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Abstract

Education, in its many forms, is an institution that mirrors the society around it, including its patterns of privilege and marginalization (Marx, et al., 2017). The purpose of this article is to provide a reflection of my experiences while working alongside four interns from an alternative school hired to work for an agricultural internship. I highlight my shifting perspectives through an autoethnography. Autoethnographic projects use selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience ("auto") to describe, interpret, and represent ("graphy") beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture ("ethno"). (Adams and Herrmann 2020). After working with four interns, I was confronted with various privileges. Most notably, I learned to appreciate more on systemic factors that influenced these individuals. I also became more aware of my language use, which perpetuated a deficit model. Finally, I was challenged with my notion of delinquency behavior and community engagement.

Keywords

autoethnography, reflection, privilege, alternative education

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Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they have done or failed to do (Johnson, 2013, p. 15). Education in its many forms is an institution that mirrors the society around it, including its patterns of privilege and marginalization (Marx et al., 2017). Privilege to me is not having to acknowledge one's own privilege.

When thinking about privilege, I am reminded of Robert Terry's (1993, pp. 61-63) take on dumb-upness.

> "…..There's good news and bad news in this parable. The good news is, we're all both ups and downs. There's no such thing as a perfect up or a perfect down. The bad news is that when we're up it often makes us stupid. We call that "dumb-upness." It's not because ups are not smart. It's that ups don't have to pay attention to downs the way downs have to pay attention to ups. Downs always have to figure out what ups are up to. The only time ups worry about downs is when downs get uppity, at which time they're put down by the ups. The up's perception is that downs are overly sensitive; they have an attitude problem. It is never understood that ups are underly sensitive and have an attitude problem."

I was confronted with my own privilege when working with four students from an alternative school who were hired as paid interns to work for Op Grows (pseudonym). Op Grows is an agricultural program that builds and maintains school and community gardens. Specifically, my privilege was confronted on the lived experiences of others, my language use, and my notion of delinquency behavior/community engagement.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to provide a reflection of my experiences while working alongside the four interns. I am diving headfirst to portray my 'dumb-upness'. I am nervously, yet willingly exploring various privileges. This is an attempt to highlight systemic factors and lived experiences that impact those deemed as *"at-risk"* while also looking inward to demonstrate the need for personal growth as a community practitioner. My shifting perspectives were researched using an autoethnography.

Theoretical Lens

An autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011; Adams et al., 2015). More aptly put, autoethnographic projects use selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience ("auto") to describe, interpret, and represent ("graphy") beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture ("ethno") (Adams & Herrmann, 2020). Autoethnographies include those self-narratives or personal stories to embrace the sociocultural contexts (Chang, 2008, p. 41).

Early on, autoethnography was thought of as insider ethnography (Hayano, 1979). Though, as Chang (2008, p. 50) claimed, autoethnographers enter the research field with a familiar topic (self), while ethnographers begin their investigation with an unfamiliar topic (others). Autoethnography represents a fresh take on ethnography where an ethnographic prospective and analysis are brought to bear on our personal, lived experience, directly linking the micro level with the macro cultural and structural levels (Allen-Collinson, 2013, p. 282). Douglas and Carless (2013, pp. 84-85) suggested that knowledge about the social and human world cannot exist independent of the knower and such that autoethnography provides a way to

learn about the general – the social, cultural, and political – through an exploration of the personal.

Autoethnography is a transformative research method because it changes time, requires vulnerability, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, honors subjectivity, and provides therapeutic benefits (Custer, 2014). Raab (2013) mentions, "…the transpersonal relevance of an autoethnographical study encompasses the idea of fostering self-awareness and self-discovery, which may lead to transformation.

> "Transformation occurs dramatically for the individual who is courageous enough to reveal him or herself to the world and readily embarks on a fantastic journey. It also occurs for those that participate in the process of introspection, reflexivity, and contemplation with the autoethnographer (i.e. the readership, audience, or other researchers)" (Custer, 2014).

An autoethnographic researcher uses deep and careful reflexivity to name and interrogate the intersections between the self and society, the particular and the general, and the personal and the political (Adams et al., 2015; Berry & Clair, 2011). Reflectivity entails taking seriously the self's location(s) in culture and scholarship, circumspectly exploring our relationship to/in autoethnography to make research and cultural life *better* and *more meaningful* (Berry, 2013, p. 212).

Methods

Organizing the Autoethnography

Creswell and Miller's (2000) suggested qualitative researchers build credibility by exploring the lens of the researcher, lens of the researched, and the lens of the audience. The lens of the researcher involves those who are collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. The lens of

the researched involve those being studied. In an autoethnography, the researcher(s) and researched can be one in the same. The lens of the audience involves those reading and evaluating the research.

When introducing the autoethnography, I further break down the "auto", "ethno", and "graphy." The "auto" will be evident as I first detail myself as the researcher highlighting past experiences to give a foundation as to what beliefs I had prior to working with the students. Detailing the "ethno" and "graphy" will tell the audience more on whom I worked with, and the methods used to collect and analyze data. I then come full circle and revisit the "auto" now from the researched lens by providing explicit detail on the interactions I had with the students. Thus, the "auto" is bridged with the "ethno" and "graphy" in the findings.

It is my goal to provide a thick, rich description throughout to show my growth as a practitioner. A thick description involved describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail so one can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

"Auto": The Researcher

Dutta and Basu (2013) wrote about the ways in which, as researchers, we need to navigate our various positions at any one time and note that we are seldom ever occupying one position. To lay a foundation of my "dumb-upness", I must briefly write about my past experiences with delinquency behavior and community engagement. It is then my hope that those reading this autoethnography can journey with me to place that at times is uncomfortable, but in the end, enlightening.

In school, I rarely got a detention or a referral. Though, there were times I deserved both especially given the number of times I showed up late to my first block classes. I was also never

in trouble out of school. This fostered the belief that I was always a good student and, thus a good person, because I demonstrated *"correct behavior"*.

Working in a community was never court mandated. Growing up, my parents and teachers tried to reinforce the importance of bettering community. My beliefs on what it means to be "good person" were strengthened while at a four-year university. I went on a few service trips to West Virginia and Tennessee while I was an undergraduate student. When given the opportunity to do something similar with Op Grows, I was excited to start working. I saw an organization that was willing to get its hands dirty: literally, and figuratively, to build community.

Though my engagement in community admittedly was rooted in a protective bubble despite working in other areas. I was able to remain in my comfort zone because I rarely interacted with those that did not have the same backgrounds. Thus, I was able to avoid learning from others' lived experiences.

"Ethno": Who I Worked With

In appreciation for the "ethno" piece of autoethnography, I wish to provide a foundation on the four students I worked with within Op Grows. The four students who were hired as paid interns were Danny, Malik, Rodney, and Stanton (pseudonyms). Each had been in trouble in and/or outside of school, had fallen behind academically, and had all considered dropping out of school. Each were sent to a local alternative school, the Carson Learning Center (pseudonym), designed for students with academic and/or behavior issues. More about the individuals will be discussed to ground the findings.

Even though alternative education programs are designed to prevent students from dropping out (Lehr et al., 2008), over half of alternative schools still have graduation rates lower

than 50% (Bustamante, 2019). Alternative education settings mostly serve students who potentially face school failure or who are marginalized from the traditional school system (Becker, 2010; Carver & Lewis, 2010; Coles et al., 2009; Schwab et al., 2016). Caroleo (2014) mentioned alternative education is used as progressive education, last chance education, and remedial instruction.

"Graphy": Data Collection and Analysis

I now wish to discuss the "graphy" aspect in the autoethnography or the ways in which data were collected, analyzed, and will be written in the findings. I remind the reader that an autoethnography is not simply a reflection, but a method where the autoethnographer documents how and why they reflected. Further, the researcher conducting the autoethnography is the primary participant documenting their experiences while working within a culture or to better understand a phenomenon. Ellis et al. (2011), suggested the autoethnographer retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity then will analyze those experiences.

Despite the personal nature of an autoethnography, others' experiences are still reported. Thus, IRB approval was obtained at the onset of the study. Further, parental consent and student assent were obtained from each intern. To understand myself in the context of others, I conducted observations and had informal conversations with the interns. Using a field notebook, I took notes on anything I saw or discussed with the interns regarding a priori notions of delinquency behavior and community engagement. For instance, myself and the interns might have had impromptu conversations about how they were removed from class on a given day. Additionally, I could document their interactions with community members or accomplishments while working in the community garden. The field notes were shorthand versions of the

observations and conversations. Though, as Emerson et al. (2011, p. 167) wrote, those writing field notes need to be mindful of how people and events are described.

The notes I took in my field notebook were then used as primers for personal audio reflections. I recorded these audio reflections after any interaction with the interns to make sure my shorthand notes were not forgotten when I was away from my data. These personal audio reflections also allowed me to ponder the similar and dissimilar experiences between myself and the interns. Through this method, I could purposefully engage how working with the interns challenged my assumptions and shaped my understanding of their culture.

Each audio recording was transcribed into separate Word documents. I initially read each transcription to remind me what transpired between myself and the interns. While reading the documents a second time, I began creating initial codes using open coding to see what stood out during the internship. I then reread the transcriptions of my personal audio recordings to produce themes using Braun and Clark's (2006) method of thematic analysis as a guide. Codes were then grouped into one of three themes 1) "Not Understanding Systemic Factors," 2) "Confronting a Deficit Model," or 3) My Skewed Version of Delinquency Behavior and Community Engagement."

Findings

It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate *doing* autoethnography from *writing* autoethnography (Adams et al., 2015, p 87). When researchers write autoethnographies, they seek to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience (Ellis et al., 2011). Ghodsee (2016) said using the first person "I" acts as an invitation to the reader, exposing the human being lurking behind the words on the printed page. Personal stories of living through and being a part of these patterns of privilege and marginalization

highlight for readers the ways we are all affected by and affecting institutionalized power and privilege marginalization (Marx et al., 2017).

Earlier I mentioned how I was able to avoid having to interact with others with different lived experiences than me. Before I interacted with the interns, I never really considered my own privileges. I never had to. I did not have to about my dumb-upness. Below I organize the findings by the themes that challenged my own assumptions. I first highlight how I had limited understanding of the students' lived experiences, especially by not recognizing systemic factors that had an active role in the interns' lives. Then, I revisit my poor language use where I perpetuated a deficit model. I conclude these findings by discussing challenges to my skewed notion of delinquency behavior and community engagement. In each section, I highlight concrete examples and explore how these themes encouraged me to be a more reflective practitioner.

Not Understanding Systemic Factors

I want to start talking about my own growth around the time I met the interns. I was asked why the students were sent to the alternative school. Without missing a beat, I indicated that the students had done something 'stupid' to put them there, not realizing this was an oversimplification that did not acknowledge systemic factors. One major systemic factor is skin color. Malik, Rodney, and Stanton are Black. The most recent data suggest alternative school enrollment consists of a disproportionally number of minority students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). This is especially relevant that for decades a disproportionate number of minority students have been disciplined at greater rates than their percentage within a school (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Miller, 2020; Skiba et al., 2000, p. 14; Verdugo & Glenn, 2006).

Tatum (2003) suggested, "There is a lot of silence about race in White communities, and as a consequence Whites tend to think of racial identity as something that other people have, not something that is salient for them" (p. 94). In that, my whiteness is something I have but often don't have to think about. I want to, as Nakayama and Krisek (1995) described: expose the rhetoric of logic of whiteness because it is only upon critically examining this strategic rhetoric that we can begin to understand the influences it has on our everyday lives and, by extension, our research and teaching. In this vein, White educators and practitioners can seek to better understand our biases and combat our color blindness.

Acknowledging systemic factors that have privileged me is one of many steps in appreciating the lives of others, which in turn can help me grow as an educator and practitioner. Though, I acknowledge I will never fully grasp the complexity skin color plays, but it is my hope I can endeavor to challenge the already existing constraints for others.

Confronting A Deficit Model Approach

Running together with not understanding systemic factors, I also promoted a deficit model approach by referring to the interns as "*at-risk"*. Soon after meeting the interns, I would tell my friends I was working with "at risk" youths: almost as if to stroke my own ego and make me feel better about myself. I was describing the interns with my own problematic language. Deficit theories assume that some children, because of genetic, cultural, or experiential differences, are inferior to other children that places complete responsibility on the individual and ignores a systemic analysis (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012). Deficit thinking might be sufficiently characterized by the discussion of unfavorable conditions, the existence of "environmental" challenges, or racial disparities in educational outcomes (Banks, 2014; Poon et al., 2016).

Historically, the term "at risk" as it applies to youths appears to have been borrowed from the medical study of the causes and effects of diseases and the identification of risk factors that make humans susceptible to diseases (Rea & Zinskie, 2015). Following the publication of "A Nation at Risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) which discussed the poor test scores of United States students compared with U.S. students from the past and international students, the term became commonly associated with any group of students, especially minorities, who evidenced poor performance on standardized tests (Rea & Zinskie, 2015). Moreover, "at-risk" status was commonly reduced to an internalized trait of low performing students (O'Connor et al., 2009).

Admittedly, breaking away from the deficit approach was a challenging thing to reconcile because changing one's misuse of language is almost changing one's culture. Only when I got to know the interns did I realize how lackadaisical I was with my language. The interns never saw themselves as "at risk." However, this is a reason I see the relevance in gaining consent and assent in autoethnography. Autoethnographies allow the researcher/participant to challenge their own culture when working with another culture. In that, more representative language can provide a more accurate depiction of a culture. Language evolves and so too must our use.

My Skewed Version of Delinquency Behavior and Community Engagement

Misunderstanding systemic factors and having poor language use gave rise to a skewed version of delinquency behavior and community engagement. I was not seeing the students' full potential…only what caused them to get in trouble. By not attempting to see the interns in a positive light, I further established a disconnect between the interns and myself. I was putting myself on a moral high ground because of what I deemed as "*correct behavior*". Through that, I often associated delinquency behavior as a character flaw. My misdeeds (showing up to first

block late for instance) were seldom observed and never highlighted as part of my character. Thus, I associated me not getting in trouble with having higher character.

Having never been assigned community engagement as a punishment, my position in society as a privileged individual allowed me to assume that if the interns did not engage with community the way I did, somehow, they did not care about the area in which they spent most of their lives. However, I was the outsider to this community. A concrete example of this is when Danny was assigned community service for breaking the law. However, Danny never wavered and found a solution. He asked the Judge if he could do his community service with Op Grows, volunteering to not receive money he would get paid from the internship. This allowed him to continue working for an organization that he believed was an asset to the community.

Interestingly, Danny created a pathway for others in his community to do community service with the organization. Op Grows became a service sight after partnering with local law enforcement and those working in courthouses. This further grew the project moving beyond just the four individuals who had been in trouble in or out of school. Danny taught me that we should listen to those that can navigate difficult experiences. He further taught me how neighborhood insiders have expertise within their own community.

Discussion

Within this article, I attempted to demonstrate how an autoethnography as a method can be used to understand privilege. I used selfhood, subjectivity, and personal experience (“auto”) to describe, interpret, and represent (“graphy”) beliefs, practices, and identities of a group or culture (“ethno”). This was accompanied by reflection as a transformational experience (Custer, 2014; Raab, 2013). I attempted to have the audience journey with me towards introspection, reflexivity, and contemplation to better understand themselves and others.

This article adds to the growing list of autoethnographies where individuals better understand systemic factors especially where White educators/researchers acknowledge their own privilege (Boyd, 2008; Martin, 2014; Magnet, 2006; Ohito, 2017; Potter, 2015; Toyosaki et al., 2009; Wood, 2017). Further, this autoethnography supported previous autoethnographies regarding the importance of representative language (Carless, 2021; Lambert, 2021). Finally, this autoethnography acted as a nexus between self and community in support of previous research (Allen-Collinson, 2013; Carless, 2021; Cutforth, 2013; Ellis & Calafell, 2020; Lambert, 2021).

Conclusions

Limitations

Despite what this research adds to the literature, all research has limitations. Autoethnography at times has been described as too self-indulgent and narcistic (Holt, 2003, p. 3). Despite my attempt to build a thick, rich description, the interns did not read the story I wrote. Thus, there was potential to superimpose my own beliefs on their culture. I fear that I have misunderstood the students' lived experiences. This in turn opened the possibility of not accurately reflecting on my own growth as an educator and practitioner. Given those limitations, this article needs to be considered in the context and time it was written. My growth is never complete, and I still need to continue reflecting as my life and the students' lives progress.

Closing Remarks

Doing and writing this autoethnography has taught me that I still have much more to learn about the opportunities my privileges have afforded me. The four interns challenged my perceptions of others so I could attempt to be more inclusive and understanding. Opening myself up to someone else's experiences got me out of my comfort zone. I encourage those reading this

article to explore their own lives and reflect on what privileges they do not readily have to acknowledge. It has been challenging, yet eye-opening to explore my dumb-upness.

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