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Reading the World: Supporting Teachers' Professional Development Using Community-Based Critical Literacy Practices

Stacia M. Stribling, Elizabeth K. DeMulder, and Monimalika Day

This paper shares the findings from a study that assessed the impact of a graduate level curriculum that engaged fifty-seven k-12 teachers in community-based critical literacy practices. The findings from the participants' written critical reflections following two community exploration activities showed that they gained enhanced awareness of social inequalities. In addition, some of the participants made connections between the observed community disparities and their civic responsibilities to work towards social justice.

A high school teacher reflects: "This year, our [community] walk was more geared toward hearing the voices of many people we never got a chance to talk to last year...my eyes were opened to things I never heard before.... It's amazing to think that if I hadn't taken the opportunity to do these walks, I would be totally oblivious of just how diverse my community is – different races, ethnicities – different socio-economic levels – different opinions on issues of race, gender, and right now immigration."

This reflection is an example of what our graduate level students contemplate as they engage in critical explorations of their school communities. As teacher educators, we take seriously our role in pushing students to both "read the word" and "read the world" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 135) in order to explore the ways in which issues of diversity, such as the race, gender and immigration issues mentioned by this high school teacher, play out in their communities and consequently in their own classrooms. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to assess the impact of a graduate-level curriculum for K-12 teachers that

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engaged teachers in critical literacy practices in their school communities. The ultimate goal of the curriculum is to support teachers' professional development of dispositions and capacities that promote social justice and civic responsibility both in and through school practices. The study was designed to answer two research questions:

1. How do practicing teachers characterize the insights gained from the exploration of their school communities?
2. To what extent do teachers' exploration of their school community impact their awareness of issues of social justice and civic responsibility?

Perspectives

The academic success of young children, especially those at risk due to their socio-economic, racial, or ethnic identification, is dependent on well-prepared teachers (Horn, 2003). As a result, much attention has been given to preparing classroom teachers who are knowledgeable in addressing diversity issues in their classrooms (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Noel, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This effort is even more crucial when considering that the majority of the population that enters the teaching force is white, female, and middle-class (Zimpher, 1989), and as Ridgeway (2004) asserts, teach the way that they themselves have been taught.

Within the literature reviews organized to tease out potential "best practices" in preparing teachers to teach in culturally diverse settings (Grant, 1994; Sleeter, 2001; Zeichner, 1992), some common themes emerge related to instruction: 1) address teachers' dispositions, 2) build their pedagogical knowledge, and 3) offer them more experiences with diversity. We contend that these three instructional areas are not only essential for pre-service teachers, but are critical for the professional development of in-service teachers as well.

One way to address teachers' dispositions, build their pedagogical knowledge, and immerse them in experiences with diversity is through the practice of critical literacy. Critical literacy has only recently entered the discourse of education so there is no single definition for what it is and how it is enacted in classroom settings (see Janks, 2000; Ciardiello, 2004; Lewison, Flint, & Sluys, 2002 for example definitions). Perhaps the most powerful explanation of critical literacy is offered by Freire when he emphasized the power of not only reading the *word*, but reading the *world* (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 135). He stressed the importance of critically examining the world in which we live and work in order to name existing inequities and begin to transform oppressive structures through the power of words (spoken, read, and written). The connection between literacy and liberation is at the core of critical literacy.

In our work with in-service teachers, we framed our curriculum around critical literacy using three different approaches highlighted in the literature: 1) critically examining texts for voice and perspective, 2) using texts as a vehicle through which one can examine larger social issues, and 3) using students' lives and experiences as the text and incorporating literacy practices. These three approaches are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, intersect in very natural and powerful ways.

Methods

A qualitative case study design (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Stake, 2000; Wolcott, 1994; Yin, 1994) was used as the framework for the study. The target population for the study was composed of 57 graduate students who were enrolled in a non-traditional, cohort-based master's program at a large university in a metropolitan area on the east coast from July 2006 through July 2007. The non-traditional structure of the program required that the teachers join in school-based teams of anywhere from two to six teachers. This professional development program, specifically designed for practicing teachers, focused on developing teachers' capacities to engage in critical pedagogy and critical literacy, school-based and community-based inquiry, collaboration, and continuous improvement. It offered an interdisciplinary curriculum that addressed central issues impacting educators, including language, culture, and moral professionalism.

Curricular Experiences

At the beginning of their graduate studies in the summer of 2006, teachers spent a day exploring their students' communities in their school-based teams. One year later, in the summer of 2007, teachers returned to these communities for further exploration and study. The first exploration was called "The Community Walk," and the second exploration was called "The New View Walk." The day after each "Walk," teachers created visual representations and shared their experiences in presentations and further discussion in class. In the year between The Community Walk and The New View Walk experiences, all 57 teachers enrolled in the same courses and attended class days together where they experienced a curriculum focused on issues of race, class, gender, special needs, and critical pedagogy, using Wink (2005), Howard (1999), Meier (2002), Harry, Kalyanpur and Day (2005), and Freire (1970/1998), among others, as texts. Over the course of the year, teachers also designed and conducted a series of four action research projects that repeatedly engaged them in the "name, reflect, act" process of critical pedagogy (Wink, 2005). These projects, conducted in the schools and school communities in which they completed both

The Community Walk and The New View Walk, offered teachers opportunities to:

- Deepen their understanding of the critical issues introduced in class and texts,
- Strengthen their critical reflection and dialogue skills, and
- Take needed action in the context of their school communities and their classrooms.

The four projects in which the teachers engaged during the year were designed to gradually narrow the focus of inquiry from the larger community to the classroom. The first action research project required that they draw on both their experiences in the classroom and on The Community Walk in order to identify a topic to explore in more depth by gaining others' perspectives and challenging their own assumptions about the issue. This Community-School Connections project entailed developing an interview protocol, interviewing a community member who might provide an interesting perspective on the topic, coding the interview for themes related to the topic, and conducting a member check by sharing insights gained from the interview with the community member. From here, the teachers narrowed their focus and identified a moral issue/dilemma they face in their school/classroom community. This second project, called the Moral Professionalism Classroom Project, entailed conducting observations in the school/classroom setting that would provide insight into the moral dilemma. Teachers wrote up their field notes from these observations and coded them for emerging themes, writing a paper that synthesized their findings and new understandings of the dilemma. The third project, called the Case Study Project, narrowed in even further on an issue that was potentially influencing the learning of one of their students. Teachers conducted a case study where they took observational field notes of the particular student and conducted interviews with the student's family members to gain a better understanding of his/her learning processes. Teachers coded and triangulated the data for themes that helped them become more aware of the influence the issue they identified had on that particular student's learning. These initial three projects finally led up to a teacher research project conducted in the second half of the year where teachers posed questions about their practice, collected data, implemented strategies that addressed the questions, and collected and analyzed data to assess the effectiveness of the strategies. It was after the completion of these four projects in conjunction with reading texts and engaging in critical dialogue that the teachers returned to their school communities for The New View Walk.

Data Sources

In order to offer teachers opportunities for reflection on their learning experiences in the graduate program and to collect feedback to improve our own teaching practices, we collect teachers' written reflective responses after specific learning experiences and after every class day. These responses to particular prompts often offer a rich source of information about the ways teachers experience the curricular innovations, the challenges they face, and the insights they gain in the program that influence their attitudes and approaches to teaching. The data from this study come from the reflective feedback teachers wrote in the second summer after their New View Walk. A first set of questions focused on their New View Walk experience. The questions were:

1. In what ways was the "New View Walk" activity a learning experience for you?
2. What new insights did you gain from the "New View Walk" presentations/discussion?
3. What left you puzzled or concerned (e.g., assumptions that need to be examined more thoroughly)?

After teachers wrote these reflections, they were given the reflective feedback they wrote in response to the previous year's Community Walk experience and were then asked to consider the two "Walk" experiences together. The second set of questions included:

1. How did your experience last year compare with your experience this year?
2. What do you notice regarding the similarities and differences between the two experiences?

Our expectation was that the work throughout the year and the opportunity to return to the communities a second time might:

- Offer teachers new perspectives with which to view the community,
- Encourage teachers to examine and challenge their assumptions,
- Enhance teachers' understanding of the communities in which their students lived,
- Help teachers to envision ways that their new understanding might impact their teaching and their students' learning.

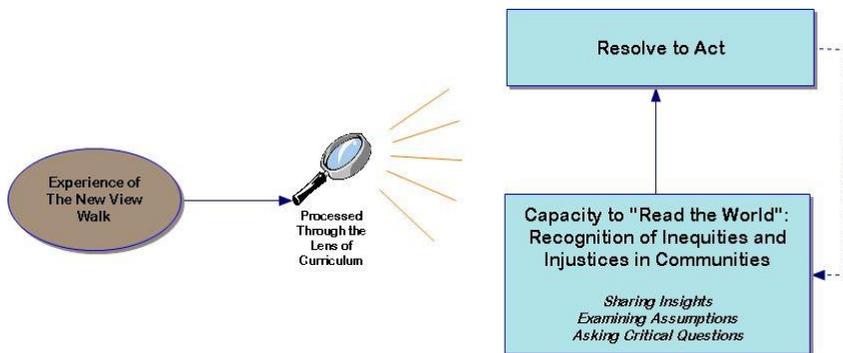
Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted by three of the authors using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to identify

potentially meaningful themes in the data. The initial themes developed included the following: 1) exploration of school communities provided powerful learning experiences (“**eye-opening**”), 2) **connections** to the work teachers did throughout the year as they described inequities and injustices observed in the communities, 3) the **value** of gaining an in-depth knowledge of the communities in which their students live, 4) **greater comfort with and understanding** of the communities during the second walk, 5) **increased awareness of and openness** to different perspectives, 6) more **critical self-reflection**, including questions and insights about their own privilege that challenge assumptions, 7) recognition of the **need for dialogue** about community issues, 8) **resolve** to make efforts that empower their students and the students’ families, and 9) **unexamined assumptions and biases** that suggest that further work is needed. As we returned to the data to code for these nine themes, we found that many of them overlapped; in other words, something a teacher wrote could have been considered “eye-opening” but could also articulate the “value” of learning about the community. At this point, we decided to develop a concept map that would both collapse the codes as well as show the connections between the themes. Using the language of critical literacy, we developed the concept map shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Concept map summarizing the themes found in the data



Teachers had much to say regarding the differences between The Community Walk and The New View Walk, differences that indicated the experience of The New View Walk had been processed through the lens of the curriculum that we implemented during the intervening year. What resulted

were two clear themes related to the processes and goals of a critical literacy curriculum. First, teachers indicated a greater capacity to “read the world;” they recognized inequities and injustices in the community and discussed these through the process of sharing insights, asking critical questions, and examining assumptions. Second, the experience of The New View Walk led some teachers to resolve to act. It is hypothesized that this action will only further enhance teachers’ ability to read the world and continue in the name-reflect-act cycle.

Findings

The teachers reported tremendous excitement and learning from The Community Walk, so we were concerned that conducting The New View Walk would, to some extent, just be “more of the same” for them; in fact, The New View Walk proved to be a different experience for the teachers. Catherine described the difference in the following way, “It seems that the overall group is less ‘in shock’ this year about what they saw. Whereas before, they hadn’t expected to find the struggles, they were now more questioning of what actions were being taken in the community.” Furthermore Lindsey reported, “I think I broadened my view this time, in terms of looking at things from the perspective of people in the community.” This shift from an “outsider” perspective to community perspectives was recognized by many of the teachers. Janna writes:

It was interesting to hear that most presentations did not revolve around the physical aspects of communities as much as they did last year. Voices were the highlights of many presentations and how those voices are received in communities or valued/devalued and why.

This shift to community voices could be attributed to the fact that the experience of The New View Walk was processed through the lens of the curriculum in which the teachers engaged throughout the year since The Community Walk. A primary component of the curriculum focused on the often marginalized voices in the school community. This point was best articulated by Tammy:

I just did not get it then! Oh my! Talk about being green. I suppose I needed more time to digest, assimilate, and really make sense of what I was learning that summer. Had I known then what I know now there would have been a more informed way that I could have presented that [first] walk. However, I REALLY needed to go through the entire year – go through and process all of my experiences, readings, research, reflection to appreciate my growth from then to now.

The feedback clearly indicates that the teachers benefited from multiple ventures into the community and that they had a different experience the second time.

The following sections explore the major themes revealed in the data regarding the ways in which the teachers experienced this powerful second exploration of their school communities.

Capacity to “Read the World”: Recognition of Inequities and Injustices in Communities

Teachers’ feedback tended to illustrate a strong commitment to reading the world in which their students live. In conducting The New View Walk, many teachers were open to recognizing the inequalities that existed in their communities, and they articulated these inequities in three different ways: 1) by sharing insights about what they observed in the community, 2) by examining assumptions they held regarding the different groups of people living and working in the community, and 3) by asking critical questions about what they observed in the community.

Sharing insights. Several of the teachers shared insights they gained about the ways in which the members of the school community were not equally represented. As Dana stated,

[We] noticed how much the community in which we teach is catering to an upper-middle/upper class white community. There are many people of different cultures living within [our school community], but they aren’t represented when walking through the shops or looking for a place to eat.

Katrina shared her insights regarding the segregation that still exists in her school community: “I learned in the walk that even though our school and community are diverse, that the community is still segregated by race and by income.”

For Crystal, the second community experience led to an insight that recognized one way that inequity becomes entrenched, making connections to the work of Freire that we had studied in class:

I was offended by the fact that some want to pull the students of the illegal immigrants out of the school system. This reminded me of Freire and all of our talks about keeping the oppressed oppressed and feeling like they don’t have the privilege of being educated.

In all of these examples, teachers shared their new insights about inequities gained through the experience of The New View Walk.

Examining assumptions. Teachers also examined the assumptions they had about their school communities and the people who lived there. As Rachel shared,

This year I really thought about my own views and assumptions as I spent the day. Why was I surprised to see a lawyer with a Hispanic name or a student leader who was also a father? I feel that I am becoming aware of how I affect the world around me with my views.

Bonnie examined the assumption that she already “knew” the community in which her students lived. This assumption was challenged as she applied Freire’s ideas to her observations and questioned her role in empowering non-dominant community members:

We had been to the neighborhood before (last year’s community walk) and I had some assumptions that I ‘knew’ this place; but when we went back I saw it in a different light. I knew the residents were poor and the trailers were small and (some) run down. But instead of just noticing the contrast between the “haves and have nots,” I thought more about them in terms of being oppressed, and wondering what we can do to help them help themselves.

Bonnie learned to examine inequities in income through a critical lens rather than through a deficit lens.

Asking critical questions. Finally, teachers read the world by asking critical questions about what they observed in the communities, or in some cases what they did not observe. Mandy asks,

Why don’t our teenagers take advantage of social opportunities within the community?...Why doesn’t our community have a larger percentage of minority families?...Growth is good, but who is motivating and monitoring that growth?...What can be done to help the transportation issues that prevent students and parents from being a bigger part of school/community events?

Janna posed critical questions related to the growing Hispanic population in her school community:

As I sit back and think about our community, some has changed physically, but my perspective has undergone the most change. The way I view our community is more critically – why are the employees Hispanics and the customers primarily white? Why does the majority of the Hispanic culture live here vs. there? I certainly question things more than I did one year ago.

Whether teachers were sharing insights, examining assumptions, or asking critical questions, they were deeply engaged in critically reading the school community.

Resolve to Act

While critical literacy practices encourage participants to take a more critical look at their surroundings, the ultimate goal is for these participants to take action that impacts those surroundings in ways that lead toward equity and social justice. As Rachel said, “Now I want to find ways to be an agent for change – real change; not just a handout.” Some teachers, including Mandy, resolved to learn more from community members:

The increased, friendly interaction with community members really ignited my interest in learning more. I’ve come to realize that time spent interacting in the community can really have a strong impact on my relationships with my students, parents, and fellow teachers.

Others, like Julia, expressed the desire to transform their classroom practice:

Gaining the knowledge of where they lived and what their lives were like felt powerful to me. It helped me realize that I wanted to change my classroom practices to meet the needs of all students.

Still others, such as Jackie, identified a particular issue that they needed to further explore:

I want to take a closer look at the disability lens because I’ve never really reflected on it before, and I think there is a lot for me to learn about in that community and with a new group of people.

A strong sub-theme emerged as teachers reflected on actions they planned to take due to their experience with The New View Walk. Many teachers were overwhelmed with the immigration issues playing out in their school communities and resolved to learn more. As Katrina wrote, “I need to examine more thoroughly the immigration problem facing [the] county. I hear about it on the news but the presentations that represented those areas made it real for me.” As faculty, we made our own resolution to develop curricular experiences for the following year that specifically addressed the issue of immigration and its impact on the school communities. We believed that in order to help teachers become more critically literate, we needed to support them through all of the stages of critical pedagogy – naming, reflecting, *and* acting.

Conclusions

For the majority of our teachers, critical literacy practices had a strong impact on the ways in which they viewed their school communities. Teachers were more likely to recognize the inequalities and injustices present in their communities

and articulated these inequalities through new insights, an examination of assumptions, and critical questions. We recognize, though, that becoming critically literate is a process. As a result, there were several responses from teachers that included unexamined assumptions and biases suggesting that further work is needed. For example, Anna wrote,

I noticed changes and the openness of the people on this walk. One area that had housed lower economic class people before now has people who take pride in their homes and their community.

While it is a positive step for her to recognize the pride of community members, Anna needs to further examine the assumption that low-income families usually do not “care” about their homes and communities. Nancy also continues to struggle with assumptions about what community members “know” about their worlds and what they value. She reflects,

I am still battling assumptions. Questions such as, “Is this all they know?” “Do they know to question these things?” keep bouncing around. It feels discriminatory to suggest “they don’t know better.” I assume everyone must want more in their lives than what many of these people have, but maybe that’s wrong. What they value and what I value may be two different things and it doesn’t mean one is right and the other is wrong.

It is important for Nancy to recognize that people’s goals might be different from her own, but it becomes problematic to believe that people living in poverty are necessarily happy to be living that way. The assumptions and biases expressed by both Anna and Nancy are subtle and deeply embedded in the narrative of the dominant culture; it will take more time and a continued focus on critical literacy skills to fully deconstruct these ideas. The work has at least begun for these teachers.

This study is of utmost relevance and importance to teachers and teacher educators because it highlights the insights that teachers can gain from community-based experiences that serve to raise awareness and sensitivity to issues of difference and power that impact the lives of teachers and students. Exposing teachers to the Freirian process of “reading the world” on The Community Walk then “reading the word” by critically engaging with the graduate curriculum, followed by “re-reading the world” on The New View Walk allowed them to more deeply examine the context in which their students live and learn. The results of this process offer teacher educators a window into the range and complexities of teachers’ attitudes and responses to curricula designed to support teachers’ professional development toward critical pedagogy.

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