Building Critical Community in Middle School Learning Environments

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Abstract

Research pertaining to institutions of public education reveals that curricular structures often function to produce and reproduce systemic inequalities. The following personal statement outlines a middle school teacher's attempt to address social reproduction in public education. By situating issues of inequity within a local context of socio-cultural reproduction, the author demonstrates parallels between written works of seminal, critical theorists demonstrating how socially reproductive structures persist under current standardized "high-stakes" educational reform agendas. The review highlights the transformative power of intersectionality, critical discourse, and personal narrative, along with the use of 21st century online platforms to connect students from privileged and disadvantaged communities as curricular structures with the power to interrogate dominant culture norms within public learning environments. Ultimately, the statement concludes with a call for the implementation of such curriculum to create and develop opportunities for new socio-cultural awarenesses in K-12 settings.

My graduate coursework in the Doctorate of Education program at Northeastern University-Charlotte has been a deep-dive immersion experience in intersectionality and vulnerability that has not only left me troubled and forever changed, but also inspired me to develop a curricular initiative entitled "Be the Change" for my eighth grade English students modeled after my graduate coursework. Building critical community has been the heart of my coursework as I've engaged in discourse that transgresses socio-cultural barriers with peers from all over the world (Bettez, 2011; Crenshaw, 1994). I have gained new insight into pervasive

perpetuations of social injustice occurring in our nation's system of public education as I've worked in collaboration with peers from different racial, economic, and cultural backgrounds to tackle problems contributing to and associated with social injustice. My time spent engaging with the personal narratives of classmates uncovered hidden biases and blind-spots rooted in the privileges I've been afforded as a white male from upper middle-class, small-town suburbia. Thus, I built the "Be the Change" project with a teacher and principal from a neighboring urban school district as a means for my students, also from a primarily white upper middle-class suburban school, to engage in a similarly intersectional experience with students across town from acutely different sociocultural backgrounds. It was my vision and hope that students from both schools would gain new social awareness by working in partnership on common projects through "blended" online and face to face learning platforms (Bettez, 2011; Crenshaw, 1994).

Intersectionality Leads to Personal Transformation

As the only white male in my doctoral cohort at Northeastern-Charlotte, my personal transformation and the uncovering of blind-spots to social injustice began on day one. I walked into a high-rise classroom overlooking downtown Charlotte, took a brief look around the room with rolling chairs, adjustable tables, and a room full of faces much different than my own, and quietly wondered if I was in the right place. It took being in the minority for the first time in my educational path to be cognizant of the stark contrast between black and white in an educational setting. It was in this setting that I grew to learn with and love the members of my cohort as we pressed through the grind of terminal academia. Dissonance led to discomfort which eventually led to transformation. Experts like Ladson Billings (1998) describe this as the disruption of white privilege by the personal narratives of others. This was the beginning of a new and better me. My vulnerability engaging with my classmates led me to empathize, listen, and internalize the voices

of others as my classmates described struggles foreign to me because of the invisibility of my white skin (p. 15-16).

The voice of one classmate, in particular, stood out when, during several learning exercises, we had the opportunity to work in collaboration and engage in discourse concerning our life experiences and how these experiences contribute to our positionality as educational leaders. For example, in an exercise to determine what we valued as actions of a leader, we discussed the meaning and power of voting privilege. I stepped to the side of the room that considered voting an act of citizenship and choice, but not necessarily an act of leadership. He, on the other-hand, quickly and boldly stepped to the other side of the room. Silently, I wondered why this was so important. My blind spot was instantly uncovered as he, nearly moved to tears, explained how voting has not always been a privilege for African Americans; therefore, in his rural African-American upbringing, to be a leader was to embrace your voice and vote.

We also discussed the "professional" appearance and actions of a school leader in the middle school setting. I described ways I "dress down" in order to create a comfortable climate for my students, while he described how he viewed "dressing up" and professional appearance as a way to disrupt stereotypes of a successful black man in a predominantly white, affluent setting. Furthermore, I listened to him describe how he advocates for students who attend his school from outlying areas in the name of desegregation. Because these students were often late from being "bussed-in," they were forced to skip breakfast. He described the burden of hour-long bus rides and described how white colleagues in his school failed to acknowledge this as they rushed them to class. He chose to pull these students from class and make sure they were able to eat before the day began. After hearing his story, I reinstituted a practice once done religiously as a new teacher. I restocked my desk with breakfast food. My learning experiences with members of

my cohort led to the realization my naïve illusions and early failures to recognize privileges afforded me as a white male in America. My positionality stemmed from a stance of race, class, and gender–blindness rooted in the invisibility of my race, and an inclusion in upper-middle-class dominant culture (Franklin, 2014).

Transformation Leads to a New Personal Pedagogy

My growth and development as a scholar practitioner shifted my positionality leading to a new personal pedagogy. I began to realize when it comes to curriculum, standardized content should only serve as a "road" map for more authentic learning structures to surface as the empty-space of that map becomes filled with students engaged and empowered in the process of transforming their world. If educators fail to shift their gaze from bold content lines to the implicit "curriculum" found in faces, voices, and experiences that walk through the school's doors, then we become complicit in what McCombs (2003) labels as an "educational paradigm or reform agenda [that] puts something other than the learner (e.g. knowledge content standards) or learning (performance skills and achievement measures) at the center of instructional decision-making" (p.96). This type of curriculum causes both learners and teachers to suffer from realizations the system is not about them or responsive to their needs. Individuals become a sidebar in the learning environment; recognizing who they are and what they need is not factored into the learning process (McCombs 2003). The tragic consequence of classrooms which take the form of a factory line is that alienation and disengagement become precursors for disempowerment. Disempowerment becomes a death knell in the education of many whose lives exist underneath lines of marginalization (Hooks, 1994). If school leaders continue to ignore issues of injustice and inequity in curriculum, marginalized students and students of privilege

alike will continue to matriculate in blind ignorance. We will miss opportunities to take our students to points of vulnerability necessary for transformational change.

A Local Problem Emerges Under My New Critical Lens

After gaining new eyes in my doctoral cohort, the need to take my own middle school students to a similar place of vulnerability came forth during a summertime professional development exercise. For this exercise, I was grouped with three female teachers all from the same mostly affluent suburban school district in Southwest Virginia. The goal of the exercise was to engage in a group observation of a physical space to address the following question: What makes a thriving community? We then had to return to the conference and present our findings to the rest of our colleagues. My group and I chose to venture three miles into downtown and interview young "twenty-somethings" in the area to gain a sense of whether they would choose to locate in this area for a career. As we engaged in these interviews, the need and desire to confront locally oppressive structures emerged, as I took notes of interviewee responses and the reactions of my colleagues.

First, we went to a local cafe and encountered a white female in her early 20's who graduated from the area's most affluent high school. She was a Bosnian war refugee whose family relocated to this area in the late 1990's. She described her educational experience as "taken for granted" while at the same time one she was "very proud of." She also discussed a desire to return to this area after college and give back to the community as a social worker. She was inspired by her high school and community college teachers and stated she loved the people and small town culture. She felt this was a place where she had opportunities for success. My colleagues suggested we take her picture to be used in a presentation of our findings when we returned to the high school.

The next person we interviewed was a white male in his late 20's who attended the city schools growing up. "Jake" worked in the market at a Natural Foods Co-Op and also described the area in a very positive light. As he polished beer bottles, he spoke of his interest in the town's "Local Foods Movement" and all of the fun outdoor activities surrounding the area. He felt like there were plenty of opportunities both socially and career-wise. He stated he hoped to become further involved in local non-profit work. My colleagues also suggested we take his picture for our presentation.

In contrast, we interviewed an African American female from the area's least affluent urban high school. The third interview began in much the same way as the first two. The interviewee described how she liked the area, the opportunity, and the people,but then she was interrupted. A male friend, who was about ten years older, had been listening and stated, "You....lying". When asked to elaborate, she stated she didn't feel accepted in the area and felt like she would be more accepted in a city like Atlanta where she felt there would be more opportunity. When the interview was over, no one suggested we take her picture as we proceeded to rejoin the other groups involved in the activity.

After conducting these interviews, my colleagues seemed to shy away from presenting the final interview to the rest of the group composed of teachers from the area's two most affluent high schools. They kept saying things such as, "We want to keep our presentation positive." One teacher even stated how she "took one for the team" by conducting the third interview. She went on to state, "I think she may have been high.." I was shocked and embarrassed by the thoughts of fellow educators laden with prejudice and racial profiling. I began to think herein lies one of the most deeply rooted issues of inequity in my hometown: the failure of those in the "culture of power" to acknowledge, see, and be willing to address obvious

inequity and prejudice (Delpit, 1988). Thus, I decided I'd bring forth the third interview as we presented our observations to the rest of the group. I did not call out my colleague's blatantly prejudiced comments in front of the group; however, I did point out the different experiences and perspectives of those we interviewed. I discussed the difference between the third interview further to suggest we as educators take a hard look at existing social structures, our practice, and the implications of inequity these interviews seemed to reveal. Since the quantity of interviews was limited to three due to time constraints, I wondered aloud whether these were just individual perspectives or perhaps indicative of deeper social justice issues in our community? After our presentation, I sat down and a female colleague who is African American, whispered across the table, "I don't think those are isolated perspectives." I agreed and used the remainder of the in-service to plan and develop a plan for building critical community into my classroom.

"Building the Plane as We Flew": A Curricular Project Designed For Change

I launched the "Be the Change" pilot project over the 2015-2016 school year as a means for students from two local middle schools with acutely different socio-cultural populations to leverage blended online and face-to-face learning environments as opportunities to enhance their socio-cultural awareness, become empowered through intersectional student-driven classroom orientations, and impact local change through their work with mentors from local non-profit organizations.

The planning for this project began with a teacher and a school administrator from an urban school in my local community about two weeks before the school year. Our goal was to facilitate face-to-face as well as synchronous and asynchronous online "third-spaces" (Caruthers and Friend, 2014) as a platform for students to partner and collaborate on common projects. Though the students involved in this project would find commonality living in the same greater

metropolitan area, their socio-cultural backgrounds were vastly different. The majority of my suburban middle school's students came from a position of affluent, white privilege while the majority of the students from the urban middle school came from a position of economically challenged, black, non-dominant culture.

Since this was a pilot project, we built the plane as we flew. We set the context by enlisting educational leaders and mentors from local non-profits as guides through four exercises in vulnerability that ultimately culminated in a project designed to impact local change. Our first two face-to-face meetings were at the new library just down the road from my suburban school, and our last two meetings were held at the new library in the city. This was done intentionally because the libraries are sources of pride for students in both communities. We knew they'd be neutral ground, whereas systemic inequity is evident in both school buildings. The suburban school has millions of taxpayer dollars evident in its aesthetic beauty. The urban school, on the other-hand, boasts new renovations on the inside but still has the appearance of an 80-year-old building on the outside.

The project began with an initial face-to-face meeting with approximately 90 students arranged in 16 groups of five to six. We started with a "people scavenger" for students to become more comfortable with each other and gain a sense of their commonalities and differences, then student groups were asked to research world activists who had taken on "problems of practice" they had shown interest in. Problems ranged from animal abuse and environmental protection to racism and the preservation of women's rights. The persons of interest for this study ranged from Jackie Robinson to Bob Barker. After students began their research in a face-to-face setting, they moved their work to a virtual setting using both district's "Office 365" program to collaborate

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and complete power-point presentations highlighting their person of interest. Students presented these initial projects to an audience of classmates at their home school.

The second face to face meeting was initiated with a "circles of character" icebreaker where students shared "I am" poems to describe their family background and customs and culture that defined them as individuals. After the icebreaker, we moved the students back into groups where they would work with mentors from local non-profits to analyze how their chosen problems of practice were manifested locally. Finally, the student groups began to brainstorm ideas for creating public service announcements for their mentors' organizations. After the second face to face meeting, student groups collaborated using Office 365 over the course of a month to develop working rough drafts of their PSAs for their mentors.

The third face to face meeting commenced at the downtown library with the idea of creating a "beautiful work." Students watched the video entitled "Austin's Butterfly." The video demonstrated the power of feedback and how it takes multiple drafts and mistakes for one to create a "beautiful work" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqh1MRWZjms). After watching the video, groups received critical feedback from their mentors concerning what they wanted in a PSA for their organization. The organizations included Feeding America, The Rescue Mission, Angels of Assisi, Co-Lab, Community Gardens Association, Points of Diversity, The Women's Center, and Local Colors. The work continued over Office 365 a final month as students completed final drafts and provided their mentors with the products they wanted to impact local change.

The final phase of the project was a culminating "Exhibition Day" at the downtown library. This phase of the project was an outreach to the public sector and an opportunity to celebrate student work. Students displayed and discussed their work for these organizations

before an audience of parents, faculty and staff, school board members, and local government officials. Ultimately, the project demonstrated that middle school classrooms can be fertile ground for intersectional experience (Crenshaw, 1994) and to establish equitable and empowering classroom orientations.

Audiences and Implications

This project is of high relevance for those interested in the reorientation of classroom instruction from teacher-directed to student-driven learning environments, as well as those interested in using school curriculum to dismantle structures that only support the interests of those in a "culture of power" (Delpit, 1988). Anyon (1981) suggests that "overdetermined classroom productions help to produce social actors who, in their behavior in society, produce and reproduce the 'system'...however, educators can do a great deal to transform cultural expressions of resistance into direct political action to change the economic and social system." Substantiating proof of concept for student-driven, non-reproductive classroom orientations must take place for projects such as "Be the Change" to become the norm rather than the exception.

On a national scale, the insight generated from this project may act as a catalyst for developing new awareness of latent, socially reproductive structures embedded within public school learning environments. It may also further substantiate student-driven classroom orientations as contexts for learner empowerment and the disruption of socio-cultural inequities. Recently, researchers have proposed that counter-discourse and intersectional experiences become common practice for both educators and students if educational equity is to become a reality (Lewis, Ketter, and Fabos 2001; Beach, Parks, Thein, & Lensmire, 2007, Anders et al., 2005).

Locally, teachers and school leaders in the greater metropolitan area could use the "Be the Change" project as a proof of concept for future collaborative efforts between teachers and students in the county and city public school systems. Partnerships consisting of teacher and student collaborations between the two school systems have the potential, through intersectional experience and critical dialogue (Anders et al., 2005; Beach et al., 2007), to expose and change local inequities that reflect a distinct "culture of power" (VDOE, 2014; Ladson Billings, 1998). Such dialogue and intersectional experience between educators and students are essential for establishing curricular platforms to induce individual and collective transformation (Beach et al., 2007). Furthermore, such transformations are necessary for exposing and disrupting "culture of power" influences within classroom environments that perpetuate social power structures in area schools (Delpit, 1988).

Stakeholders and Resources

For the "Be the Change" project to progress into an effort that has a sustaining impact, the venture must continue to involve a variety of stakeholders and be matched with available resources in the community (Smith and Peterson, 2006). Smith and Peterson (2006) categorize these resources into three groups: human capital, financial capital, and intellectual capital. First, any effort seeking social impact must establish a foundation of human capital from across the education, business, nonprofit, and public sectors (Smith and Peterson, 2006). Educators must transcend classroom walls and network to create deeper learning opportunities for their students. By tapping into local resources and forming substantive collaborations with mentors from the community, learning becomes more relevant and exciting, and students engage to a point where they take ownership of the process (Martinez and McGrath, 2014).

This step will be useful for securing the financial capital necessary to maintain the "one-to-one" laptop initiative that makes this collaborative project possible. The financial investments the schools have made to establish their one-to-one programs provide pictures of the financial investments necessary for projects like "Be the Change" to occur. Without such capital, blended learning opportunities that rely so heavily on web-based technologies would be nonexistent. Thus, garnering the support of stakeholders who hold public influence is necessary for securing the financial capital required to move the project from the pilot stages to a sustainable initiative.

In addition to financial and human capital, intellectual capital is also imperative for the "Be the Change" project to be conducted with fidelity. Smith and Peterson (2006) define intellectual capital as the "ideas, practices, and policies that feed entrepreneurs ongoing understanding of where opportunities lie, what lessons can be learned from the work that is already happening, and what changes need to take place to maximize success." Currently, both county and city schools have on-going professional development designed to promote 21st century instructional reform. The focus of these efforts is to promote skills such as collaboration, communication, creativity, community building, and critical thinking through student-centered classroom orientations; therefore, projects like the "Be the Change" effort must be conducted with reciprocity. The educators involved in carrying out such projects must continually work as learner-practitioners seeking the intellectual capital to refine and develop their craft so they can enhance the learning experiences for students. They must also simultaneously use their work in such projects as proof of concept to support 21st century reform.

Barriers and Challenges

 In spite of the opportunity the "Be the Change" project provided for empowering students to challenge dominant culture norms, enhancing socio-cultural awareness, and

developing 21st century skills to impact local change, there were still challenges and barriers due to standardized models of education and pervasive sociocultural disparities. First, efforts to achieve results on state-mandated tests made it quite a challenge for both middle schools to work around formative assessments, test-prep, etc., and to engage in these meetings and take the time to work collaboratively online. Furthermore, if educators are ever to cure the disease of deficient, socially reproductive curriculum on a national scale, they must take local steps to expose the tortuous logic that uses the tragic results of high stakes tests as an argument for their continuation. Local educators must transform the nature of socially reproductive curriculum rather than put measures in place to stop the bleeding. When curriculum is designed with end goals attached to performance on standardized tests rather than the development of autonomous learners, the "standard" for educational reform remains about results rather than empowerment. Curricular structures in the schools should be transformative instruments to empower and promote social justice and equality rather than socially reproductive instruments that perpetuate class and race-based inequalities.

Conclusion

In sum, there has been an observed correlation between socio-cultural disparities and testing data taken from the county and city public schools (Virginia Department of Education, 2014). Partnerships consisting of teacher and student collaborations between the two school systems have the potential, through intersectional experience and critical dialogue (Crenshaw, 1994; Bettez, 2011; Anders et al., 2005; Beach et al., 2007), to expose and change these inequities that reflect a distinct, local "culture of power" (Ladson Billings, 1998). Advancing and establishing proof of concept for projects such as the collaborative "Be the Change" partnership between two middle schools of acute sociocultural difference can be early steps toward the use

of curriculum to impact local change and promote social justice within the institution of education. Ultimately, experiences building critical community in a doctoral learning environment not only revealed my blind spots regarding issues of social justice, but these experiences also had an impact on my instructional practice.

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