Learning from each other: Justice work with 9[1] grade urban English I students[1]

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore how critical literacy principles and practices inform the teaching and learning of teacher-students and students-teachers (Freire, 1971) in an urban 9th grade English I class. Data are drawn from an ongoing ethnography of a novel partnership between an urban high school labeled by the state department of education as "persistently failing" and a local research university that has been approved as an Educational Partnership Organization (EPO) (Education Law 211e, 2014) by the New York State Department of Education (NYSED). The larger study focuses on understanding: How literacy is used, how it circulates, and how power relationships develop and shift? After six months of the study, Larson began co-teaching with three teachers in whose classroom she had been observing for several months. The goal of co-teaching was to design and implement critical literacy pedagogies in the required 9th grade curriculum.

Our interdisciplinary theoretical framework brings together theories of literacy as social practice, critical literacy, and power to analyze and interpret the data. We draw on literacy as social practice theories (Larson & Marsh, 2015; Street, 1984) to understand how literacies were used and how power circulated among those practices. To understand the transformative potential of literacy practices, we used a critical literacy framework (Freire, 1971) to design and implement a unit that required students to select a justice issue of importance to them and to design a justice project to enact as the culminating

experience. Critical literacy has been a significant theoretical lens and pedagogical framework for decades. Research has documented how critical literacy can transform relations of power through processes of liberation (Morrell, 2008; Pandya & Avila, 2013). Participatory action research using a critical literacy lens has been used to understand youth practices (Cahill, 2000; King, 2013; Kinloch, 2011). Specifically, Kinloch's (2011) work on how urban youth use literacy for social and political transformation offered us a framework for understanding the opportunities and challenges of justice work in urban education reform. This lens helped us to understand the counternarratives, or counter-stories (Solórano & Yosso, 2002) students produced as part of their social justice action project. To understand how social and power relations were transformed as the classroom culture changed over time, we use Foucault's (1990/1978) concept of power as a complex set of force relations in which power produces. This analytics of power helped us trace how power relations shifted over the course of the unit and what power produced in this process.

Methods

The larger study from which data are drawn is participatory ethnography. Building on participatory designs in qualitative research, we adapted participatory ethnography as a methodology that has been shown to be particularly well-suited for complex organizations (Darrouzet et al., 2009). Often used in complex corporations, participatory ethnography aligns with the critical literacy framework of Freire (1979) with its focus on researching with participants, not *at* or *for* them (Kinloch et al., 2016). When the complexity of an organization is as massive as a school's, it is disingenuous to think a single researcher will walk away with an understanding of that complexity.

Instead, participatory ethnography focuses on building understanding within the system, alongside the participants, and positions all parties as knowledge builders and actors of change within the system. Furthermore, the critical participatory stance we adapted to this methodology explicitly positions the research as emancipatory and the researcher as full participant in that emancipatory work. As such, participatory ethnography in this study moves past building capacity in participants because of the organization's complexity (Darrouzet et al., 2009) toward working alongside the East community to co-construct justice and equity in urban education. We also use a mixed methods social design experiment in our study design to structure an iterative process whereby analysis shapes future data collection that is focused on an equity oriented social change agenda (Gutiérrez, 2016; Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010). The EPO is, in effect, the "design experiment" we are documenting.

There are 38 formally enrolled participants in the larger ethnography: 10 administrators; 14 teachers; 14 students. The racial, ethnic, and gender makeup of the adult participants (teachers and administrators): 57% are white, 35% African American, 9% Latinx; 57% are female, and 43% are male. Adult participants' experience in teaching and/or leading ranged from 27 years to first year teachers and administrators. While the research is ongoing, the full data corpus at this point includes: field notes (~350) of participant observation in classrooms, leadership and staff meetings, hallways, cafeterias, auditoriums, full day shadowing of key participants, lesson and unit plans and video (~24 hours) from a co-teaching experience in a 9th grade English class; formal (~40) and informal interviews (~200) of officially consented study participants (N=38); school wide administrative data; documents including: emails (~3800), newspaper articles, meeting

minutes (~1500); research and teaching memos (~40); photographs; and, surveys of teachers, staff, students, and families. With permission, the climate surveys were adapted from the widely-used Consortium on Chicago School Research's (CCSR) *My Voice, My School* instruments. The survey data corpus is illustrated below in figure 1.

	2016		2017	
Group	# of respondents	Response rate	# of respondents	Response rate
Teachers	132	80%	153	90%
Non-teaching staff and administrators	20	20%	45	82%
Students	678	52%	579	53%
Families	51	4%	46	4%

Figure 1: Survey Data Corpus

Data for the analysis in this paper are drawn from the larger ethnography of the reform and emerged out of sustained classroom observations in a 9th grade English I class. We developed a data corpus of this classroom that includes: 1) audio taped interviews of participants; 2) field notes taken during participant observations; 3) video tapes of co-teaching sessions; 4) school data (demographics, attendance, suspensions, achievement scores; and, 5) all documents, paper and electronic, including all lesson and unit plans along with other planning documents, emails between the researchers, and students' work.

The classroom participants are representative of the larger school community in demographics. Two of the three certified English teachers with whom Larson co-taught were white and male with a combined urban teaching experience of over 35 years. The third teacher was a biracial (Native American and white) male in his first year of teaching

as a certified ESL/Social Studies/Spanish teacher. Larson is a white woman and full professor at the private research university who is the EPO for the school. She could fully participate in the daily life of the school due to a year-long sabbatical. Her research focuses on literacy practices and power in schools and communities. The 19 students in the class were African American (8), Latinx, most of whom were non-Native English speakers (8), Nepali (1), Somali (1), and white (1). The group was evenly split between female (11) and male (8) students. One student openly identified as gay.

Teaching together

We began the critical literacy unit by trying to identify justice issues in Romeo and Juliet which students were reading that marking period and connect those issues to those the students would identify themselves. We quickly realized that students' understanding of the play and the work we needed to do for the critical literacy project did not work well in combination. A key part of this realization was learning that students had been under taught in previous years (Delpit, 2006). For example, none of the students had ever done a revision or worked in peer conferences to revise a text. This required a rethinking of how we would structure the lessons and the unit. At the same time, the teachers were getting some resistance to the original plan not to follow the last Common Core module of the year. We navigated this tension by getting "official" permission to be exempt. Larson's role as researcher, EPO leader, and University faculty member afforded space to negotiate this exemption. This is an example of how power produced generative frictions resulting in room for the teachers to innovate within constraints such as state mandates and internal conflicts with other teachers in their department (liberatory pedagogies/state mandates).

Our daily 72 minute[2] class periods always began with a writing reflection. We showed video clips, photographs, music videos and other multimodal texts after which students would write a short reflection. Discussion was designed to induce the justice issue students' thought the reflection piece was designed to elicit. At the beginning of the unit, students wrote in composition books we called "source books." Larson wrote written responses to students' comments weekly until the schoolwide Chromebook initiative was rolled out into this class. Problems with Larson being "external" (e.g. not a district employee) resulted in her no longer being able to write back to students.

Planning together proved to be difficult. The beginning was rocky at best. We used Google docs to write things together, but we really needed time to brainstorm ideas and revise face-to-face. Larson would work on a plan on the Google doc, they would take a look when they could, maybe chat together in between their other classes, and we ended up making changes in the four minutes they had between another class and the one we taught together. We arranged to have coffee one Saturday afternoon, but Domiano couldn't make it. Fitta, Bethmann, and Larson brainstormed ideas and came up with a general plan (this was when we realized trying to combine Romeo and Juliet with the justice project wasn't a good idea). We made more purposeful plans to meet together so that classes didn't feel so haphazard even if not all of us could do it at the same time or if one of us could only stay a few minutes.

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[2] A key initiative in the EPO plan included extending class periods from 45 minutes to 72 minutes. Students had 5 periods a day (10 total each marking period) in an alternating day pattern (AC/BD) which gave them the opportunity to gain more credits each year in order to enter high school with more than 5 credits and to graduate on time.

Preliminary interpretations of the data

We found that power produced generative frictions that animated culture change in general and changes in power relations in this classroom. These generative frictions were not binaries, nor were they oppositional; they were in relation to each other, mutually constitutive, and fluid. Power in this case included using a critical literacy framework brought by Larson, school requirements to use an Understanding by Design (UbD) (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005) unit and lesson plan framework, and student agency. Generative frictions in this classroom identified included:

Generative Friction	Description	What produced
Liberatory pedagogies/state mandated curriculum	Negotiating critical liberatory pedagogies within the constraints of UbD and NYSED mandates	Growth in liberatory mindset; Critical literacy unit using UbD template; exemption from one Common Core unit; approval to repeat unit a second time
Collaborative/teacher led	Shifting from IRE discourse patterns to responsive collaborative	Some reduction in teacher instruction giving; more time for group work for students; more physical movement; a variety of desk arrangements
New expectations/old expectations	Changing the culture and mindset of teachers and students	Some shift in students' mindset from task completion to authentic literacy
Ground up curriculum/top down mandates	Tension between teachers' expertise and external mandates	Negotiated exemption from Common Core Module and tensions around doing so
University perspective/classroom teacher perspective	The difference between Larson's expertise in literacy and the teachers' expertise in pedagogy	New insights from all of us in terms of the importance of the inseparability of research/practice; co-authorship; insights into how research can inform practice and how practice can inform theory

For this paper, we focus on one of the generative frictions: liberatory pedagogy/state mandated curriculum. Only one of the co-teachers had heard of critical literacy or of

Freire. Bethmann was a graduate of the UR's teacher certification program at Warner, so he had read Freire and used some of the principals when teaching ENL students. To Fitta and Domiano, this was a new way of thinking. One day Fitta said to Larson, "why don't teachers have access to this!" after which he promptly bought a copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This reading and our time co-teaching built deeper understanding in the teachers about critical literacy and its potential to effect change. Larson learned important tools for working with young urban adolescents who have been under taught.

As a scaffold from critical literacy to UbD design requirements, we brought together National Writing Project tradition of daily writing reflections with workshop structure. The practices associated with these frameworks were somewhat familiar to the teachers and to administration and proved to help us answer the questions required in the UbD unit plan. The first unit produced met our goal of using critical literacy within this framework; however, the second unit produced in spring 2017 considers professional learning during summer 2016 and what we learned in the first implementation. As a result, the second unit is more robust and more focused.

By teaching together, we learned from each other. Larson brought knowledge and commitment to critical literacy and Fitta, Bethmann, and Domiano brought their English content knowledge and deep urban teaching experience. Teaching about critical literacy was done in the act of doing it. In other words, Larson did not distribute research articles or books and the teachers did not try to control her teaching, even when the lesson was going badly. In fact, they were incredibly generous in letting her lead class and fail miserably. Her language was often too academic – and she lost the kids. But, the teachers knew what to do to get them back and Larson learned as she watched them work. In the

end, the students produced justice projects on issues they were dealing with in their personal lives.

Project website: https://sites.google.com/site/youthdoingjustice/products-services

Conclusion

Schools in high poverty urban areas have long been recognized as not meeting the needs of the populations they serve (Anyon, 2014; Lipman, 2004). Inequalities in funding and curriculum between urban and suburban schools constitute a national shame (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Larson, 2014). Access to authentic curriculum that centers youth interest is rarely implemented in urban schools that are under scrutiny from the state. The research reported here illustrates how one group of 9th graders took action to change inequities they identified in ways that contribute to knowledge about justice oriented reform work in urban schools under intense scrutiny and constraining curricular mandates. Together, we continue the fight against society's attempts to dismiss us as a lost cause by telling our stories.

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List of writing reflection prompts:
- Beyonce's "Formation" video (4:53)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrCHz1gwzTo&feature=youtu.be
- Suli Breaks video (5:52) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-eVF_G_p-Y
- Immigration photos
- "I know why the caged bird sings" by Maya Angelou
- Chris Rock's Oscar monologue (10:28):
  http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/chris-rock-oscars-monologue_us_56d08212e4b0bf0dab31dd5f
- "Kids who die" by Langston Hughes
- Turf Dancing video: https://youtu.be/JQRRnAhmB58 (3:56)
- "I can't breathe" flash mob (2:47)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBaLGRbmq30
- Side by side photo comparing 1950 photo and Trump rally
- "Lunch is Gross" (7:09 min) http://www.teachertube.com/video/lunch-is-gross-11129
- Photos of school lunches around the world:
  http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/25/school-lunches-around-the-world_n_6746164.html
- g-speak video: https://vimeo.com/2229299 (3:02)
- The winning Google Doodle, "My Afrocentric Life", which was designed by a high school sophomore.
- Duke Breaking Out project:
  https://www.facebook.com/dukebreakingout/photos/pb.1392987277645947.-2207520000.1459640986./1707062676238404/?type=3&theater
- Native Hip Hop video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0jq7jIa34Y
- Watch Angelou recite "And still I rise"
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqOqo50LSZ0
- Ted talk "What adults can learn from kids" (8:12):
  http://www.ted.com/playlists/129/ted_under_20
- Ted talk "Find your voice against gender violence (13:58)"
  http://www.ted.com/talks/meera_vijayann_find_your_voice_against_gender_violence#t-822524
- PSA "Don't Flip Your Lid" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he-fW9_3egw
  (4:12)
- "Danger of a Single Story"
  http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story
  (18:49)
- Motivational speaker clip: http://www.viralvo.com/motivational-speaker/ (4:21)
- Examples of youth public service announcements:
  - Youth violence prevention: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-FhV1frRCY (3:33)
  - Street violence PSA: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8t2jNusPFw
    (2:33)
- One woman protest: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLJ52pJN7PY (1:10)

- Gallery walk of infographics on different justice issues
- Youth activism on climate change: http://remezcla.com/film/you-should-stream-this-short-doc-on-indigenous-eco-activist-wonderkid-xiuhtezcatl-martinez/ (5 min?)
- "Everybody dies, but not everyone lives": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ja-n5qUNRi8 (5:40)
- Kid Warrior: What the frack? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxI7ERflFfM&feature=youtu.be (5:23)
- Public Science Project website: http://publicscienceproject.org
- Youth produced websites: http://listenup.org/index.php ; https://global-action.org