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Voice from the Field

Using Literature Circles to Discuss Social Justice in Teacher Education

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As literacy educators, we feel it is incumbent on teacher preparation programs to prepare teacher candidates with the dispositions and competencies needed to work with students from diverse racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds. As a way to initiate the discussion and help candidates examine their own views on race, we decided to use literature circles (Daniels, 2002). We chose literature circles because of their documented success in multiple contexts in the decades since the introduction of "grand conversations" (Eeds & Wells, 1989), as well as our own experiences using them across grade levels. By facilitating lively discussions, literacy circles increase students' comprehension and multicultural awareness, while also building community.

Simply put, literature circles are discussions based on a text. In this case, we created a list of books (see Appendix) from which students could choose, each of which we thought would provoke targeted discussions and reflection about race and social justice, particularly in American public schools. After we briefly introduced each book, candidates selected which book they wanted to read, forming groups of three to five students. As a way to model how literature circles are used in the classroom, we used the roles introduced by Daniels (2002) to prompt discussion, such as Discussion Director, Vocabulary Enricher, and so on. Our candidates divided their books into three sections, and held three discussions about their books, rotating roles each time. Each discussion lasted about 30 minutes, and although some discussions were held online in a Google chat, most were face to face in the classroom. These books were introduced over a two-year period in five sections of a Secondary Reading Methods Course, which was offered to candidates from all content areas earning a secondary teaching credential (grades 7-12).

Positive Outcomes from the Literature Circle Discussions

The literature circles had several benefits, including insights we do not believe the candidates would have made without such specific topical discussion.

For instance, candidates were able to make personal connections to topics addressed in the text, like race and class. One candidate from an interracial family and another in a long-term interracial relationship shared personal experiences with racism. Others discussed struggles they faced when moving from less to more affluent schools, due to low academic preparation from their former schools.

Candidates also discovered new terms and concepts as a result of participating in the literature circle discussions. For example, in *Muslim American Youth* (Sirin & Fine, 2008), some terms brought up were *contact zones*, *intersubjectivity*, and *symbolic violence*.

By reading and discussing these texts, candidates also seemed to become more sensitive to their own language and beliefs, questioning previously-held beliefs and stereotypes. By taking time to understand and deconstruct particular stereotypes, candidates overcame habits of thinking that too often pass without consideration.

Candidates also began to understand inequities in public schools. While many candidates claimed they came from middle or upper-middle class families, even candidates from more disadvantaged backgrounds expressed shock and surprise after reading about the conditions of some of the poorest schools in our country (e.g., Kozol, 2006). Not only were they surprised by the dire physical conditions of the buildings, but also by the still-prevalent racist attitudes in the school administration and the general public.

Concerns from the Literature Circle Discussions

Although there were some benefits to the literature circles, we also found areas of concern to be addressed in order to more effectively promote social justice understanding among preservice teachers.

Discussing social justice and learning to identify stereotyped beliefs, which are so common in our society that they often go unnoticed, is a developmental process. Given that, it is not surprising that candidates need guidance as they work their way through what is sometimes new and shocking material. For example, the reality that middle-class Black families may choose to stay in poorer neighborhoods with a higher percentage of Black neighbors, rather than move to the White suburbs, was contentious (Wise, 2009). Candidates did not understand the complexities of housing, and the challenges minority groups face when they move to wealthier, predominantly White neighborhoods and send their children to predominantly White schools.

Another concern regarding the literature circle discussions was group dynamics. For example, a group discussing the *Color of Success* (Conchas, 2006) had one White male, one Hispanic male, and two Hispanic women. The White male had worked as a full-time intern for two years, had more classroom experience than the other candidates, and often spoke as an "expert." During literature circle discussions, he was vocal and sometimes dominating, leading the other candidates to participate less and often apologetically. It seemed that racial and/or sexist issues might have affected the interplay within the group, reproducing social roles and expectations.

A final concern was inaccuracies in candidates' critiques of the texts. For example, candidates in the Kozol (2006) and Landsman (2001) groups complained that the authors ought to have provided more solutions. They felt that just highlighting the problem was not enough, and failed to see that one purpose of these books was to bring attention to the social inequities prevalent in American public schools. Sometimes, candidates outright challenged the authors' claims about the level of discrimination in American public schools. In one group, a candidate accused the author of making up her statistics in order to back up her

findings. Clearly, a deeper look at the authors' purposes for the texts, and what we can get out of them, is needed.

Connecting Benefits and Concerns

In analyzing both the benefits and concerns arising during this study, we found two places where they overlapped significantly.

First, personal connections were important in numerous ways. Many participants made personal connections to the texts, leading them to see the Other as human. We also saw defensive reactions to this identification with the Other in the form of participants criticizing the veracity of the texts or monopolizing discussions. Thus, the benefits of connecting personally to the texts have to be balanced with personal connections to the other participants in the circle and a willingness to suspend disbelief that defensively emerges when our view of the world is challenged.

Secondly, vocabulary was key to developing an understanding of social justice issues. Too often, we see students denied the language they need to talk about the prejudice, oppression, and complacency they experience on a daily basis. Once given access to this vocabulary, participants were able to voice their feelings and understandings, which led to questioning their previously-held beliefs and beginning to understand inequities in schools and society. Thus, literature circles were particularly effective for developing the vocabulary key to increasing awareness of social justice issues among preservice teachers.

Recommendations

The literature circle roles provide a basic structure for the discussion, create a purpose for reading, and ensure that each person comes to the discussion prepared with something to talk about. However, teacher educators need to find ways to make sure discussions are equitable and that candidates whose voices are traditionally silenced can be heard.

In order to increase the effectiveness of the use of literature circles in discussing social justice issues, we also recommend the introduction of some of the language and concepts for addressing race before candidates begin reading the texts. Providing background to the language of race might also be helpful for candidates wrestling with their own racial background. If candidates understand some of the initial concepts and background of the authors and texts, it is possible that they will be less challenged by the material.

Furthermore, group norms need to be established so candidates feel like they can share in a safe space. Although most candidates seemed to feel comfortable in group discussions, some comments in the written reflections (read only by the course instructors), particularly by minority women, were not shared in the oral discussions. This led us to believe that it is our job as instructors to create a safer environment for candidates to share with their peers.

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References

Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature discussion circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Eeds, M., & Wells, E. (1989). Grand conversations: An exploration of meaning construction in literature study groups. *Research in the Teaching of English, 23*(1), 4-29.

Appendix: Books Used in Literature Circle Discussions

Boyle, G. (2011). *Tattoos on the heart*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Conchas, G. Q. (2006). *The color of success: Rach and high-achieving urban youth*. New York, NY: Teachers College.

Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature discussion circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Fremon, C. (2008). *G-dog and the homeboys*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America*. New York, NY: Crown.

Landsman, J. (2001). *A White teacher talks about race*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Sirin, S. R., & Fine, M. (2008). *Muslim American youth: Understanding hyphenated identities through multiple methods*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Tatum, B. D. (2008). *Can we talk about race?: And other conversations in an era of school resegregation*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Wise, T. (2009). *Between Barack and a hard place: Racism and White denial in the age of Obama*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights.