, 2011). If raised to consciousness, all types of print in local environments are highly stimulating to learners. This print is socially positioned, with a reader, writer, context, and purpose delivered through specific media. Studying environmental print involves noticing and questioning these factors as well as analyzing their effects (Cotton, 2011). Linguistically, educational settings can be made more effective by noticing environmental print (Makin, 2003).

Although defined as learning environments, schools offer contained settings that consistently fail to connect with students' life experiences (Austin, 2007). Meaningful connections compound learning. Accordingly, neglected realities of students' lives should be discussed in classrooms, as authentic environmental material has undeniable pedagogical value (Freire, 1998). Neglected and excluded material, subjects, approaches, and locations are known as the 'null curriculum' (Ahwee et. al., 2004). Limited understanding, welling from limited material, hinders developing an entire society's knowledge and skills (Shirley, 2007). Aspects of learning environments included in the null curriculum require pedagogic involvement as local literacies illuminate intricate relations with and between individuals, words, actions, beliefs, and values (Gee, 2000). Classroom environment is widely acknowledged as vital to learning, but effective and creative teaching opportunities can also be pinpointed outside school in the immediate landscape (Haslam, 1971). Schools traditionally view local environments as impenetrable, static, and

removed from learning experiences. However, this alienates students from locality (Stone, 1989). Indeed, most environments, regardless of potential stimulation, become invisible with repeated exposure (Jarvis, 2009). Subsequently, even when open to incorporating the local environment into classrooms, most potential learning opportunities outside school are rarely noticed or questioned. Making the familiar strange redefines pedagogy and makes learning more engaging (Albers & Harste, 2007).

Noticing which languages and how they occur in local settings provides insight into cultural identities of students and their formation (Cotton, 2011). Furthermore, providing positive literacy environments across student life is hugely important to successful reading (Makin, 2003). In truth, literacy practices go beyond classroom walls. Moving beyond classrooms transcends formal and informal teaching methods, assisting student participation and integration into culturally valued community activities and multiple literacies of everyday life (Larson, 2006). Inherently unique and authentic learning environments are vital to developing all senses and multiple intelligences through integrated means impossible within classroom constraints (Beames, Higgins & Nicol, 2012).

As well as placing local environments in classrooms, constructing classrooms in local environments can also constitute teaching material. Place-based learning (PBL) is one pedagogic method that embeds education in local phenomena and culturally relevant student experiences facilitating inquiry-based learning (Smith, 2002). Accordingly, PBL emphasizes the familiar but not necessarily the understood (Beames, Higgins & Nicol, 2012). Although traditionally envisioned in green spaces, PBL is ripe for and equally applicable in urban settings (Nicol, personal interview, May 9th, 2014). However, prior to planning and engaging in PBL, teachers must develop awareness of various locations where learning experiences can occur. (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010). Implementing this innovative approach can revitalize teachers and students, raising levels of learning, enthusiasm, and motivation to optimal levels. It is important to realize awareness is only a prerequisite to effective PBL. Teacher willingness and initiative are crucial to responding to learning opportunities beyond classroom walls (Sobel, 2004). One learning opportunity manifested outside classrooms is street art, which will now be explored.

2.2 Street Art

Street art is firmly entrenched in social mainstreams, yet remains isolated from institutionalized structures (Rafferty, 1991). Research shows that when street art is brought within a social mainstream its preservation is vigorously defended (Shaw, 2009). Accordingly, if street art is a valued and recurring cultural phenomenon, maximizing its pedagogic value should be advocated. Although often overlooked, street art inherently promotes lingering, reflection and interaction (Shaw, 2009). These innate effects have massive educational implications and can contribute to developing critical reflective learners engaged in current local issues (Halsey & Young, 2006).

Through street art, decaying urban areas are vividly transforming, ultimately creating sociocultural spaces promoting freedom of expression and intentionally instigating public discussions about local issues (Cotnam-Kappel, 2014). Hence, studying street art has academic value as it is a platform where community members purposefully converse, reflect, and act (Iddings, 2009). Knowing how and why street art was introduced into public space enhances awareness, appreciation, and enjoyment of message (Miles, 1989).

For this reason, if street art appears from an external culturally irrelevant source, its importance and reactive qualities diminish (Shaw, 2009). This phenomenon was observed with the work of Chilean artist INTI in Beirut, which will be later discussed. Street art as PBL can overcome learning bubbles, as although street art is local, it reflects global concerns. Thus, through street art, local places and global issues are connected and made relevant to students as developing citizens of the world.

Language is the core of street art (Cotnam-Kappel, 2014). Gilmore defines language as any communication conveying a genuine message (2011). Thus, even when unaccompanied by words, street art is an example of language and text. As text, street art has a wealth of daily engaged readers who automatically form connections between the art and life. Street art significantly affects communities as a product of them, for them and addressing them, contributing to developing language, culture and politics (Cotnam-Kappel, 2014). Hence, street art is authentic text. Especially when visually focused, using authentic text in classrooms has been widely acknowledged as motivational and highly effective in developing students' receptiveness to new vocabulary aiding comprehension. Furthermore, authentic material should be rich and accessible to students (Gilmore, 2011). Street art meets all these criteria. As text incorporating words and images, street art will now be considered and explored as multimodal text.

2.3 Multimodality

Conceptually, written language is being displaced from its previously unchallenged dominant position, but not replaced. Multimodal texts characteristically consist of numerous pathways conveying information, encouraging extensive cross-referencing and transmitting evocative graphics extending meaning (Hasset & Curwood, 2009). Multimodal texts are not simply exposed to students in classrooms. Children grow up in highly multimodal environments where streets, homes, and schools are submerged in texts that blend picture, sound, and words (Bearne & Wolstencroft, 2007). Young adults are increasingly consuming and producing texts, learning from surroundings (Vasudevan, 2007). However, these literacies are often ignored by teachers due to perceived distance from academic literacy. In truth, relying on traditional language arts skills when dealing with alternative text is repressive and leads to academic blindness (Chaplin, 1994). Visionary teachers enable students to move fluently between text and image and, in turn, between literal and figurative worlds (Crafton, Silvers & Brennan, 2009).

Blending images, writing, and design elements into multimodal ensembles challenges readers and demands more resources for meaning-making than conventional texts (Youngs & Serafini, 2013). Pictures exist within systems of learned codes, making little sense to anyone without prior knowledge of those culturally ascribed systems (Torr, 2008). Accordingly, students must learn to read pictures as adeptly as words. With practice, students realize all representations are, in fact, re-presentations of reality. This contributes to immunity against being influenced by unquestioned ideologies pervading language.

Comics are multimodal text that emerged from the margins to mainstream in literacy instruction (Jacobs, 2007). Historically viewed as simplified literacy for struggling and lazy readers, comics have been re-conceptualized as complex multimodal texts. Using comics can develop critical readers and, as multimodal text, be wielded to develop critical literacy (Jacobs, 2007). As such, comics can act as a precedent to street art. Street art has immense potential as meaningful multimodal text that can expand

literacy skills and increase student reading range. Visual technologies, like spray paint, and images they convey, such as street art, render worldviews in subjective ideological multimodal terms. In this way, images are not windows or reflections, but interpretations (Rose, 2007). Sensitizing students to semiotics of pictures depicting worlds empowers them to negotiate their own subjectivities (Nodelman, 2005). This frames future critical literacy (Crafton, Silvers & Brennan, 2009).

2.4 Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is the brainchild of Paulo Freire, Brazilian philosopher and teacher (Comber, 2003). Critical literacy arose from dissatisfaction with understandings and teaching of language as neutral. Hence, the notion was born that texts and teaching practices both reflect and sustain class structures in addition to racialized, gendered, and cultural environments (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011). The key to critical literacy is conscientization, defined as the process through which students achieve empowerment by deepening awareness and recognizing human intentions, powers and purposes shaping their lives (Darder et. al., 2003) and either assuming its authority or resisting it (Holme, 2004). Freire hoped and advocated that critical literacy encouraged natural movement from reflection to action (Quintero, 2009).

As previously discussed, looking at multimodal texts, such as street art in local learning environments, guides students to criticality and critical reading. Critical reading involves analysis of content presented in text. However, critical literacy extends beyond this by encouraging readers to be suspicious of ways texts might serve interests of groups at disadvantage to others (Mission & Morgan, 2006). Furthermore, critical literacy aids learners to understand that while words are significant, they are also limited. Instead of protecting students from complex socio-political issues, educators should allow students to embrace, examine, and understand them (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Critical literacy fulfills teachers' duty to not represent reality as motionless, compartmentalized, and predictable (Freire, 2003). Critical literacy programs transcend reader-response approaches by devoting attention to semiotics and challenging supposedly natural and authentic reactions to texts. Especially in multimodal texts, looking carefully at images with a critically literate mind involves thinking about what and how visions of social categories are presented (Rose, 2007).

In context of all previous literature discussed, critical literacy is extremely pertinent. Developing critical literacy implies deconstructing everyday texts, of which street art is included (Gruenewald, 2003). Analyzing globalized narratives in local contexts is one way to form critical agents. Students also need exposure to texts critical of dominant value systems (Morrell, 2008). Street art is one such example of text. Although PBL is often removed from urban arenas, cities are often claimed by critical pedagogues (Gruenewald, 2003). Thus, unconventionally merging PBL into urban locations facilitates including critical literacy. Creating situations where students deal with feelings of being manipulated by outside forces should be prioritized, as without such scenarios, students face feeling powerless. Without having a sense of agency, students are unlikely to pose meaningful questions which source learning (Greene, 1988). Stimulating epistemological curiosity, disrupting cultural assumptions with new perspectives, and helping learners make the familiar strange engenders amplified understandings of issues where new visions of reality become available and change becomes possible (Iddings et. al., 2011).

Previously, critical literacy has addressed itself unevenly to pop culture, primarily focussing on mass media (Gibson, 1986). However, art, specifically street art, has academic value in its huge potential to reveal society and be critically read. Art reflects values, injustices, fears, hopes, and socioeconomic relationships (Gibson, 1986). Thus, acting as an informal avenue, street art already instigates critical awareness (Iddings et. al., 2011). When exploited in classrooms, optimal learning of critical literacy can be attained. The process of deconstructing street art in lessons allows students to rebuild and produce meaningful discourses that are socially, geographically, linguistically, politically, and culturally relevant.

In conclusion, environment, multimodality, street art, and critical literacy merge coherently and with concrete pedagogic value. However, a hole in the literature exists in using street art as a text for critical literacy instruction in educational institutions. While street art and critical literacy have both haltingly infiltrated most schools, they have never been conjoined. Moreover, street art has been largely invisible in PBL and as a form of multimodal text.

3. Methods

This work acknowledges multiple realities and aims to explore and examine one facet of the world. How teachers view and interpret the world of street art in learning environments was investigated. Accordingly, a mixed methods design and multiple case studies were selected to carry out data collection. In this research, four pilot interviews were carried out amongst university professors in the United Kingdom. The pilots refined the interview guide and schedule. The mapping tool was also piloted on six students of a local university in the same neighbourhood as the two schools of this study. These pilots indicated the difficulty level of the mapping activity.

A photo-mapping tool was devised and implemented with participants. Tests measure the extent of prior knowledge (Thomas, 2013). In this case, the test was intended to informally measure awareness of street art and general learning environment in Grade 10 English Language Arts teachers in Ras Beirut, Lebanon. The test centred on a map of the school and immediate learning environment with several accompanying photographs of both street art and general landmarks. Teachers were given colour-coded stickers corresponding to photographs which they were required to place on the map as accurately as possible. In this way, mapping provided a lens into ways space is experienced and shaped and how environmental relations are formed and maintained (Giesecking, 2013). Sticker tasks, as used in this study, stimulate maps and are highly suggestive of which information in an environment has been attended to and which were considered irrelevant (Kastens & Liben, 2010).

Six teachers were interviewed and given a mapping activity to complete for this study investigating teacher awareness of street art in learning environments. Due to complex and sensitive factors involving history and politics of the area, no political street art was included in this study. Three teachers from each of two schools in the same learning environment teaching Grade 10 English participated in this study. In each school, two teachers were North American and one teacher was local. Furthermore, two teachers from each school were in their thirties except for one North American teacher in his sixties. Both of the local teachers were female. Thus, teacher demographics for each school were highly similar as are the schools in terms of area and curriculum. For these reasons, teachers will be compared to each other rather than on

a school-wide level. Limitations to this study included some teachers having difficulty with map-reading skills and low spatial awareness. This occasionally led to a teacher correctly identifying an area verbally but being unable to locate it on the map provided. However, this did not greatly affect results as when this was the case, both locations were inaccurate for identifying the pictures shown.

Ethics are crucial to all stages of research where ensuring no harm to any living creature is paramount (Wisker, 2009). This study was extremely low-risk for participants and all participants were able to consent after approval from each school board, headmaster, and principal was granted. As informed consent extends beyond paperwork (Sieber, 1998), virtual communication was maintained after interviews and opened for contact at any point during the study's synthesis. In addition, all participants were made aware of how data would be collected, analysed, and subsequently, destroyed (Thomas, 2013). Although absolute confidentiality is impossible (Christians, 2000), by using pseudonyms and not mentioning place of employment, every effort was made to protect participant identities. All teachers interviewed were questioned about Language Arts teaching, PBL, and street art. Interviews were transcribed and coded with fine-grained analysis and a second reader to refine and validate findings.

4. Findings

After analysis, themes centering on criticality, place-based learning (PBL), culture, tailoring instruction, and street art emerged from data. Aisha and Lulwa are both Lebanese teachers in their thirties with a background outside of education. Ben and Fred are both North American teachers in their sixties and Audrey and Robin are both American teachers.

Although in Lebanon Grade 10 has no national standardization or examinations, topics such as recent local history and sectarianism are still forbidden, ultimately restricting teachers to a certain extent. Participants generally felt restrictions in discussions impaired developing critical thinking abilities in practice. Audrey exemplified this by stating:

“I don't think necessarily the curriculum and the books we pick hinder [students'] critical thinking. But...in books where you really see these issues are applicable to the country, it is sad how you are not able to actually show the kids how it is directly applied to their life...you are talking about everyone in the world but not about where you are.”

Fred extended this sentiment by noting the importance of students being able to:

“respond to literature in a meaningful way...and I don't mean just in writing, I mean in their own human experience and in...literature and art and film and any advertisements on TV. [It is important] that they are aware of how these...operate on them...[and] are aware of these things as meaningful.”

Lulwa outlined “literature [as] actually a reflection of many of our issues...it not only gives me the chance to say what I think but also hear what they think.” Audrey elaborated that restrictions are not only felt by teachers, saying “being not allowed to talk about certain things, I am a little more fenced in...Even the kids know when a discussion goes towards [sectarianism, to]...not get into it.” However, not all teachers interviewed associated or prioritized criticality with language arts. Robin felt he was “not even at a point now where [he was] looking to get [students] to analyse thoroughly...just write with clarity.”

Although most teachers acknowledged the language arts' potential for criticality, other teachers,

such as Aisha, seemed to struggle with the notion of critical questioning as a language arts goal altogether, citing close reading and annotation instead. Ben seemed to perceive print sources as unquestionable, claiming “anyone can just throw stuff out there on the net. So, it’s just not the same kind of quality filter we had around in the days of traditional publishing” when asked about which materials deserve critical analysis.

In addition to detaching criticality from language arts teaching in practice, PBL was also dissociated from practice. Robin perceived PBL as “so much more accessible to history,” while Fred agreed “history would be ideal for PBL.” Only Aisha immediately drew a connection between PBL and creative writing.

Overall, teachers were not highly aware of the school’s learning environments, as confirmed by the mapping test. Robin, having taught in seven different countries, could not “say any particular school stands out in terms of environment.” Aisha felt place was important, but could only express superficial features, saying “kids are so privileged, and teachers as well because we have the sea nearby. We can look out and see the Mediterranean and see the mountains...I think the environment contributes to people’s feelings of wellbeing.” Lulwa attempted to capture potential of the area expressing “I find [Hamra]¹ very special. It has a certain vibe...something you cannot find anywhere else in Beirut.” However, Lulwa felt this atmosphere would not be relevant to students as “they are still young...they are not exposed to Hamra’s atmosphere.” Fred was also sensitive to culture and heritage contributing to place, noting:

“I’ve felt this sense of chaos and of upheaval and the environment around is a part of that...a picture won’t do it because there is a sensory experience...it’s everything around and this is an attitude, this is an environment that I’m really aware of...I mean here we are on the corniche and the Mediterranean, it’s right down there and it’s just incredible...and I’m so aware that the ravages of war are just everywhere. Even last year, I just realized that I was just walking around in the structure and destruction of war.”

However, in practice Fred believed “it’s enough to just try to get people to focus in class...it would be cool to go on AUB campus and write...but, I mean, we get out of class during advisory and we go to Starbucks.” Indeed, every teacher interviewed negatively perceived PBL in practice. Aisha took her class “up to the roof to read...but they were really very distracted and I thought ‘never again.’” Audrey never tried because at first “I was new myself. So, I didn’t feel comfortable and I didn’t know the country. I hadn’t travelled a lot within Lebanon and then what happened was this year we weren’t allowed.” Robin also never attempted PBL, but because he felt Lebanon had minimal offer in comparison to “countries like England [which are] rich in cultural heritage...and that...helps...shape a certain mentality. It gives...a greater sense of life.” As the most novice teacher, Lulwa was simply “not sure how to integrate” PBL.

Another interesting trend that emerged in interviews was the notion of culture, both national and school. Foreign teachers all experienced a form of culture-shock and block. Ben seemed oblivious to the notion of constructing culturally relevant lessons as his example of such a lesson was a teacher-centered closed-activity “I’ve always liked doing.” Robin refused to acknowledge value in the host culture, stating

¹ A street at the heart of Beirut that is historically an intellectual and liberal hub located in between the region’s two most prestigious universities. Hamra is one of the few areas that are sect-neutral adding to its unique history and rendering it loved and accessible to all citizens.

“I wouldn’t say here, that there is a rich cultural heritage in terms of the arts...there is a little bit, but I don’t find myself personally interested in it.” Fred was perplexed saying “I didn’t know what I was dealing with in term of classroom culture...they’re nuts.” Audrey struggled to remember the name of the native component, the internationally renowned poet Gibran Khalil Gibran, she had attempted to incorporate in her lessons. Lulwa, as a local herself, was quick to contrast with her colleagues saying “I am actually the only English teacher here that is Lebanese and I think this is a big advantage...I can give examples about Lebanon, about our culture, and I can make them relate to whatever [students] are learning...it helps them understand more deeply.” However, Audrey was the only foreigner to attempt to rationalize this cultural barrier between teachers and students claiming:

“I wouldn’t say that they think about [student home culture] that much with the curriculum because I think that the [school] mission statement is more broad and they actually want a more liberal education and an international education...We have such a mix at [school] that there are very Lebanese students who speak Arabic all the time at home and they...don’t have another passport and they are coming from the Lebanese Bacc...I think those kids really loved [local literature] but it’s interesting because even the other Lebanese students, if they live in Beirut for example, they are like ‘who cares about the village and what does this have to do with anything’ or they just thought that the other kids are exaggerating and it’s not really like that in Lebanon because it is such a mix, depending on where you live. So some students loved [local literature]...but, no, other books that have nothing to do with Lebanon, other students enjoy much more.”

When the conversation moved towards opinions of street art, preemptive of a discussion on its academic value, Fred exclaimed “I love it!” This sentiment was shared by Lulwa and Aisha, who even declared “there should be much more [street art] in Lebanon because Beirut is so ugly.” Ben had “not too many strong feelings one way or the other.” However, both Audrey and Robin were negative about the practice. Robin commented that when he “was a kid, they used to call it graffiti,” negatively connoting tagging practices and vandalism. Audrey clearly stated that she was “not really into street art...I guess I just don’t find it pretty. I don’t like the way it looks aesthetically...the colours are so primary and stark.”

Teachers who held positive views of street art were more alert to the impacts of street art on the environment. Fred communicated that “there is a connection between environment and people creating the space they want.” Lulwa expressed that “street art is a physical manifestation of the atmosphere of a place,” and Aisha said “when I see [street art], I feel happy. It makes me feel optimistic.” Audrey had a negative perception of street art, but realized her views had been altered by the unique art scene and mentality of her new country of residence recalling “I just couldn’t understand it...no, it’s not ok. And I laugh about it now. Here, these things really don’t matter. Street art is just so acceptable here. There is a huge contrast between what happens elsewhere and here.”

When placing street art inside classroom contexts, teachers implicitly defined it as alternative text and often expressed a preference for mainstream materials. Robin felt that street art he appreciated were “the ones [he saw] in museums...done in much the same way but of much higher quality.” Audrey felt that “if [street art] is in an approved space, I think that it is really healthy and nice. Just so long as, you know, you need to do it in an orderly fashion. Graffiti is vandalism.” In giving an example about how street art

might fit into a language arts classroom, Audrey said:

“In advertisements in English or French I find the Lebanese so good in word play. So, it’s not street art but it’s still out there and you look at it and that has been really interesting to me...there is this Arabic ad about *labneh*² I used and I guess it means sandwich and bride? I’m not sure if I used it successfully. So, we used that and talked about how you can play on words and double meaning. I used it just because of the word play and I knew they would get it.”

Ben believed that “a lot of people don’t see street art as a legitimate art form, but it’s just not a mainstream art form...it is legitimate in the same way now, for example, we accept graphic novels as a legitimate form of English.” Aisha even proposed that the Beirut “municipality should take advantage and have artists paint the whole city.”

While most of these opinions seemed promising, actual awareness of street art and its presence in immediate learning environments was not entirely congruent with them. Audrey made the apparently plausible claim that “linguistically, graffiti is possibly valuable, but unfortunately I don’t read Arabic.” However, it should be noted that most street art in Beirut, when incorporating text, is in English. Ben mentioned he had recently been exposed to a famous artist named “Banksy” by his students and Robin spent 1:22m of his interview expressing disbelief at the location of one of the pieces shown. Robin walked past this building-sized piece nearly every day for two years and yet, had never seen it.

In conclusion, all teachers were asked if they would incorporate street art in future lessons following the interview and mapping activity. Fred thought that “students can respond to street art as they do with other works.” Ben felt “it was kind of an education for [him]” and Lulwa said “if I feel I need to show [students] something that conveys a certain message, street art would be a good idea.” Aisha was also positive, pinpointing that she has students “write about paintings and photographs, so why not street art? Especially in protest writing because that is what it is all about.” Two teachers less positive in outcome were Robin, who was “unsure of the teaching potential” of street art and Audrey, who simply said she would not integrate it in future hypothetical lessons. Forthwith, these findings will be discussed according to the literature previously framed.

5. Discussion

The discussion will span across arenas of place-based learning (PBL), street art, multimodality and critical literacy. As previously exhibited in the literature review, each area of discussion is intended to be framed according to its predecessor, weaving findings, literature, and analysis together in a conclusive way to demonstrate the advantages and opportunity for incorporating local street art as multimodal text into critical literacy language arts teaching juxtaposed with its current invisible state.

² A form of waterless yoghurt, typically enjoyed for breakfast with bread. However, it should be noted that *labneh* does not mean sandwich and bride, “*arouss*” is the word allowing for that pun, which in fact, is not a pun as “*labneh arouss*” means sandwich, named such for the white colour which resembles a bridal veil and simply “*arouss*” means bride. There is absolutely no confusion or double meaning as the specification of “*labneh*” is always necessary when referring to the sandwich.

5.1 Place-Based Learning

Place-based learning (PBL) is the frame in which all discussion can be placed. Teachers participating in this study did not grasp the importance of school environments as pivotal to learning and sociocultural integration. Teachers revealed minimal awareness of immediate surroundings as none correctly identified all three campus pictures. As seen under findings, teachers mostly emphasized views of the sea and mountains rather than immediate grounds as environmentally distinctive. Although Robin, Audrey and Aisha made tenuous links between environment and mental states reinforcing literature that environment pervades consciousness, Lulwa and Fred were teachers who specifically referenced features of local environment.

Fred was most aware of place compared to his peers but romanticized the “structure and destruction of war” and was far more aware of ideas manifested in the physical environment than actualities. Mesmerized by war, Fred mentioned that, on more than one occasion, he encouraged students to write about their traumatic experiences of war as it was authentic to them. While accurate on some level, the last ‘wartime’ Beirut experienced was ten days in 2008 and one month in 2006 when Fred’s students were 10 and 8 years old respectively. Moreover, the vast majority of Fred’s students come from privileged backgrounds with multiple houses in “safe zones” within the country or abroad. Thus, restricting students to writing about experiences of war, however physically obvious by bullet holes in nearby buildings, is superficial, at best. As seen in the literature, schools offer constricted settings that systematically fail to relate to student life-experience. In dismissing nearby Hamra’s academic potential after noting its unique quality, Lulwa separated her own life from her students’ and reinforced divisions between the reality of school and the reality of the external world. In this, there is clear space for street art as meaningful and authentic text for students, bridging the gap between external and internal school lives. Moreover, examples given by teachers from both schools indicated student interest in street art; therefore, through the use of street art, PBL can be meaningfully and interestingly implemented to enhance learning in language arts classrooms.

In order for street art to augment teaching and learning, educators must be aware of its presence in local environments. This study demonstrated that street art was included in the null curriculum. Audrey noted that students are socialized into silence concerning Lebanese sectarianism and consequently have impaired critical thinking skills. Removing street art from the null curriculum can provide a platform on which to sensitively tackle national issues and liberate students from silences pervading all facets of life in Lebanon. Such disconnection with environment leads to cultural alienation. In fact, this alienation was perceived by Audrey in her students. Audrey observed that students from different areas had radically different experiences of their country and typically never explored unfamiliar territory. Accordingly, Audrey struggled to find material that would relate to all of her students. Including text in places all students can identify with counters this cultural alienation.

This study confirmed that local environments are often viewed as removed from learning experiences. However, this study also showed that teachers removed learning experiences from local environments. Even when venturing into the immediate neighbourhood, teachers conducted lessons that were place-insensitive and thus, not reaching full learning potential. Ultimately, teachers, for reasons ranging from

difficulty, seeing Starbucks as a good learning location, discomfort with the country and politics, lack of skills, and dismissal of the country's cultural value, totally misunderstood the meaning of place and how to engage students through it.

The crux of PBL is making appropriate connections between place, learning objectives, and student interests. Some teachers mentioned struggling to relate external literature to internal situations due to political issues, yet none contemplated the ease of relating internal situations to global contexts. Despite inherent political association, sectarian-neutral street art in school environments exists and can be used to instigate critical pedagogy of non-political discussions where the local is framed according to global concerns.

5.2 Street Art

As participants noted, texts, such as street art, envelop school environments, permeate consciousness and attract student interest. However, awareness transcends exposure. Literature claims knowledge of how and why culturally relevant street art is installed into public space augments awareness, prominence and evocative qualities. The mapping activity participating teachers performed resoundingly confirmed this claim. One photo depicts the largest street art piece in the Middle East by internationally known Chilean artist INTI. Not only is this piece massive, spanning around 8 stories, it is located on Hamra Street within 100m of where most teachers from both schools are housed and inevitably pass daily. Only Fred recalled ever having seen this piece before and correctly identified its location. Far from identifying with Chilean culture, Fred described an event where numerous street artists exhibited in the city's most prestigious gallery and collaborated to create art across city walls over a weekend. The name of the event he could not recall was "White Wall," created by local and international curators to give Lebanese street art new impetus in 2012. Thus, it can be inferred that Fred was the only teacher who identified INTI's piece because only he was aware of how and why it was created. Although Fred was highly aware of street art and other environmental features compared to his colleagues, all teachers studied were minimally aware of learning environments.

Initially, it was thought that attitude towards street art would lead to heightened awareness of it. However, the two most enthusiastic teachers, Aisha and Lulwa, were the least aware teachers interviewed. A relation between attitude towards street art and effort made in identifying pictures was found. For example, Robin, who didn't find any worthwhile art in the country, let alone the street, placed the majority of his stickers in the sea. Audrey, the other teacher who was largely opposed to street art, opted to "pass" on placing most of her stickers on the map. She claimed she had never seen most of the pictures before, including one visible from the window at her back. Conversely, Fred, the most environmentally-aware teacher, took the longest time to complete the mapping activity, deliberately thinking about each picture and often narrating anecdotes about how he identified them. In each case effort to correctly identify photos reflected enthusiasm about street art.

Participants were rightly enthusiastic about street art and its pedagogical potential as it demonstrates its capacity to merge with preexisting teaching goals, pushing students beyond current boundaries. It was also seen that street art is firmly embedded in social mainstreams, but neglected within institutional ones

as teachers narrated high levels of student interest but low pedagogical integration. When asked about alternative texts used in class, teachers listed poetry jars, free verse, advertisements, and other conventional textual sources displaying an unwavering preference for conventional texts. Hence, a wider view of literacy is needed amongst teachers as relying solely on traditional language arts skills is repressive. Reluctant to deviate from custom, these teachers were blind to their surroundings and its bounty. Furthermore, in limiting texts in language arts teaching, students are denied varied paths to expand knowledge and develop communicative skills. Street art has the potential to remedy this along with the dissatisfaction most teachers expressed at student linguistic abilities, initiative, and creativity. Audrey conditionally approved of street art “in an orderly fashion” and Robin maintained that street art in museums were of “much higher quality.” Thus, even when considering street art, which is unregulated in essence, teachers expressed comfort only with control or prestige such as the ludicrous claim that artwork in museums is the only artwork worth enjoying. Only Ben saw potential in street art’s future legitimization in schools when he likened it to graphic novels.

That a teacher was aware of material outside mainstream channels and precedents of text crossing is promising as awareness precedes change. As literature illustrates, street art can be an agent for social change. In Lebanon, using street art to reduce stagnant silences in society would certainly have transformative effects. Currently, teachers’ superficiality, such as Aisha listing street art’s effect simply as optimistic, contrasts with the hyperawareness most teachers possess concerning classroom design. However, spatial designs outside classroom walls and windows demand recognition despite lack of teacher control over them. Similarly superficially, Audrey could only describe her attitude towards street art due to its “primary and stark” colours. Attention must be drawn to the actual meaning imbedded in street art and its value as an ongoing critical commentary of society. Teachers must develop critical awareness, as without it they have extremely reduced chances of fostering it in their pupils. As noted in the literature review, vision is a fundamental sense through which the world becomes known. Therefore, incorporating contemporary art into classrooms is important. Street art encourages critical thinking and forging meaningful connections between the self and environment. Evidently, street art has massive advantages when incorporated into language arts classrooms.

5.3 Multimodality

As language arts teachers, all except Audrey stressed on improved reading as their ultimate goal. As demonstrated by literature, providing positive literacy environments is highly important to reading success. Therefore, if street art were positively incorporated into language teaching, another layer would be added to print-rich environments surrounding the school. Furthermore, multimodal texts, such as street art, develop stronger readers and have the capacity to redefine reading practices. In this way, a space for street art in pedagogy to meet preexisting teaching goals exists. In addition, Ben advocated using shorter selections of text to increase range but maintain depth of study. Street art also meshes nicely with this teaching preference, adding variation to standard texts while being appropriate in length for an enriching discussion.

Teachers generally have freedom of resources and approach when teaching set curricula. Whatever

is available is used, typically whiteboards, computers, posters, books and suchlike found in most schools and classrooms. Environment is also a resource, often overlooked. Within literature advocating environmental features for PBL, street art is a form of text that is also overlooked. If the local environment is utilized as a pedagogical tool, only context, not curriculum, changes. In order to be effective and beneficial, PBL should enhance rather than detract or distract as Audrey and Aisha's previous experiences indicated. In Audrey's opinion "a reason Lebanon has been unable to move on and still continues to have that same continual strife is because in the educational system, we are not teaching kids to learn to disagree and do it diplomatically." Audrey accredited this stagnation to restrictions and forced silences in curriculum. However, not being allowed to discuss certain sensitive issues and not being allowed to discuss those issues in certain ways are different things. By law, some topics such as the Lebanese Civil War and sectarianism are absolutely forbidden in schools, yet speaking of political issues is not confined to those unmentionable topics. In addition, much more can be said of society than its politics. Street art provides multiple facets of society to critique and consider in politically-sensitive ways and can develop critical literacy without impinging on the law. Although incorporating street art cannot solve Lebanon's problems, or even the strife Audrey mentioned, it can pave the first steps to progress.

5.4 Critical Literacy

Before progress can occur, teachers must possess the necessary skills to make it happen. In addition to pedagogical skills required to implement PBL, awareness of street art, and acceptance of multimodal texts, teachers must also be critically literate to foster critical literacy. Most teachers are familiar with critical thinking or reading; however, critical literacy exceeds both practices. Ben seemingly had no grasp of criticality, claiming traditional print sources required no critical questioning as publishing is the highest form of reliability. Critical literacy calls for questioning all things. Furthermore, critical literacy does not question content, as Ben seemed to suggest, but delivery and insinuations of power dynamics. In addition, insight into how societies organize language for social purposes and how meaning is communicated is derived. When Audrey narrated her lesson concerning puns and her understanding of Lebanon as multilingual, she portrayed awareness of how society organizes and uses language to convey meaning. However, Audrey never delved deeper into implications of linguistic structures in Lebanon, which incidentally, highly reflect power structures. These examples demonstrate a definite need for teacher professional development in critical literacy. Being of the opinion that analysis, let alone criticality, was relatively low as a language arts teacher's priority, Robin highlighted this need.

Aisha equated critical literacy to close reading and annotation. Critical literacy requires critical reading skills, and fostering them is advantageous. Incorporating critical literacy into pedagogy would hone skills Aisha valued, in addition to an ideological appraisal of society and its power processes. Critical literacy is rooted in exposing, discussing, and analyzing societal silences rather than reinforcing them. As such, critical literacy is perfectly suited to a Lebanese theatre, a country without even a unified history curriculum beyond the Phoenician period and more silences than speech. Of all teachers interviewed, Audrey solely expressed frustration at lack of critical skills in her students. Audrey advocated needs for criticality, both for the community at large and individuals, but felt helpless in actualizing it. Fred was most

aware of critical literacy and indicated understanding of how various media operated and controlled. However, beyond acknowledging a need for students to develop critical literacy and abstractly understanding its concepts, critical literacy never materialized in Fred's classroom. As previously explored, street art would provide an excellent route for developing critical literacy skills in both teachers and students with the added benefit of a localized context.

Evidently, critical literacy is advantageous for school communities. Although criticisms showed critical literacy will not move students to action, it also communicated that tools bestowing choices and power to transform society into the new generation's hands are provided. Empowerment is attained through deepening awareness of social realities, of which street art depicts one facet. Combining street art with critical literacy reduces silences and transforms society by abolishing indoctrinating children into a preexisting stagnant conflict. As Audrey noted, her students independently held back from broaching socio-politically charged silences of the community. As students' role models, teachers breaking the silence in critically constructive ways could begin an era where national problems are overcome rather than tolerated. If handled delicately, both students and teachers enhance critical consciousness and forge stronger identities as empowered citizens.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study connected and explored street art as multimodal text and place-based learning under the umbrella of critical literacy. Six teachers in two schools within the same learning environment in Ras Beirut, Lebanon were studied for this research. Multiple case studies through mixed methods revealed that participating teachers were minimally aware of place and its pedagogic value. Furthermore, teachers had incongruent understandings of students' life experiences outside school and the actuality. Teachers were largely unaware of street art despite mostly positive attitudes towards the practice highlighting cultural disconnections between teachers, students and place.

Limitations to this study included its scope. By refusing to engage with political discourse a rich layer of analysis was omitted and unexplored. As critical literacy is inherently political, avoiding the issue reduced areas of discussion. Regarding what was performed, the quantitative mapping tool was also limited. Some teachers struggled with map-reading and could not orient themselves on it. Moreover, as noted by several teachers, street names were off-putting as they are rarely used in reality. More pictures could have been used to accurately gauge environmental awareness. Moreover, difficulty levels of identifying photographs may have been too high. This study was also limited in terms of time. All raw data was gathered over a span of two weeks. Follow-up interviews and activities would have resulted in deeper findings and over time, may have yielded greater insights into teacher awareness of place.

This study revealed the existence of a concrete space for street art in language arts teaching. Street art can not only ameliorate critical literacy practices, but can also fulfill existing learning objectives. In addition, street art bridges the perceived discrepancy between school life and reality outside it. From the results of this study it can be suggested that teachers are in need of professional development to grow as critical educators. Through awareness of PBL and street art, teaching can be invigorated and lessons can establish much-needed cultural connections to engage students. Indeed, by becoming more aware of street

art as one facet of place, teachers may become more aware of local culture and develop new levels of appreciation and understanding of it. Ultimately, this study advocates and demonstrates a need to reduce silences in Lebanese and international education and proposes critical literacy via street art as the route to do so.

In future, this study has the potential to be greatly expanded. Investigating which factors teachers are most aware of in local learning environments is of interest. Exercises of identifying photographs with different zooms would indicate which contextual features teachers notice most. Using this study to construct a professional development workshop for in-service teachers is also an opportunity to investigate awareness and attitudes before, during, and after the sessions. Another clear area for expansion would be to conduct a similar research on students. Such a study would enlighten developing both material for teacher professional development and engaging material for lessons. In greater ambition, a model for using street art for critical literacy in classrooms can be developed and piloted as a need for such teachings was demonstrated to be beneficial.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Participants' Mapping Raw Data

Note: All original maps of participants and original photographs are available upon request.

TEACHER	AGE	NATIONALITY	SCHOOL	LIVED IN LEBANON	TRANSPORT	PHOTOGRAPHS CORRECTLY IDENTIFIED
AISHA	30-39	LEBANESE	#1	6 YRS	CAR	1/15
FRED	60-69	AMERICAN	#1	2 YRS	WALKING	5/15
ROBIN	30-39	AMERICAN	#1	7 YRS	WALKING	3/15
AUDREY	30-39	AMERICAN	#2	3 YRS	WALKING	2/15
BEN	60-69	CANADIAN	#2	2 YRS	WALKING	1/15
LULWA	30-39	LEBANESE	#2	WHOLE LIFE	CAR	2/15

OF CORRECTLY IDENTIFIED PHOTOGRAPHS			
TEACHER	STREET ART	SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT	LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
AISHA	0/1	1/1	0/1
FRED	2/5	2/5	1/5
ROBIN	0/3	1/3	2/3
AUDREY	0/2	2/2	0/2
BEN	0/1	1/1	0/1
LULWA	0/2	2/2	0/2

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