



The Big Questions

An after-school project earns New York City kids academic credits and an inside look at their urban environment.

By Bernice Yeung

The final bell rings at the International Arts Business School (IABC), a public school on Brooklyn's George Wingate Educational Campus, and a handful of ninth-grade students trickle into a classroom for their after-school service-learning class on a rainy spring afternoon.

The students quickly settle into seats, and their teacher, Hatuey Ramos-Fermin, pulls up a chair alongside them to begin the session. The class is in the midst of conducting an urban investigation, a unique, local service-learning project that asks students to confront challenging issues within their community to gain fuller understanding and become more engaged citizens.

Raising Awareness

Through a partnership with the nonprofit Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), these students have tackled a big question—what will the East New York neighborhood look like in 2030?—as a way of exploring an often overlooked corner of their city. After spending a semester on interviews, research, and documentation, the group will explain what they discovered about the future of East New York by creating an edu-

cational art project, which they'll share with the community at large through a public presentation.

"The idea is to encourage civic participation," says CUP program manager Valeria Mogilevich. "You don't feel ownership over where you live unless you understand how the neighborhood works and that there are people with faces who make decisions about it. We're training the students to know it's possible to ask questions and figure out how things work."

For eight years, CUP has worked with more than a dozen public high schools and community educational programs across the city to craft after-school, summer, and internship projects like the one taking place at the IABC. The investigations are often part of a school's service-learning curriculum or an extracurricular class that supplements core subjects.

Students have asked and answered questions such as where the city's garbage goes or how the *bodegas* (markets) in the Bronx get their food. To illustrate what they've found, the students collaborate with a rotating cast of local teaching artists to produce polished, professional-grade documentaries, art exhibits, posters, or mini-magazines that are then

used to educate the general public.

At the IABC, the classroom investigation proceeds as Ramos-Fermin, a teaching artist, hands out a short bio of East New York pastor and community leader David Brawley, who the students will interview that afternoon. "Before we go, let's talk about what we're doing," says Ramos-Fermin. "Why are we talking to David Brawley?"

"Because he's with the people who are building a bunch of houses there," responds 14-year-old Gavin.

After a few more minutes of discussion, Ramos-Fermin motions that it's time to catch the subway to meet Brawley at his church. This will be the group's fourth interview with as many key community leaders in the past six weeks, and the students are clearly becoming more comfortable with the activity. "I used to be shy about asking questions," says ninth-grader Isaiah. "But if you take the time to think about it, it's a skill that everyone has. It's really just curiosity." As he slips on his backpack, the high school freshman grins and says, "OK, time to make some people nervous."

Building Kids' Investigative Skills

At the beginning of every urban investigation, CUP pairs students with a teaching artist, who shepherds the teens through every part of the process, from refining the initial question to conducting and documenting the interviews to crafting the final product. Previous urban investigations have often resulted in art exhibits and documentaries—some have been shown at New York's Museum of Modern Art and at national conferences, such as the National Conference for Media Reform, and community organizations regularly use others as educational tools.

For his students' East New York project, Ramos-Fermin started out by giving them a primer on real estate and urban planning, because the neighborhood they're investigating is undergoing rapid redevelopment. The class learned the definitions of relevant terms like *foreclosure* by first discussing them and then physically representing them to form a human tableau. Ramos-Fermin photographed students' poses and then used the pictures to make collages representing their initial impression of East New York.

The first few weeks of any urban investigation are also dedicated to building the students' interviewing skills through role-playing and mini-lessons and to creating art projects that develop the students' videography or

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photography skills, which they use to document the interviews. Ramos-Fermin's students, for example, have taken photographs and recorded their conversations with real estate brokers, community board members, and housing developers. By the end of the project, the group will compile recordings, interview transcriptions, students' drawings, and photos to produce a mini-magazine and a podcast audio tour of East New York.

To get them thinking about the politics of urban development, Ramos-Fermin divided his students into groups, each one representing someone they'd interviewed, and then he asked the young investigators to draw a picture of that person's vision of East New York in 2030, based on things that person had said. Afterward, they collectively discussed the different images that emerged from each group.

Until recently, CUP, which receives various federal and local arts grants, has focused its ef-

forts on New York City, but the organization is developing free, downloadable curriculum so its model of local investigations can be conducted anywhere. "You can do an investigation any place where people live and where things change," says CUP's Valerie Mogilevich. "It's fascinating to dig deeper to see how change happens and who is responsible for it."

It's a Wrap

On the day of their interview with David Brawley, Ramos-Fermin and his students arrive at the St. Paul Community Baptist Church in the late afternoon. After a few more minutes of strategizing in the church, the group is led to a well-appointed office behind the sanctuary.

Once seated around a table, the students begin peppering Brawley with questions: "How did your church become involved with the affordable-housing business?" "How is religion tied to the construction?" "Is it environmentally safe to

live there because of its history as a landfill?"

"That was one of the toughest interviews I've had in a long time," the pastor tells the group after the hour-long interview.

Out in front of the church, Gavin, a freshman, says he didn't know what to expect when he joined the urban investigation, but he's glad he did. "I just joined for the credits, but after a while, I started to see it was more of an educational experience," he admits. "You learn a lot from the experience—more than from anything else." **e**

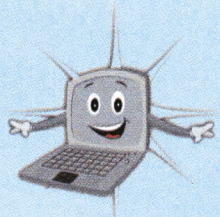
Bernice Yeung is a contributing editor for Edutopia.

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