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# From Knowing to Understanding Student Empowerment: A Narrative Approach to Research in a Middle School

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## Abstract

This paper examines how, as a teacher researcher, I employed a narrative approach to research to better understand my 8<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts students' empowerment in school. Drawing on sociocultural theory, critical pedagogy and a narrative approach to teacher research, students' voices were privileged and compared to the systemic assumptions regarding student empowerment inherent in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy in order to develop a stronger professional understanding of how schools empower and disempower students.

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## Introduction

Since the passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), standardized curricula and high-stakes testing have been officially embraced as the panacea of academic underachievement in public schools in the United States (Leistyna, 2007). As "violent" high-stakes (Janesick, 2007, p. 240), standards-based policies and pedagogies take greater hold of public school curricula, teaching, and learning assessment, the already faint voice of the student becomes even more marginalized. Teaching practices that are co-constructed with students, put students' voices at the center of the curricula, are responsive to students' lives, and encourage critical action for social justice struggle to find room within the NCLB-driven public school that obsesses over universal, one-size-fits-all practices in the name of equality and constant surveillance and formalized assessment in the name of accountability.

In part, student empowerment can be defined as "academic competence" (Gay, 2000, p. 32) with "strong skills and academic knowledge" (Shor, 1992, p. 15). While the adults who authored the official NCLB Statement of Purpose did not use the word *empowerment*, similar language is used. For example, the purpose of NCLB is "to

ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments." (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, SEC 1001). But what do students who work within classrooms affected by NCLB policies say about their empowerment in school? This paper intends to address that question by crafting a critical inquiry unit based on the guiding question, "How does school empower and/or disempower you?" As a teacher researcher, I sought to capture the voices of my students as they unpacked their thoughts and experiences relative to empowerment within our urban middle school that was being tightly managed due to restructuring in accordance to NCLB policy.

## Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the concept of sociocultural theory (Bakhtin, 1986; Dewey, 1938/1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; and Wenger, 1998) as a theoretical lens through which to make sense of the social and cultural nature of students' experiences and

descriptions of how school (specifically the educational activities in their class related to literacy) empowered and/or disempowered them. I chose to focus on students' personal narratives as a primary source of data, and, because I viewed the narratives through a sociocultural lens, my findings describe and interpret students' learning as empowered (or disempowered) within varied social and cultural contexts. In short, I use narrative inquiry to identify student experiences of learning in terms of power, and these are always understood as occurring within the social organization of schooling and the culture of the school and my classroom as a community.

As an 8<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts teacher, critical pedagogy and critical literacy were central to my teaching practice and this study. As noted by Ernest Morrell, Peter McLaren states that, "critical scholars reject the claim that schooling constitutes an apolitical and value-neutral process. Critical pedagogy is intended to provide teachers and researchers with a better means of understanding the role that schools actually play within a race-, class-, and gender-divided society" (2008, p. 113). Stevens and Bean define critical literacy as "active questioning of the stance found within, behind, and among texts. Critical literacy is an emancipatory endeavor, supporting students to ask questions about representation, benefit, marginalization, and interests" (2007, p. 12).

Due to my pedagogical inclinations towards critical pedagogy, as a researcher I was drawn to a narrative approach to research. Influenced by sociocultural theory, a narrative approach to research is defined simply as "the study of how human beings experience the world" (Gudmundsdottir, 2001, p. 16). Essentially, a narrative approach focuses on how individuals assign meanings to their experiences through the stories they tell (Moen, 2006). A narrative approach is not only subject-centered by drawing focus on the lives of subjects, it also uses the subjects' own stories and interpretations as data and begins and ends in the storied lives of the people involved (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Subjects' stories cannot be understood without attention paid to the context of everyday life (Daniels, 2008). Further, the aim and purpose of a narrative approach is not to generalize and universalize truth (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), but

narratives are cultural scaffolds or thinking tools that can be used to develop the profession and the field of practice (Moen, 2006).

## Methods and Data Sources

Based on my pedagogical grounding in sociocultural theory and critical literacy, interpretive research - the interest in social construction of reality as individuals interact in social scenes (Geertz, 1973) - was a comfortable research methodology. Elements of ethnography were also employed. "Ethnographic field research involves the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995, p. 1). The eight participants in my study were the ones who made meaning of the particular classroom context and its practices, and it was my objective to understand how they made meaning and what meaning they made regarding their empowerment and disempowerment in schools.

Due to my classroom use of critical literacy, in this project, I also used a theoretical framework and paradigm for my research. By illuminating students' voices and student-assigned meaning, utilizing a narrative approach to research complimented a critical paradigm. Critical research is defined by the desire of the researcher to use research as a tool for social change (Morrell, 2004). Critical research is usually conducted with or on behalf of marginalized populations, the work itself is collaborative in nature, and the work is geared toward producing knowledge in the pursuit of action for change (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). My use of critical literacy as a teacher and a narrative approach as a researcher illustrate my professional intentions towards social change.

All 26 of my students in one of my "On Grade Level" 8<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts classes were invited to participate and have their voices be a part of this study. Of the 26 students invited, eight volunteered their participation. In order to protect the identities of the participants, their names and the names of all other people and places are pseudonyms. The participants represented in many ways the racial, linguistic, economic, and academic diversity found in our urban, Title I middle school that had been restructured one year ago due to failure to make

Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) standards. Ethnographic data in the form of written and digitally recorded audio field notes, digital recordings of students within the workings of my classroom, student work, individual interviews, and focus group interviews was analyzed.

The initial guiding question of our unit came about from surveying my students across all three 8<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts classes by asking them what they were interested in learning. Questions and topics related to school and justice were most popular among my 70+ students, so I decided to offer a critical inquiry unit related to school to my classes. The majority of my students agreed and we had class discussions to focus our collective work, which led me to the concept of empowerment. This was not a concept the students were familiar with, but much of their discussion was related to schools serving and/or disempowering students' academic, social, emotional, and cultural strengths and needs, so the concept of empowerment seemed like a great opportunity for them to apply new conceptual learning to familiar experiences in school.

Based on our conversations leading up to our critical inquiry unit, I introduced a working definition of empowerment as leading to the following outcomes: 1) academic competence 2) personal confidence 3) habit of inquiry, and 4) a willingness to act (Gay, 2000; Shor, 1992). Students then created lists of events and experiences they had experienced in school that they deemed as empowering and/or disempowering. Next, students identified one practice or policy in school that they defined as being importantly empowering or disempowering to them as a student that they would like to research further. Finally, students created a research plan that required them to create a research question, an intended audience, methodology, data to be collected, and intended outcomes for their research. At the end of the unit, students presented their research according to their plans.

While my students were conducting their research, I was conducting mine. As noted earlier, ethnographic data in the form of written and digitally recorded audio field notes, digital recordings of students within the workings of my classroom, student work, individual interviews,

and focus group interviews was analyzed. Given the nature of our research, much of the data I collected spoke directly towards my students' empowerment and disempowerment. However, in order to involve my students in the data analysis process and further privilege their voice, I shared initial assertions I made regarding their empowerment and disempowerment and invited their critique. As a critical pedagogue engaging in a narrative approach to action research, I wanted to make sure I was finding what I thought I was finding and contributing to "youth/adult equity" (Hart, 1992). My students' reading of my analysis was essential to this process.

More specifically, data was analyzed in steps. Step one involved the practice of "narrative smoothing", separating irrelevant and relevant data (Polkinghorne, 1995) to "see what is there" (Grant, 1999). Step two involved a functional approach to analysis (Bruner, 1991) so that data that illuminated participants explicitly making sense of their lived experiences regarding school and empowerment was identified. Step three of the analysis process involved participants "proofreading and editing" my analysis of their words and work. In one-on-one interviews, I shared with them what patterns, themes, and stories I saw emerging from the data. At this point, participants were able to critique my analysis and provide critical feedback that informed the data analysis process.

## Findings

My eight participating students explored a wide variety of topics in their critical inquiry research projects. Three students researched school uniforms, two students researched homework, one student researched America's Choice, one student researched Pioneer's gender segregation policy at lunch and recess, and one student took a different take on the project and researched global sex trafficking. Through the course of our shared research, my students and I identified two primary findings in regards to building an empowering learning community at school. First, students spoke and wrote often about being able to work in constructive ways with their peers while doing common tasks, which reflected Etienne Wenger's (2007) notion of *community of practice*. They voiced that such work was a

necessary resource in troubleshooting challenges found in classroom assignments. Students also spoke of the desire and need to simply interact with their friends and peers in the context of a classroom setting. Here, empowering learning communities takes on multiple meanings. First, empowering learning communities suggests that learning is a shared endeavor among group members, in this case, classmates. Second, because this aspiring empowering learning community takes place in a classroom, the student-teacher relationship is of great importance. Finally, the actions of the teacher in facilitating the development of an empowering learning community are critical.

My identification of the two aforementioned themes came about over the course of teaching and regularly reflecting on my students work during this unit. After nearly every class period I digitally recorded my immediate verbal reflections on the work of the day and what possible themes I saw emerging. The daily reporting of “what I saw” was able to transition into “what I’m seeing” reflections that were bolstered by the conversations I heard my students having, the responses to structured prompts in assignments and in interviews, and in their critical inquiry research projects. Therefore, these reflections, which began broadly, began to narrow towards community of practice and culturally responsive relationships with teachers based on the frequency and the depth of the foci in my observations.

For example, much of my early reflections came about from seeing my participants read together and engage in whole group discussions driven primarily by me. I wondered, “When students work together, what work is their individual mental work and what work is their group’s collective or socially distributed thinking? Does it even matter to tell the difference between the two?” From here I began thinking more specifically about co-construction of knowledge and communities of practice. A few days later after a whole group discussion I facilitated, I reflected, “Discussion was dull. I think they are more active. Stuff like that isn’t what they’re looking for. Move more in the direction of interdependent student work.” The next week a phone went off in class and having a phone on

your person was against school rules. Instead of interrupting class by identifying the culprit and apprehending the phone, I paused and gave a nonchalant smile refusing to look for the person turning off the phone. After class Hannah approached me laughing embarrassingly and confessing that it was her phone and she was sorry for it going off in class and that it would never happen again. After this exchange I reflected, “I’m thinking about this in terms of school empowerment and relationships. How do relationships you have with your teachers empower and disempower you? What encourages those relationships, what discourages those relationships, what potential do those relationships have?”

By reflecting immediately after my daily teaching I was able to begin to identify what was empowering and disempowering to my students and then respond accordingly in my future teaching practices. In short, I wanted to do my best to create an empowering environment, listen to my participants, and make appropriate changes in pursuit of my developing hunches all in pursuit of best identifying what empowered and disempowered my participants.

### **Community of Practice**

Throughout my research, I was drawn repeatedly to the notion of *community of practice*. Internally, I felt that facilitating student engagement that provided students the opportunity to co-construct knowledge was a “best practice”. I was also reminded through various ways the social nature of my students. Defined by Etienne Wenger a *community of practice* is “formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour” (2007, p. 1). While Wenger acknowledges that communities of practice are “everywhere”, implicit in Wenger’s definition is the notion that members of a community of practice actively co-construct knowledge. Within most schools, students engage in group activities that do not necessarily meet the definition of a community of practice. Much of the group work that goes on in traditional school settings does not allow for students to construct meaning and knowledge through collaborative efforts, rather students are following teacher-centered “assembly line” work with others.

During Luke's exit interview, I asked him to clarify his earlier written statement, "In Math and Science all we do is work. When I get out of Math I am so tired and I can't focus as good and sometimes that effects the work in this class."

I attempted to paraphrase, "So if you're more active and given more of the chance to talk and move around, although in this class you said you don't like to move around..."

Luke interrupted, smiling, "I like to talk in this class."

I responded, "Oh, I know. But what you're saying is that if you don't get that chance it sort of effects the rest of your day."

Luke clarified, "That's why I like it when we get to have group discussion. 'Cause then we can discuss and we can write down the problems and we can use the rest of the time to talk quietly."

In Luke's Math and Science classes his teachers strictly followed NCLB imposed curricula, whereas in my class I tried my best to avoid such constraints. Luke, along with his fellow participants, identified that an essential component to being empowered in school was engaging in the process of collective learning.

Renée, like Luke, was more socially reserved in whole class settings. She tended to open up only in small groups of peers where she felt safe. She was self-conscious about what she described as a stutter so she rarely spoke up. Near the end of our research, she and I talked about the data we had collected and assertions I was beginning to make. I started by paraphrasing multiple reflections she wrote that reflected her desire to talk and interact with her peers in class. I asked, "You like the social aspect of class? You like to be able to talk and work at the same time?"

Renée confirmed, "Yeah, because like in Math we get to talk but it's only math-related. And we started last week that if someone gets it wrong we get in trouble. And to be talking it's funner (sic) because like, if your friend is feeling bad you can help them out."

I mentioned to Renée how I noticed and was impressed by the work she did with the other students. While I detailed my observation of the work Renée did with her classmates, she hung her head with a small smile, looking embarrassed by the compliment. I then asked, "What would it have been like if you had not had the opportunity to

work with these other students? You could have only worked alone and quietly. Do you think that would have been different as far as how well you did?"

"It would have. Like, I wouldn't have been doing that much because if I would have gotten stuck on something I would have been like, 'Oh, I can't ask anybody for advice or for someone to help me.' So I'd a been like, just sitting there, drawing or something."

Next, I asked Renée what she liked about the unit and what her general reflections were towards the concept of empowerment and how the unit influenced her. Renée responded by stating, "I liked to read the books and that we got to write what we thought about them. And like, we got to see how other people feel."

### **Culturally Relevant Relationships with Teachers**

What was not intended to be a foci of this study, *culturally relevant relationships with teachers* emerged as a powerful theme in my participants' notions of empowerment and disempowerment in school. Geneva Gay notes that "although called by many different names, including *culturally relevant, sensitive, centered, congruent, reflective, mediated, contextualized, synchronized, and responsive*, the idea about why it is important to make classroom instruction more consistent with the cultural orientations of ethnically diverse students, and how this can be done, are virtually identical" (2000, p. 29).

Participants regularly expressed the importance of engaging in *culturally relevant relationships with teachers*, which according to them, involved teachers providing explicit academic support, positive teacher affirmations and expectations and culturally relevant texts. Vasha was one who expressed the need for teachers to offer explicit academic support when she stated, "Like in this classroom when we did that poem thing. You wrote out the steps for us, the six steps. You wrote out the poem for us and gave us time to pick out our topic and brainstorm and stuff. Use different words and use our ideas and stuff. For the people who don't really know how to write poems, gave them an idea."

In a focus group interview, Raul captured a popular non-example of positive teacher

affirmations when he spoke about Mr. Ethridge, a math teacher many students had:

The thing I don't like about Mr. Ethridge is the way he looks us down. Like I guess he don't care about our dreams. He'll like, he'll tell us straight out, like if he thinks we're going to be nothing in life, he'll just tell us. He told half the class already that you're not going to be nothing in life. And one day he started telling Lance that in his first job he'll get fired if he doesn't turn in his work right. Lance, he tries, he tried hard to do his work. I've even seen him. Like, I'll admit, he works harder than me, but you have to be an A student to make Mr. Ethridge smile.

In contrast to Raul's popular critique of Mr. Ethridge, Luke and Vasha both identified Ms. Sutton as a teacher with whom they had a culturally relevant relationship.

Luke stated, "She lets us work in our own speed. She helps us if we need help; she makes sure we always get our work done at the end of the day. She basically just makes it really easy... kind of tells us if we're doing good or stuff."

And Vasha added, "And she empowers everybody. She don't never tell us we can't do it. She be like, 'Well you need to do this and do that, maybe you'll get it next time. You can do extra work if you want to get your grade up.'"

Raul sparked discussion regarding the use of culturally relevant texts when he said, "I like this class because usually like every year since I was little, like reading and Language Arts would be the class I would fail."

"I didn't like Language Arts," added Vasha.

"Me too," said Hannah.

"But now, this class, from all my years, it's different like. It's fun and I actually learn and in this class I actually want to read like 'cause you actually give us a book like that if we want to read not one that like you're pressuring us to read," continued Raul.

Vasha elaborated, "It's like every time we read a book in this class it's always teaching us something, you'll get deep in the book. You connect with all the students and it makes us want to have a connection with you."

Raul and Vasha further explained the need the participants had for rigorous and respectful relationships with teachers by illustrating how the chosen text could be a conduit for both. Raul's, Vasha's, and Hannah's eyes had been opened to the possibility of liking reading and a Language Arts class in part because they had the opportunity to read culturally relevant texts, not just material that was decided for them that may not relate to their life experiences and interests. By matching the curricular materials and texts to students, Raul and others felt their lives were central to the classroom, they were more respected, and they had greater room to voice opinions. All of which led to greater confidence and engagement. In addition, Vasha also spoke to the potential of teaching illuminating depth in the connections between student and text. If the students' lives were connected in important ways to the text, often via cultural affiliations, and the text could be studied in academically rigorous ways, then there was inherent depth to the lives of students. Not only were students' lives and experiences being reflected in what was being studied in class, but their lives were being shown as worthy of in-depth study and intellectual.

By making students the center of the class curricula in terms of what content was studied, how the content was related to students, how time was used in the classroom, and how feedback was provided to students, students felt more confident in their abilities, more apt to seek out and be given constructive support, and more comfortable as a participant in school. In short, more empowered.

## Significance

Looking at my participants' work and listening to their perspectives as they relate to their empowerment in schools in isolation wasn't necessarily impressive. Much of what they expressed affirmed what I already assumed about students in general, and my participants more specifically, in regards to empowerment in schools. However, looking at how the individual pieces fit together to foster empowerment was extremely illuminating. It wasn't enough to simply let students work together and form communities of practice, participants had to do relative work that, in most cases, could only be done better with the help of others. It wasn't enough to tell

participants that in the name of critical pedagogy students would be in charge, I needed to intervene and provide the right amount of support at the right time. In essence, it was the thoughtful and reflexive blending of what the students and I identified as empowering components that aided in the participants' empowerment and furthered my learning as a practitioner.

Planning, engaging in, and assessing critical literacy within a heavily regimented standards-based school was an incredible professional challenge for me. Despite my most heartfelt intentions, the actual facilitation of the work I intended to explore with my students was made difficult due to the obstacles related to America's Choice expectations within the building, the prior experiences of my students and my prior experiences related literacy pedagogies, and the role of assessment.

This paper challenged the terms of research and also of learning in ways intended explicitly to address the shortcomings of instruction and research ordinarily undertaken in classrooms. As such, it investigated the ways in which school was acted upon students utilizing student-centered teaching practices and research methods that allowed students to tell their own stories. This study may uniquely complement and synthesize research aimed at teachers involving critical pedagogy, action research, and a narrative approach to research.

This study highlighted the value of student voice in research, particularly teacher research. Much of research related to schools and subsequently policy related to schools involves adult stakeholders acting in the supposed best interest of students. However, the assumptions that inform such actions are rarely based on a survey of student voices. This comes to no surprise to me, as schools are not generally constructed to allow students to shape practices and policy, therefore it would not be a common practice for researchers to center student voices on their work. Through my listening to the voices of my participants, I found that students offer a rich and nuanced perspective regarding the realities of the classroom and the effects enacted policy has on their learning and lives. Their voice is a rarely respected resource that has the potential to guide research and policy

that more accurately addresses the needs of students.

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