Literacies of Power: Expanding Youth Advocacy in English Class

Purposes

This study explores how to support English teachers in amplifying youth voices in historically marginalized student populations via literacies of power (Morell, 2005). Our team, two university-based literacy researchers (Authors1 and 2) and a high school English teacher (Author3), collaborate to meet our mutual goal of expanding possibilities for youth advocacy through literacy instruction and practice.

A disconnect exists between research and classroom practice manifested when researchers neglect responsibility to design studies relevant and transformative to student learning (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). This disconnect harms the students we claim to serve, denying them practical opportunities to directly benefit from our work. We acknowledge our complicity in this practice by writing "implications" in published articles (Author1, 2018; Authors, 2015) that *speak to* teachers but do not actually *work with* them to ensure that our ideas make an impact in classrooms. Recently, we formed our collaboration to more closely knit together research and practice, to design, implement, iterate, and study a curricular unit that aims to amplify the voices of historically marginalized youth. Partnerships like ours facilitate practitioners' connection to co-constructed research findings, practitioner access to researchers, and the development of real-time, local innovations (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013).

Our collaboration focuses on Author3's senior capstone unit based on Solutions Journalism (Solutions Journalism Network, 2019), whereby students identify a local problem in their community, research past solutions to the problem, and propose a research-based solution. Students present final products as both a research paper submitted to the teacher and a TED Talk posted on the school's YouTube channel. The unit is designed to facilitate student access to and

practice with academic literacies that also develop their skills in critiquing societal structures and working toward social change (Morrell, 2005).

When schools feel pressure to improve test scores, a skills-based form of literacy instruction (Street, 1984) often eschews opportunities for enacting literacies of power (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Selvester & Summers 2012). This unjust, inequitable binary demands renewed effort to resist state-sanctioned policies and open opportunities for a socially responsible pedagogy, that is both academically rigorous *and* deeply connected to students' lived experiences and concerns. Researchers can assume responsibility in this resistance by connecting research to practice, while studies are happening, so that it more meaningfully impacts the students participating in their research.

This study aims to expand access to literacies of power through supporting the design and enactment of Author3's Solutions Journalism unit. We explore the following research questions: How do students enact literacies of power as part of a senior research project? How does the teacher design and implement an instructional unit to support students enacting literacies of power?

Perspectives

The literacies of power (Morrell, 2005) that inspire our research and form the basis of the Solutions Journalism unit we studied are rooted in critical literacies pedagogy (Freire, 2005; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008), which repositions marginalized populations as agents of change whom, through the practice of literacy, can question, critique, and transform oppressive social structures surrounding them. In English classrooms, this pedagogy guides students not only in deconstructing dominant narratives, but also in creating their own texts that they can use

"in the struggle for social justice" (Morrell, 2005, p. 313). Youth can learn how to practice literacies of power on behalf of their own school and neighborhood communities (Gee, 1991).

In this tradition, researchers and practitioners describe the potential of classroom learning as a "practice of freedom" (Coffey, 2015, p. 6), pertinent in urban schools where critical pedagogies are most needed, yet least often practiced amid pressure to reach projected achievement outcomes. Students, who are often frustrated with and oppressed by their literacy instruction, can instead be sources of power in their lives and for their communities (Selvester & Summers, 2012).

Methods

Our research-practice partnership (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017) explores designing, iterating, and implementing a curricular unit intended to mobilize students' literacies of power. We followed a design-based research methodology (Barab & Squire, 2004; Reinking & Bradley, 2008) to closely examine the planning, instruction, and student work for Author3's Journalism unit. We first identified these pedagogical goals: 1) students will explore solutions to a local or hyperlocal issue that affects them or their community; 2) students will advocate for change as they further the conversation about that issue by producing and sharing digital media messages.

Author3 then shared her unit outline, and we brainstormed and planned for how her instructional methods and curricular design could meet the goals. We then entered into a design-based iterative process involving systematic observation of and reflection on classroom practice leading to adjustments to instruction. Our collaborative, ongoing data analysis guided students toward the pedagogical goals.

Research Site and Duration

Hamilton High School (HHS), where our study takes place, is located in one of the most economically challenged, segregated urban centers in the country. Similar to other urban schools nationwide, HHS's student population is majority minority (92% nonwhite) and economically disadvantaged (87%) (State Ed data). In 2015, with rates of 33% graduation, 77% attendance, and 87% of students scoring below proficiency on standard assessments, HHS faced forced closure. Presently, the district, school, and our university are midway into a 10-year partnership to revitalize HHS. Our collaboration is situated within this broader university-school partnership.

Phase One of our study took place in both sections of Author3's 12th grade Journalism class during the 4th quarter of the 2018-2019 school year. Data collection began the week prior to the Solutions Journalism unit's start, continued for seven weeks of instruction (capturing Author3's introductory lesson, one or two lessons per week, and the final days that students recorded their TED Talks), and concluded with a final reflective conversation among the research team the week after the unit's conclusion. Phase Two was scheduled for the same period 1-year later, but was postponed to Spring 2021 due to COVID-19.

Participants

Author3 has a multi-layered role in this study, serving as course instructor, study participant, and co-researcher. She has been teaching at HHS for 14 years and has taught this Journalism class for eight of those years. Table 1 describes the 16 student participants.

Data Sources

Through a variety of data collection methods, we built a data corpus (see Table 2). Author1 and 2 each observed one class period per week and documented participant observation and informal conversations through systematic field notes and researcher memos (Emerson,

Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The three of us met for planning conversations weekly using the Zoom video conference platform, which produced audio recordings that were selectively transcribed. Throughout the unit, we gathered artifacts, including Author3's lesson/unit plans, samples of student work, and final research products (written research papers and TED Talk videos).

Near the unit's end, Author1 and 2 also conducted 10-15 minute interviews with nine students, as attendance allowed. Our open-ended questions gathered students' perspectives about their research process, their teacher's role in the unit, what it was like to communicate their work via video, and any suggestions they had for future implementation. Finally, the researchers met for an approximately hour-long reflective final conversation (FC). These data were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is following Erickson's (1986) analytic induction method. With our understandings of powerful literacies (e.g., advocacy, voice) serving as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954), Author1 and 2 made assertions about the data. We then returned to the data to search for confirming and disconfirming evidence to revise, strengthen, and/or reject these assertions and presented them to Author3 for refinement through discussion. As analysis continues, we will write narratives for those assertions that survive testing.

Results

We are pursuing the following assertions:

1. Our collaboration allowed us to identify challenges students faced in enacting literacies of power during the unit.

2. Our collaboration facilitated real-time and long-term iterations to address these challenges and expand the potential of the unit.

Challenges

During unit implementation, we found that students struggled with academic literacy practices of sustained writing (06.13.2019 Zoom), research stamina (05.30.2019 Zoom), and public speaking (05.30.2019 Zoom; 06.25.2019 FC). During our weekly conversations, we realized that these practices cannot be fully addressed with iterations during a seven-week unit, but would need to be scaffolded during the entire school year (06.25.2019 FC).

We also identified specific conceptual thinking required by the Solutions Journalism unit as another challenge. For example, while many students quickly identified problems they wished to research, they tended to choose big, global issues, like poverty or hunger (05.13.2019 FN; 05.23.2019 FN). Students needed support refining and localizing these problems to realistically advocate for solutions in their communities. Further, we learned that the nature of a problem (e.g., concrete, abstract) helps determine the most appropriate means of advocacy (e.g., logistical, educational) (05.06.2019 Zoom).

Iterations: Academic Literacies Preparation

During unit implementation, Author3 supported and scaffolded the academic literacies of student research and sustained writing by adding more teacher conferencing time (05.15.2019 Zoom). For public speaking support, we suggested sharing models of other youth advocating for change in their communities, thus, Author3 added a lesson for students to analyze video examples (05.30.2019 Zoom). To inspire students who began to feel mired in the research and writing processes, Author3 identified those making headway and asked them to share their processes in class (05.20.2019 Zoom).

For next year's implementation, we plan to support students' sustained writing, research stamina, and public speaking skills by rethinking the four units that comprise Author3's year-

long curriculum, building in numerous opportunities to practice each skill (06.25.2019 FC). As an example, students will create a Flipgrid (a short video shared online with their class) to accompany each of the monthly newspaper articles they write, providing regular practice speaking about a topic in front of a camera (06.25.2019 FC). Author3 will also share the inaugural class's TED Talks as artifacts for inspiration and analysis (06.13.2019 Zoom). Additionally, we hope to pair each student with an external mentor in the school community who can direct them to resources and provide feedback during the unit (06.25.2019 FC).

Iterations: Unit Specific Thinking Strategies

During implementation, Author3 scaffolded some of the conceptual thinking of Solutions Journalism by adding a teacher conference earlier in the unit to help students localize problems as they were identifying them (05.15.2019 Zoom). Additionally, Author3 introduced mini-lessons about the nature of abstract problems (e.g., white privilege) and concrete ones (e.g., grocery store food waste), and how to imagine means of advocacy (e.g., a social media campaign; redistributing unsold food to homeless) that effectively matched problems (05.06.2019 FN).

For future implementation, Author3 plans to incorporate peer conferencing activities and training throughout the year, so that students can better support each other's thinking rather than relying exclusively on their teacher (06.25.2019 FC). Students will also practice localizing problems in their monthly school newspaper articles (05.15.2019 Zoom). An additional two-week "bridge unit," leading up to the Solution Journalism unit, will develop unit-specific conceptual thinking (06.25.2019 FC). Author3 also plans to begin with assignments that engage students in journalistic observation tasks that attune them to potential issues that are relevant, local, and meaningful (06.25.2019 FC).

Scholarly Significance

With the goal of expanding possibilities for youth advocacy through literacy instruction and practice, our study identified instructional challenges and addressed them with in-the-moment and long-term iterations. These decisions matter for the curriculum and learning in classrooms with students who face inequitable, unjust conditions in their communities.

If we believe our own research claims about the transformative potential of literacies of power, researchers must stay close to the sites in which students learn, working "*with*, not *for*" (Freire, 2005, p. 48, emphasis in original) them and their teachers. Our collaboration ties research to students' lives by bringing our respective expertise to bear on implementing literacies of power curricula and staying focused on affirming youth voices, as students critique and imagine new possibilities for themselves and their communities.

Tables

Table 1 *Student Participant Information*

Class Period	Total	Genders	Ages*	Racial Distribution	Language Variation	Disability Status
1st	10	6 females 4 males	2 minors 8 adults	5 Latinx 3 Black 1 Bi-racial 1 Other	2 with Spanish as their first language	None
5th	6	3 females 3 males	2 minors 4 adults	1 Latinx 2 Black 3 White	None	1 with hearing impairment; 1 with significant speech difference; 1 with 504 plan

* Age at the end of data collection.

Table 2 *Data Corpus*

Data Source	Quantity
Field Notes (FN)	14 field notes documenting participant observations of lessons
Researcher Memos (RM)	16 researcher memos
Zoom Recordings	6 audio/video recordings of weekly planning conversations between the 3 researchers
Artifacts	6 samples of student written work 1 recording of all TED Talk videos 8 instructional artifacts (unit plan, teacher-created project documents, student conference sheets) 3 photographs documenting one lesson's outcomes
Interview Transcripts	9 student interviews 1 final reflective conversation between the 3 researchers

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