


2017

Critical Collaborative Inquiries in Social Studies: Fostering Inclusion, Engagement and Literacy

Sara Lewis-Bernstein Young Ed.D.
Worcester State University, syoung3@worcester.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jpr>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Young, Sara Lewis-Bernstein Ed.D. (2017) "Critical Collaborative Inquiries in Social Studies: Fostering Inclusion, Engagement and Literacy," *Journal of Practitioner Research*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

DOI:

<http://doi.org/10.5038/2379-9951.2.1.1053>

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jpr/vol2/iss1/3>

Critical Collaborative Inquiries in Social Studies: Fostering Inclusion, Engagement and Literacy

Cover Page Footnote

Critical Collaborative Inquiries in Social Studies: Fostering Inclusion, Engagement and Literacy August 24, 2017 Sara Lewis-Bernstein Young Worcester State University 486 Chandler Street Worcester, Massachusetts 01602 508-929-8246 (work) 413-230-6515 (home) F: (508) 929-8164 syoung3@worchester.edu Sara Lewis-Bernstein Young is an Associate Professor of Education at Worcester State University where she teaches pre-service and in service teachers. Her research is in critical literacies and multicultural education.

Abstract

Collaborative inquiry groups are a well-advocated tool to support comprehension and collaboration, but how do critical collaborative inquiries support students with different levels of engagement and academic performances in social studies to develop critical literacies? This article responds to this research question through case studies of two high school students who engaged in a critical collaborative inquiry project. One student was a senior labeled with disabilities, who struggled with academic literacies, graduated at the bottom of her class, and said that she hated school. The other student was a junior who thrived in school, mastered a range of academic literacies, graduated near the top of her class, and felt very engaged in school. These students were part of an elective social studies class open to all students in grades 9-12 taught with a negotiated curriculum that centered on individual and critical collaborative inquiry projects.

This article focuses on a critical collaborative inquiry project and the individual responses, engagement, and growth of two high school students. Each student engaged with critical inquiry and grew in quite different ways, while participating in the same class and working on many of the same projects. Their experiences and reflections help to answer the research question, how do critical collaborative inquiries support students with different levels of engagement and academic performances in social studies to develop critical literacies?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in socio-cultural literacy theories (Haas-Dyson, 2004; Heath, 2004) and focuses on the development of critical literacies in social studies through engagement in critical collaborative inquiries. Critical literacies are pedagogical and theoretical understandings of literacy that focus on critical analyses of language, multi-genre and multimedia texts, power, and norms with an aim towards disrupting social inequalities, revealing ideologies and dominant discourses, and taking action for social justice (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Janks, 1993; Rogers, 2002; Shor, 1987). While much critical literacy research has centered on the socio-political issues of race and social class, there is a growing body of researchers that are including a focus on sexual orientation (Blackburn, 2002, 2003, 2005; Martino, 2001, 2009; Mattson, 2008; Unks, 2003; Young, 2007, 2009, 2010).

Inquiry-based learning can be used to support students' critical literacy development. Inquiry-based learning centers on students' problems or questions and allows them to do the asking, researching, and answering of their own questions with a teacher facilitating the inquiry process. Collaborative inquiry groups are a well-documented tool to support comprehension and collaboration across subject areas and grade levels (Harvey & Daniels, 2015; Ohn & Wade, 2009). Critical inquiry involves engaging students in problematizing, critique, and inquiry (Fecho, 2004; Franzak & Noll, 2006). Laman, Smith, and Kander (2006), use the work of Edelsky, Christensen, Vasquez and others to demonstrate the connection between critical literacy, critical inquiry, and action.

Critical inquiry weaves critical literacy practices throughout the curriculum and offers children prolonged engagement with issues that are important to them and important to democracy. In such contexts, children read against texts, re-envision the world they live in, and take action within that world. (Laman et al., 2006, p.204)

I define a critical collaborative inquiry as an open inquiry (Harvey & Daniels, 2015) or negotiated curriculum project that is grounded in social justice, where students collaboratively choose the area of inquiry, conduct research, reflect, ask larger questions, problematize, critique, synthesize, and ultimately create a way of demonstrating their learning through taking social action. Through critical collaborative inquiry students are able to further refine their critical literacy skills.

Collaborative inquiry research has been documented across subject areas and grade levels, but does not focus on one of the key challenges of teachers: engaging and scaffolding students with a range of literacy skills and participation in school. For example, Powell, Cantrell, and Adams (2001) document an inquiry project with a fourth grade class near Lexington, Kentucky whose inquiry led them to join Appalachian students in taking action to save Black Mountain from strip mining. While this project included elements of critical collaborative inquiry, the emphasis was on the whole group, rather than individual students with a range of academic skills and various levels of engagement in school, coming together through critical collaborative inquiry.

Boozer, Maras, and Brummett (1999) examine how "critical talk" does not always move to "critical study and action" (p. 62). In their classroom study of group homes, students who did not live in group homes were moved personally, but along with their teachers, failed to ask larger political and systemic questions that might lead to action. In a second study with a different class, students were able to follow through and take action to challenge a reward system that they

viewed as unjust. The major limiting factors to enacting an action based critical literacy curriculum, which they ran into were lack of time and curricular inflexibility. They also found that although their discussions and actions were critical in nature, their investigations into the root causes and consequences of their topics of study were not. Ultimately through their research, they found,

Neither critical study nor action can occur without conversation, for it is the means by which we identify injustice, and determine how we might attempt to alter ourselves and our society to rectify that injustice...without the exchange of ideas we are limited by our own position, unable to imagine possibilities. Without possibilities, there is no change. (Boozer et al., 1999, p. 75)

Thus dialogue is directly tied to action and social change, but critical dialogue alone will not necessarily result in action.

Methods

Data Collection

Informed by critical theory, anthropology, and sociology, this qualitative study employed critical practitioner research and critical ethnography. Critical practitioner research (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994; Kincheloe, 1991) is conducted by a teacher or other school practitioner with their students and employs praxis, as theory and practice mutually inform one another. Critical practitioner researchers “see a socially-constructed world and ask what are the forces which construct the consciousness, the ways of seeing the actors who live in it” (Kincheloe, 1991, p.35). Thus such research moves beyond the dominant paradigms of empiricism and rationalism towards a research methodology rooted in social justice that seeks to inform our practice as teachers, but also understand and problematize oppression, inform theory, and work as “transformative intellectuals” (Kincheloe, 1991, p.24).

Critical ethnographic methods, drawing on the fields of anthropology and sociology, rely on thick cultural description situated in a socio-political context in order to understand a culture and ultimately challenge injustice (Anderson, 1989; Carspeken, 1996). For two years, as a classroom teacher and then advisor to the Gay Straight Alliance, I gathered data at Jones High School in my Contemporary Issues classroom, the Gay Straight Alliance, and in the wider school community. Data was collected through extensive field-notes; formal and informal interviews with students, faculty and administrators; audio recorded classes; participant

observation; student journals; student class work; student surveys; and document collection. I have used this data to form case studies (Merriam, 1998) of two focal students. Both students researched with me in their Contemporary Issues class and chose their own pseudonym for the reporting of this research. Merriam (1998) describes a qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). Using her definition of case study, I have crafted cases of two students across multiple classes and school spaces.

Data Analysis

The data analysis draws on critical discourse analysis and critical multicultural analysis in order to explore the critical literacy practices of the students and the power of language to shape and resist ideologies in schools. I coded the critical literacy strategies, which appeared in the data set using both top down coding grounded in critical literacy theory and bottom up open coding initially to see what emerged from my data.

I used discourse analysis to further unpack the language and silences in the data set. In order to analyze the data I used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992, 2001; Foucault, 1984; Gee, 1999) with a focus on wording (Fairclough, 1992). To further inform my analysis, I look to Critical Multicultural Analysis (Botelho, Young, & Nappi, 2014). Using these theories, I was able to examine the power of language and language use both in terms of oppression and resistance, limiting freedom and exercising agency. In Fairclough’s (1992) text analysis he emphasizes word meaning and metaphor. In terms of word meaning, Fairclough (1992) points out that words have multiple meanings or meaning potentials and as producers and consumers of language we constantly make “socially variable” choices as to our interpretation of them (185-6). He also refers to a ‘hegemonic model’ of word meaning whereby those in power attempt to “win acceptance for particular meanings for words” which is a means of solidifying hegemony (p. 190).

Context: Critical Collaborative Inquiry in Contemporary Issues

Contemporary Issues is an elective social studies class open to students in grades nine through twelve, which I started at Jones. I designed the class using a negotiated curriculum focused on critical collaborative inquires because I believe that powerful learning occurs when students’ inquiries are followed as they feel invested in what they are studying and it provides the opportunity to develop critical literacy practices. This type of ownership over learning allows students to

explore issues that are important to them and requires their active involvement in the creation of knowledge, which shapes the reality in which we live.

During the two years in which I conducted this research, the topics or areas for critical collaborative inquiries were broad, ranging from the Presidential election to Fast Food to the War in Iraq to heterosexism and gay rights. Individual inquiries focused on topics including affirmative action, recycling, American Indian Rights, teen-age pregnancy, and socialism.

While some students opted to take action as the result of other units such as fast food and the Presidential election, the unit on heterosexism and gay rights was the longest critical collaborative inquiry unit and involved the most sustained and far reaching action. Many of the students were able to demonstrate their critical literacies through this work, as it was a pivotal unit in our negotiated curriculum for these straight-identified students.

We start each critical collaborative inquiry unit by reflecting on our own experiences and beliefs about the topic. In journals, students begin by taking stock of what they know and what they believe about our inquiry topic. Students start from very different points; some have more background knowledge, stronger opinions, or more developed inquiry and literacy skills than others. I differentiate the curriculum, so each student can access it and develop their content knowledge, inquiry, and literacy skills in ways that challenge them as individual learners. I provide some foundational materials, immersing students in the content of the inquiry and building a common base for our unit of study. For example, in our unit on Fast Food, we read excerpts from *Fast Food Nation* and watched *Super Size Me*. In our unit on heterosexism, we began with primary and secondary sources.

Once students have some common foundation, they begin posing questions to guide their critical collaborative inquiry. They share, discuss, and deepen questions in class. As individuals, in groups, or at times as a whole class, we research and gather sources and data to answer and refine our questions. Then, through more targeted journal prompts, I ask students to critically reflect on what they are finding, what language is used, whose voices are present, who and what is missing, and how we can go about finding that information. In the unit on heterosexism, the straight-identified students noted the lack of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender student voices, so we invited LGBT students from a nearby university to share their stories with us. In our Presidential election unit, students polled their entire school on candidate preferences as well as issues.

Students bring their data together to discuss and analyze what they have found. Often this leads to more questions where students engage in more research. Through journaling, discussion, and data analysis students synthesize what they have collected and researched. In our unit on the Presidential Election, students had gathered data polling their peers, so when they brought the data together, they had to calculate the results. Here students may reflect, ask larger questions, problematize, and critique what they are finding, hearing from their peers, and coming to understand.

In the final stages of the critical collaborative inquiry, the students choose how to show what they learned. For our unit on heterosexism, students decided to do an action project to raise awareness and solidarity with people of all sexual orientations. The students further developed critical literacy as they negotiated the language and action of their project with the principal, in class, and with the rest of the faculty. They worked to educate the school community about heterosexism and designed and held a “Day of Solidarity” to raise awareness of heterosexism and support for people of all sexual orientations. On this day, high school students could choose to wear jeans and a white t-shirt and/or stickers to demonstrate their support for people of all sexual orientations. They involved middle school students in discussion circles to engage in critical dialogue about heterosexism. At the same time, several of the students in this class along with students in my sociology class got together to start the first Gay-Straight Alliance at the school. Building on the Contemporary Issues class’ first success, the Gay-Straight Alliance sponsored many more activities including a second Day of Solidarity the following year. Through our critical collaborative inquiry, the students and I developed critical literacies and worked through school wide resistance to challenge the heterosexism we saw in ourselves and in our community.

The course is explicitly grounded in critical literacies. Throughout the year, we engaged in dialogues around language and power, multiple perspectives, ideologies, norms, and oppression. At the end of the year, students were asked to write about their own development of critical literacy strategies such as: looking at issues from multiple perspectives, recognizing who benefits from the status quo (the way things are), questioning and thinking critically about the language we use, and taking action to address injustices. Two students, Orleana and Jane, engaged with the curriculum in different ways; but they both grew and developed their own critical literacies in powerful ways.

Cases: Orleana and Jane

Orleana

Orleana is a white, middle class, Christian young woman. She was in both my eleventh grade English class and Contemporary Issues class during the same year. She successfully navigated multiple modalities of school literacies evidenced by good grades in her classes, lead roles in theater, yearbook and the school paper editorship. Orleana's topics for individual research and facilitation included paranormal phenomena and socialism, which represent her range and scope well. She chose newspaper articles with controversies such as *CIA's Bleak Outlook on Iraq*, *Congress Blocks Action on Environment*, *Clean Water Act violations on Navajo Lands*, and *Burma releases Prisoners but not Suu Kyi* to read and respond to during the year.

At the beginning of our unit on heterosexism, the Contemporary Issues students reflected on their own beliefs about heterosexism and gay rights in their journals. She wrote,

I am not homophobic. I do not know any open homosexuals but I am not against homosexuality. I am not in a strongly homophobic environment. My friends support homosexuality and my family usually doesn't discuss the topic so I don't know their feelings. The only people in my family I would think are openly against it are my grandparents because of the difference in their generation. Also my grandmother is very religious so she is definitely against it.

Orleana does not know any "open homosexuals" but does not consider her environment to be strongly homophobic since her friends support it and her family "doesn't talk about it." As Orleana continues, she considers the multiple perspectives and silences within her own family. She realizes that her grandparents, especially her grandmother, are homophobic and connects this with their age and religious ideologies. Orleana's word choice "open homosexuals" and exploration of her family's perspectives on "homosexuality" are outdated and clinical, indicating that these may be newer areas and discourses for her to explore.

As we began to look at the heterosexism in our school, Orleana became conscious of the collusion of her school in the maintenance of heterosexism. Orleana reflected in her journal, "Jones hypothetically stresses the value of tolerance, but we don't act upon it. So many remarks go unchallenged..."

Orleana's use of the word "hypothetically" signifies that she doesn't believe that the school really "stresses" it. She sees that there is no real enforcement of "tolerance" as "so many remarks go unchallenged." The "remarks" that she is referring to are the everyday derogatory uses of "fag," "queer," "that's so gay" and "don't be gay" that the students documented at Jones. The implication is that if "we" really cared about "tolerance" the intolerant "remarks" would be challenged. Yet homophobic language is used every day at Jones, and rarely interrupted by teachers or students. Her use of "we" is significant because she is also identifying her own collusion and silence in the face of heterosexism. At the same time, she uses the word "tolerance" as opposed to support or acceptance, which she later adopts.

Although we continued to face some resistance from some of the faculty and administration and questions about the necessity of such a day, Orleana remained steadfast. She wrote in her journal,

I feel that is necessary that our school holds a Day of Solidarity. Although it seems like the majority of the school is supportive of homosexuality, there is a fair number of hardcore homophobes. If let go now of what we started, then we are not addressing the problem. It is like saying these students have won. It sends them a message that it's OK to continue doing and saying what they are currently.

Orleana sees that we must do something. If we don't "address the problem" of homophobia then "it sends them a message that it's OK to continue doing and saying what they are" saying. Her refusal to collude is reminiscent of Elie Wiesel's (1986) Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, which she read in class: "*We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.*" She recognizes that not doing something, feigning neutrality, means condoning the behavior of the "hardcore homophobes," or oppressors; yet she is still using the term "homosexuality."

In order to move forward, the students had to revise their announcement for their Day of Solidarity. Orleana's growing consciousness of the power of language is evident as she writes,

We wrote an announcement and a new proposal for [principal], which we had to tweak three times to make it perfect. We had to include the words non-discrimination and tolerance. We had originally decided on the word

“support” because it sounded more positive than merely “tolerance” but we were willing to include these words to get our day passed.

Here Orleana’s shift in her own awareness of language is clear. In previous writing and in transcriptions from early class discussions, she uses the word “tolerance” as the ideal towards which we were aiming. Now she wants to use “support” which demonstrates her shifting ideological awareness of the discourses surrounding the issue. She also shows an awareness of power relations and the art of negotiation.

Ultimately the students held their Day of Solidarity, but Orleana still hoped for more. She saw that the official discourse around homophobia and gay rights was still suppressed. Although about three quarters of the high school participated, she focuses on those who did not. Orleana wrote,

Also a lot of people didn’t dress up because they had forgotten. They most likely forgot because of the lack of announcements (which was an attempt to exclude the middle school)...I also wish [principal] had at least stopped and said something at lunch, like if he just made a short speech saying “look around you...blah blah...shows what a great community we have...yada yada...successful day, thanks for being supportive and respectful.”

Orleana critiques both the imposed restrictions on announcements and the principal’s own collusion in the silence on the Day of Solidarity. She was disappointed that the principal didn’t say something.

Orleana chose to write a persuasive essay in my English class on gay marriage, building on her work with me in social studies. In it, she begins to create a response to the dominant Christian objection to same-sex marriage.

A large group of the voices arguing against gay marriage are Christian. To them I say: the Bible denounces homosexuality as a sin, but it also preaches tolerance. Preventing gay couples from marrying is not stomping out homosexuality, it is only forcing your beliefs on someone else. Not everyone in America is Christian, not everyone in America is religious.

Her family, as she identified early on, are part of this large Christian group. Not only is she developing the literacy to resist the dominant ideologies of society, but she is also considering how she may respond to those in her community and

family about gay rights. Here she uses gay as her own term, but homosexuality as the Biblical or Christian word. She concludes her essay with the role of allies:

Those who support gay marriage need to band together and speak up, for it is only when people take action that changes are made. Now that the door to gay marriage has been opened a crack, we need to put our foot in the doorway and fight to pull it open completely.

She has located herself with the supporters of gay marriage and sees the need for voice and action to result in change.

The following year, as a senior, she helped to design a second Day of Solidarity which included a giant pink triangle made of individual students' and teachers' signed smaller triangles and discussion. She was at every GSA meeting, engaged in every event. As the editor of the yearbook, she made sure that it included pictures of the GSA to ensure its continued visibility. Through this critical collaborative inquiry and her development of critical literacies, she moved from being "not homophobic" and not knowing "homosexuals," to being an activist committed to ending heterosexism and supporting "gay marriage."

Jane

Jane is a very quiet twelfth grade student who I have watched drift through school since I first had her freshman year. She has failed several classes throughout the years as she has a high rate of absenteeism, does not turn in assignments consistently, and is often politely disengaged from school when she is physically present. She graduated second to last in her class with a GPA 2.11 and was the only student in the class to initially report that she had no plans of going to college. Although she has been labeled with learning disabilities, she consistently chose not to receive support from the resource room. In Contemporary Issues she also did not do all of her homework, but her engagement and development of critical literacy grew throughout the year as she participated in our critical collaborative inquiry into heterosexism.

During our unit on heterosexism, as my students and I discussed the purpose and procedures for the school-wide action project that they proposed to disrupt the heterosexism in their school, we were met over and over again by teachers and students alike with the question "Why do this?" The message was that things were fine the way they were and we should not challenge the norms and make trouble. Jane reflected in her Contemporary Issues journal, "I had always known that by living in Jonesville we lived this sweet semi-sheltered life,

but I never realized just how desperate some people were to keep it that way until we began our action project.”

Jane describes life in Jonesville as “sweet” and “semi-sheltered” and some of the people who live there as “desperate to keep it that way.” She implies that as we brought issues of heterosexism to the surface that it threatened some Jonesville residents’ visions of “sweetness.” Challenging norms can feel very threatening, especially to those in power. In class, the students and I began to ask critical literacy questions about who benefits from “keeping it that way,” from not “rocking the boat,” and whose interests were being protected and whose were being ignored?

Through reflective journal writing and critical collaborative inquiry, I saw that Jane was able to develop a stronger sense of critique, which was necessary to begin to unpack dominant ideologies. Jane saw that interrupting heterosexism at Jones was threatening to some people. Heterosexism had been made to appear as normal, as “just the way things are” which makes interrupting it seem either as disruptive or making a big deal out of nothing. Responses from school administrators, teachers, parents, and students to having a Day of Solidarity were at times explosive. As Jane pointed out, they were “desperate” to keep things the way they were. Some may have felt that they were losing control over the “normal” way things were.

Initially, some teachers opposed the Day of Solidarity and several worked to limit the visibility. The Head Teacher removed the students’ signs from the walls about the Day. The principal denied the students the right to make future announcements about it. The faculty “had concerns” that inviting students to dress in jeans and a white t-shirt would be like asking them to wear a “uniform.” They asked the students to “rethink” this aspect of the Day. The faculty also had concerns about straight students who chose not to participate in the Day of Solidarity.

Jane wrote regularly in her journal throughout this project. She expressed her critique and frustration with the administration.

I think the teachers/faculty (some), really don’t want this day to happen. Including [principal]. Although some of their concerns are reasonable, I think it’s a stalling tactic. I think the more things we fix/ try to fix, the more problems they will come up with. I think if they wanted us to have the day, we would have already (Jane, emphasis original).

Jane's increased participation in this critical collaborative inquiry resulted in increased individual writing in her journal as well as increased participation in class discussions and activities. Jane was also able to channel this frustration into resistance. She writes, "When we first started this project, it never occurred to me that people might have a problem with it. But the more people pushed against us, the more it made me want to push back."

Unlike some of the other students who assumed that the issue would be controversial, Jane didn't think that it would be "such a big deal." Yet as it became a big deal, the controversy fed her motivation and commitment to continue this work. It engaged her in a way that I never saw before. Her eyes lit up and she was more fully present in her desire to push back. This presence was in physical attendance (it was more consistent) as well as more active participation during class sessions.

For Jane, the most remarkable example of her growth came as we were planning and executing discussion groups about heterosexism with the Middle School students. In class, the students had worked together to divide the approximately one hundred middle school students into ten groups, which were each to be facilitated by a Contemporary Issues student and a member of the Gay Straight Alliance. The plan was for all of the middle school students to gather in the cafeteria where the Contemporary Issues students would meet them and put them into their groups. When I asked who would call out the names of the middle students, so they would know which group they were in, I was surprised when Jane volunteered. I explained that it would mean standing on stage and really projecting her voice while reading one hundred names in the cafeteria which has poor acoustics, thinking that she might rethink her offer as she visualized what it might be like. She just reiterated, "I'll do it." I said "OK, great!" and we moved on. On the Day of Solidarity, she showed up in her jeans and white t-shirt, took the list of names and made her way up to the stage. In the loudest voice I ever heard her use, she effectively organized one hundred chatty middle school students into ten groups.

In her self-evaluation at the end of the year she wrote: "I was also very impressed with myself during the education part of our solidarity day, with the seventh and eighth graders, when I stood up on the stage and yelled out the groups that we had put together." I too was "very impressed." She impressed her peers, her teacher, and most importantly herself through her projection of voice and empowerment. Jane graduated second to last in her class. This was the only time I remember hearing or seeing her say that she was "very impressed with myself" about anything related to school (or out of school).

She continued reflecting on the action part of our critical collaborative inquiry in her self-evaluation,

I really enjoyed participating in our homophobia action project. It was fun and a huge step in the right direction for the whole town. Throughout this year, in Contemporary Issues class, particularly this unit, my ability to form and articulate my opinions has grown significantly.

For Jane, a student who was often very passive and disengaged in school, “I really enjoyed participating” is significant both in that she “enjoys” what she is doing and that she sees herself as an active participant in “our” project. She owns it and values it because it is “fun” (first use of fun that she used) and because of the value to the “whole town.” She is also able to reflect on areas of “significant” growth, specifically “forming” and “articulating” opinions. I too saw this growth in her opposing viewpoints project and her contemporary issue project on American Indian Rights.

Not only was she able to recognize her own growth, but she also considered the impact on the Middle School students. “I definitely think that it was important for the middle schoolers. They came away with some interesting and important knowledge, and if I had to do it over again, I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Discussion

Working with these students through critical collaborative inquiry to develop critical literacies was rewarding work. I saw each student grow and develop critical literacies in different ways. They were personal and political; individual and collective.

Orleana began the year positioning herself as “not homophobic” and not knowing any “open homosexuals.” Through her writing and participation in class discussions, I watched her language and attitudes change. She began to include language more commonly found in the gay rights movement, such as “GLBT,” “gay” and “hardcore homophobes,” which was slang used by the local gay rights activists on the panel to refer to staunchly anti-LGBTQ people. While the acronym has since changed to include more groups, at the time the data was collected it was considered inclusive.

Orleana critiqued her school, the silence of her principal, religious ideologies of her community and moved to a position of action where she took

responsibility for teaching her peers. She grew from a focus on tolerance to one that centered on acceptance, support, and action for change. She was not satisfied with the Day of Solidarity, as it was too quiet, she wanted more. Orleana was able to recognize heterosexual privilege and see some of the ways that heterosexuals exercised the privilege, which resulted in maintaining oppression. Orleana's recognition and critique of the homophobic comments that "we" don't challenge implies an acknowledgement of the privilege not to do so, a consciousness of the oppressive results, and an articulated commitment to end such collusion. Orleana also recognized straight privilege in terms of marriage and saw that unless marriage laws are changed, there will continue to be "inhumane discrimination of the dominant group." As a member of the "dominant group" she implicated herself in this oppression too. She also identified as an ally as she composes her message to those who oppose same-sex marriage.

In this class, Jane broke her own silence and engaged within and beyond the classroom walls. She reflected on the critical collaborative inquiry and her role in it. The quality and quantity of her writing increased as her engagement and attendance grew. Rather than continuing to passively accept things the way they were, Jane used critique. Jane's use of voice and her desire to call out the names of the students for the Middle school discussion groups was another area of growth and pride for her.

For Jane, yelling – expressing her voice loudly so that everyone could hear it – was an act of empowerment. Her participation in a class rooted in critical collaborative inquiry and critical literacy curricula did not transform her into a straight A student or someone who was ready to change the world, but it did engage her in new ways, make her "want to come to school," feel "impressed" with herself, use her voice, and increase her "ability to form and articulate" opinions about social issues. She recognized the benefit to the community in doing this work, "it was a huge step in the right direction for the town" and "important for the middle schoolers." She knew she was a part of these processes.

Both Jane and Orleana became more aware of the ideologies and politics of discourse. They saw and critiqued the silences and resistance within their own community and developed ways of responding. For Jane, it was "pushing back" an uncharacteristically active stance for her to assume in school, and for Orleana, it involved composing a response to those who use religion to justify heterosexism and becoming more involved social justice work. For both young women, their growth appeared in personal, critical and academic realms.

Implications for Teaching and Research

As a practitioner researcher, the participants in this study were my students. They were not randomly selected subjects and I was not an “objective” outsider. We were students and a teacher, teaching and learning together. Together we identified issues for critical collaborative inquiry, we researched them, we used critical literacy to understand how they functioned in our school and the wider world, we examined and interrupted our roles as well as well as others, and together we engaged in social activism.

Through critical practitioner research layered with critical ethnographic research, this study provides a local perspective of the effects a critical inquiry curriculum had on two different students. It points to strategies of critical inquiry, deconstructing language, and engaging in social action, which might be transferred to other social issues as well. It also reminds us that students may reap different benefits from such work and grow in a range of ways. Though collaborative in nature, critical collaborative inquiries provide the opportunity for differentiated and individualized instruction, allowing all students to feel adequately challenged with scaffolding for literacy development and personal growth.

Critical inquiry also honors what children already know about literacy practices and the world. It builds on this knowledge as well as creates spaces for reconsidering what they already know. It’s reflexive. It doesn’t have to look the same for all students, rather we as teachers should look for the areas of growth that we see and invite students to reflect and share their thoughts about the personal and political consequences of their work.

Critical collaborative inquiry is a powerful pedagogical practice that can support the development of critical literacies for individual students with a range of levels of engagement in school. Students may develop critical inquiries about their own cultures, languages, identities, environments, social conditions, schools, communities, or worlds. This work takes time and space. Such space needs to be carved out of lesson plans, which may be increasingly dictated by mandated curriculum. Elective courses, after school clubs, and creative planning may provide space for such work. Teachers can create spaces in their classrooms and beyond for students to imagine, carry out, and reflect on action projects designed to challenge privilege and oppression in their worlds. Such pedagogies should not be filled with guilt, but rather with hope that through understanding we can deconstruct oppressive dynamics and systems and recreate a more equitable world, which benefits everyone.

References

- Anderson, G. (1989). Critical ethnography in education: Origins, current status, and new directions. *Review of Educational Research*, 59, 249-270.
- Anderson, G. L., Herr, K., & Nihlen, A. S. (1994). *Studying your own school: an educator's guide to qualitative practitioner research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press.
- Blackburn, M. V. (2002). Disrupting the (hetero)normative: Exploring literacy performances and identity work with queer youth. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 46(4), 312-324.
- Blackburn, M. (2003). Exploring literacy performances and power dynamics at The Loft: Queer youth reading the world and the word. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 37(4), 467-490.
- Blackburn, M. V. (2005). Agency in borderland discourses: Examining language use in a community center with Black queer youth. *Teachers College Record*, 107 (1) 89-113.
- Boozer, M., Maras, L. & Brummett, B. (1999). Exchanging ideas and challenging positions: The importance of conversation to holistic critical endeavors. In C. Edelsky (Ed.), *Making justice our project: teachers working toward critical whole language practice* (pp. 55-76). Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Botelho, M.J., Young, S., & Nappi, T. (2014). Rereading Columbus: Critical multicultural analysis of multiple historical storylines. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 40(1), 41-51.
- Carspecken, P. F. (1996). *Critical ethnography in educational research: a theoretical and practical guide*. New York: Routledge.
- Comber, B. & Simpson, A. (2001). *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms*. Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.
- Fecho, B. (2004). *Is this English? Race, language and culture in the classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Foucault, M. (1984). The Order of discourse. In M. J. Shapiro (Ed.), *Language and politics* (pp. 108-138). Oxford: B. Blackwell.
- Franzak, J. & Noll, E. (2006). Monstrous acts: Problematizing violence in young adult literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(8), 662-72.
- Gee, J. P. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: theory and method*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Harvey, S. & Daniels, H. (2015). *Comprehension and collaboration: Inquiry circles in action*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Haas-Dyson, A. (2001). Relational sense and textual sense in a U.S. urban classroom: The contested case of Emily, girl friend of a ninja. In B. Comber & A. Simpson (Eds.), *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms* (pp. 3-18). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Heath, S. B. (2004). The children of Trackton's children: Spoken and written language in social change. In R. Ruddell & N. Unrau (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading, fifth edition* (pp. 187-209). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Janks, H. (1993). *Language and Power*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (1991). *Teachers as researchers: Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment*. Philadelphia: Falmer Press.
- Laman, T., Smith, K., & Kander, F. (2006). Changing our minds/Changing the World: The power of a question. *Language Arts*, 83(3), 203-215.
- Martino, W. (2001). "Dickheads, Wusses, and Faggots": Addressing issues of masculinity in the critical literacy classroom. In B. Comber & A. Simpson (Eds.), *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms* (pp. 171-188). Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates.

- Martino W. (2009). Literacy issues and GLBTQ youth. Queer interventions in English education. In Christenbury L., Bomer R., Smagorinsky P. (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent literacy* (pp. 400-414). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ohn, J. D., & Wade, R. (2009). Community service-learning as a group inquiry project: Elementary and middle school Civiconnections teachers' practices of integrating historical inquiry in community service-learning. *The Social Studies*, 100(5), 200-211.
- Powell, R., Cantrell, S., & Adams, S. (2001). Saving Black Mountain: The promise of critical literacy in a multicultural democracy. *The Reading Teacher*, 54(8), 772-782.
- Rogers, R. (2002). "That's what you're here for, you're suppose to tell us": Teaching and learning critical literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45(8), 772-787.
- Shor, I. (1987). *Freire for the classroom: a sourcebook for liberatory teaching* (1st. ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Unks, G. (2003). Thinking about the gay teen. In A. Darder, M. Baltodano & R. D. Torres (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader*. New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Wiesel, E. (1986). The Nobel Acceptance Speech delivered by Elie Wiesel in Oslo, Norway on December 10, 1986: The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity.
- Young, S. L. (2010) "Rocking the boat:" Developing a shared discourse of resistance. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 43(4), 463-477.
- Young, S. L. (2009) Breaking the silence: Critical literacy and social action. *English Journal*. 98(4), 109-115.
- Young, S. L. (2007). Practitioner research on critical multicultural pedagogy: Challenging heterosexism in a public school. *Multicultural Perspectives: An Official Journal of the National Association for Multicultural Education*. 9(4), 13-19.

