How do we best educate our students that come from completely different backgrounds as their teachers? What types of pedagogical strategies best suit students who have emigrated from foreign countries? Why is it important to take into account the perspectives and life experiences of the children we are teaching, when designing curriculum? Though not always in the clearest of terms, these are all concepts at the core of Laura Trafí-Prats’s article, “Destination Raval Sud: A Visual Ethnography on Pedagogy, Aesthetics, and the Spatial Experience of Growing up Urban” (2009). This writing looks at a case study of 6th grade students in the El Raval Sud, in Barcelona and their photographic exploration of the urban environment they call home. In addition, Trafí-Prats speaks of pedagogical practices in relation to aesthetics and the best way to reach children with vastly different, migrant backgrounds.

Trafí-Prats takes a reconstructionist approach to education and adopts the philosophy that we need to change the way we design art education curriculum to allow for children’s voices to be heard and to reach students of all backgrounds. Through nomadic aesthetics, the concern is placed on “creative juxtapositions, unexpected encounters, and forms of parody” (p. 8) that place emphasis on the experiences and opinions of the nomadic individual or group. In conjunction, relational aesthetics focuses on everyday life and the fluidity that comes with different life experiences, valuing the opinions of all. Both types of aesthetics have strong connections to performance art pedagogy, which focuses on action and building knowledge through learning, experimentation, and cognition.

Nomadic aesthetics, relational aesthetics, and performance art pedagogy are all at the heart of the study done in El Raval Sud. This part of Barcelona was gentrified in the mid 1980s and is home to a large migrant population. The neighborhood itself started off as a hub for working class immigrants and had a hard time meeting the demands of the increasing population. In the years that followed the mass influx of residents, El Raval Sud has become more and more middle class, but remnants of the old working class structures still remain (p. 11).
The researchers wanted to value the opinions of the young artists participating and used visual ethnography as a way for students to express their views and insights. Visual ethnography allowed the study to produce still images, videos, and written statements that document the creation of a curriculum that links relevant life content to contemporary art and urban life. At the time of the study, Robert Frank, a photographer who immigrated across Europe, Peru, and the United States had work on display at the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art. His work addresses the first-hand experiences of a childhood spent without a real sense of home and would resonate with many of the students in the study.

To compare and contrast outcomes of the study, the researchers divided the students into two groups, each receiving a different experience with Frank’s work, and each yielding different results. The first group was exposed to Frank’s work, Detroit, which explores the time he spent in an environment that revolved around the Ford Motor Factory. As students read stories of Frank’s time in Detroit and viewed the images, their response was to take photographs of people in the midst of their daily jobs, in El Raval Sud. Students focused on action shots of mainly immigrant workers performing different aspects of their jobs. Their work gives us an enlightened view into how they see the world of immigrant and nomadic life; while their explanations of their photographs show that they don’t see these “migrant” people negatively or differently than anyone else.

The second group of students were exposed to Frank’s work From the Bus, a series of photographs taken while he was traveling on a New York bus. The students’ were captivated by the motion depicted in these images, and decided to adopt Frank’s strategy of taking photos on the go. They walked through El Raval Sud photographing aspects of everyday life on the street. Their statements give insight on how they feel about nomadic life and the concerns they have.

Creating content that is relevant to our students is arguably one of the most important goals of the present-day art educator. This case study sheds light on the methods used by one group of researchers, in a very ethnically diverse neighborhood, where it is more common to be migrant than native. Through this study, the obvious seems to be pointed out in that we need to “adopt a pedagogical perspective centered on the cultures, memories, and interests of young people whose social, cultural, and geographical biographies significantly differ from the ones of their adult caregivers” (p. 18). While I
consider myself an open-minded educator, this reading caused me to reflect on the ways I approach my curriculum and how it affects the diverse group of students in each of my classes. Perhaps the lessons that seem so impactful for me don’t mean as much to the Latino students in my class and I need to take more time to address the environment my students live in each day. While the environment I teach in is far from urban, I am surprised each day at the diverse backgrounds of my students and the different home-lives they lead. If the reconstructionist’s are right, I need to take more time to focus on the everyday lives my student live and explore the different environmental factors they deal with in order to best serve them with a relevant curriculum.
Resources