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"What Color are Our Hearts?": Challenging Social and Literacy Inequalities in an Elementary School Writing Club

Purpose and Research Questions

The title of this presentation is borrowed from the writings of Ahmaad, a 12-year old author-student participating in an afterschool writing club at an elementary school started by two high school English teachers and their students. Over the course of a school year, the writing club addressed local and systemic issues of inequality and facilitated the voice, agency and creative expression of the third to fifth grade students who chose to participate. Throughout this proposal, and indeed throughout the paper presentation if accepted, we will "step aside" as researchers in order to provide space for the children, youth and teachers in this project to tell their stories and illuminate their hope and work toward a more equitable future.

The purpose of this longitudinal study is to understand how two experienced English teachers worked with a high school group created to address literacy inequalities both global and local. As a subset of the larger study, this research centers on the work being done at a local elementary school in an underserved area of a large urban city in the Southeastern United States. Recognizing that there was a need in the community to address the issue of at-risk readers and disparate resources in local schools, Dr. Davidson and Ms. Johns (pseudonyms) recruited students to be Reading Advocates (pseudonym). In the initial stages of the Reading Advocates program, we (Authors) visited from the university and conducted workshops related to theoretical ideas around social justice as well as those related to creative and engaging approaches to literacy instruction. The following three research questions frame this study:

1. How do two English teachers and the Reading Advocates balance the pressures of high stakes testing in the public school site with creatively engaging students as motivated readers and authors with voice and agency?
2. What specific strategies and materials are the Reading Advocates producing to engage underserved populations in ways that also address literacy and social inequalities?
3. How are the Reading Advocates being mentored in critical literacy approaches in this project and how might that inform similar work at other sites?

Theoretical Framework

We situate this study within the theoretical framework of critical literacy. As Freire (1985) noted education either liberates, domesticates or alienates. A critical literacy stance provides an orientation to literacy that reminds us that issues of power and privilege are ever-present in and out of text. As Ernest Morrell (2008) notes:

Critical literacy, therefore, is necessary not only for the critical navigation of hegemonic discourses, it is also essential to the redefining of the self and the transformation of oppressive social structures and relations of production. Confronting ideological language and texts is a requisite activity, but resistance and transformation are also textually based practices for the critically literate citizen. (p. 5)

Beyond interrogating texts, a critical stance invites students to analyze the effects of globalization, capitalism, and issues of sexual orientation, gender, racial and cultural inequalities in both the local and global spheres through dialogic exchange in classrooms and beyond (Luke, 2013). Thus, the individual sees literacy not only as a practice, but as a means to purposively act to create change. Cheryl McLean (2013) argues, "When this occurs we see evidence of the individuals ability to question, challenge, critique and redefine beliefs" (pg. 65).

From Jeddidah's writing:

"I have a dream that little people will do big things and big people will do big things and small ideas will be big ideas and one day that will happen to me.."

Given the nature of a risk society where youth will need to analyze, critique, and ultimately solve problems related to hunger, poverty, climate change, terrorism and human rights violations, to mention a few, how can students take up critical literacy practices to advocate for those "big ideas" of equality and social justice? Allan Luke (2013) notes that our curriculum is often mired in what he terms "first wave literacy" that may address mechanics such as strategy use and passive knowledge, but ignores the greater purpose of literacy in addressing local and/or global injustice.

Research Methods

A phenomenological qualitative case study research design (Creswell, 2003; Groenewald, 2004) was utilized in this research. This paradigm guides the development of qualitative approaches, the aim of which is to understand more deeply the experiences and perspectives of the Reading Advocates and their teachers/mentors as they confront issues of literacy inequality and access effecting the students with whom they work. This involves face-to-face collection of data and interacting with participants in their familiar, usual setting. As Creswell (2003)

indicated, this approach allows the researcher to interact with the participants on a human level and listen to and respond to their experiences. It allows for the collection of rich and textual material.

Participants

The participants for this study include the current group of eighteen freshman, sophomore and junior Reading Advocates and their two English teacher/ mentors, Dr. Davidson and Ms. Johns as well as the written voices and contributions of the children they work with in the writing club. As a matter of disclosure, it is the desire and intention of the Reading Advocates and their teacher/mentors to present this research with the Authors if the paper is accepted. Thus complete anonymity for these participants has been waived in the consenting process.

Context

Each Wednesday, the Reading Advocates take a bus from their private high school to a local elementary school, Lakeside Elementary (pseudonym) and tutor third through fifth graders (n=25-30 depending on transiency). Lakeside Elementary serves one of the most economically disadvantaged areas in this large city, with 98.3% of the children receiving free or reduced lunch. Despite making improvements on standardized tests and receiving conditional accreditation, 2015 test data indicates that only 48.61% of 5th graders met English/Language Arts standards compared to 78.77% of 5th graders statewide.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection has included:

- Reflective field notes following our meetings
- Artifacts in the form of materials produced for the tutoring sessions
- Transcripts from ongoing meetings
- Wordpress site commentary and analysis of the sessions with the elementary students
- Artifacts produced by the children at the elementary school (identifiers removed)

Data analysis is iterative and adheres to constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) as follows:

- Reading and rereading to code for patterns and categories
- Raising the level of abstraction (Merriam, 2009) via identifying emerging themes
- Generation of meta-themes

Role of the Researchers/Teachers/Tutors

Although not a central theme in this study, our roles/identities as white teachers, tutors, researchers cannot be overlooked, if also not overemphasized. At the elementary school site, we are all aware of, and actively resist, two common positions historically enacted by white teachers/researchers working with marginalized populations – that of the benevolent mother-teacher or the traveler/missionary. Both of these positions harken to an image of a “Lady Bountiful” who acts as a selfless, civilizing force educating their charges for the good of the Nation. Thus, while providing education and care, by never overtly challenging society, s/he reinscribes its inequality and oppression (Harper, 2002).

Findings

In the second year of the project with twelve Reading Advocates now in the program, we have focused on exploring how the two English teachers navigate the needs of the school site amidst developing highly creative materials that go beyond typical worksheets and scripted lessons often found in underserved schools. Due to the pressures on teachers at the elementary school to conform to restrictive mandates to boost high-stake test scores, the Reading Advocates work with the children during an afterschool program. During this time they begin with student interests and created reading materials and activities that are specific to them. Additionally, they have hosted poetry nights featuring the third-graders poems and songs for local stakeholders, as well as creating a professionally bound collection of the students’ writings, which are featured in this paper. Indeed, these students are dedicated to making substantive change in their tutees literacy development as well as in their feelings of agency and confidence in making their voices and views heard.

Ms. Johns, Dr. Davidson and the Reading Advocates position themselves not as “coming in with the answers,” but rather as co-learners in service to the school and the children. In this approach they have deconstructed some of the more prevalent approaches to reading instruction that position books as “sacred relics that belong in hush-be-quiet temples of academia...[that] unwittingly create barriers to books and reading”. Instead they see their efforts as a means of getting kids into books by putting them in books as authors. As Dr. Davidson wrote about the children in the writing club:

“...they can walk into a library knowing they too are authors, and because of that they are less likely to see a book as a distant, foreign, and intimidating thing...when Jevonna and Soren volunteered to be in a book, they broke an important barrier.”

The second theme that will be discussed centers on the intersection of digital and print based literacies in service to social justice that the group is using to engage the students at Lakeside Elementary. The Reading Advocates created *Catapult Press* to bind the students’ stories and poems into books for them to keep. As of this writing, the Reading Advocates have published three volumes of the students’ work. These

books were shared at the Lakeside Elementary Poetry Night to the delight of the children, parents and other community stakeholders. In regard to digital literacies, the Advocates and writing club students are utilizing popular culture and such outlets as YouTube to co-create materials for the students while also using their work as a model for the elementary students' own productions.

Although this longitudinal study is on-going at the time of this proposal submission, we believe that the trends and themes so far analyzed speak to the promise and possibilities of inter-age writing clubs that go far beyond traditional tutorial models. Rather than engaging in a banking method of tutoring, this project facilitates voice, agency and equality, as well as making significant gains in literacy acquisition. It is our hope that this study will contribute to the ongoing efforts to bridge inequalities in education. Even in uncertain times, in trying and tragic times, voices such as these hold the power and the promise of a better future. We can think of no greater testament to this than the words of eight year-old Kam'ryn: “

...when I was born in the world it was bold. It was amazing. I wish I could do it again.”

Word Count: 1793.

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