EMPOWERMENT IN THE ERA OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON EMPOWERMENT IN A RESTRUCTURED URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

By

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ABSTRACT

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From its inception, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has had the veiled intention to empower students. Through increased federal funding and an adherence to standards-based education reform, American public school students' individual outcomes were to be improved. Notably, NCLB focused attention on traditionally underserved students. Students of color, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty were to be better served via universal academic expectations of success. This aim included the distribution of funds being awarded or withheld based on a school's overall average performance on their state's annual standardized tests as well as the average performance of the school's major racial, linguistic, and ability subgroups of students. Schools that underserved all students or perpetuated the "achievement gap" by enabling White, middle-class and wealthy students to pass standardized tests while students of color, students in poverty, students with disabilities, students who speak English as a second or other language fail those same tests would lose eligibility for substantial federal funds and could be restructured or closed due to chronic underperformance. On paper, NCLB was to usher in a new era of accountability, support, high expectations, and competitiveness that would empower millions of school-age children.

From my position as an 8th grade Language Arts teacher in an urban middle school that was restructured due to failure to meet NCLB demands, I was able to experience from a practitioner's perspective how NCLB policies affected the empowerment of students and teachers. Teachers and students felt the pressure to follow universalized curricula that was strictly paced and many rejected these demands. It was on the basis of these experiences that I decided to examine the empowerment of my students as we engaged in critical literacy practices within a school that demanded strict adherence to non-critical curricula and instruction.

Acknowledgements

The process of conceptualizing, researching, writing, and completing this dissertation as well as my doctoral studies has been a lengthy process and a true test of my intellect, endurance, and commitment. Along the way there have been many obstacles, setbacks and triumphs, all of which I could not have fully experienced as opportunities to learn and grow without the presence of so many important people in my life. It is here that I'd like to thank them.

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In addition to great graduate colleagues, I've been blessed to have worked alongside excellent teachers in my return to the elementary and middle school classrooms. Heidi Salciccioli, Nicole Hurst, and Stacie Looney made the challenges of "The Big House" manageable, even though our time there together was cut short. And Cammie Cathey and Amy Barry were the perfect friends and colleagues to teach with me as I returned "home" to dissertate. I know that "Pioneer" will continue to progress while your voices are present.

Due to the length of my studies and other special circumstances, I've had the benefit to learn from a great many talented, inspiring and invaluable faculty. Steve Ryan was my first and best advisor, official and otherwise. Ernest Morrell, Susan Melnick, Lynn Findler, and Lynn Paine all provided me with personal and professional support at important times while on campus. Angela Calabrese Barton and Susan Florio-Ruane (who has been with me from almost the beginning in one capacity or another) have had the unenviable responsibility of guiding me through the end of my studies from over 900 miles away. Both, along with Samantha Caughlan and Sandra Crespo have been living saints and deserve more thanks than I can express here.

Life as a teacher is incomplete without the relationships built with students. During my careers as a teacher I've been indelibly shaped by each and every one my students and without question can't acknowledge my current professional place without acknowledging how my hundreds of students helped me get here. My participants in this study will always hold a special place in my heart and I will forever be in the service of each student who has graced my many classrooms.

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and nobody has believed in me more than you. You, Olivia, Jude, and Micah are at the heart of everything beautiful in my life and have made the impossible, possible in so many ways.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I spent my 7th and 8th grade years as a student at Pioneer Junior High School[1]. I walked the three short blocks to my neighborhood school every day, played on the basketball team, ran track, and sang in the choir. I had many friends and both years I had a strong rapport with my social studies teachers. I also got poor grades, regularly skipped class, and was assigned in-school suspension multiple times. While my years at Pioneer were socially comfortable, they represent the first time in my schooling career when I felt both academically and politically disempowered. Prior to my life in middle school I had felt academically proficient. Grades and tests were never of great interest to me, but I felt as though I was progressing relative to my peers. I had frustrations inside and outside of elementary school, but my frustrations never coalesced to illustrate a broader sociopolitical narrative. However, my experiences at Pioneer created the articulated feeling that school was profoundly disconnected from my life as well as the lives of others and that school was not a place where a great many of my peers and I could go to learn how to alleviate our frustrations, but instead was a place where our frustrations would be perpetuated.

Twenty years after leaving Pioneer for high school, seeing school and society with growing distrust and apathy, I returned as an 8th grade Language Arts teacher. In the spring of 2008 Pioneer had failed to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for five consecutive years, as defined by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy. Consequently,

[1] The names of all places and people in this study will be pseudonyms.

Pioneer was forced to restructure, a process that resulted in a new administration and a majority of teaching staff being replaced. According to NCLB, Pioneer was seemingly disempowering its students by failing to teach them literacy, and I decided to take a risk and trade my life as a veteran elementary school teacher for a chance to "go home" to Pioneer Middle School and attempt to understand and help to solve this problem. My return was compelled by my personal witness to disempowering experiences at Pioneer, subsequent empowering school experiences many years later, and my professional work towards enacting critical pedagogy, a way of understanding and teaching literacy within the school curriculum which is central to this dissertation and about which I will say more in subsequent chapters. Further, I returned to Pioneer with a specific interest to better understand my own disempowerment at this school as well as to better understand the empowerment and disempowerment of the current students at Pioneer. I had not been back to Pioneer at all since my last day of 8th grade and as I walked the halls for the first time as a teacher the immediate feeling, given my history and my professional intentions, was nothing short of surreal.

In the 1992 book Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change, Ira Shor details what empowerment in schools involves. "Empowering education" is described as inviting "students to become skilled workers and thinking citizens who are also change agents and social critics" (p.16). According to Shor, "empowering education" is characterized by 11 values; it is, in Shor's terms, participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, desocializing, democratic, researching,

interdisciplinary, and activist (ibid). The goals of "empowering education" are to "relate personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change" (p. 15) Shor asserts that "empowering education" runs contrary to "traditional education", a pedagogy exemplified by E.D. Hirsch (1987). "Traditional education" is described as being centered on teacher-talk, is Euro-centric, and that it perpetuates the myth that education is the great equalizer. Hirsch claims that the mastery of "a few hundred pages" of canonical, convergent information is all that stands between "the literate and the illiterate, between dependence and autonomy" (p. 143).

James Banks' (1991) definition of empowerment speaks to my return to Pioneer and the nature of this study: "A curriculum designed to empower students must be transformative in nature and help students to develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critics who can make reflective decisions and implement their decisions in effective personal, social, political, and economic action" (p. 131). As a student at Pioneer I rarely, if ever, felt that the learning I had experienced through life was explicitly connected to the skill of making constructive decisions that address the social world in which I lived. Further, I was never asked to reflect on my interpretations of schooling as an agent of empowerment or disempowerment. Therefore, my students and their interpretations were the focus of this study. My objective was to understand how and in what ways they were empowered and disempowered by school. In order to gain understanding into the development of their interpretations, it was important to

describe and explain the activities, curriculum, and standards in which my students engage. The general purpose of this dissertation project was to describe and explain how 8th grade students in my Language Arts class interpret how they have been empowered and disempowered by school. The study also addresses the process and potential of a narrative approach to action research and the engagement of critical pedagogy in an urban middle school.

Before dealing in specific with the basic concept of "empowerment" organizing my study, the narrative approach I took to action research in the study, or the theoretical framing of my study within critical theory and critical pedagogy, I briefly describe my broad research questions and describe the site of my research below.

My questions fall into two broad categories: the nature and role of empowerment (or, conversely, disempowerment) in my students' experience of the critical literacy curriculum I developed and enacted with them; and the question of teacher/school policies and practices empower/disempower students. Specifically, I ask the following:

1. What empowers/disempowers students?
2. How does students' empowerment come to be?
3. What teacher/school policies and practices empower/disempower students?

To answer these questions, as described above, I returned to the school where I had been a disempowered student and, now as a teacher, created and studied a curriculum

focused in critical literacy. I engaged in practitioner inquiry within an action research context—that is, I studied my own practice and the learning of my students while in the midst of making changes in curriculum and instruction to help my students engage in empowered experiences of literacy.

By engaging in action research, the selection of my research site was of little consequence since it was the place of my employment. Simply, Pioneer Middle School is the school in which I taught. Pioneer is situated in a working class residential neighborhood in a large city in the Midwest. Pioneer has about 500 students in grades 6-8. While Pioneer has a small enrollment relative to other district middle schools, Pioneer feeds into City High School, the city's only central city high school and the state's largest high school. Racial parody among students is a unique characteristic of Pioneer, whereas Pioneer is the only school in the district that has three racial groups constituting at least 25% of the school's population. The racial breakdown is as follows: 36% white, 28% African American, 28% Latino, 6% Asian American, and 2% American Indian. Pioneer is also a Title I school where over 90% of students are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches.

At Pioneer I taught 8th grade Language Arts. During the 2009-2010 school year, during which this study took place, I taught two sections of On Grade Level (OGL) Language Arts and one section of Advanced (AD) Language Arts. Math and Language Arts classes are double blocked at Pioneer taking up two 45-minute class periods each

day. Therefore, these three classes represent all the classes I taught. At Pioneer, OGL and AD Language Arts classes generally had between 15-25 students.

Participant Selection

This research project involved one of the two classes of 8th grade OGL Language Arts classes I taught, which included between 22-28 potential participants. I drew participants from my second section for logistical reasons. My second section met immediately prior lunch so after each class I could digitally record audio field notes while thoughts were fresh in my mind without having to interrupt teaching duties. It was my hope that my focal group of participants be representative of Pioneer in multiple ways. Invitations to participate were extended to all members of the class and I anticipated that I would have 6-12 students return consent forms. In the end, eight students agreed to participate. The primary role of the participants in this study was to be to naturally engage in classroom activities required by my classroom expectations for all of my students in attendance, participants or not. The additional time or activities required of the participants for the purposes of this research was to be participation in small group or individual interviews, which took place during class (e.g. silent reading time) or during a time of their choice.

Researcher Role

My primary role in this project was that of an 8th grade Language Arts teacher. Secondarily, was my role as a researcher. Participating in both roles was professionally and personally challenging as well as professionally and personally rewarding. My

experience teaching 8th grade Language Arts at Pioneer during the 2008-2009 school year involved burgeoning curiosities regarding student empowerment and student definition of the school-related sources and examples of empowerment and disempowerment. During the 2008-2009 school year, I informally observed and researched regarding this topic, but was unable to come to the understanding regarding this topic that I desired. My intent for this study was to have the opportunity to delve more deeply into more formalized data collection and analysis so as to come to a level of understanding that would enrich my students' lives as well as my own and also provide a resource to colleagues and fellow teachers.

By definition, engaging in action research required me to also be an active participant in the research. There was no way I could remain neutral to anything that went on in the classroom, nor could I merely observe as a "fly on the wall." My participation as teacher and researcher heavily influenced how the classroom environment was shaped and I realize that my voice was entangled with the "multivoicedness "of my participants' voices in each piece of data I chose to collect and analyze (Moen, 2006, p.5). I understand that there are implications and consequences of my presence. Because of this, I intended to be sensitive and perceptive as to how I was impacting the study. In addition, I also intended to be transparent in my research as to how my presence impacted the participants and data.

Significance of the Study

Since the passing of 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, p. 98). Yet, due to the distortion of reporting test scores, the infringement of class time, and the profanation of and arrogance about the use of class time for drilling for the test, all converge to elucidate the violence of high-stakes testing (Janesick, 2007, p. 240). Teachers rarely facilitate research that shapes policy that defines what is best for students. Even more rare is research that focuses on student voice in regards to the policy and practices of school relative to their empowerment. It is the intention of this study to conduct research that enacts voice with my students so as to form a counter-narrative to traditional schooling and research that marginalizes student and teachers within the era of NCLB. This study also intends to provide insight into the potential and possibility of critical pedagogy and action research that informs policy and practice of teachers, students, researchers and school administrators.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This research project adopts the concept of sociocultural theory (Bakhtin, 1986; Dewey, 1938/1997; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Vygostsky, 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) empowers and/or disempowers 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.

Etienne Wenger (1998, p. 72-73) illuminates sociocultural theory by defining a "community of practice" as a site of learning and action in which people come together around a joint enterprise, in the process of developing a whole repertoire of activities, common stories, and ways of speaking and acting. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991, p. 29) describe the process of becoming a part of a community of practice through the process of "legitimate peripheral participation". There are three principles of legitimate peripheral participation that are at the focus of this study involving critical pedagogy and the narrative approach to research. First, knowledge needs to be presented in an authentic context; that is, settings and applications that would normally involve that knowledge.

Second, learning requires social interaction and collaboration. Third, This framework places learning at the intersection of community, shared practice, identity, and meaning. While Lave and Wenger may not explicitly list it, their construct of legitimate peripheral participation entails the idea that learners are always in different places within the community as they learn to practice; that the practice is available to be learned in its full complexity, and that it is a given that as people approach full knowledge of the practice they can legitimately stand at the periphery. The key is that they are all authentically engaged and making progress, that the practice is meaningful and available to be learned, and that they are moving toward not only mastery of a practice, but also taking a kind of ownership of it in which they not only learn it, but transform it as they take on the roles of mature members of that community of practice—they both learn and also make culture.

This brief literature review examines three themes central to this project -- critical pedagogy, action research, and the narrative approach to research. These three themes compliment sociocultural theory in that they all involve the authentic perspectives of participants and reciprocity in the shared work of participants. The first theme highlights the pedagogy that students will experience in my classroom. The second theme illustrates the duel role of teacher/researcher that I will play as I conduct research in this project. Finally, the third theme describes the method of inquiry used in this project.

Students are the essential element to all work regarding schools. Schools exist for students and schools cannot exist without students. School policy is either directly or indirectly written with students in mind. Research regarding schools is either directly or

indirectly conducted with students in mind. Students are central to the concept and application of schools. However, students rarely have a voice in shaping the construct of school (Mitra, 2004, p. 652). Students do not write nor do they enact policy. Therefore it is not surprising that Students rarely engage in student-centered activities where they have the opportunity to experience pedagogical practices which apprentice or in which their learning is supported to acquire the new practices with gradual release of control.

Similarly, students do not write nor do they enact policy. Students rarely engage in student-centered pedagogical practices. Students, while often the subject of school research, rarely ever are participants in school research. Via compulsory education, students are required to attend school, are tested, graded, evaluated, and policed. Students represent the school stakeholders with the highest level of participation while also representing the stakeholders with the least amount of capital (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 124-125). This study changes 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 investigates the ways in which school is acted upon students utilizing student-centered teaching practices and research methods that allow students to tell their own stories. This study may uniquely complement and synthesize research aimed at teachers involving critical pedagogy, action research, and the narrative approach to research.

Critical Pedagogy

Drawing from critical theory and inspiring many critical practices such as critical literacy, pinpointing a consistent definition of critical pedagogy is no easy task. Peter

McLaren (1989) offers a coherent definition of critical pedagogy by detailing its work relative to resisting oppression and working towards social justice:

> Critical pedagogy challenges the assumption that schools function as major sites of social and economic mobility. Proponents of this pedagogical theory suggest that schooling must be analyzed as a cultural and historical process, in which select groups are positioned within asymmetrical relations of power on the basis of specific race, class, and gender groupings. (p. 166)

Citing McLaren, Ernest Morrell (2008, p. 113) 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." Perhaps the most well known tenet of critical pedagogy is "problem-posing" education (Freire, 1970, p. 80). Problem-posing education is an alternative to the "banking concept" of schooling (Freire, 1970, p. 72), in which teachers simply transfer knowledge to students via lecture. Problem-posing education also involves students and teachers negotiating through dialogue the process of learning around solving relevant problems that exist (Morrell, 2004, p. 22).

While some theorists who write about critical pedagogy exclude mention of students and/or do not discuss the participation of students in enacting critical pedagogy, a socioculural view of the process of teaching and learning such as that described by Lave and Wenger would highlight student participation not merely as a byproduct of

critical pedagogy, but as explicitly involved in its enactment and students' experience of learning as empowering. Stevens and Bean (2007, p. 12) 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." Drawing on Freire (1998), Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008, p. 27) expand the notion of critical literacy beyond a classroom practice belonging to teachers by asserting that critical literacy can be developed within teachers and students as a lens through which to "read the word and the world" (Freire and Macedo, 1987). They say that, "This literacy revolves around the five stages of critical praxis. It creates a cycle of awareness, action, and reflection whereby people are empowered constantly to analyze and act upon the material conditions of their own lives" (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, p. 27).

A myriad of critical pedagogues have written about how critical literacy as a practice and worldview influences students and teachers. Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008, p. 7) examined the work of leading critical pedagogues looking for commonalities and came to describe the four dimensions of critical literacy: *disrupting the commonplace* allows readers to analyze text to understand how people and things are positioned and defined by the text, *considering multiple viewpoints* encourages readers to multiple and contradictory perspectives relative to the text as well as to ask, "Whose voices are heard, and whose are missing?", *focusing on the sociopolitical* requires readers to interrogate the sociopolitical systems in which a text resides, and *taking action to promote social justice*

engages readers in praxis reflection and action on the world to transform it.

Teachers and researchers such as Bean and Moni (2003), Beck (2005), Hynds (1995), Jewett and Smith (2003), McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), Morrell (2004), Quintero (2004), and Van Sluys and Reinier (2006) have offered work that illustrate how critical literacy can be successfully implemented primarily in elementary and secondary schools. In younger grades, students may show more of a proclivity towards imaginative play that lends itself well to the consideration of multiple perspectives. In secondary grades, in addition to considering multiple perspectives, students may be more open to exploring issues related to privilege and access, which may facilitate greater work around focusing on disrupting the commonplace and sociopolitical issues. Little research has been done in middle school contexts involving critical literacy practices to illustrate how middle schoolers engage in critical literacy practices. In part, this research will seek to explore how middle schoolers engage in critical literacy practices by highlighting what the participants

> are putting their energy into, the ways in which they are approaching knowledge of the world...; at the same time, it gives us [teachers and researchers] a way to explore the patterns and assumptions that formed the structure and content of ...[one's] own teaching (Ballenger, 1999, p. 14).

Critical pedagogy is not without its critics. While critical pedagogues challenge the "banking concept" of education and "traditional education", critical pedagogy has been described as being overly theoretical and idealistic (Ravitch, 2000, p. 393),

intellectually soft and lacking rigor (Hirsch, 1987, p. 132-133), and de-emphasizing the role the teacher plays in imparting skills and knowledge relative to the culture of power that the poor and students of color must learn to be successful in school (Delpit, 1988, p. 283). Morrell (2004, p. 24) echoes Delpit's concerns regarding the culture of power but warns against teaching "the culture of power" (which might take the form, for example, of requiring students' to master received interpretations of works of literature rather than teaching them how to read literature critical) without critical study of the social mechanisms that create and perpetuate the culture of power. We can see in Morrell's (2008, p. 117) work with urban high school students in community-based summer literacy projects in Los Angeles, for example, that it is possible to teach students normative knowledge about text, while also helping them to understand such knowledge critically and develop alternate ways of and reasons for knowing about, creating, and interpreting text.

The term critical pedagogy cannot be attributed with all certainty to any one person or group. However, it is widely considered that Paulo Freire, with the publication of Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) is the most likely candidate (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p. 24). Critical pedagogy is a contemporary movement but the philosophical influences of critical pedagogy are centuries old. Morrell (2008, p. 37) offers a timeline of critical philosophy and credits Immanuel Kant (1721-1804) as the seminal work. Central to Kant's three major critiques is questioning the source and nature of knowledge. Enlightenment philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel (1770-1831)

challenged the idea of absolute knowledge and was interested in how people came to know the world on their own terms. Karl Marx (1818-1883) is the Enlightenment philosopher most notably connected with contemporary critical pedagogy. Marx endorsed a revolutionary "class" consciousness on the part of the proletariat in order to better understand and resist material conditions espoused by exploitive capitalist ideology. The collaboration of academics known as the Frankfurt School contributed to critical theory from the 1920s-1960s. According to Morrell (2008, p. 43), "The Frankfurt critical theory is one that gives humans, as social agents, language and tools to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions." This study presented here attempts to expand on the scholarship of critical pedagogy by illuminating, through the narrative approach to action research, how this theory is employed as the conduit through which students study and articulate empowerment and disempowerment in school, particularly within a school that is subjected to strict NCLB mandates.

Narrative Approach to Research

Influenced by sociocultural theory, the narrative approach to research is defined simply as "the study of how human beings experience the world" (Gudmundsdottir, 2001, p. 16). Essentially, the narrative approach focuses on how individuals assign meanings to their experiences through the stories they tell (Moen, 2006, p. 5). The 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 and Rosiek, 2007, p. 71). Subjects' stories cannot be

understood without attention paid to the context of everyday life (Daniels, 2008, p. 93). Further, the aim and purpose of the narrative approach is not to generalize and universalize truth (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007, p. 60), but narratives are cultural scaffolds or thinking tools that can be used to develop the profession and the field of practice (Moen, 2006, p. 9).

Torill Moen (2006, p. 4-5) organized literature on the narrative approach and found three basic claims. First, human beings organize their experiences of the world into narratives. Research that addresses the perspectives of individuals can be supported by the narrative approach. Second, narrative researchers maintain that the stories that are told depend on the individual's past and present experiences, her or his values, the people the stories are being told to, the addressees, and when and where they are being told. In the narrative approach context matters as well as the collaborative relationship between researcher and subject. Third, multivoicedness occurs in narrative research. Multivoicedness refers to subjects' voices shaped by their experiences, knowledge, values, and feelings that are being shaped by the cultural, institutional, and historical voices in which they occur. Moen (2006, p. 6) goes on to explore the process of the narrative approach by highlighting that one of its main characteristics is the collaborative process between the researcher and her or his subjects. Subjects are seen more as collaborators rather than informants. Also, stories are expressed from subject to researcher via dialogue in its many forms. Therefore, including both the subjects' and researcher's points of view in the research report is necessary. In referencing her own

experience with the narrative approach, Daniels (2008, p. 101) notes that "Researching women's learning experiences through narrative inquiry lets women speak, and speak in their own words..."

The researcher using the narrative approach may have every intention to let the subjects' stories speak for themselves. However, in reality the researcher still makes important decisions regarding what stories are told, for what purpose, how the stories are told and which contexts are favored over others (Daniels, 2008, p. 102). The researcher makes subjective decisions based in part on her or his stories. These decisions are unavoidable and are apart of the complex process called "restorying". With restorying, the researcher collects and analyzes stories that have been interpreted, re-interpreted, considered, documented, read, and re-read. It is a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling as the research proceeds (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). Therefore, the researcher must be transparent to her or his audience regarding the complexity of the narrative approach.

The narrative approach is a relatively new branch within the qualitative or interpretive research tradition (Moen, 2006, p. 2). As stated earlier, the narrative approach relies heavily on sociocultural theory, primarily focusing on Vygotsky's (1978) ideas on the developmental approach to the study of human beings, and Bakhtin's (1986) ideas on dialogue (Moen, 2006, p. 2). Vygotsky's (1978) notion that human learning occurs in socially and culturally constructed contexts supports the narrative approach theme that context matters. Bakhtin (1986) furthers Vygotsky's assertion by stating that

humans are in constant dialogue with themselves and others and it is through interactive dialogue that humans together create meaning and understanding. The narrative approach is fueled by the dialogue or stories that are expressed subjects, researchers, and all other people and institutions that contribute to their lived experiences.

Narrative research is not abstract, remote, or inaccessible. They are familiar, informative, and relevant to those who read them (Moen, 2006, p. 9). Narratives bring practice up close (Carter, 1993, p. 6), contributing to provoking, inspiring, and initiating discussions and dialogues, something that is crucial for reflection on practice and its development (Moen, 2006, p. 9). Given that the narrative approach is useful to study experiences of the less visible members of any group in society (Daniels, 2008, p. 98), and that using stories of experience to investigate learning, researchers can gain insights that are not possible using methods that preclude individual experience as a starting point (Daniels, 2008, p. 104), this study attempts to expand on such scholarship by combining it with action research involving middle school students.

Critical Pedagogy and the Narrative Approach to Research in Concert

There are important complimenting components that make the narrative approach to research a logical match with critical pedagogy. First, both the narrative approach and critical pedagogy recognize that learning is shaped by people's interaction with others and with texts and other artifacts, all part of the cultural context in which it takes place. The narrative approach speaks to the multivoicedness of the classroom that extends beyond teacher or printed text as authoritative knower or source of knowledge to include

the talk and writing of students. Not only students' their voices at play, but so too are the cultural and institutional voices that surround them. Similarly, critical pedagogy views school as place where asymmetrical power exists along cultural lines. Through critical pedagogical practices, students and teachers can become more aware of the privileging and marginalizing actions of school as well as become more active in challenging this reality. For example, at Pioneer, America's Choice became a powerful voice that was privileged at the building, district, and federal levels that largely dictated what, how, when, and why curricula was to be transferred to students. Consequently, the voices of students and teachers were marginalized and alternative notions of teaching and learning were not readily respected.

Second, the narrative approach involves the study of how students experience the world in which they live. Focus is given to how students perceive their surroundings rather than forcing students to perceive their surroundings in a particular way. This tenet compliments the practice in critical pedagogy that calls for students to "read the world". Students are to be more aware of their surroundings and become more skilled at articulating how institutions and individuals shape the world around them rather than teachers prescribing a particular standard or making no mention to context at all.

Third, both the narrative approach and critical pedagogy are interested in students assigning meanings. Utilizing the narrative approach, teachers (with the help of students) harvest students' own stories and interpretations as privileged data in the classroom rather than having researchers impose meaning on the students. With critical pedagogy, teachers

involve students in asking questions regarding benefit, marginalization, and interests within a context so that they can make meaning for themselves.

Finally, collaboration is key in both the narrative approach to research and critical pedagogy. Both researchers and subjects work together in order to most accurately capture the perspectives of the subjects when the narrative approach is being utilized. Critical pedagogues use “Problem-posing” as opposed to “banking” methods of teaching so that students remain central to the work within the classroom. In both cases, students and teachers and/or researchers work together, reciprocally rather than teachers and/or researchers taking on a more dictatorial role.

Chapter 3: The Research Project: Questions and Methods

Rationale for Methodology

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009, p.4). It is also a broad term applied to varied research techniques. What they have in common is interpretation as a means of studying naturalistic activities and participants' understandings and ways of making meaning as the focus of research. As stated, qualitative research in general, and narrative research in particular are ways to tap students' interpretations of school literacy activities and the roles that students play within them as empowered or disempowered learners. The narrative approach is used because the intent of the study is for students to detail their interpretations of school in assignments they were given and for me to work as participant observer and narrative researcher to interpret those representations of experience in order to answer my study's question.

In interpretive research, the interest is in social construction of reality as individuals interact in social scenes (Geertz, 1973, p. 20-21). For this reason, elements of ethnography will also be 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 participants in this study are the ones who will make meaning of the particular classroom context and its practices, and it is my objective to understand how they make meaning and what meaning they make regarding their empowerment in schools. However, as their teacher, I will be engaging in action research (previously

defined), trying to understand how my own practice is part of the process by which my students become engaged in meaningful school learning.

Due to my classroom use of critical pedagogy, in this project — the rational for which is described in Chapter Two — I also used a theoretical framework and paradigm for my research. By tapping into participants' voices and student-assigned meaning, utilizing the 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, p. 42). 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 and Morrell, 2008, p.109). My use of critical pedagogy as a teacher and the narrative approach as a researcher illustrate my professional intentions of social change.

Ethnographic field research supports the narrative approach to research and critical pedagogy when it becomes critical itself, as Thomas and O'Maolchatha (1989) explain:

> Critical ethnography refers to the reflective process of choosing between conceptual alternatives and making value-laden judgments of meaning and method to challenge research, policy, and other forms of human activity (p. 147).

Moreover, Jim Thomas (1993) helps to clarify some of the differences between conventional and critical ethnography while also connecting to the narrative approach and critical pedagogy via privileging participant voice:

> Conventional ethnographers generally speak *for* their subjects, usually to an audience of other researchers. Critical ethnographers, by contrast, accept an added research task of raising their voice to speak *to* an audience *on behalf* of their subjects as a means of empowering them by giving more authority to the subjects' voice (p. 4).

Action Research

Whether known as *action research*, *teacher research*, or *practitioner inquiry*, all are similar in their definitions. For the purpose of this study I will use the term action research when describing my project or the work of others for two reasons. First, *action* closely relates to notions of critical pedagogy in that learning is active rather than passive. Second, using *action* instead of *teacher* allows for students to be co-facilitators and more involved and equal participants in the research.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993, p. 7) define teacher research as being "systematic and intentional inquiry about teaching, learning, and schooling carried out by teachers in their own school and classroom setting." Fleming (2000, p. 11) defines action research as "a systematic inquiry into a school or classroom situation with the intent of improving the quality of teaching and learning and gaining a deeper understanding of the complex context in which it occurs." What isn't completely illustrated in both definitions but is discussed further in both texts is the Freirian concept of "praxis" (Freire, 1970). Praxis is defined as "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it (p. 79). Noted by Cochran-Smith and Lytle, teacher researchers' inside perspective on the ways in which students and teachers co-construct knowledge

and curriculum allows teacher research to move towards praxis, or critical reflection on practice (Lather, 1986, p. 263). Fleming doesn't mention Freire or praxis by name but does describe how the process action research involves teachers raising questions about school or classroom practices, developing plans for investigating their questions, and systematically observe the results of their action plans on student performance. This process leads to reflection, analysis, and informed decision making which resembles the Freirian process of praxis which includes the following stages: identify a problem, analyze the problem, create a plan of action to address the problem, implement the plan of action, analyze and evaluate the action (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p. 25).

Lankshear and Knobel (2004, p. 3-4) have identified three points of broad consensus regarding action research. First, action research is non-quantitative, non psychometric, non positivist, and non experimental research. With intention, action research has grown over the past 30 years in opposition to quantitative research. Second, action researchers are teachers who direct immediate research in their own classrooms. Third, the goals of action research involve two key concepts: action research enhances teachers' sense of professional role and identity and engagement in action research can contribute to better quality teaching and learning in classrooms. Important to this study, Critical pedagogue Joe Kincheloe (2003, p. 4) advocates a further ideal for action research. Through action research, teachers can resist pedagogy by "technical standards" based on "expert research" imposed in a "top-down" manner by educational administrators and policy makers.

Broad characteristics may be easy to identify regarding action research, but

Fishman and McCarthy (2000, p. 3) claim that there are two competing "sides" of action research. One side favors "teacher story and retrospective". This side emphasizes narrative, personal voice, and classroom experience and is often criticized by being "too narrowly personal". The other side favors action research that advocates "systemic methods of data collection and analysis." This side emphasizes analysis, academic voice and theory but is often criticized for being "too narrowly academic." Lankshear and Knobel (2004, p. 17) define this division as those viewing research as social science/case study and those viewing research as composition/writing experience into knowledge. In addition, Fleming (2000, p. 19-20) describes three major "camps" in action research: *technical-scientific* in which the researcher tests a particular intervention based on a pre-specified theoretical framework, *mutual-collaborative* in which the researcher works in concert with other researchers or practitioners to identify and explore a specific problem, and *critical-emancipatory* action research. Grundy (1987, p. 154) states emancipatory action research "promotes emancipatory praxis in the participating practitioners; that is, it promotes a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change." Duncan-Andrade's and Morrell's (2008, p. 15) description of critical research closely resembles critical-emancipatory action research. "Critical research is usually conducted with or on the behalf of marginalized populations, the work itself is collaborative in nature, and the work is geared toward producing knowledge in the pursuit of social change." By engaging in this project I aligned myself as an action researcher with the *critical-emancipatory/critical research* "camp". Through my research I wanted my students and myself to have a greater opportunity to evaluate, reflect, and

act in relation to empowering and disempowering influences in school in an effort to affect change.

Similarly to the historical beginnings of critical pedagogy, the origins of action research are unclear. Fleming (2000, p. 18) provides a brief chronology of action research with mention to McKernan's 1991 study that suggests that action research derives from the "scientific method" in the late 19th century. Action research is later found within the works of John Dewey in the 1920s and Kurt Lewin in the 1940s. Stephen Corey and others introduced the term action research at Teachers College of Columbia University in 1949. Corey envisioned Action Research as incorporating a group of teachers, rather than being an individual endeavor. The 1950s saw a decline in action research as critics claimed it was methodologically poor and unscientific while research detracted teachers from their teaching. During the 1960s and 1970s action research was not viewed as a way to produce generalizable results or theory, rather action research was used as a way for teachers to engage in professional development and to improve practice. Contemporary notions of action research as teachers examining school and classroom practices that can improve practice, contribute to educational research, and precipitate policy came into effect in the 1980s and 1990s. Based on the *critical emancipatory* characteristics of action research, it is essential to involve action research in a study that involves critical pedagogy and students' perceptions of empowerment in school.

While it is generally accepted among those in the field that action research is inherently non-quantitative and is done by teachers in their classrooms, there is disagreement regarding these two points. Lankshear and Knobel (2004, p. 7) state, "it is

neither desirable nor sensible to simply exclude quantitative research being done by teachers from the domain of teacher research by fiat or by definition." Further, Lankshear and Knobel (2004, p. 7) challenge the mainstream notion that action research should be done solely by teachers in their classrooms by supporting research done by teachers who "investigate historical, anthropological, sociological or psychological studies and theoretical work conducted in other places and/or other times." In addition, Lanshear and Knobel (2004, p. 8) advocate the teachers to research in other teacher's classrooms because "we often get clearer understandings of ourselves and our own practices, beliefs, assumptions, values, opinions, worldviews, and the like by encountering ones that are quite different from our own, and that throw our own into relief and provide us with a perspective on them." A key component of action research is that teachers are engaging in research that informs and guides their current practice. This can be done in a wide variety of ways and in a myriad of contexts.

While I participated in this research, I felt constant tension between my roles as teacher and researcher. Even though I was new to this dual role, much of what I felt was familiar and did not carry with it a feeling of distress, but instead a feeling of eustress. The self-assessment needed as a researcher was not unlike what I was used to doing as a teacher. As a teacher I was used to regularly evaluating what I was bringing to the classroom environment and how my history and intensions impacted student learning by being reflexive (Bloome and Egan-Robertson, 1998, p. xii). Because the topic of empowerment at Pioneer specifically intersected with my own experiences, I was all the more motivated to take a critical look as to how I was shaping our unit. Moreover, as a

teacher I was experienced with "kidwatching" (Goodman, 1978) and learning about children by watching how they learn, which I found to be very useful as I took fieldnotes.

However, participating as both teacher and researcher did create tension that was less than positive. As a novice researcher, I was constantly second-guessing myself in regards to how thick and accurate my fieldnotes and data were. As an experienced teacher, I felt as if I needed to be teacher first and researcher second. But I also knew that as a researcher I needed to collect data that was valid. I wrestled with a constant, internal uncertainty about my practice as both a teacher and researcher throughout my data collection all the while trying to be mindful of the inquiry relationship with my participants' lives I had as a narrative inquirer (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007, p. 69-70). Another tension I experienced was how I was shaping the "authentic" voices of my participants. Surely, I was making their words central to the research, but I was in charge of deciding what words were and were not used and how they were contextualized within the research. Even though I called upon the participants to check the accuracy of my data collection, this tension was a dilemma that was not solved, but at best managed throughout the research.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collected for this study was collected over a two-month period and primarily followed an academic unit during most of the second 9-week school academic grading period (November through December, 2009). Decisions about data collection were based on the relevance to inform the research questions. Data collected included field notes of class sessions, student work, digitally audio-recorded class sessions, and

interviews with participants. All collected data were labeled and organized by date and by activity type (e.g. data collected during class was labeled: 11/25/09, Daily Class Field Notes or 11/25/09, Daily Class Audio Record).

Because of the brief extent of the unit (7 weeks, 37 school days), the data collection period was an intense one. The academic unit involved critical inquiry centered on the guiding question, "How does school empower and disempower students?" The overlapping topics of inquiry that involved my students and me provided an immense amount of data. Since everything we did in the class potentially was data that addresses the research questions, I was prepared to collect data in one form of another at all times during class. I collected student work that directly related to the critical inquiry unit, digitally audio recorded class discussions and activities when relevant to the unit, and wrote and recorded field notes regarding each class on a daily basis that reflected my pursuit of the study's research questions.

Field Notes and Digital Audio Recording

According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995, p. 1), the practice of taking field notes is described as the ethnographer "writes down in regular, and systematic ways what she observes and learns while participating in the daily rounds of life of others. Thus the researcher creates an accumulating written record of these observations and experiences." In writing them I followed conventions so that I could record events I observed but also attempt to note different layers of interpretation and bias in my writing. A sample page of field notes is attached in Appendix and shows the conventions I used for recording. I will say more later about how I further analyzed the field notes and the role that "triangulation

of evidence" (Creswell, p. 191, 2009) played in crosschecking my observations with insights gained by collecting and analyzing other kinds of data (e.g. digital audio recording).

Writing field notes allowed me to examine the students and the various ways in which they participate in the activities and assignments of class. In making observations and taking field notes, I have adhered to suggestions by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995, p. 19-20) which include jotting down details of what I sense are key components of observed scenes or interactions and jotting down concrete sensory details about actions and talk. From November 2, 2009 to January 7, 2010, a time period spanning 37 school days, I paid close attention to how participants informally interacted with each other and with me regarding class work and text. I was interested in seeing how students engaged in their work, what motivated or prohibited their engagement, and how they talked about during and about their work.

I also digitally audio recorded and then transcribed formalized whole group and small group discussions as well as my own reflections that served as audio field notes. This was done in order to get a clear picture of what participants had said and in what context they spoke. Sample transcripts are included in the Appendix. Portions of whole group discussions during class, small group discussions during specified tasks, small focus group discussions, conversations with participants regarding their critical inquiry research project, and individual interviews with participants comprise the data that was recorded. In all, I accumulated 70 digital audio recordings that totaled roughly eight hours. Focused attention was placed on the types of questions students asked, what

students acknowledged as experience, and what students and I counted as evidence or data during discussions. In further describing my analysis below, I will explain how I developed categories for analysis and also show how I applied these categories in to my observations and recorded data.

Student Work

Classroom artifacts in the form of student work were essential data collected during this project. The overwhelming majority of the participants' writing activity related to a text or topic connected to student empowerment in schools. Participants analyzed quotes, songs, and poetry to varied depths and lengths, participants wrote personal reflective pieces involving prompts relative to the unit of study, participants conducted research involving the unit of study and was expected to present their research findings to a specific audience of their choosing. I photocopied and collected all pertinent student work. As I analyzed student work I looked closely for work that students described as being highly engaging either through direct communication or my inferring. If I inferred that a participant was highly engaged by an assignment I spoke with that participant to confirm her or his level of engagement. I also looked closely at student work that related closely to the critical inquiry projects as they focused directly on participants' articulating their empowerment in schools.

Interviews

Participants were individually interviewed at least once during the time period of the project. Interviews were facilitated more as discussions related to their participation and learning related generally to the unit on empowerment and more specifically their

critical inquiry research project. Interviews lasted between 5-10 minutes in length and were conducted in a private setting during class. The purpose of the individual interviews was to provide participants with the opportunity to communicate thoughts that might not be as easy to articulate during a class discussion or on a written assignment. Through dialogue, an individual interview allowed for efficient and deep thinking that may not have taken place in a large group or through solitary writing. Further, conducting individual interviews allowed me to clarify with the participants my assumptions based on the data I collected. Together we went over their work and my relative field notes as I conveyed my interpretations. They were then able to accept or reject my interpretations in order to best capture their perspective.

I also conducted two small focus group interviews, one with five participants and the other with three participants that each took place during a lunch period in our classroom. The two groups engaged in digitally recorded discussions facilitated by participants and me through questioning and dialogue. Each focus group session started with me presenting the participants with a list of eight broad topics around which participants could dialogue. Listed topics included schoolwork, teaching styles, classroom conversations, relationships with teachers, discipline/rules, expectations, participation, and preparation for the future. I created the list in an effort to encourage the participants to think and talk about instances in school when they feel empowered or disempowered. Because interviews were conversational in manner and situated in the current work of the unit of study, no interview protocol was constructed. Instead, I presented each group with the list of topics and encouraged participants to reflect on their

experiences in school as they relate to the eight topics or other topics. When needed, I asked clarifying questions along the way to foster deeper reflection and wider participation. Observational field notes of informal class dialogue and activity, the examination of pertinent student work, and the facilitation of individual and small group interviews allowed for a rich, and varied data collection for this project. All interviews and focus group sessions were transcribed and coded. As I analyzed the recorded data I listened for recurring themes about which the participants spoke passionately and with depth, in relation to other topics. I wanted to get a sense of what was collectively and individually most powerful in their schooling experiences and I used the amount of talk devoted to a particular topic, the vivid description used in articulating each topic and the apparent emotional investment given to each topic as initial indicators of their engagement. I triangulated data via the juxtaposition of written and digitally recorded fieldnotes, digital recording of classroom activities, individual and focus group interviews, and evidence of participant work.

Referencing again the work of Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008, p. 15), Collecting and analyzing data as I did in the form of fieldnotes, student work, and digitally recorded interviews of participants reflects my work as a critical researcher utilizing narrative methods in various ways. First, my research and analysis was done with and on behalf of a marginalized population. Given the recent history of gross miseducation within an urban, Title I school, that served a majority-minority student population; many of my participants had been historically and contemporarily marginalized. Second, the research and data analysis was collaborative in nature. By

sharing with my participants my initial hunches regarding their perceptions in relation to our academic unit and their empowerment in school, my participants were positioned as essential partners in this research, not just subjects. Third, the goal of our unit, my research and data analysis was to produce knowledge in the pursuit of social change. I specifically coded for evidence that participants had or gained knowledge that could be utilized to improve schools.

Academic Unit at a Glance

The participants were introduced to the unit by my posing of the guiding question, How are you empowered and disempowered by school? Preliminary work was done to co-construct a shared definition of what "empowered" and "disempowered" meant. The viewing of clips from Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986) and Freedom Writers (2007) along with whole class discussion helped to lead students to create lists of events in their own lives as students that they deemed as being empowering and disempowering. In addition, at the onset and throughout the unit participants were given quotes relating to empowerment and disempowerment to analyze.

From there, participants were introduced to Nikki Grimes' Bronx Masquerade (2002) the novel that would serve as the core text for this unit. Participants were told that Bronx Masquerade was chosen because it involves issues of empowerment and disempowerment within a school setting that the participants might find familiar, which would provide participants with greater opportunity to share their narratives as they use the novel to articulate their experiences. To aid in this process I gave students a template

that allowed them to identify in small reading groups events from the book that they defined as being empowering and disempowering.

The most important component of the unit was introduced last after I felt participants had a more confident and deeper understanding of empowerment and disempowerment within a school setting. Participants were asked to identify a practice or policy in school that they defined as being importantly empowering or disempowering to them as a student. Then participants were to create and participate in a critical research project that centralized their empowering or disempowering issue. First, participants took field notes in their classes making note of empowering and disempowering events. This mimicked the work they had been doing while reading Bronx Masquerade identifying the empowering and disempowering events in the novel. Next, participants used their preliminary data collected to identify the issue they found to be most important to them. Then, participants with a partner or alone, 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. Finally, participants conducted and presented their research according to their plans.

Data Analysis

The field notes, digital audio recordings and accompanying transcripts, student work, and transcripts from focus group and individual interviews were labeled and dated as collected. In analyzing the data, I intended to understand how participants define the sources, impact, and effects of school empowerment and disempowerment through the academic study of school empowerment.

This process really began before the unit was completed. On an almost daily basis I digitally recorded audio reflections upon the conclusion of the day's class. These field notes allowed me to make note of possible patterns and emerging themes as well as for me to reflect upon my dual role as teacher and researcher. I was also able to be reflexive in my teaching and data collection as I developed a more focused pursuit of emerging themes in the midst of my data collection. This process of analysis consisted of constructing and naming (i.e. coding) patterns and themes that cut across the data that I continued as my analysis progressed.

Upon the completion of the participants' critical inquiry research presentations and at the close of the semester, I read through my entire collection of data looking for supporting instances for my emerging themes while also open to data that rejected my identified emerging themes and/or data that illuminated new emerging themes, a process that took the entirety of my winter break. I paid close attention to instances when participants were highly engaged. It didn't matter to me whether the participants were highly engaged in an academic endeavor, an endeavor that was or was not sanctioned by me as their teacher, or any other context. I wanted to focus on instances when participants were communicating effectively and energetically, the basic standard I used to define engagement.

After these instances were identified, I looked more closely at the context in which participant engagement took place. Specifically, what were the participants doing? How were they communicating with each other? With whom were they communicating? How did their communicated thoughts relate to empowerment and disempowerment?

What were the participants intending to accomplish? What were the conditions in which this instance of engagement is taking place? Who shaped these conditions and how were these conditions shaped? Asking these questions as I reviewed the data helped me to more substantively identify what students engaged in school vis-à-vis my research questions.

Next, I reread the data, this time focusing on the instances in which participants were less than highly engaged. I asked myself similar questions challenging the data to show me something different or more than what I had read at that point. With a more solidified set of emerging themes in mind I returned to my class after winter break intending to share with my individual participants how I was perceiving the data that I felt was most powerful. With copies of student work, field notes, pertinent transcripts and clarifying questions in hand, I met with each participant individually and shared my interpretations of my findings to that point. Through questioning the participants about their particular work of reflection and asking for their feedback regarding my interpretation, I was able to ascertain a rich addition of data that was vital in my analysis process.

Guiding the entire data analysis process was the narrative approach to research. Because the narrative approach focuses on how participants experience the world, I focused particular attention on data that reflected this element. Whether through their responses to assigned quotes, their critical reading and shared discussion of Bronx Masquerade, comments in whole group or small group discussions, comments during interviews, or reflections during their critical inquiry projects, I wanted to capture my

participants' understanding and articulation of the world in which they lived. My goal was to provide my participants with opportunities to unpack their understanding of empowerment in school and to be around to accurately capture and disseminate their narratives in order to construct a broader, collective narrative.

Chapter 4: Participant Critical Inquiry Profiles

An essential element of my research and my teaching unit was student engagement in critical inquiry. Through various reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities, student work focused on how school empowers and/or disempowers students. Pedagogically, I sought to facilitate student production of knowledge relative to empowerment, while providing an empowering environment and process in which to work. By engaging students in critical inquiry, I was resisting what Freire (1970, p. 72) calls a banking model of education, in which teachers deliver to passive students apolitical maxims created by faraway forces intended to reproduce hegemonic narratives. Instead of being told what was empowering or disempowering, students engaged in critical research that illuminated what they defined as being empowering or disempowering. In contrast to the banking model, Freire and Macedo (1987, p. 55) promote critical literacy that enables students to be critical of influential, hegemonic practices around them so that they may free themselves from dominating ideologies. As my students closely examined the forces that surround them in school, it was my intention that they would be better equipped to resist current hegemonic forces as well as better prepare them to resist hegemonic forces with which they contend in the future. As a specific embodiment of critical literacy, Morrell (2008, p. 115) argues for students and teachers to move beyond the mere consumption of critical texts towards production in critical literacy in what he calls *Critical Textual Production* (CTP). Critical educators aim to teach students how to construct counter-narratives to dominant texts that they have gained the ability to deconstruct (p. 115). For this reason, students in my class were

involved in a school empowerment research report that served as the primary academic focus of this unit as well as the centerpiece of my data collection and analysis.

Analyzing participants' critical inquiry research projects reflected my critical and narrative-based approach to action research because participants were socially and intellectually engaged with each other and with multiple texts and artifacts. Further, the critical inquiry projects promoted a "multivoicedness" that removed myself as teacher from a position of an all-knowing authority figure and privileged the knowledge and products co-constructed by the participants. By participants engaging in research that involved a topic of their choosing, participants, and myself as researcher, had the opportunity to focus on how the participants perceived the world in which they lived. Participants assigned meanings and identified and explained what was empowering or disempowering to them in an attempt to make positive social change, all of which is consistent with a critical and narrative-based approach to action research.

The bulk of this chapter is a collection of eight participant profiles. Each profile highlights the participant's background whereas I rely on my collective knowledge of each participant and utilize participants' personal self-describing when available so as to create the most accurate and affirming portrait possible, his or her critical inquiry project, and making meaning from his or her critical inquiry project. The profiles are also grouped according to how each participant's research and participation during the unit framed his or her practiced definition of empowerment. This chapter offers a student-centered lens through which to view what empowerment meant to my participants.

School Empowerment Critical Inquiry Research Project

From early in the unit I told students they were going to be given a chance to explore the issues in school they found to be empowering and disempowering. I introduced the basic term "empowerment" by sharing with the students four components that were inspired by Ira Shor (1992, p. 15) and Geneva Gay (2000, p. 32-33) that make up empowerment: academic competence, personal confidence, habit of inquiry, and a willingness to act. I explained that students could be empowered by school in each of the four ways. I didn't use the list of components as rigid criteria, but rather for a starting point to begin to think about the specific issues that students found powerful in their schooling lives and how those issues affect them. This was done in an attempt to have students considered who had power within the school context.

During a whole group discussion I asked, "Who has the power to make rules and policy in schools?"

Jordan quickly answered, "Districts."

"The principal's principal," added Hannah as she went on to include, "We have that America's Choice. We don't get part of America's Choice and we're Americans. We don't get to choose."

"You gotta be over 18", challenged Jordan.

"We're still Americans no matter what. I'm okay with Cornell Notes, but all that other stuff, uhhh!", responded Hannah.

I then asked students to think about and discuss the issues in school that aroused in them great passion, either positive or negative. I explained that a practice typical of

great writers and researchers is to start with an issue that is personally meaningful. Writers are more motivated to their best work and fulfilled when they get to pursue issues that they deem important. Further, I explained that writers often find the most meaning and motivation in issues towards which they have the strongest feelings. When I was introducing the brainstorming activity and that it would relate to what they defined as being empowering and/or disempowering in school Hannah interjected saying, "America's Choice! I already know what I'm doing." Raul asked if he could research Mr. Ethridge and I told him he could if he could come up with a more specific topic that relates to Mr. Ethridge.

Students brainstormed issues and thoughts related to school in order to identify a singular issue they felt greatly affected their empowerment. Then students were guided to research their chosen topic with the intention of changing and improving the issue so as to make it more empowering for themselves and others. For example, through their research, many students sought to make changes in the school's uniform policy, while others wanted improvements made to the school lunch program. Through listening to and observing students initial brainstorming, the majority of students thought about issues towards which they held strong negative feelings and wanted to pursue issues they felt disempowered them in school.

Students initially spoke at varying lengths and depth towards the issues that they chose. In order to help students connect concrete experiences with general feelings and pursue a final issue that they knew they could productively pursue, I encouraged students to take field notes. I provided students with a field notes packet in which they would

observe and collect data in each of their classes for a week. Students would go to each of their classes and specifically look for events in class that they defined as being empowering or disempowering. To help them think more deeply about how an event was empowering or disempowering students were to identify to which of the four components of empowerment the event connects. Students were to also write a short narrative as to why they felt the event was empowering or disempowering. At the end of a week of taking field notes students were to then have observational data that could help them select an issue for their research.

Once students chose their issue to be researched they had the opportunity to work with a partner who had similar research pursuits or to work alone. I restricted their choice to pairs or individuals for logistical reasons. While it would have been more efficient for larger groups to form and work such as interviews and Internet research to be allocated, I wanted all participants to be involved in all aspects of the research. This could have been done with groups of 3-5 or larger, but I thought that groups this size traveling together conducting interviews or sitting around a computer doing research and creating a presentation would be too cumbersome. Once in pairs or as solo researchers, students met with me to set a course for their research by completing a Critical Inquiry Project Plan. Students answered the following questions: What is your focus and why does it matter to you? What do you want to create and why? Who is your intended audience and what do you want them to think, do, and feel about your research? How can you be helped to complete your project? And students identified their research question, data collection plan, and mode of research presentation.

Finally, students were given class time to conduct interviews of students, teachers, administrators and staff, research on the Internet, time to write and create their presentation, and to meet any other research needs expressed in the project plan. In all, about six weeks of class time was devoted to supporting students in their research pursuits. During the last two weeks of the semester students shared their research via their presentations with the class and other intended audience members.

At the beginning of the unit many participants expressed that within the context of school, power resided in adults who held authority positions. However, the participants were eager to express their thoughtful opinions and enact their voices within the context of our class discussions. Essentially, participants viewed school as being run by the adults "in charge" without being open to the perspectives of youth while they, as youth, had well-supported and formulated views as to how school should be run differently. The fact that the participants didn't feel as if there was space at school for them to have their views be heard and respected made this unit all the more important. It was my intention that the participants would be able to engage in self-directed research that supported their views that could be articulated to school audiences so that the participants would become more confident and empowered at school to enact positive change.

All 26 students from my second block On Grade Level 8th grade Language Arts class were invited to participate in this study. Of those invited, eight volunteered to participate. Three of the participants were female and five were male. Four participants self-identified as African American, while two participants self-identified as White, and two participants self-identified as Hispanic. All eight participants were identified by

Pioneer Middle School's Data Leader as "Bubble Kids", meaning they had either barely missed passing the 2009 State Reading Assessment or barely passed the 2009 State Reading Assessment as 7th graders. More specifically, four participants received an assessment rating of "Approaches Standards" while four participants received an assessment rating of "Meets Standards" on the 2009 State Reading Assessment.

The eight participants represented a typical range in personality traits, habits, strengths, weaknesses, interests, and abilities found among all 26 students in their Language Arts class and among all 70-80 of my 8th grade Language Arts students at Pioneer Middle School. The following provides an overview of each participant and his or her School Empowerment Research Project and Presentation.

Hannah

Figure 1: Hannah

Legend: 1 For interpretation of the references to color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this dissertation.

Hannah's Background

Loud, boisterous and stubborn, outwardly jovial, yet inwardly conflicted, and hampered by a low self-esteem, Hannah was a self-described African American and the most involved student during our Critical Inquiry Research Project. Hannah was a middle child in a large family whose parents were in the process of separating. Hannah shared with me that her relationship with her father was strong while her relationship with her mother was extremely strained. Her mother was a paraprofessional teacher within the school district at an elementary school and Hannah often shared with her America's Choice Navigator teacher and me the specifics of her family's complications.

Hannah perpetuated a persona that was always happy and funny, often putting herself at the center of self-deprecating humor. During a whole group discussion, Hannah, through laughter and on the verge of tears, disclosed that people always perceive her as being happy all the time but that she has had to put up with a lot of crap in her life. Hannah always stretched the boundaries regarding school uniform and attire by wearing accessories and clothes that captured the attention of others and expressed her unique personality. However, Hannah wore long tights under her skirts, long sleeves, and multiple layers of clothing because, as she explained to another teacher and me one day after school, she was self-conscious of her body.

Hannah was enrolled in Algebra class, the highest math class offered for 8th graders. She described herself as needing to be able to socialize with her peers in class and that classes that did not allow that to happen were frustrating to her. In my class,

silent independent reading was extremely difficult for Hannah. She said that this time was boring and that she would often stare at a page in the book, run her fingers across it, and flip the pages occasionally to make it look like she was reading. Hannah did very well working academically with her peers in my class. She was involved in the "Group of Seven" when reading Bronx Masquerade and was a vocal leader in that group that often made constructive comments that helped further her learning and the learning of the other group members. During whole group discussion, Hannah was very eager to actively listen and verbally participate, as she was regularly able to inject on point analysis and clever humor into statements. On the 2009 State Reading Assessment Hannah was assigned the performance level of "Meets Standards". Despite this, she was still enrolled in the America's Choice Navigator class, a class that was officially designed to address the needs and accelerate the learning of students who were perceived to be one reading grade level below. On the 2010 State Reading Assessment Hannah was assigned the performance level of "Exceeds Standards".[2]

While America's Choice Navigator filled one of Hannah's exploratory classes, Leadership filled the other class. This class was designed to be a precursor to high school Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp (JROTC) programs. Hannah was a decorated

[2] While I pedagogically question the goals, design, administration, and influence of NCLB-mandated assessments, I make note of the participants' ratings on the State Reading Assessment in this study to illustrate inconsistencies in the placement of students in remedial classes as well as challenge the institutional assumption that America's Choice was the only path to success that could be measured on the State Reading Assessment.

leader in her class and lead the school's Drill Team in district and regional competitions, during which, the team and Hannah earned numerous awards. After the Drill Team season concluded, the Drill Team challenged the faculty to a Drill competition in front of the school. Watching Hannah perform in a way that was so very contradictory to how she behaved in my class was surreal. I asked her after the demonstration how she is able to do so well on the Drill Team since it takes so much discipline and quiet focus, skills she admits to lacking at times in classroom settings. She shrugged and said, "Because it's easy. It really is. And I'm a very competitive person." Hannah's answer wasn't surprising, she saw the Drill Team as being relatively easy and she was relatively good at it. I interpreted these conditions as helping to generate her feelings of competence and confidence, both of which increase her levels of engagement and success. In terms of a traditional classroom setting, if Hannah experienced similar levels of competence and confidence then her focus, levels of engagement, and overall success would increase.

Hannah's Critical Inquiry Project

When I introduced the research project to my students my goal was to provide space and time for them to formally and safely express opinions they were relative to schools and to provide them with the opportunity to critique the power structure of the school system. As noted earlier, Hannah expressed her feelings towards America's Choice early in the unit when I asked the class, "Who has power to make rules and policy in schools?" Hannah was aware of the hierarchical power structure involved when she answered, "the principal's principal". She also alluded to the ironic marketing involved in America's Choice when she went on to state, "We have that America's Choice. We don't

get part of America's Choice and we're Americans. We don't get to choose." "Like in math, we're doing '3,2,1' and stuff, I didn't like that, but right when you get used to it they changed it. Now we have to do 'Rapid Fire'. We have homework every single day. Uh."

This was Hannah's first public utterance regarding America's Choice in my class, but it would not be her last. Over the course of our unit Hannah would continue to pursue America's Choice in her research and in the process engage herself in a powerful critical examination of school.

America's Choice came to Mead the year before. Hired by the Wichita Public Schools for use in "failing" middle schools, this million-dollar investment constructed specific curricula for Math and Language Arts courses geared towards students at grade level (On Grade Level Language Arts and Pre-Algebra and Algebra in Math) and below grade level (Ramp Up Language Arts and Language Arts Navigator and Ramp Up Math). Both Math and Language Arts teachers were expected to follow strict curricular and pedagogical guidelines constructed by America's Choice, however in my On Grade Level Language Arts classes, I very rarely followed America's Choice to the degree I was expected by building and America's Choice administrators.

Later in my introduction of our research project I asked the class, "How many decisions do students make in school? How many chances do students get to have a say, a voice in school?" Hannah responded, "Zero out of a thousand." I showed the theatrical trailer for the film Walkout (2006) and an interview with one of the students about whom part of the movie was based. The film was based on the real story of a group of Chicano

high school students in East Los Angeles in the 1960s that organized walkouts in multiple high schools that primarily served Chicano students as a way to protest dehumanizing school policy and Eurocentric curricula. I showed the interview and movie trailer as a way to illustrate to my participants that thoughtful student action was not outside the realm of possibility I their lives and had the potential to make real, positive changes happen in schools and communities.

The class was quiet and I went on to explain the use of field notes in our research project connecting the data collection they will have the chance to do with the data collection needed by the characters in the movie clip. I demonstrated to the class how they could take notes in each of their classes, mine included, and that this was their opportunity to have a voice and express an opinion. Hannah yawned loudly and asked, "Since we do America's Choice every day can I put it on every… single… paper?" The introduction activities were meant to provide students with the opportunity to take their generic frustrations or feelings towards certain issues in school, narrow the field to one issue to explore, and begin to articulate, with observable and specific evidence, why they feel the way they feel. Hannah clearly had a more developed position relative to America's Choice. Based on her initial statements made during the whole group discussion, Hannah felt disempowered by the mix of rigidity and inconsistency in her Algebra class because of America's Choice. Without her own choice or power to shape her learning, Hannah was cynical towards America's Choice as an academic program as well as the cleverly marketed name of the company.

Hannah's field notes echoed her earlier statements in class. However, Hannah missed parts of three days of school during the data collection days due to her participation in an extracurricular school activity so her field notes lacked breadth. Nonetheless, on the first day of observations Hannah noted that in her Algebra class she felt disempowered because, "We don't get a choice in America's Choice. 'Rapid Fire' is stupid and easy. (The teacher) talks a lot and little time to work. Boring."

On the bottom of her field notes page for the day in the notes/reflection section Hannah wrote, "Mostly none of the classes allows you (to) get up or do anything."

At the end of the unit I asked Hannah specifically what makes classes boring. Hannah responded by using silent reading in my class as an example of something that is boring by explaining, "We don't get to interact. I like to interact."

I then asked her for an example of something in her classes that allows for interaction and that is fun. She cited the "forced choice" activity I do in my class in which I read a statement to the class and students move to a predetermined place in the room that signifies whether they agree, agree with conditions, disagree, or disagree with conditions. Hannah explained why she likes this activity, "We get to talk about why we chose it."

"You like to be able to voice your opinion on things," I asked.

"Yeah, in other classes we go to stations and we don't get to talk about it."

"So there wasn't an opportunity for you to voice your opinion?" Hannah shakes her head "no". I go on to ask, "So you like it when you get to voice your opinion? Why is that?"

Hannah answers, “Because, you can’t go somewhere, like, ‘Why do you like…?’ (shrugs her shoulders), ‘Why do you like…?’ (shrugs her shoulders). Yeah.”

Again, Hannah expresses her social and academic need to express herself and interact with her peers. She sees that in life one needs to have the ability to think critically about the world in which one lives and articulate thoughtful opinions on issues, however she doesn’t see that she is being prepared for this future in classes such as her America’s Choice influenced Algebra class.

When given the opportunity to work in pairs on the research project, Hannah and Vasha both entertained the notion of working together. However, after some discussion, they decided that neither wanted to compromise and sacrifice the issue each had identified through their field notes as the most important to them. Thus, Hannah was working alone on her exploration of America’s Choice. When the two of us sat down to create her project plan Hannah expressed that selecting America’s Choice was important to her because, “America’s Choice is not fair because we don’t get a say in it and we are Americans. The way we solve math problems is changing and the amount of homework is too much.” When asked who her intended audience was and what she wanted her audience to think, do, or feel towards her research, Hannah responded, “The whole school. I want a little bit of a say in America’s Choice.” Hannah’s research question was, “Why don’t students get choice in America’s Choice?” and she planned to interview her math teacher, a school principal, the school’s math coach, as well as conduct research on the Internet. Hannah decided on a PowerPoint as her mode of presentation.

Hannah, who identified herself during many class activities as “needing to work with other people”, chose to work alone in order to continue her pursuit of America’s Choice as her research topic. There was no indecision on Hannah’s part regarding what choice she would make. She felt compelled to pursue a topic that she selected and that meant something substantive to her. During her time to research in class she was very focused on her work. Hannah often gets in trouble in school for talking with classmates or being too loud was focused, productive, and took her work very seriously. Despite being discouraged about not finding anything online regarding America’s Choice that wasn’t created by America’s Choice and not being able to finish the end of her presentation due to absences, Hannah was proud of her research and the opportunity to express it.

When the unit was complete and students were presenting their research, Hannah was one of the first to volunteer. Hannah knew that she was not finished with her project but was eager to present as soon as she could. During Hannah’s presentation it was clear that despite gathering supportive information through interviews, Hannah saw her project as a vehicle to express her opinions on America’s Choice, opinions she felt previously restricted to express. During her presentation Hannah stated:

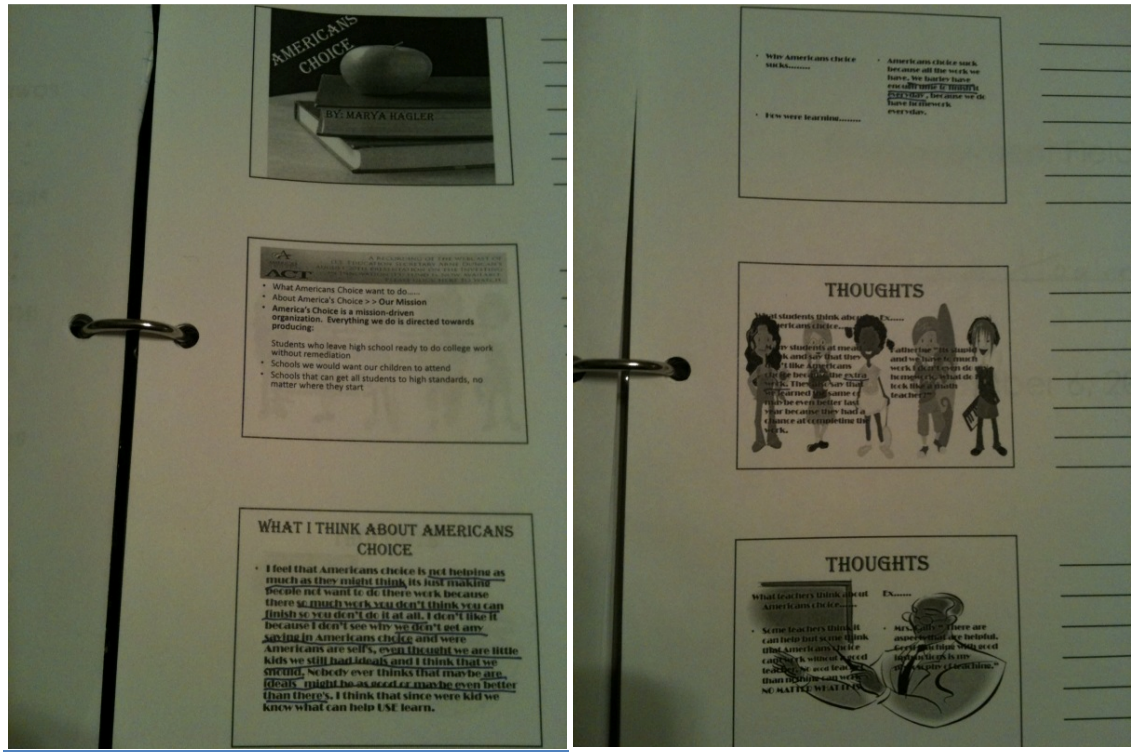
> I feel that America’s Choice is not helping as much as they might think. It’s just making people not want to do their work because there is so much work you don’t think you can finish so you don’t do it at all. I don’t like it because I don’t see why we don’t get any say in America’s Choice and we’re Americans ourselves, even though we are little kids we still have ideas and I think we should. Nobody

> ever thinks that maybe our ideas might be as good or maybe even better than theirs. I think that since we're kids we know what can help US learn (Hannah, critical inquiry unit presentation).

Making Meaning from Hannah's Critical Inquiry Project

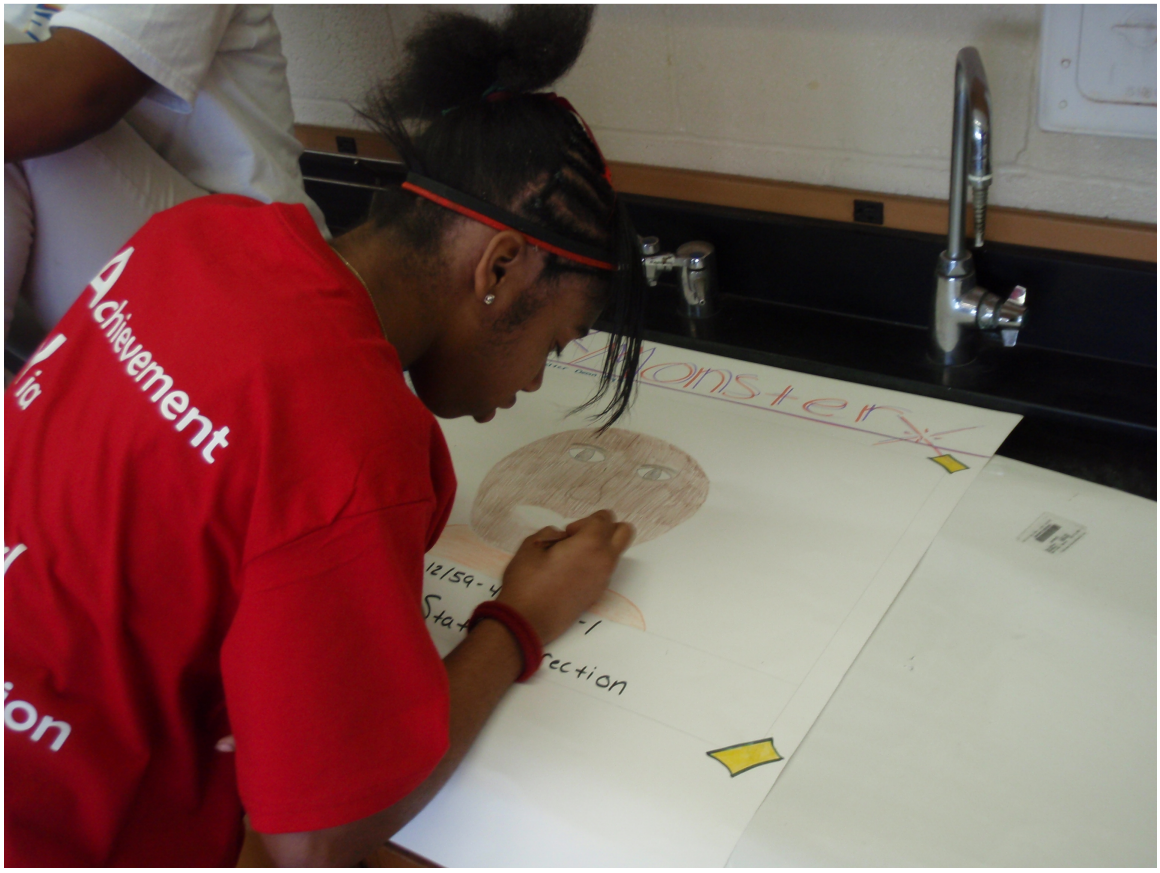
Hannah, an honor roll student who takes the highest-level math class available, felt disempowered in her math class. Unable to express her opinion so that change could possibly be made regarding the curriculum and instruction in math class, Hannah was cynical and disengaged. Hannah directed the majority of her ire towards America's Choice for making the strict rules that marginalized student voice. Given the opportunity to explore and express her frustrations, Hannah took a critical view of America's Choice and was empowered by the research process. She selected a topic that she found powerful, engaged in original research that supported her perspective relative to America's Choice, and publically presented her ideas so as to contribute to positive changes at Pioneer. Hannah's end product fell short of certain expectations in that her presentation was incomplete, but her engagement in critical literacy as evidenced by her critique of the dominating ideology of America's Choice and her critical textual production illustrates empowerment that could serve as a scaffolding experience for future acts of critical literacy in school or out.

Figure 2: Copy of Hannah's PowerPoint presentation slides



Vasha

Figure 3: Vasha



Vasha's Background

Described by me as the "alpha" figure in our class, and perhaps the entire 8th grade and school, Vasha had a remarkable combination of charm, intelligence, social maturity, strength, confidence, an eagerness to learn, and humility that made her an extremely powerful and compelling figure in our classroom. Had Pioneer had a student body president, Vasha would have surely won unopposed. Vasha, a self-defined African American was the daughter of a single mother. She was a star athlete at Pioneer, playing

volleyball, basketball, and running track as a multiple school record holder. She was also a poet and rapper, periodically sharing her work with our class. On Fridays we would often watch performance of spoken word poetry and I would open the floor to anyone who wanted to share his or her work with the class. Very few people would share, Vasha being one of them. Her original pieces would draw great applause and genuine interest from her peers, as well as comments such as “How did you do that?”, “Who would want to follow her?” and “I’d rather listen to Vasha than that other guy.”

In class, Vasha would eagerly read during independent reading times pausing only to share an interesting part of a story to her best friend. She would also meticulously finish assignments happily going above and beyond my general expectations. Vasha was never shy about her peers seeing her do her work in a way that would typically draw criticisms towards other students. Instead, Vasha would exude confidence and curiosity about wanting to know more that would disinvite any outward teasing, friendly or serious. During class activities Vasha was always engaged. Opinionated, articulate, and confident, without being abrasive, Vasha would often unintentionally intimidate classmates from challenging her point.

Once in class, students were debating the ideal school. A majority of the class felt that a school that was more “non-traditional” and “student-centered” was ideal whereas only Vasha and another student thought that a school that specifically prepared students for college focusing on rigorous, teacher-centered curricula was ideal. Vasha had no problem confidently arguing her point against multiple detractors. At one point, she essentially calls out the mass of students who would prefer to go to the “student-

centered" school calling them "lazy". Nobody responds to this point so I interject, "Do you want to stand up for your opinion, or do you want to say she's right?" To which Raul says, "She might say something smart."

Language Arts and reading were not always enjoyable school activities for Vasha. During a focus group interview Vasha disclosed that she used to hate reading and Language Arts and that this class was different because, "It's like every time we read a book in this class it's always teaching us something you'll get deep into the book." Vasha read Bronx Masquerade with the "Group of Seven" showing that she was a vocal academic leader as well as someone who was able to personally connect with the other group members and be a part of and facilitate personal connections with the text. Vasha's performance on the 2009 State Reading Assessment was rated as "Approaches Standards", although she was not enrolled in the America's Choice Navigator class. On the 2010 State Reading Assessment, Vasha's performance was rated "Exceeds Standards."

Vasha was an ideal member of the AVID program: smart, eager, open to learning, and a leader. While many AVID students saw the extra work required to be in AVID as cumbersome, Vasha said that it was for her own good and the good of the rest of the students. She followed by claiming that Ms. Gina was just trying to prepare the students for what high school and college was all about. Vasha had a strong relationship with Ms. Gina, as well as the rest of her teachers. Vasha rarely had any behavioral issues within the classroom; however, this did not mean she never got into trouble. Vasha was "written up" as well as given in-school and out-of-school suspensions for loudly socializing in the

halls, tardiness, uniform infractions, and once getting into a shoving and yelling match with a male student after school in the stairwell.

Vasha's Critical Inquiry Project

For the Critical Inquiry Research Project, the very social Vasha chose to work alone researching the topic of gender segregation at lunch. She almost partnered with Hannah, but both found the other not wanting to change her original focus topic, so they decided to keep their topics and research individually. At Pioneer, students of each grade had staggered lunch, meaning the 6th graders would start lunch and recess, then 5 minutes later the 7th graders would start lunch and recess, and finally the 8th graders would start lunch and recess. In addition to staggering lunch by grade level, boys and girls were separated at this time. For the first part of the year the girls in all three grades ate lunch first while the boys were at recess first. At semester it was switched so that the boys ate first and the girls were at recess first.

Vasha was the only student to research this topic. To some students it was a major irritant to not be able to socialize with members of the opposite sex during lunch and recess time, while for others it was not a relevant issue of concern. True to form, Vasha was eager to get started and did so with well developed direction. Her and I spoke briefly during class one day and Vasha expressed to me that she was pursuing this topic because she felt that by separating the sexes at lunch, the school was not failing to prepare them for the real world and even high school where men and women interact all the time. She felt it was childish to assume that girls wouldn't want to hang out with boys and vice versa. I asked her what she wanted to accomplish through her research and she stated,

realistically, that she wanted the administration to consider mixing things up and lunch and at least trying to something different.

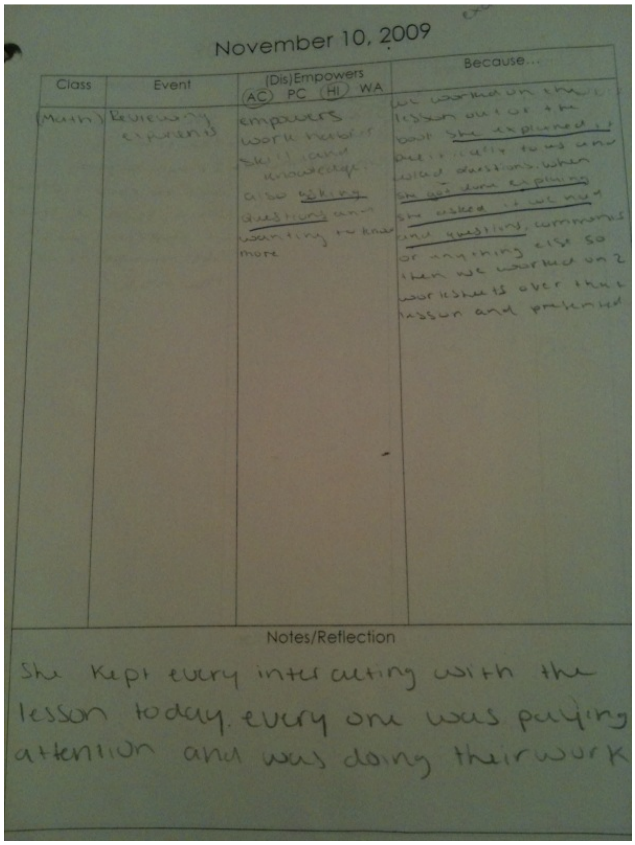
The course for Vasha's research had been set and interviewing had begun when unavoidable circumstances disrupted her research. Vasha missed class time when her AVID class went on a field trip to a nearby university. Raul and Brandon also went but they had partners and were less delayed. Also, Vasha had become ill and missed multiple days of school. It was rare for Vasha to miss school and/or fall ill and Vasha had limited logistical resources at home to help her create her PowerPoint. Vasha vowed to get as much done during AVID class as Ms. Gina would allow, and when presentation day in class came along, Vasha proudly but disappointedly presented her incomplete research. Only a couple of slides in and missing absent sufficient data, Vasha introduced her topic and explained to the class why she thought this was an important topic to her and how segregating boys and girls at lunch was detrimental to students' development towards high school and adulthood. The audience was listening intently and Vasha continued. She closed her presentation as it was by explaining that if the administration would just let students have the chance to show that we were responsibly enough then she thought the students would prove them wrong. Concluding with, "but if we get the chance and we blow it, that's on us."

Making Meaning from Vasha's Critical Inquiry Project

Like Hannah, Vasha chose to pursue an issue at Pioneer that was very important to her, even if it meant conducting her research by herself. Vasha was well respected by students and staff and viewed herself as someone who could, at the least, engage in

dialogue with school power brokers regarding a proposed change, and at the most, being able to dialogue with school power brokers to make a proposed change come to fruition. She believed she had a case to be made and was confident, although pragmatic, in the ability of the students to hold up their end of the bargain and prove that her proposed change in recess policy would be a success. To both Hannah and Vasha, empowerment was taking specific action towards change within the school setting.

Figure 4: Copy of Vasha's field notes



Empowerment is *Self-Expression*: Brandon, Jordan and Raul

Brandon

Figure 5: Brandon

Brandon's Background

Soft-spoken and reserved, Brandon was a socially and academically enigmatic African American youth. Often perceived as being aloof and angry by his peers, I came to know Brandon as being shy and sensitive. Midway through the first semester, our class added a student transferring from another school within the district. Musa was eager to make friends but bounced around from group to group within our class never gaining full social integration. Musa eventually found in Brandon a classmate who would work with him without complaint as well as seek out Musa for certain projects and activities. Brandon and Musa did not become best friends but Brandon demonstrated responsive sensitivity towards Musa and his position in our class.

At school and at home, Brandon was a reluctant independent reader. During silent reading times in class, in which students could choose to read whatever they wanted, he would often put his head down or draw. When questioned or redirected, Brandon would offer little explanation and then do what appeared to be reading, although on most instances it was obvious that he wasn't reading for comprehension or enjoyment. There was one exception to his general lack of interest in independent reading. The novel, What My Mother Doesn't Know (2001) by Sonia Sones captured Brandon's attention, along with the attention of a lot of other students in class, for the brief time it took him to read the book. While reading What My Mother Doesn't Know Brandon's physical demeanor changed. Instead of lying the side of his head down on the desk with his arm serving as a pillow of sorts, Brandon sat upright and leaning forward. His lips moved and his eyes tracked as he read and on multiple occasions Brandon would work outside the

expectations of silent reading and share an excerpt from the book with a student sitting near him. I asked Brandon what he liked about that book so much. Brandon smiled, almost embarrassed, and said softly, “I don’t know, what that girl be talking about. She’s crazy.”

When it came to group or class reading tasks and discussion, Brandon was regularly engaged by actively listening, taking notes, and raising his hand to contribute to discussion. In small groups, he participated with his peers and was often vocal. During the down times in class, usually at the beginning and end of class, students would speak freely with their peers. However, during this time, Brandon was often by himself drawing or putting his head down, while most of his classmates took full advantage of their opportunity to socialize. Interestingly, Brandon tended to choose to be by himself when he had the opportunity to interact with his peers non-academically, but he was at ease with his peers doing academic tasks, and when given the choice, Brandon would choose to work with others academically.

Brandon was a student in Pioneer’s inaugural AVID (Achievement Via Individual Determination) class. At the beginning of the year, Brandon complained about the workload involved in being an AVID student, however by mid-year, Brandon communicated only positive things regarding AVID, and especially, Ms. Gina, the AVID teacher. Brandon was in part selected to be in AVID because he received a rating of “Approaches Standard” on his 2009 State Reading Assessment. Brandon was also in an America’s Choice Navigator class. This class was also taught by Ms. Gina and was characterized as a class for students who were about one grade level behind in reading.

Brandon was unable to take P.E. or Art classes, both of high interest to him, because AVID and Navigator were taught at the end of the school day during the 8th grade Exploratory class block. When Brandon took the 2010 State Reading Assessment he received a rating of "Exceeds Standards", which is the second highest rating given by the state.

Brandon was also a member of Pioneer's boys' basketball team, which I coached. During the basketball season, Brandon was a reserve who at the beginning of the season was unhappy about his limited role. He came to me asking what he could do to earn more playing time. We talked specifically about how he could elevate his game and he took the conversation to heart eventually becoming a part-time starter and the team's top scorer off the bench. During basketball season Brandon was especially focused on his grades. We had weekly grade checks for the players and Brandon was on the honor roll for the season's academic quarter.

With his father in prison in another state, his paternal grandmother, Mrs. Davis, is raising Brandon. Mrs. Davis is a Special Education teacher at Pioneer who is retiring at the end of this school year. She is also a senior member of the district's, state's and national teachers' unions. Brandon has a good relationship with his father and he is kept up to date about how Brandon is doing. During basketball season Brandon's father wrote me expressing his pride in Brandon and apologies that he wouldn't be able to offer a more supportive presence for Brandon during the season.

Brandon's Critical Inquiry Project

As our class became involved in selecting topics and partners for the School Empowerment Research Project, Brandon and Jordan decided to work together researching school uniforms. The two had been working together in the "Group of Seven" while reading Bronx Masquerade and had had a positive rapport and working relationship up to this point. Both boys shared a strong dislike for school uniforms and both expressed their feeling that school uniforms hampered self-expression and made for an overall uncomfortable feeling at school.

The boys went through the pre-research planning stages of designing their project and creating their interview questions and identifying their participants without issue. Brandon and Jordan completed a Critical Inquiry Project Plan that required them to focus their research subject, research methods, audience, and research goals. In addition, Brandon and Jordan completed an Interview Protocol Guide that provided them with resources regarding the selection of interviewees and what questions the two should ask. They sought to change the uniform policy at Pioneer by interviewing as many 8th graders as possible asking them their feelings about school uniforms. They anticipated a clear consensus that could be articulated through their presentation that could then be used to persuade school administration to make a policy change. The boys asked the following questions:

1) If you were in charge of a school, what would you do?

A. Keep uniforms

B. Not wear uniforms.

Why did you pick what you did?

2) What do you think about uniforms?

3) Do you think uniforms have anything to do with learning? Why?

During the interviewing stage of their research, Brandon and Jordan, along with other research groups, were given the opportunity to leave the classroom with specific destinations in mind and travel to other classrooms in order to collect data. It was during this time that tensions between the two began to emerge, although it wasn't reported to me until later in the research process. After students were given class time and time before school, after school, and during lunch to conduct interviews, students were given the opportunity to work in the computer lab and research using the Internet as well as publish their presentation. During this time it became apparent that Brandon and Jordan were not working constructively together. The boys lagged behind their peers in the quantity and quality of work they were doing. Jordan engaged in conversation with other groups and Brandon sat in front of their computer screen. When asked about their work, both blamed the other for not taking the interviewing stage of the project seriously and both claimed to have done his share of the work while the other wasn't pulling his weight. I encouraged both to work through their conflict and helped them come up with a strategy they could follow towards a successful completion. Moving forward, Brandon would be primarily responsible for the data collection of students and staff at Pioneer and Jordan would be primarily responsible for research on the Internet. This limit their interaction for the immediate future in hopes that by the time they were to create their

presentation they would both be ready to work together again. Both begrudgingly agreed told them that I would check in with them the next day to look for progress.

Before I was able to check in with them the next day, Jordan came to me asking to be switched from his partnership with Brandon to that of his friend who was with a student who rarely came to class. I directed Jordan to think about and how this change could benefit all students involved. While Jordan was considering the affects of this change I met with Brandon and the other students to get their perspectives. In the end, Jordan switched partnerships and Brandon kept their data and worked alone.

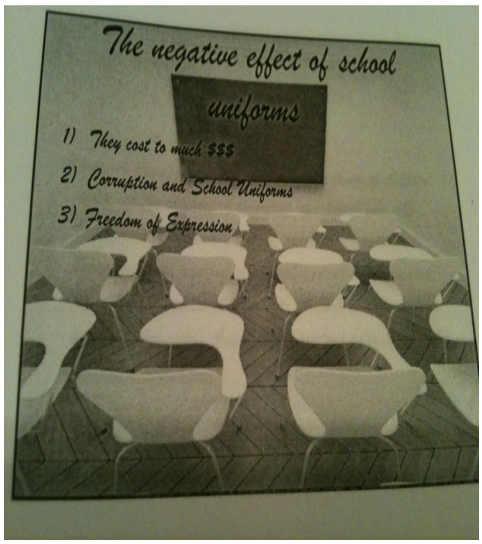
Once Brandon became an independent worker, his focus and quality of his research vastly improved. At the end of the unit, Brandon presented his research to the class in the form of a PowerPoint and Brandon volunteered to be one of the first presenters. He focused on two main arguments against school uniforms: school uniforms cost too much money and they stifle freedom of expression. In regards to the cost of school uniforms, Brandon wrote, “Uniforms are not cheap and this is a reason to be against school uniforms. Because children are constantly growing, there is a captive market for new school clothes and manufacturers take advantage.” Speaking to uniforms restricting personal expression, Brandon wrote, “A uniform breeds uniformity. We need free thinking children to become thinkers of tomorrow, not drones…”

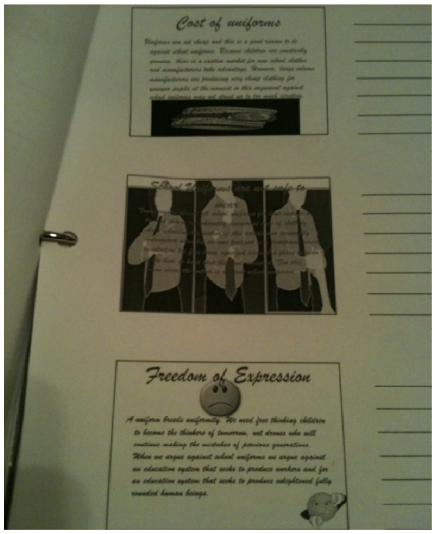
Making Meaning from Brandon’s Critical Inquiry Project

Both reflections in Brandon’s project presentation indicate that he was able to make complex connections between the concrete issue of school uniforms as it affected him and abstract societal power structures. Brandon recognizes that through school

uniforms he is disempowered and without choice in regards to what he wants to wear to school. But he also internalizes that school uniforms are attached to other disempowering forces like a clothing industry that capitalizes on uniform policies as well as a broader American culture that encourages conformity.

Figure 6: Copy of Brandon's PowerPoint presentation slides





Jordan

Figure 7: Jordan

Jordan's Background

Charismatic and popular amongst his peers, Jordan was one of the most vocal and confident participants. Jordan, self-described as being biracial and/or African American, had many groups of friends with whom he would split time in my class. He would often spend a few weeks sitting and working with one group of friends and then switch his seat and spend the next week or two working with another group of friends. With the exception of his "break up" with Brandon, Jordan's social oscillation wasn't due to fights or a falling out with his friends. Rather, his social movement was due more to what/who he was in the mood for at any particular time. While most other students strictly stuck with the same core group of friends and classmates, Jordan regularly changed his circle of friends with ease.

His appeal to his classmates came from many sources. Jordan was self-assured, articulate, athletic, and "one of them" as he was often critical and rebellious of the practices and policies of school. However, Jordan wasn't entirely "one of them" as his father was an assistant principal at Pioneer Middle School. Jordan's father, Mr. James was popular among most Pioneer students, however Jordan's closeness to administration represented both a social obstacle and resource that Jordan was regularly troubleshooting to work to his advantage. Jordan mentioned that he didn't want to be treated any differently by teachers because his father was a principal at Pioneer, but Jordan enjoyed having physical access to the school building that students weren't supposed to have. He didn't like teachers "tattling" to his father just because he worked down the hall there in the building, however, Jordan mentioned that he had capitalized on his father having

authority over his teachers when he complained to his dad about one of his teachers treating him unfairly. Oftentimes, students would say jokingly or seriously that they would have to watch their words and actions while in the presence of Jordan, for fear that he would tell his father. Jordan was sensitive to this and would defensively and quickly dismiss such comments and say directly, “Shoot, I don’t care.”

Jordan didn’t live within the enrollment boundaries of Pioneer. Instead, Jordan lived in an upper middle class suburb on the outskirts of the city. In addition to being an assistant principal at Pioneer, Jordan’s father was also a former college and professional soccer player. Jordan himself played soccer at an elite level playing for the junior affiliate of a professional soccer team in a major city over 200 miles away. Jordan and his father would drive great distances to practices and games on school nights and over the weekends. In the fall, Jordan was able to run Cross Country for Pioneer, and even place 6th in the All City meet, but was unable to play basketball in the winter and run track in the spring due to his soccer commitments. Jordan expressed frustration and disappointment that he couldn’t participate in soccer and more school activities, wishing he could have had more social time with his friends, describing the situation as “stupid”.

Academically, Jordan was very capable. He was enrolled in the only Algebra class, which was the highest math class available to 8th graders, and Jordan made the honor roll during the grading term that coincided with the majority of my research. Jordan was very eager to work in my class when working with others was an option. When the class started reading Bronx Masquerade Jordan asked at the beginning of a class period, “Do we get to read in those groups again? Cool.” Jordan was a vocal leader

when working with others and during whole group discussion often making statements or asking questions that furthered the thinking of others. However, he admitted that he "hates reading" and was notorious for doing everything possible to avoid reading during silent and independent reading times. Despite my efforts, I was only able to find a few books that were interesting to Jordan that he read independently during class. Jordan viewed much of the academic work in school as irrelevant and unimportant. According to Jordan, school didn't relate to his aspirations of being a soccer player and were therefore uninteresting. On the 2009 State Reading Assessment Jordan's performance was rated "Approaches Standard". Curiously, despite this fact, Jordan was not enrolled in the America's Choice Navigator class (a class comprised disproportionately by males of color). On the 2010 State Reading Assessment Jordan's performance was rated "Meets Standards".

Jordan's Critical Inquiry Project

Jordan began his Critical Inquiry Project with Brandon, but after the two parted ways, Jordan wound up with another partner. Jordan and Brandon had been exploring school uniforms, just as Jordan's new partner had been previously studying with his previous partner. However, Brandon kept the data that the two had collected and Jordan had to essentially start over with his new partner. Jordan was relieved to have gotten out of his partnership with Brandon and he assured me that in doing so he would be able to start over with his new partner and do even better. Weeks behind the rest of the class, but with a new partner, Jordan was outwardly interested and excited to start fresh.

By the time Jordan had started with his new partner the rest of the class had completed their interviewing and they were researching on the Internet and working on their presentations. Jordan and his partner were instructed that they would need to be creative in their use of time when it came to interviewing as they were not going to be given class time to conduct interviews. I told them that they had already been given class time to interview with their previous partners and that they needed to interview students and teachers at lunch, before school, after school, during passing periods, through social mediums such as texting, Facebook, MySpace, cell phone conversation and the like. They agreed and while their classmates worked on computers in the computer lab they were to work on their research plan and interview protocol.

Class periods went by and Jordan and his partner didn't make progress outside of class towards gathering data for their research. At this point, Jordan and his partner had outwardly disengaged from the project. I talked with Jordan and his partner about this and reminded them of their decisions to distance themselves from their former partners so that they could do better work. Jordan's response was limited to reiterating that Brandon wasn't doing anything and that he got to keep their data. I asked him what kind of product he wanted to share at the end of the unit and Jordan was steadfast in his belief that he and his partner would be able to gather data and create a PowerPoint for their presentation that met the project's criteria.

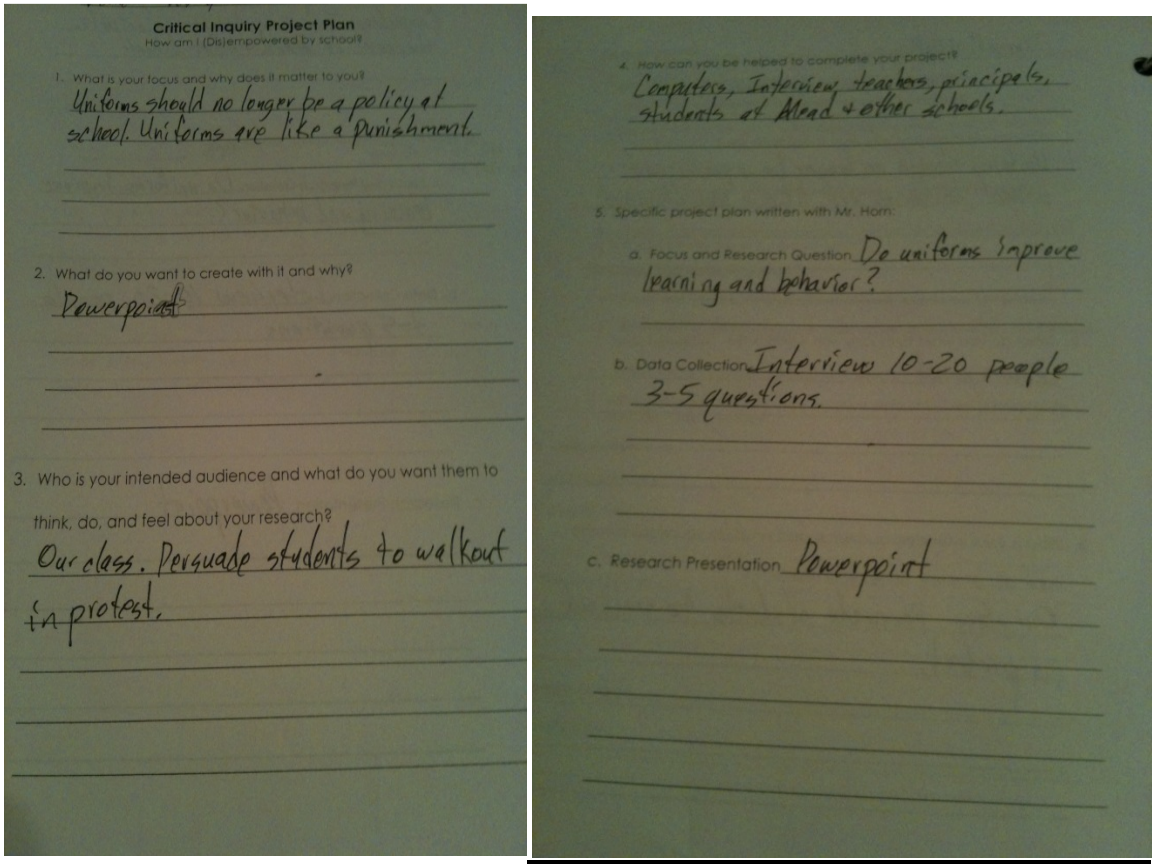
Jordan and his partner did complete their project and present it to the rest of the class at the end of the unit. The two focused on how uniforms stifled individuality and was a primary reason students came to school upset. They expressed their frustration with

constantly being watched in regards to following the uniform policy and not even teachers can agree on how to enforce the uniform policy. However, it was clear that Jordan was motivated to get something done and earn some sort of grade rather than express himself through research. Jordan was disappointed and didn't turn in a copy of his PowerPoint. When I talked to Jordan about his feelings towards his completed research, he offered little reflection stating that Brandon had not done his part when they were partners. Despite Jordan's affinity for working with others, and more specifically working successfully with Brandon during the reading of Bronx Masquerade, Jordan could not constructively work on this project.

Making Meaning of Jordan's Critical Inquiry Project

What drew Brandon and Jordan together as partners, a feeling that school uniforms stifled self-expression, may have been what contributed to the demise of their working relationship. While beginning to conduct their research, the two young men found the other to be distracting and bossy. Working with a new partner, who presumably Jordan saw as someone who would allow him to be more self-expressive, didn't pan out the way Jordan had planned and he withdrew further from the project. In the end, Jordan's self-expression didn't come through as it related to his case against school uniforms as much as it did in ditching Brandon as his partner and then disengaging with the project altogether.

Figure 8: Copy of Jordan's Critical Inquiry Project Plan



Critical Inquiry Project Plan
How am I (Dis)empowered by school?

1. What is your focus and why does it matter to you?
Uniforms should no longer be a policy at school. Uniforms are like a punishment.

2. What do you want to create with it and why?
Powerpoint

3. Who is your intended audience and what do you want them to think, do, and feel about your research?
Our class. Persuade students to walkout in protest.

4. How can you be helped to complete your project?
Computers, Interview teachers, principals, students at Mead + other schools.

5. Specific project plan written with Mr. Horn:

a. Focus and Research Question Do uniforms improve learning and behavior?

b. Data Collection Interview 10-20 people 3-5 questions.

c. Research Presentation Powerpoint

Raul

Figure 9: Raul

Raul's Background

Self-described as a Mexican American, Raul was a comedic, stubborn, friendly, and socially attuned youth. Raul was a first generation American whose parents immigrated to the United States before he was born. Both parents primarily speak Spanish at home and Raul is fluent in both Spanish and English preferring to use English in academic and most social situations. Around Pioneer, Raul is most notably, the school's best boxer. Among the 10-20 students who box in organized gyms and tournaments around town and across the region, Raul is widely considered to be the best. Despite his short stature, Raul is respected physically and is very dedicated to his sport. Raul's parents encourage his boxing career taking him to tournaments hundreds of miles away. During basketball season, Raul was a student manager for the Pioneer boys' team I coached. However, about half way through the season Raul's parents made him quit because he was neglecting his training.

In class and at recess Raul, socialized primarily with groups of Latinos, but also with groups of African Americans. Raul chose to work with two other Latinos during the reading of Bronx Masquerade and as he worked on his Critical Inquiry Research Project. However, much of his socializing in class involved Vasha, Jordan and two other African Americans. As a recess monitor I saw that at recess Raul would play soccer with or talk with other Latino members of his boxing club, but on occasion would hang out with a group of African Americans, most of whom played on the school basketball team. On these occasions Raul would regularly interject himself in the conversation as the butt of a joke. Raul would often joke about how he was scared the boys would jump him or deport

him because he's Mexican, or create free-style raps that were expressed in a way that would make him look inept and dorky while bringing the crowd to laughter. Just as in these circumstances, I never witnessed or heard of Raul playing up the physical skills he obviously had and leveraging them against others. Instead, Raul downplayed his physicality while illuminating his quick wit and satirical humor.

Raul was enrolled in Algebra class and constantly butted heads with Mr. Ethridge. He was very sensitive to the way Mr. Ethridge spoke to the students in his class and was more apt to report instances in which Mr. Ethridge spoke unfairly to others than to instances in which he felt mistreated. Through the course of the year, the normally reserved Raul became more and more confident in challenging the mistreatment of students he observed in Mr. Ethridge's Algebra class and in Mrs. Lutz's Social Studies class getting kicked out of class more and more often. In the fall during a focus group interview, Raul said of Mr. Ethridge's treatment of students, " 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 strait out, like if he thinks we're going to be nothing in life he'll just tell us." During spring parent/teacher conferences, Mr. Ethridge and I were placed next to each other in the gym where all teachers were meeting students and their parents. Raul's conference with Mr. Ethridge became particularly heated as Mr. Ethridge challenged Raul's work ethic and Raul challenged Mr. Ethridge's fairness. At one point, Mr. Ethridge responded to Raul's tone and comment by interjecting, "Now, you need to watch it sir, you're being disrespectful." To which Raul quickly fired back, "So are you!"

In my class, Raul was a reluctant independent reader who started the year reading and rereading books he had read in elementary school. Raul eventually found in my class Life in Prison (2001) by Stanley "Tookie" Williams, which he eagerly read. I also brought in The Greatest: Muhammad Ali (2001) by Walter Dean Myers and he engrossed himself in that book as well. Raul didn't come to my class with a history of liking reading or Language Arts classes, but perceived my class differently. During a focus group interview Raul 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 always fail. 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 you're making us pressured to read." Raul was an actively engaged member of class in small group and whole group settings. However, he would often not turn in major assignments or projects. When I talked to him about this he would assume responsibility for his mistakes and tell me he appreciated the help he got from me but there was really nothing else I could do to help him. As it turned out, most of Raul's grades in my class were very low. On the 2009 State Reading Assessment Raul's performance was rated "Meets Standards" and on the 2010 State Reading Assessment Raul's performance was again rated as "Meets Standards". The juxtaposition of Raul's poor graded performance in my class and others and his satisfactory performance on the State Reading Assessment complicates both the validity of the system of traditional grades and the State Reading Assessment.

Because of Raul's graded underperformance in many of his classes, he was recruited to be in the AVID program. Raul participated with the AVID class throughout the year but compared to his peers that I had in my classes, he wasn't as interested and motivated to outwardly adopt the program's goals. Raul didn't take the AVID required Cornell Notes in my class like other AVID students did, and when discussion in class centered on high school, college, and beyond, Raul didn't offer positive or concrete goals and intentions for himself, a response which was typical of other AVID students.

Raul's Critical Inquiry Project

On the Critical Inquiry Research Project, Raul worked with one of the students he had worked with while reading Bronx Masquerade. The two selected school uniforms as the focus of their research taking a critical perspective that was meant to influence policy change at Pioneer. Both Raul and his partner were extremely efficient at starting their research. They composed their interview protocol before all other groups and made excellent use of their time collecting data during the allotted class time. When I sat down with the two and talked to them about their developing research Raul hardly spoke, while his partner was very detailed and descriptive about the work they intended to do. However, when I asked the pair what they really wanted to find out by doing their research Raul stated, "Why it is they make us wear them?"

From there, Raul and his partner successfully interviewed 8th graders, teachers, and principals, asking them:

1. What do you think about school uniforms?
2. Do you think uniforms are necessary?

3. Should uniforms still be expected? Why or Why not?
4. Why do you think we should keep or not keep uniforms?

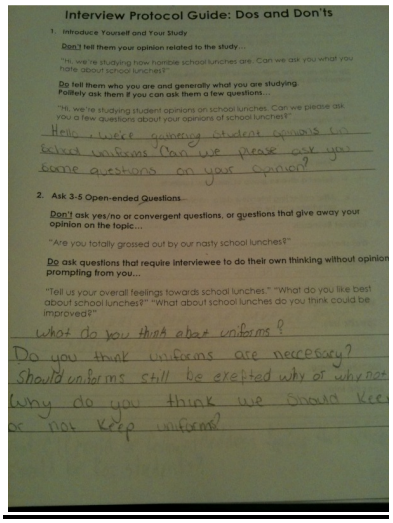
Data was complied and use to create a PowerPoint presentation that was shared with the class. While the presentation was a very strong reflection of the data collected, both boys were hesitant sharing their work with their peers. During the presentation, Raul and his partner showed in very strait forward terms how student perceptions of school uniforms differed quite drastically from the perceptions of teachers and administrators. The overwhelming majority of students asked found school uniforms to be not necessary (90%), a point that was not a surprise to the class, although some students were surprised the percentage was that low. What was surprising to the duo and the class was the percentage of adults in the school who were found uniforms to not be necessary (30%). It was widely assumed that almost all the teachers were in favor of uniforms, but the data that Raul and his partner collected challenged this assumption. This revelation precipitated the point a student had that there may be just a few teachers and administrators needed to win over in order to have a majority that would consider changing uniform policy. Vibrant discussion ensued that came about from the research Raul and his partner conducted. Despite the success of his research, Raul didn't turn in his PowerPoint after it was presented to the class.

Making Meaning of Raul's Critical Inquiry Project

Raul's focus on school uniforms as a form of self-expression within school is complemented by actions unrelated to his critical inquiry project. Raul was proud of and outspoken about his Mexican heritage. His dress, art, and specific comments in regards to

his heritage all illustrated a need for him to comfortably express his cultural affiliations at school. In Mr. Ethridge's class and with regards to the school uniform policy Raul was school entities as being confining his self-expression. For Raul, being able to express one's self culturally and be respected for it was the essence of empowerment.

Figure 10: Copy of Raul's interview protocol guide



Interview Protocol Guide: Dos and Don'ts

1. **Introduce Yourself and Your Study**

Don't tell them your opinion related to the study...

"Hi, we're studying how horrible school lunches are. Can we ask you what you hate about school lunches?"

Do tell them who you are and generally what you are studying. Politely ask them if you can ask them a few questions...

"Hi, we're studying student opinions on school lunches. Can we please ask you a few questions about your opinions of school lunches?"

Hello, we're gathering student opinions on school uniforms. Can we please ask you some questions on your opinion?

2. **Ask 3-5 Open-ended Questions...**

Don't ask yes/no or convergent questions, or questions that give away your opinion on the topic...

"Are you totally grossed out by our nasty school lunches?"

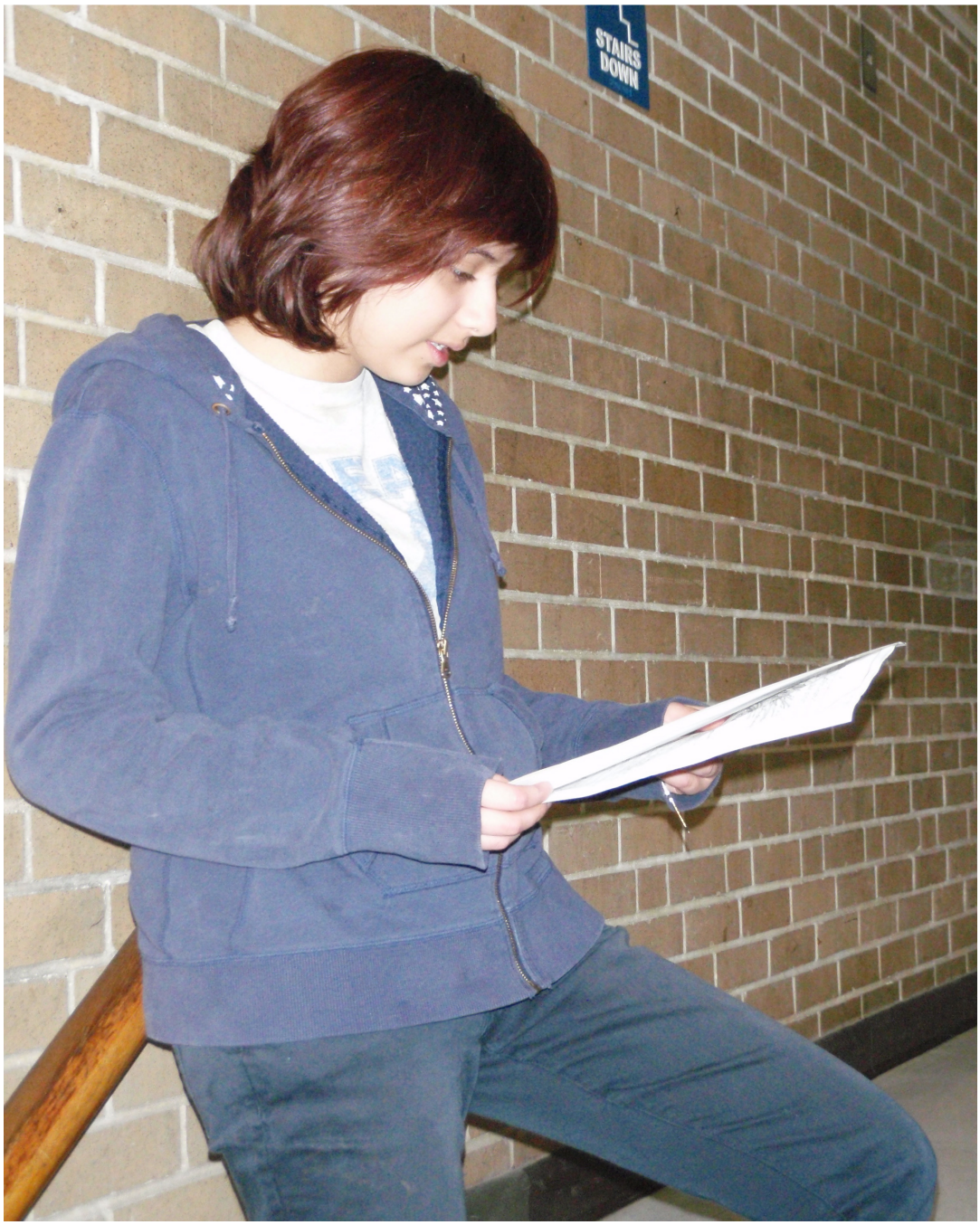
Do ask questions that require interviewee to do their own thinking without opinion prompting from you...

"Tell us your overall feelings towards school lunches." "What do you like best about school lunches?" "What about school lunches do you think could be improved?"

What do you think about uniforms?
Do you think uniforms are neccesary?
Should uniforms still be exepted why or why not
Why do you think we should kee
or not keep uniforms?

Renée

Figure 11: Renée



Renée's Background

Renée, similarly to Jordan, found very little use for the academics of school that was not directly related to music. Renée described herself as a Latina and her family migrated to the United States from El Salvador before she was born. She would often feign defensiveness when people described her as being Mexican. Rather than being upset that she was being affiliated with Mexicans that perpetuated a sense of superiority, her hyperbolic reaction was used to challenge and satirize the assumptions that all Latino/as are Mexican. Renée was born in East Los Angeles and grew up speaking Spanish. Her family moved to our city when Renée was eight years old to seek safer and cheaper living conditions. Throughout her elementary years and during her 6th grade year at Pioneer Middle School, Renée was enrolled in English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) programs. Renée was very happy to be exited out of her ESOL classes as a 7th grader because she reported that being in ESOL made her feel dumb.

Music was central to Renée's persona. Students and teachers alike knew Renée to be an accomplished guitarist and rock musician. This notoriety earned her a great deal of respect at school. Joan Jett, Paramore, and Lady Gaga inspired Renée's musical and personal stylings and Renée was constantly pushing the limits of the school's dress code with her wearing of navy jeans instead of navy khakis, exposed rock and roll t-shirts under cardigan sweaters, and assorted wristbands and other accessories that were often dubbed "distracting". Renée performed solo between Pioneer basketball games and lead a three piece band of other 8th graders in a cover of "We Got the Beat" by Go-Go's during

the Spring choir concert. When with her guitar or talking about music, Renée exuded confidence and poise.

Despite having her performance on the 2009 State Reading Assessment rated as "Meets Standards", Renée was enrolled in an America's Choice Navigator class. She was also initially enrolled in AVID. These two classes took place during Exploratory classes causing Renée to miss being in Band class, a situation that did not sit well with Renée. She and her Navigator teacher tried to get her out of Navigator but could not. Subsequently, Renée dropped out of AVID a few weeks into the school year and immediately enrolled in Band class. When asked about why she dropped out of AVID, she explained with great seriousness, "There's no way I can't take a music class. No way!" Later in the school year during a class discussion regarding probable district budgetary cutbacks, Renée said with certainty that if music was cut from the high school she attended, she would drop out.

In my class and out, Renée was an active reader. She was a fan of the Twilight series, although she said she scaled back her following of the books' characters and movies' actors because it was getting too popular. Renée read a wide range of books in class, although she rarely documented her reading in the way that was encouraged at Pioneer via America's Choice. She was often reserved during class discussions or small group work, but at times would passionately express her thoughts and greatly appreciated any opportunity for the students in class to engage in discussion with each other. In referencing this point, Renée once said, "I like it because, yeah, we teach each other and like, it's like equal. Just like with teachers teaching us stuff, we don't really get it." Renée

failed to see the importance in her math classes because she was unable to connect the work she did in math with her future as a musician. While Renée was very engaged in activities where pieces of music were the central text in my class, she was often quite engaged with subject matter that had nothing to do with music.

At the end of our empowerment unit we watched and analyzed the movie Walkout, which is based on the true story of students in East Los Angeles high schools who organized collective walkouts to protest school policies, resources, and curricula that marginalized Chicano/a and Mexican American students. During a class discussion of the movie, Renée, visibly affected, expressed how hard it was for her to watch students being beaten and sprayed with fire hoses by police officers. When asked why, Renée responded that those students could have been her parents. On the 2010 State Reading Assessment, Renée's performance was again rated "Meets Standards".

Renée's Critical Inquiry Project

When it came time to select a topic and direction for the Critical Inquiry Project, there were few issues that inspired Renée. Most students geared their research in a direction that was critical of a current school practice at Pioneer and advocated a policy change. Renée was also quite critical of America's Choice, school uniforms, school lunches, and other popular issues that drew the critique of many of her classmates. However, Renée wasn't interested in doing what she perceived as something everyone else was doing.

A couple of days into the project I began making my way around the classroom asking students what topic and direction they had in mind and if they were going to

research with a partner or alone. When I approached Renée I found her to be disconnected from the project sitting alone. This was uncharacteristic of Renée and I talked to her about where her thoughts were regarding the project. She expressed to me that nobody was doing anything that she was really interested in doing. She told me she was going to work with Hannah and research America's Choice but she wanted to do something different. I told her she could really do almost anything with the project and that the point was to focus on and practice empowerment. Many of the students were going to empower themselves by researching issues in school that they felt disempowered themselves and others. However, I explained to Renée, that she could empower herself by researching a topic of her choosing that she feels has either an empowering or disempowering affect on herself or others. I encouraged her to be more creative in her thinking, focus on what interests her, and come back tomorrow with a few ideas.

The next day Renée came to class energized and with a selected topic. Despite my guess that the topic would be music related, Renée told me that she was going to research international sex trafficking. Surprised, impressed, and intrigued, I asked her how she came up with that topic choice and told her I was surprised that her topic didn't have anything to do with music. Renée responded by telling me that it was something that she had recently learned about, not a lot of people knew about it, and it was a very serious and sad problem. She also told me that she wanted to organize a charity concert to raise money to fight sex trafficking. The two of us sat down and plotted a research course for Renée to pursue. Here, Renée wrote in her Critical Inquiry Project Plan, "I am empowered by music. Music is the only thing keeping me alive (and God). And music

moves people. Music has meaning to many people." Renée planned to incorporate a fundraising component to the winter choir concert in which she would play and sing a song or two and audience members could donate to a cause that advocates for those affected by sex trafficking. After approaching the Band and Choir teachers with her idea, Renée was told that the program had been set and they wouldn't be able to accommodate her idea. Disappointed, Renée designed a PowerPoint that she shared with the class.

Renée's presentation to the class was visually compelling and well articulated. While the beginning of Renée's presentation mostly focused on statistical facts, her delivery of those facts commanded the collective attention of the class. Renée also focused on the work of Love 146, an organization that advocates for the end of child sex slavery. Renée's presentation was far from what she had originally envisioned and lacked the personal touch that she had been able to create had she been able to follow through with her fundraiser. This frustrated Renée, however she was happy with her work and slightly embarrassed by the positive response from her classmates. At the end of the presentation Renée read a poem she wrote that incorporated statistics related to child sex trafficking and the work of Love 146:

#146

I wear the number 146
I have no friends
no family
well that's how it seems to me

I seem to be the only one alive
here behind this glass
all the other girls don't seem to care
they seem to be watching 146 cartoons

I don't
I look to see the men who watch me
$25 and they have me
The pain I feel every day
not ever having time to play
and be myself
I don't want to go with these men
but I have no choice
like they have no life

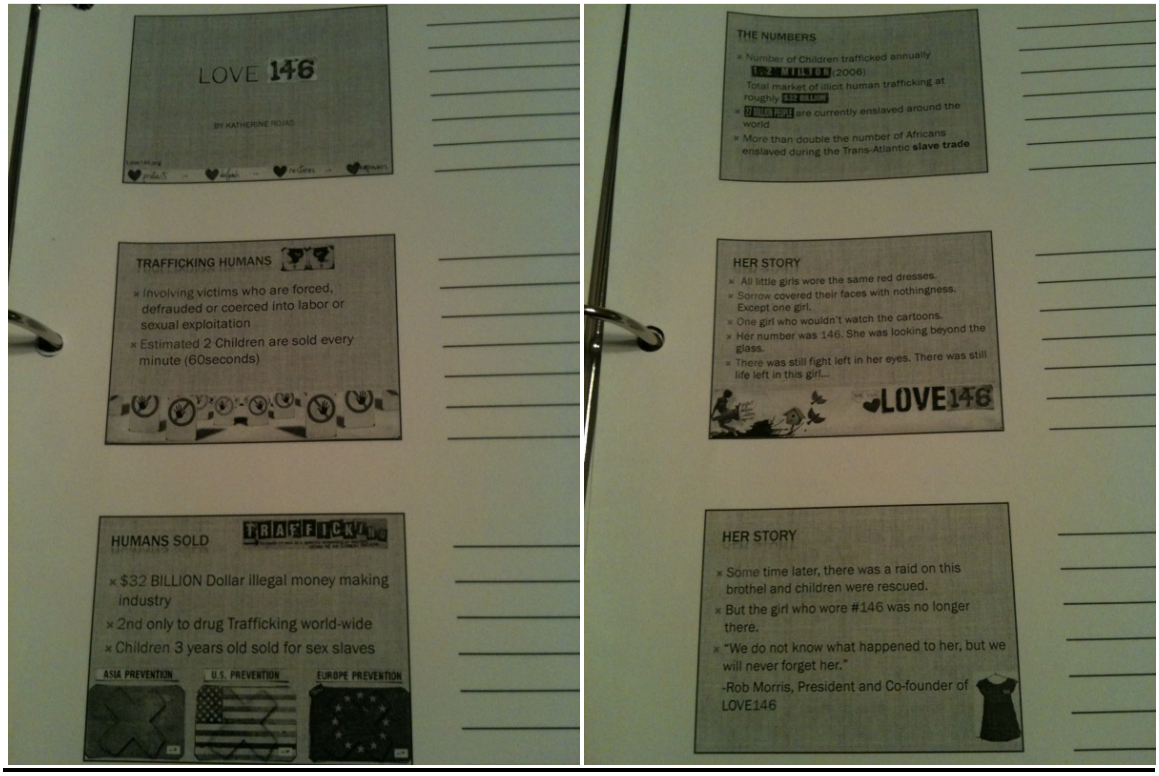
They spend hours watching us
I want to break free
to never see these people
and be back with my family
but for now it seems I'm stuck here

But do you care?
Do you care if I go through
pain every day?
Well, it doesn't seem like it

Making Meaning from Renée's Critical Inquiry Project

Renée had disagreements with many in-school policies and practices, but none of them had the weight and importance to Renée as social issues that she saw as being outside of school. Renée was highly interested in the Workers' Rights Movement and the social conditions surrounding the Civil Rights Movement, particularly those highlighted in the movie Walkout. For her project, she continued to think beyond the school. To Renée, empowerment was addressing social issues that were not relegated to the school context.

Figure 12: Copy of Renée's PowerPoint presentation slides



Luke

Figure 13: Luke

Luke's Background

Quiet, contemplative, polite, and sarcastic, Luke was a self-described White youth with a quick wit and a dry sense of humor. Raised as an only child by a single mom, Luke would often stay after class for a few moments when the rest of the students had left, to engage in conversation that was usually spurred by a question related to pop culture. Luke would ask if I'd seen certain movies, watched certain TV shows, or played certain video games and we would briefly carry on in a way that felt, at times, more like

two adult friends talking rather than an adult and a middle school aged boy. The conversation would usually end when Luke would say, “Ok, well I better get to Consortium, have a good rest of your day, Mr. Horn.” At times, Luke would ask me if I’d seen movies or TV shows that were more sophomoric in nature such as “The Hangover” or “The Family Guy”. It was apparent to me that Luke would enjoy being surprised that I had seen many of the movies and shows he mentioned and enjoyed engaging in conversation about them with me. I would pay particularly close attention to what parts of these movies and TV shows I would talk about and how I would talk about them tacitly acknowledging the professional dynamic of our relationship. Luke respected the boundaries I worked at upholding, while also finding humor in testing them.

Luke described himself as someone who would work really hard for and with teachers he liked and respected, but would not for teachers he didn’t. He was not a student who would naturally be engaged in class work and homework, but if the teacher won him over, so to speak, he would work hard to be successful in his or her class, be apologetic if he didn’t meet expectations, and willingly do what the teacher wanted him to do trying to get the best grade possible. In my class, Luke would never engage himself vocally in whole group discussions and hated working alone. While Luke was constructive and additive presence in the “Group of Seven” reading Bronx Masquerade, he preferred to work with just Henry and another friend in class.

Traditional texts and literature did not easily interest Luke. Once Luke stated that novels bored him because they were so long.

I responded, “You liked The Pearl (1945/1993) though, right?” knowing that he was engaged when we read the Steinbeck novel together in class.

“Well, we read it together and Coyotito getting shot and killed at the end was really surprising.”

During silent reading time in my class Luke read the few graphic novels and comic collections I had and never chose to read traditional novels during independent reading. He didn’t like our school library because of its lack of graphic novels and my classroom library didn’t have enough graphic novels for his liking. Luke described himself as a “gamer” that played a lot of video games within the action and adventure genre at home. Once, he dismissively told me that doesn’t read or do homework at home because it gets in the way of his video games. I responded by saying there are a lot of people who view video games as text and legitimize their presence alongside fictional novels, non-fictional articles and books, poetry and other pieces of traditional literature. Luke was pleasantly surprised by this and with a slight, wry smile across his face he asked me of he could then get credit for playing video games at home like people get credit for reading books. I liked his idea, told him I didn’t think why not, and said we should sit down and work out the specifics. Regrettably, neither of us followed up, and Luke’s idea never came to fruition.

On the 2009 State Reading Assessment, Luke’s performance was rated as “Approaches Standards”. However, he was not enrolled in the America’s Choice Navigator class. On the 2010 State Reading Assessment, Luke’s performance was rated as “Meets Standards”. When I shared this information with him and asked him why he

thought this increase occurred, Luke mentioned that he worked a lot harder in class this year than last year. He added that he took the class and the test more seriously this year. Luke partnered with Henry for his School Empowerment Research Project. Greater detail regarding their project will be provided in Henry's section.

Henry

Figure 14: Henry

Henry's Background

Imaginative and bright, unorganized and a loner, Henry was a self-described White youth. Henry's mother was a single parent and a paraprofessional teacher in an elementary school that was a part of the Pioneer feeder pattern. Henry was an academically successful and sensitive student. He was enrolled in Algebra and professed to liking math and being skilled at it. However, Henry was negatively affected by the coarse and public admonishing he received from Mr. Ethridge, the Algebra teacher. Henry conveyed that most of Mr. Ethridge's badgering was because he didn't take and keep neat and proper notes, often failed to turn in complete and/or legible homework assignments, or wasn't paying attention in class. Henry would often come to my class from Algebra verbally frustrated and emotional.

During one class period early in our empowerment unit, I circled the room checking on students' progress with Bronx Masquerade and the template. I noticed that Henry's template was incomplete and I asked him what he thought the expectations for the assignment were. Through my discussion with him and clarification of the assignment Henry became dejected and angrily began erasing the work he had done. I told him that we had just started and that if he continued from this day forward meeting the expectations of the assignment he would be fine. As I asked him if this was all right, I noticed that Henry was beginning to tear up. From that point forward I aimed to be accommodating towards his writing needs and thoughtful in the ways I redirected him.

Henry had a history of getting good grades in his classes and made the honor roll multiple times during middle school. His performance on the 2009 State Reading

Assessment was rated as “Meets Standards”, while his performance on the 2010 State Reading Assessment was rated as “Exceeds Standards”. Henry was a highly engaged independent reader. He thoroughly enjoyed silent reading time in my class and always took full advantage of it, often extending his reading after that allotted period of time was over. Henry read more books over the course of the school year than anyone else in his class. Most of the books he read were adventure books, and he was particularly fond of the Alex Rider series. Henry described himself as a good reader who hated writing. His handwriting was very difficult to decipher and obviously caused Henry a lot of stress. Despite this, Henry had a vivid imagination that he could easier articulate in conversation and was very capable picking out and describing the nuances of literature. However, Henry very rarely spoke up during whole class discussion. During these times Henry would often lower himself in his chair or pull out a book to read, essentially doing anything to assure that he wouldn’t have to speak in front of the entire class. When the class read Bronx Masquerade Henry chose to read and work alone. Near him other students worked together, but Henry simply hunched over his book and read without complaint.

Luke and Henry’s Critical Inquiry Project

As the class began to turn attention to their Critical Inquiry Research Projects, I was interested to see how Henry would respond. Henry preferred to work alone, and even though he had the opportunity to do so, this project really catered to students who could work constructively with others. This project also had a presentation component and encouraged interviews as a form of data, social and academic practices that were not in

Henry's comfort zone. After brainstorming ideas for possible topics and sharing his ideas with his classmates as a way to facilitate likeminded students to partner together, Henry found that both he and Luke were interested in homework as a topic. The two agreed to work together and decided to research homework from the perspective that it has a detrimental affect on students.

After I read the boys' Critical Inquiry Project Plan, I called them over for a short conference during a class library checkout time. I started by asking the boys why they chose homework as their topic, "Why of all the things that go on in school, why is it that homework is at the top of your list?"

Luke answered, "Like in math class, we work all day on problems and stuff and at the end of the day we get ... and its pure nonstop work, work, work."

"So why does this matter to you?", I inquire.

Again, Luke responds, "Because we work all day long and even though we do all this work we just have more and if we don't get it done we get a bad grade and stuff. We should just have to do the work we already do."

Henry adds, "Basically the time takes away from the time we want to spend doing something else that doesn't involve school."

Luke continues, "So many hours of our day are taken up and they just take out the rest and that's all we have after school. Then even the weekends are sometimes taken up. Sometimes I just don't do it."

I'm interested by Luke's response that he just doesn't do his homework as a response to being overwhelmed by it and ask, "You don't do the homework, and then

what happens if you don't do the homework?"

"I just do it in class the next day. In like science class I don't do the homework. We only have science every other day so I just do it in social studies class. We barely have any homework in there," Luke answers.

Temporarily satisfied but still wanting to learn more, I stop myself from asking too much as I don't want my questions to lead their thinking or research more than it should as this early stage. I return to the Critical Inquiry Project Plan and ask clarifying questions. "What's your question? What do you want to learn more about?"

Henry is quick to answer, "I want to know why teachers give us so much homework."

Looking for clarification, I ask, "So do you want to go to the teachers who give you lots of homework and the teachers who don't give you lots of homework. See what their opinions on homework are, their professional opinion on giving homework is?"

Both Luke and Henry nod as I jot down notes on their Critical Inquiry Project Plan. Then Luke breaks the momentary silence by adding, "In Ms. Sutton's class we don't have to do homework but if you want to get a good grade you kind of have to. But she doesn't make us. It's kind of like a, sort of like a, psychologically kind of thing."

I stop writing down notes. Intrigued and humored, I ask, "OK, what do you mean by that?"

Luke expands, "Sort of like saying, she's trying to make us think like she's saying you don't have to do it, but you'll get a bad grade trying to put that in my memory that we have to do it. Just trying to trick us."

I return to writing notes and can't help but to smile and chuckle lightly at Luke's critique. Luke seemingly picks up on me being entertained and adds, "You don't give us that much, but the homework that you do give us is really hard."

Having recaptured my attention, I stop again to look up at Luke and Henry and ask, confused, "I give homework?"

"Yeah, sometimes I don't get done with all the stuff and I take it home," responds Luke.

Once again I'm interested by what Luke and Henry are saying regarding homework, but keep myself from being too inquisitive. This time they have mentioned how put off they are by doing schoolwork at home and Luke even mentioned that he often does his homework at school in other classes. However, Luke mentions that I give some homework, and that the homework is hard, but does not mention shirking it or doing it in other classes like he does with math and science homework.

With time in the library almost up and our conference winding down Henry interjects by stating, "Mr. Ethridge claims he has no power because… I have Algebra, which is high school, so he has to do what the high school people are doing so he's saying that he has no power over our homework."

Before I get a chance to verbally respond to this adept reflection, Luke jokingly asks, "Why do you like to psychologically mess with our minds, make it seem like we have to do the homework and get a good grade when you know very well that we could just do it in our other classes. Why do you make it seem like we need to get this done or else you will fail?"

“Are you saying me like, me as a teacher or me specifically? Why do *teachers* do that?”

“Why do *you* do that?”, clarifies Luke.

“Do I do that? Have I done that?”

“I think you do that.”

Sensing Luke’s playfulness I ask for proof, “When have I done that?”

Mockingly, Luke answers, “If you don't finish this Bronx Masquerade sheet you'll fail, you need to get it done, you need to do whatever you can do to get it done. Take it home.”

Allowing Luke his fun I contend, “I said that, I said you'd fail? I don't think I said that, did I? I think you're putting words in my mouth.”

“You use the words ‘pass’ and ‘fail’, you don't use *A*, *B*, *C*, *D* or *F*. The ‘pass’ word comes out a lot and the ‘fail’ word comes out a lot,” Luke gibes.

I play along, “I didn't notice that. That's interesting though. I'll have to think about that.”

The two worked diligently and effectively together during the data collection phase of their research. They ascertained interview data from 10 8th graders and from four 8th grade teachers, myself included. They followed the interview protocol they established closely asking me, and other teachers:

1) What are your general thoughts on homework?
2) Why do you assign the homework that you assign?
3) Do you think students should be assigned more or less homework? Why?

Henry and Luke also created a well-designed and thorough PowerPoint presentation that reflected their interview data as well as research they found on the Internet. The two generally reserved boys who rarely voluntarily spoke in whole class discussions volunteered to present to their class and were one of the first presenting groups. The duo appeared nervous and uncomfortable, but they also carried themselves with an aura of confidence in this context that was refreshingly atypical. The title and opening slide of their presentation read, “As Homework Grows So Do Arguments Against It”. The presentation proceeded to show arguments against homework from the students’ perspective found on the Internet. The presentation went on to contrast, side-by-side, arguments for and against homework. Perhaps the most difficult component of the project presentation for the class was to acknowledge and fairly articulate opposing viewpoints. In their presentation, Henry and Luke did very well at meeting this expectation.

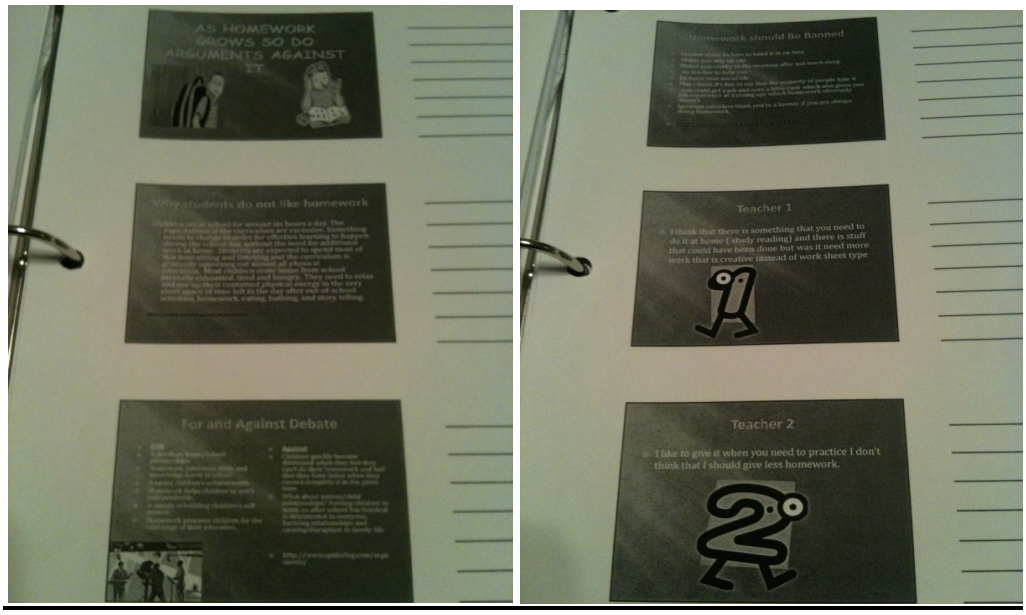
The presentation then shifted to pulled quotes from the teachers’ interviews. Again, Henry and Luke were able to capture opposing views. For example, one teacher was awkwardly quoted as saying, “I think that there is something that you need to do it at home (study reading) and there is stuff that could have been done but was it need more work that is creative instead of worksheet type.” While another teacher was quoted as saying, “I like to give it when you need to practice I don’t think I should give less homework.” The presentation concluded with a summary of the issues and the boys’ opinions that reflected both an acknowledgement of some positive aspects of homework and instances and types of homework that are important and necessary as well as an

overall critique of how homework is generally administered at Pioneer and how it could be improved. Henry and Luke concluded with a quote from Albert Einstein, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education.”

Making Meaning of Luke and Henry’s Critical Inquiry Project

Not wanting to be hassled with irrelevant curricula and have “their time” infringed upon at home by schoolwork, Luke and Henry sought freedom from the teacher-centered construct of school. They worked on homework in other classes or didn’t do it all together. Luke and Henry even playfully accused me of assigning homework, surely an insulting distinction to be made regarding the character of a teacher. The two viewed their empowerment as being connected to having the freedom to choose what and how to use their time in a school setting.

Figure 15: Copy of Luke and Henry's PowerPoint presentation slides



Participant voices together

Viewed individually, the descriptions of these participants show eight very unique and distinctive lives. Students with varied skills, interests, frustrations, and inspirations all cohabitating in the same 8th Grade Language Arts class. However, when viewed together, greater patterns of similarity and overlap can be seen among the participants. First, the participants had an acute eye for fairness. Whether they were focused on self-preservation ends or thinking about the common good, the participants passionately talked about, thought about, wrote about, and researched topics and issues that related to what they perceived to be fair or unfair in the world in which they lived. Second, the participants were eager to learn and take action. Despite the fact that they largely felt suspicious of any notion that their collective or individual voices could actually affect change in school, they still maintained and expressed their voices through engaging in the critical inquiry research project. Finally, the participants learned from each other. During the times in class when students were sharing ideas in small groups, whole group, structured discussion, or impromptu interaction, the participants listened to what their peers had to say. Further, the participants did not experience themselves as students or empowered learners in isolation, but rather, within a social system of which each participant was a part.

Eye for Fairness

Throughout the unit, and in varied instances, the participants were attuned to what was and wasn't fair. Whether we were analyzing a quote, reading a section from Bronx Masquerade, listening to a poem, or reflecting on a current event or school characteristic,

fairness was a shared value among the participants. To the participants, fairness involved individuals having a measure of control within groups so that their needs and the needs of others can be met. One of the most striking examples of this notion was when the class was asked to read the synopses of three fictitious schools that differed in pedagogical practices and then rate the schools in relation to which school they would most like to attend. During a whole group discussion, students compared their ratings and explained how they came to their conclusions. It was during this discussion that Renée, Raul, Henry, and Jordan articulated their selecting of the school that they felt afforded them more freedom of choice. It was this key element that made this school more fair in that students could pursue what they wanted as individuals and therefore more attractive.

In reference to a traditional model of school that tracks students, is teacher-centered, and utilizes the "banking concept" (Freire, 1970, p. 72), Jordan stated at that school, "everyone thinks you're dumb."

Henry adds, "Because you won't feel as smart if you're put in the low class. You won't feel as smart so you think that you won't even try."

Jordan nods and adds, "Yeah, that ain't right."

In comparison, Raul brings up another hypothetical school that is designed to be student-centered, detracked, and ascribe to a "problem posing" (Freire, 1970, p. 80) model of schooling, "Students are not given grades. I like that."

Renée continues, "Yeah, I like it because we teach each other and it's like equal."

However, Vasha disagreed. She aligned herself with the school that was more closely related to preparing students for college. To her, this school illustrated fairness as

it too prepared students for what they would individually want to accomplish as adults. In response to Raul's mention of the more student-centered school, Vasha interjects her disagreement, "I think this school is unnecessary because how you gonna go to a school that barely teaches you anything? And it says right here, 'Teachers use the lives and curiosities of the students…'. So basically this school is for kids who don't want to go to college because if they're trying to pick they own stuff and they don't even get grades you aren't really learning."

The participants didn't outwardly acknowledge the similarity in their analyses, yet both perspectives illustrated that a component of fairness, particularly in schools, was having access to resources that would help one achieve their goals in life. For Jordan, Raul, and Renée their goals were less connected to the institution of school and corporate institutions, as Jordan was an aspiring soccer player, Raul an aspiring boxer, and Renée as aspiring musician. Therefore, school would be fair to them if it was more organic wasn't working to prepare them for a career they didn't want. For Vasha, as an aspiring child advocacy lawyer, school would be fair to her if it helped her learn how to best navigate school in order to gain access to more schooling and a professional career.

Another example of how fairness was an important focus of the participants was the subject matter of their critical inquiry research projects. Almost all of the participants chose issues in school in which they felt they did not have a reasonable say in how that issue took shape in school. Homework, America's Choice, school lunches, and school uniforms were all topics that the participants, in one way or another, expressed as being too constraining. They felt that they were old enough and responsible enough to be

treated like adults and granted with more respect. To them, it was only fair to be able to have greater say as to what they wore to school, what food they had available to them at school, and the academic work they did in school and out.

The concept of fairness attracted the attention of participants when it was present in the texts we experienced in class. When there was an opportunity to think about and discuss fair treatment and instances of social justice and injustice participants were eager and able to discuss. During the reading of Bronx Masquerade it was discovered that multiple characters encountered bullying from classmates. During small group and whole group discussions participants would regularly admonish behaviors they deemed unfair without specific encouragement from me to do so. Identifying instances of injustice was also practiced through formal and informal discussions regarding current and historical events. While the participants were interested in fairness as to how it pertained individually to them, throughout the course of my research they also demonstrated how they were interested in how others, locally and globally, were or were not being treated fairly.

When school resumed after Winter Break, Vasha spoke regularly about the recent earthquake in Haiti. Based on the interest of many students throughout our school, Pioneer organized an "I Heart Haiti" day that raised awareness in the students and staff and money for the Haitians. Vasha, Hannah, and Renée were key contributors to the facilitation of this school-wide project as Renée noted during a planning meeting, "Man, this is just like those projects we did last semester, Mr. Horn." I addition, during the Spring our class studied the legacy of César Chávez and the historical and contemporary

struggle for workers' rights. As we studied the expanding gap between the average pay of an American CEO and that of an average American worker with an hourly wage, Hannah noted, "Dang, this is just like the doctor in the The Pearl taking advantage of Kino." Later in the unit, Luke said he wasn't going to drink Coke anymore because of a recent workers' strike for better wages and working conditions. To which Brandon joined saying, "That's fine with me, Coke's nasty anyway."

Finally, the issue of fairness was strongly expressed in the participants' critical inquiry research projects, albeit in different perspectives. Raul, Brandon, and Jordan each focused on school uniforms. When they thought of the most pressing issue related to empowerment in schools they thought of the personal issue of self-expression through dress and style. To them, fairness was viewed at the personal level where youth deserved greater control over their own personal choices. Vasha focused her research on the social aspect of gender segregation at lunch and recess time. To Vasha, empowerment and fairness involved youth being able to enact greater control and choice, similarly to the ends of Raul, Brandon, and Jordan, but with the added component of youth interacting with each other. Hannah's focus on America's Choice and the dual focus of Henry and Luke on homework illustrated their collective conceptualization of fairness and empowerment in schools relating to academics. Student choice and appropriate control were still underlying themes present with Hannah, Henry, and Luke, but the context towards the work done in school constituted a unique difference between how they and the other participants viewed fairness. Finally, Renée took a more global perspective in her examination of sex trafficking. Being empowered in school and eyeing fairness meant

taking social action to combat social injustices. Having access to curricula that fostered study of and action towards social justice issues was a necessary component of school for Renée.

Expressing Their Voices in New Ways

Just like having an eye for fairness, participants came to this unit with a developing ability to express their voices, their speaking personality, their speaking consciousness (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 7), in new ways. For my participants, utilizing their voice in new ways illustrated the social, cultural, and contextual nature of language, whereas the dialogic use of language involved the sociocultural acknowledgment of speaker and listener as well as the temporal acknowledgement of an earlier and later version of the speaker's self (Bakhtin, 1986, p.7).

Participants had been expressing their voices on policies and practices in school already in many ways. For example, participants had verbalized directly to other students their feelings by stating problems in school policy and practice and explaining the problems' effects. Also, participants had indirectly communicated their feelings to teachers and school officials through disengagement in certain policies and practices, sabotage of certain policies and practices, and complaining about policies and practices. Their specific abilities and avenues for expression were varied, however, all participants expressed the need to express themselves. Perhaps the most widely used form of self-expression was through rule breaking. Vasha, Hannah, and Renée protested uniform policies by slightly adding articles of clothing or accessories that violated the stated policy. Brandon and Raul would untuck their long shirts so they could "sag" as low as

possible without the athletic shorts they wore under their uniform pants being exposed. Luke, Henry and Jordan would not do assigned homework or leave their textbooks in other classes to protest classroom policies. Still other participants would not bring their student ID to protest lunch and recess policies. This form of expression was not intended to espouse policy change. The participants didn't feel as if their voices were fairly respected in school so they had realistic intentions related to their tacit protests. Instead, their goal was to simply express their voice to satisfy their peers and their own individual conscience.

Exhibited less often, especially without institutional encouragement, participants would on occasion directly express their voices to teachers and school administrators. Primarily because participants largely felt pessimistic about teachers and school administrators positively receiving their concerns, only a few participants felt comfortable confronting school officials uninvited. Only Vasha and Jordan expressed their experiences speaking up towards school officials regarding a criticism. However, all participants conveyed experiences in speaking directly to a school official regarding a criticism when they had been encouraged to do so as an isolated instance or their speaking up was a regularly fostered component within a class with a teacher. Despite having the opportunity to speak and be respectfully heard, most participants still expressed doubt that their voice would in fact lead to change. However, all participants felt they deserved a respectful audience to express their concerns. While I attempted to encourage them to take a more idealistic stance towards expressing oneself to school

personnel, I understood their reticence was based on histories of mistrust that wouldn't be easily trumped by my simple encouragement.

There was interest in the idea of taking greater, more explicit steps towards enacting voice for institutional change. Participants were impressed by the efforts of the students in the movie Walkout and Raul, Renée, Luke, and Henry would often joked casually about organizing walkouts or other forms of nonviolent protests in school, jokes that I always took seriously and told them I would consider encouraging, but jokes that never came to transformed into serious ideas of action. Also, participants liked the idea of sharing their critical inquiry research projects with school officials but eventually opted for their peers being their audience. Jordan, Brandon, and Raul spoke of taking what they experienced in our unit and utilizing what they learned in high school or college or later when the issues were more important. In all, participants further developed their voices and the ways in which they could express themselves.

While all participants expressed their voices through their critical inquiry research projects, many struggled to comfortably direct the full force of their voice. At the beginning of the introduction of the unit the participants felt generally eager to be able to express their opinions in a concrete fashion. Many were even excited at the possibility that they would be able to invite teachers and administrators to view their presentations, an option I actively encouraged. However, as I worked to support their ability to construct a research project, for some, the process began to feel like another "assignment". Raul, Luke, and Jordan conveyed dissatisfaction towards gathering field notes and following the steps I laid out for them. Others were distrustful of the impact our

research would have within the institution and uncomfortable interviewing teachers and principals, let alone having these people as audience members. Jordan, Brandon, Luke, and Henry felt as if they were almost dressing up and playing researchers rather than being bona fide researchers themselves. Vasha and Hannah did set forth and follow through as researchers with the skill and confidence to communicate something personally important for them to say. Not all participants were at the same place as Vasha and Hannah, although all participants did engage and express their voices through their critical inquiry research projects.

Learning From Each Other

Throughout the entirety of the unit one of the most powerful themes expressed by the participants was their desire to learn from each other. The group of seven was the most concrete example of this with seven diverse students working together to enhance each other's learning. Participants bounced ideas off of each other, shared personal connections to the text that aided in the comprehension and appreciation of the text. With the sole exception of Henry who chose to read Bronx Masquerade by himself, all participants were able to learn from others while reading the novel in groups.

Hannah mentioned that learning from other students was more powerful than learning from teachers. Hannah, along with all participants except Henry and Luke, expressed how much they learned when our class would engage in structured "forced choice" activities. As I read statements of opinion constructed by either students or myself, students would move to the section in the room that matched their response to the stated opinion: *agree, agree, but…, disagree, disagree, but….* Then students would

explain their opinion and listen to others explain theirs. If students' minds were changed, they would move to their new section of the class. This activity fostered lively debate and discussion and was widely heralded as one of the best activities we did in class.

Regardless of the topic or the presenter, the participants were actively engaged in the research shared by their classmates. As participants shared their work, those who comprised the audience listened and responded so as to create an atmosphere of solidarity within the classroom. Heads nodded in agreement, side comments and feedback directed to the presenter supported their data and conclusions regarding their research. A feeling of togetherness and shared experience undergirded the presentations like at no other time in class. Through the research presentations, participants learned from each other in terms of the ways in which their classmates engaged in research and communicated their research, but also they learned that much of their observations regarding school were being echoed and supported by their peers.

Summary

Through my work to make critical literacy a central component of the classroom, participant voices were privileged and brought to the fore. In varied ways and in varied degrees, participant voices, in concert, illuminated the power and potential of youth engaging in critical literacy practices. Primarily through the critical inquiry research projects but also through shared reading and analysis of various texts, participants critiqued the often-disempowering institution of school around them, as Freire and Macedo (1987, p. 55) suggest, so as to free themselves from dominating ideologies. In addition, participants moved beyond the critical consumption of text, such as Bronx

Masquerade, and worked towards critical textual production in their critical inquiry research projects, as Morrell (2008, p. 115) argues. As the teacher, my work was complex, wrought with obstacles, and in constant need of self-reflection and upkeep.

CHAPTER 5: BUILDING EMPOWERING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

In the previous chapter the lives and work of my eight research participants were outlined. Some important similarities were apparent between the participants, of which I made brief note. In this chapter I continue to explore patterns of similarity within the work of my participants, but more deeply as I develop the idea of empowering learning communities as well as more broadly as I connect the lives and experiences of my eight participants to established research and literature. Specifically, I will explore how participants engaging in the shared reading of Bronx Masquerade and the exit interviews of a couple of participants illustrate the socially situated and shared learning endeavors of a community of practice. Also, I will explore how the two focus group interviews illustrate culturally responsive relationships with teachers.

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. Therefore, I developed three main themes that describe and explain the building of empowering learning communities: community of practice, culturally responsive relationships with teachers, and the teacher's role. In this chapter I will show that in each of these three themes have powerful potential in providing students the conditions in which to develop as empowered students and individuals.

My identification of the three 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, culturally responsive relationships with teachers, and the teacher's role 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 groups 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 in the direction of interdependent student work." The next week a phone went off in class, which is 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 (2007), a *community of practice* is "formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour." 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. Further, Wenger (2007) identifies three elements that distinguish communities of practice from other groups and communities: *the domain, the community,* and *the practice*. These three elements will be further explained and connected to the participants' work later in this chapter.

Participants spoke and wrote often about being able to work in constructive ways with their peers while doing common tasks. They reflected 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. Perhaps the most powerful example from the research of students participating in a *community of practice* was a group of students that regularly formed during their reading of the primary text in the unit, Bronx Masquerade by Nikki Grimes. While the development and execution of the participants' critical inquiry research presentations were good examples of working in a community of practice, the students shared reading of Bronx Masquerade was a more powerful example due to having more working parts, so to speak. Reading Bronx Masquerade in most cases involved a bigger group of students than the pairs researching together. Also, with a more structured task at hand imposed by me with the reading of Bronx Masquerade, groups had a greater obstacle to making their work together actually work. The fact that the participants were so successful in establishing communities of practice while reading

Bronx Masquerade further punctuates the potential of developing communities of practice within the classroom.

Shared Reading of Bronx Masquerade

Bronx Masquerade is a novel set in Mr. Ward's freshman high school English class in the Bronx, NY. This novel was introduced towards the beginning of the unit and was chosen as the core text of this unit for multiple reasons. First, the book's lexile score of 670 was within or just under the lexile range of my students, according to the latest Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) reading assessment. Second, I believed the age and sociocultural traits of the characters as well as the urban context of the school would be culturally relevant to my students. Third, the novel provides multiple examples of students being empowered and disempowered by school, which I felt would provide my students opportunities for conversation and thinking regarding school empowerment. Finally, the characters in the novel express themselves through poetry. Studying and creating poetry was a key academic component of this unit and the novel's use of poetry reinforced this aim.

The book was divided into sections that centered on members of Mr. Ward's fictitious class. Each section would open with a first-person narrative from a student who disclosed powerful events in his or her life and the student's responses to those events. Following the narrative was a poem the student wrote and read aloud in Mr. Ward's class. The context of the poem always reflected the experiences the student's narrative disclosed. Finally, the section concluded with a reflective narrative from Tyrone, one of the students in the class, responding to the poem that was read aloud in class.

Each class period, students in my class were assigned two sections from Bronx Masquerade to read. These sections could be read individually or in self-selected groups. In most cases, students chose to read in groups of four to five. While reading each section, students were to keep track of the events the characters were writing about in the narratives that then showed up in their poems. My students were writing their own poems and I wanted them to see how one might use the actual events in their life as inspiration and context for writing poetry. Students were to also make note of examples of poetic and literary devices used in the narrative and poems. Poetry was a focus of this unit and I wanted students to become more adept at identifying literary devices in texts and also more creative in using literary devices in their own poetry and writing. Finally, students were expected to identify how the characters were being empowered and/or disempowered by school. Analyzing how students engage in events that empower and disempower them, albeit in fictitious circumstances, would expand my students' personal understanding of empowerment in schools. To assist in the record keeping, I constructed a template that students used to guide their work with Bronx Masquerade. On this template students were to collectively identify the connections between each characters' narrative and poem, poetic devices used in the poems of each character, and examples of how each character was empowered and/or disempowered.

Responsible Shared Reading

From the beginning of my students' reading of Bronx Masquerade, I noted the ease with which students were able to effectively and responsibly read aloud with self-selected peers. This came to no surprise to me as this had been the case during readings

from earlier in the school year of Maya Angelou's "High School Graduation", John Steinbeck's The Pearl, and Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present (1980/2003). An illustrative example of students participating in a *community of practice* occurred during the class period in which students read the "Devon" and "Sterling" sections of Bronx Masquerade. Students had been reading Bronx Masquerade for three weeks. Originally, students read with the classmates already sitting with them in their four-desk group. However, some students eventually began to read alone or move around and form different reading groups as they worked to meet their individual needs. The largest group formed in the class was originally a group of four that eventually added two students from an adjacent group, whose third member was often absent, and another student from a different group who drifted away from his original group under amicable circumstances. Together, this group of seven students included six of my eight participants and became a regular site for "collective learning".

Group of Seven

About halfway through the day's class period, the focus of the work shifts to Bronx Masquerade. Books are passed out, students shuffle through their three-ring binders to find their templates, groups rejoin, and many students converse casually. I circle around the room availing myself to students with questions or concerns, assisting when needed, and otherwise witnessing the groups of students transition smoothly into their reading. Brandon and Jordan scoot their desks a short distance over to be near the desks of Renée and Hannah, who are sitting in their desk cluster facing each other next to Luke and another student, both of whom are facing each other. Vasha leaves her desk

from the other side of the room to rejoin the group. She sits in Jordan's abandoned desk, which he left for my extra office chair that he rolled from near my desks over near the group. Jordan is now at the end of the large group by Brandon and Vasha. The group of seven gets into position to begin their work and figures out who will read what with no apparent rush or with no major distraction. Group members talk freely with each other discussing logistical issues related to the book as well as other personal topics. Within a couple of minutes the group begins reading. While members take turns reading aloud paragraphs from the text the other members of the group read along silently. Reading is briefly and regularly paused to discuss the work related to the template or to personal connections made by the students to the text.

I continue to circle around the room stopping by each group listening to their reading, watching their collective work, and helping if needed. Seeing that the groups are working constructively and that there are no more immediate student needs to be addressed, I come back around to the group of seven for a longer observation. Students are discussing the literary devices in the section. Jordan reads a section from a poem and suggests that the line is an example of alliteration and assonance. After a pause he self-corrects and states, "I mean repetition, I'm sorry."

Vasha, looking up from the poem, asks me, "It's not assonance?"

I review how repetition, assonance, and alliteration are different from each other and read a line from the poem and ask, "How about 'even cereal boxes boasting champions', what's he mean by that?"

"What's that even mean?", asks Vasha.

"Isn't that personification?, answers Jordan.

Discussion continues regarding literary devices used and how the student in the book later used the word "flake", and its many meanings. Jordan, Hannah, Vasha, and Renée vocally participate in the discussion, while Luke and Brandon participate silently.

The discussion shifts when Vasha asks the group, "So what's disempowering? I know what's empowering."

Jordan is quick to answer, "Bullying!" Jordan goes on to explain his thinking and group members make note on their templates and Hannah and Vasha add their interpretations of the topic of bullying within the context of the book.

Hannah then interjects by exclaiming; "You can't judge a book by its cover."

Jordan responds, "Thank you."

After a pause, Hannah, thinking, adds, "Well sometimes you can."

This triggers Renée to take the conversation off topic to share, "I don't read books with dumb covers." Jordan asks Renée about this and while the two of them start their own side conversation Hannah continues to tell the group about how she would be judged if she were a new student.

While Luke and Brandon write on their templates, Jordan and Vasha begin to quietly discuss bullying at school while Hannah talks to Renée about her coming off as shy in certain situations. Eventually the two conversations come together and focus on where they went to elementary school. After about a minute listening to this side conversation and seeing that the students not engaged in the conversation are done

writing, I interject asking, "So he was disempowered by the bullying? How's he being empowered?"

Vasha, Renée, Hannah, and Jordan all speak up at once to collectively explain that Devon likes Tanisha. Vasha turns to the book attempting to reference something specific Devon said to support their claim. She notes that Devon didn't want to express his feelings towards Tanisha because he didn't want to be like all the other guys. To which Renée states, "I hate guys like that."

I push the group to look at the end of the Devon's narrative in order to identify what Devon did and how it relates to empowerment. Vasha, frustrated, says, "Y'all gotta help me." Members of the group find the part in the book and Hannah and Jordan take on the persona of Devon in order to explain how he was empowered.

Jordan, alluding to Devon reading a book on the team bus despite being bullied for it, proudly says, "I'm reading!" Then tells the group, "I hate reading." To which Renée responds, "I'll read if there's nothing else I have to do."

Hannah, as Devon, adds, "I'ma make sure everybody sees it!"

I ask the group why Devon wants to flaunt his reading of the book and both Vasha and Jordan say they don't know. I go on to ask what Mike wants Devon to feel. Hannah answers, "Like a nerd!" I continue by asking the group what Devon wants to do by showing off that he's reading this book? After a pause, Renée responds, "He doesn't care what people say." At this point I worry that my presence, while apparently helpful in spurring conversation, might stifle critical thought and communication between the group

members. I leave the group where they are and begin to make my rounds checking in on the progress of other groups.

The next day in class I make it a point to stop by and closely observe the group of seven again. As I find my same spot as the day before I notice that the group is physically positioned the same as the day before. Jordan repeats a line from a poem in the book, "many moons ago." Confused, Jordan looks up at me. I ask what the line means and Vasha answers, "A long time ago." Jordan continues reading aloud and his fellow group members continue to read along silently.

When Jordan is done reading his section Vasha asks me, "Isn't 'I dipped my brush in the sky' metaphor?" I tell her it is and we go on to identify that "the stench and sting of chlorine" examples imagery. Jordan reads another excerpt from the poem and he discusses it with Hannah, Vasha, and Renée.

As was the case yesterday, Luke and Brandon listen to the conversation, read along silently, and add to their notes without vocally participating. Jordan, Hannah, Vasha, and Renée, the more vocal members of the group, continue to go back and forth between reading, discussing the text, relating the text to their own lives, completing their templates, and having side conversations unrelated to the task at hand. Compared to yesterday and days before, there is less reliance on me as a resource and more reliance on each other. At one point during discussion, Vasha interrupts by asking a Renée, "You like this color, don't you?" Jordan, Renée and Hannah respond and after about a twenty-second conversation, a student mentions empowerment and both Vasha and Jordan quickly state that the character in the story is empowered by Raul. Vasha supports this

point by reading directly from the text and both Jordan and Hannah add comments in agreement. Jordan adds to that what took place in the story is similar to what he has seen in "old time movies". He describes his point focusing the attention of the entire group and espousing laughter from Hannah.

Discussion remains on-topic as a student asks if the character is disempowered by anything. Renée remembers from earlier in the book how the main character's father played a role in the character's empowerment but is unsure. There is a pause from the group and I encourage them to look back in their notes to see for sure what we learned about this character earlier. Members of the group flip back through their notes and Renée finds out that she was right about this character's father. Vasha, Jordan, and Hannah talk about this character's empowerment as they and the others write on their templates stopping periodically to return to the text to specifically read aloud parts that guided their work. Later, as more and more conversation became off-topic, Luke spoke up to say, "We only have like, five minutes." And Vasha added, "You guys, shut up." After this interjection, the talking members of the group did return their attention to the task at hand and all members finished reading, discussing, and writing before the end of the work period.

On both days the group of seven worked together positively towards a common goal. Social interaction and collaboration was encouraged by the structure of the classroom environment and successfully utilized by the members of the group. On the first day there was a greater reliance on me as their teacher to ensure that they were on the right track and doing accurate work. Also, my presence helped focus the attention of

the students. Whereas on the second day students were more apt to problem solve on their own and manage their work and time without as much assistance from me. These two brief examples of classroom work illustrate the students desire to work and learn with and from each other, their learning how to learn in a community of practice, and the success they experienced learning in this environment.

The group of seven engaged in authentic intellectual work around a specific topic with a specific purpose. The group was self-constructed and self-regulated as students chose to work together and kept each other on pace challenging and supporting each other as they worked. While their work was largely intellectual and academic, it was not linear. Students didn't work along a straight, uninterrupted trajectory towards efficiently completing the tasks of each day. Instead, students took "side trips" off topic making personal connections to the issues of the text or making no connections at all. At first glance it may seem as if these "side trips" were a distraction to the learning process, however, it is because of these diversions that the group was able to thrive as it did.

Participation in a community of practice is predicated upon the rituals and routines of the group that are practiced by its members. Briefly steering conversation away from the literal text was a tacitly agreed upon ritual of the group that met the needs of its group members. Fostering this practice in this group increased the level of commitment to the group from the members, which in turn increases engagement and overall success. Communities of practice matter in that they allow for students to take more active roles in order to tailor their learning to meet their needs. As the teacher witnessing their work, I was struck by how many "best practices" regarding group size

and “time on task” I had learned over a decade ago were being broken. Yet, the students’ development of their own community of practice trumped two widely accepted “rules” of teaching.

Knowing that I was making best guesses regarding much of what I observed as the group of seven engaged in their community of practice, I made it a point to sit down individually with each participant and ask them about their participation in their group as well as in the other aspects of the unit in order to get a more complete view of how the participants conceptualized their community of practice and their understanding of empowerment. Hearing directly from the students at the end of the unit about specific happenings within the unit provides a more accurate portrait of each student than relying only on field notes.

The following interview data from Luke, Renée, and Vasha support the assumption that the practice of interspersing casual and tangential talk with academic and specific talk serves both academic and social ends. For many middle school youth socialization is empowering and developing a community of practice allows for vital socialization to occur. The interview data also show that students are empowered to set their own course when participating in communities of practice. Luke, Renée, and Vasha all participated in the same group for both different and similar reasons. Regardless, they all had the freedom to select with whom they could work and how they would work in order to best meet their needs. Finally, much of the empowerment Luke, Renée, and Vasha expressed was related to process of being able to participate in a community of

practice. While the inner workings of the group was empowering, so to was simply knowing that they had the freedom to choose their own route in class.

Luke's Exit Interview

At the conclusion of my research timeframe I spoke with all eight participants individually. Prior to the meetings I had made copies of all their written work including their Bronx Masquerade templates, responses to weekly quotes, critical inquiry PowerPoint presentation, critical inquiry field notes, and other pertinent assignments from the unit. I read through their work and made notes regarding recurring themes in their thinking as well as questions I would like to have them clarify. In addition, I closely read through my field notes that I had produced and listened to some of my digital voice recordings so as to again make note of predominant themes and reflections that I wanted my participants to clarify or further expand.

Luke was one of the most reserved members of my class. He greatly disliked activities that required moving around and talking to people other than the small group of classmates with whom he was most comfortable. He was able to work independently and a proficient level but still preferred to work with others, but only if they were classmates he considered his closest friends.

When I sat down with Luke I wanted him to speak more about his observations regarding the types of activities in his Math and Science classes. I began by asking him about his few reflections regarding his Math class that he has right before our Language Arts class and his Science class that he has every other day after our Language Arts class and lunch. I read back to Luke what he had written, "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 then attempt to clarify, "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 interrupts, smiling, "I like to talk in this class."

I respond, "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 clarifies, "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."

I went on to tell Luke that I noticed that during the reading of Bronx Masquerade his group did very well working together academically and socially and that while watching them work I was very impressed. During my sharing of my observation, Luke nodded in affirmation and had a slight, yet confident smile across his face. When I was done complimenting the work of him and his group Luke simply stated, "Thank you."

Later during Luke's interview I read a response he had written in which he said about his Science class, "All we do is get in trouble there." I asked him to explain exactly what he meant by this statement and to provide some context to this reflection.

"Truthfully that's basically it. I always get in trouble there."

"Yeah, but how?"

"Um, sometimes I don't even know. Sometimes I'm with a group of kids and we're working on a project and they're talking about it and I get in trouble for it. Or sometimes I say something that I'm not supposed to say while she's talking and I get in trouble.

Luke then gets more emotionally attached to his reflection as his voice raises and speeds up. He adjusts in his seat, sitting more upright, "She really doesn't even give us a chance or anything. If you mess up once she basically holds it against you. Doesn't really give you a chance."

Renée's Exit Interview

Conducted right after Luke's, Renée's exit interview offered important insight as to how crucial it was for her to be able to participate in and help construct a community of practice in our classroom. 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.

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 confirms, "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 because like if your friend is feeling bad you can help them out."

Just like with Luke, I mentioned to Renée how I noticed and was impressed by the work she did with the other students (what I've called the *Group of Seven*). While I

detailed my observation of the *Group of Seven's* work Renée 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."

Vasha's Exit Interview

Vasha was one of the most engaged and confident students in my class. She was quick to speak her mind and share her opinions with others. Vasha was comfortable in class, both academically and socially. Vasha valued hard work and self-determination and was proficient working individually. However, she also valued working collectively. While in the *Group of Seven,* Vasha eagerly involved herself in discussion specifically and tangentially related to the novel's topic. She was open to the ideas of others and often relied on the analysis of her fellow group members for providing clarity and direction.

Throughout Vasha's interview she spoke of her need for physical activity and variety in her classes. I asked, "Could you say more about how work can be more active and fun? The work we do in class can be more fun and more engaging?"

"Pairing up, moving around the room, doing activities. Staying active, not just staying in one seat writing, constantly staring up at the board and writing the whole time," replied Vasha.

"I noticed that when we read Bronx Masquerade the group you worked with worked pretty well. How would have it been different had you just had to read individually, silently?"

"I think it would have kind of taken more time, because when we was reading in our group we would read together and after that we went over it and talked about what we read about and then we started writing. And we went back in the pages and actually had a discussion."

Etienne Wenger (2007) describes three crucial elements in distinguishing a *community of practice* from other groups and communities:

The domain. A *community of practice* goes beyond a group of friends or a social network of people. "It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people (*op. cit.*)."

In the case of the *Group of Seven*, participants did not come together as a group because their teacher had assigned group membership to them. Nor had the participants decided to work with their best friends. In fact, in most cases participants in the *Group of*

Seven did not work with their best friends in class, in the group. The shared domain of interest for the *Group of Seven* was deep engagement in the text. Members of the *Group of Seven* were committed to their learning, both individual and collective, and by extension their group, which served their best interests and served as the vehicle by which learning would occur.

The community. Reciprocal communication that involves and goes beyond the task at hand is key to a *community of practice*. Rather than doing parallel work next to each other or having some members do all or most of the work while others do little or nothing, participants in a *community of practice* share responsibility and connect with each other at a more personal and human level than just being co-workers or classmates. "In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other (*op. cit.*)."

Group of Seven members oscillated between work that explicitly involved the reading and writing tasks related to Bronx Masquerade and communication that was more personal, helped to bond the group members, and also helped to connect the learnings of the group members. Renée talked about helping out a friend who was feeling bad and the opportunity to get advise from a group member if she was confused as necessities. Vasha alluded to deeper and more accurate work done due to the availability of fellow group members as a resource. The presence of a community was a valued and imperative component of the *Group of Seven*.

*The practice***.** Over time members of a *community of practice* develop routines and rituals that are utilized to get their work done. Their work becomes efficient and comfortable because it has become personal and collective. "Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction (*op. cit.*)."

While Luke wasn't at his most socially comfortable working within the *Group of Seven*, he spoke of the upside of working in a group that ran smoothly. He mentioned how his group was able to efficiently work so that they were able to speak more freely later in the class. The *Group of Seven* had developed the practice of being able to diverge discussion from the academic topic at hand. This ritual was missing in groups found in other classes according to Luke and Renée. The members of The *Group of Seven* had established their group to meet their needs, worked together in a community, and developed their own rituals of behavior, of which everyone at least tacitly agreed with and was accountable.

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 (2000, p. 29) 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 ethically diverse students, and how this can be done, are virtually identical.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) also explores the notion of culturally relevant teaching. She notes that "Almost forty years after the Supreme Court decision declaring separate but equal schools to be illegal, most African American students still attend schools that are in reality segregated and unequal" (p. x). She defines culturally relevant teaching as "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right" (p. 17-18). Ladson-Billings outlines these practices as entailing three main aspects- "teachers' conceptions of themselves and others, how social interactions are structured in the classroom, and teachers' conceptions of knowledge."

Peter Murrell (2002) claims that teachers have had difficulty in applying the culturally relevant framework. He proposes the difficulty is twofold:

> First… developing culturally responsive practice is difficult when you are at the beginning stages of understanding the historical struggle for quality education for African American children. Secondly, for many teachers it is too difficult to avoid dichotomization of "mainstream" versus "African American" cultural experience. (p. xxxvi)

Murrell critiques the shortcomings of culturally responsive pedagogy as a framework for designing effective pedagogy for African American students, asserting that

> …it merely repositions the African American experience as "the other"—something out of synch with the universalized mainstream cultural experience represented by school. It implies a process of closing the gaps and making connections, without interrogating the deep-rooted cultural values that are antithetical to the African American conceptions of education, development, and struggle (pp. 14-15).

Geneva Gay (2000) more specifically addresses the role of student-teacher relationships in regards to cultural relevance as she notes the descriptive characteristics of culturally responsive teaching. "*Multidimensional* culturally responsive teaching encompasses curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments" (p. 31). My participants reflected often on the content and the context of their classes. They spoke to how classes were established and how their interactions with their teachers influenced their feelings of empowerment.

During Gay's description of culturally responsive teaching being empowering she states that, "Teachers must show students that they expect them to succeed and commit themselves to making success happen… This is done by boostering students' morale, providing resources and personal assistance, developing an ethos of achievement, and celebrating individual and collective accomplishments" (p. 32). It was common for my participants to express their desire to have teachers who maintained fair and accurate expectations for themselves and their classmates.

Focus Groups

During my research, participants often wrote about and talked about with each other their relationships with teachers. Much of the participants' reflections related to the frustration with the disconnection they felt towards some of their teachers. However, there were also times when participants reflected on positive and powerful relationships they had with teachers. While most of the participant conversations and written reflections were brief, there were occasions in which I was able to capture participants' detailed musings related to their relationships with teachers. The most powerful of these occasions was when I conducted a focus group interview with some of the participants. In this context, participants were able to express their thoughts in an open forum that was rarely made available to them. It was here that I captured the participants' most illustrative reflections of their relationships with teachers.

The importance of culturally relevant relationships with teachers became most apparent when I conducted my two focus group interviews about midway through the unit. Participants Vasha, Luke, Henry, Hannah, and Raul met for one focus group while Jordan, Brandon, and Renée met for the other focus group interview. Both groups ate lunch in my classroom during their lunch and recess time. Discussion was prompted by a list of topics I provided that were projected on the SMART Board. Topics included *schoolwork*, *participation*, *expectations*, *teaching styles*, *relationships with teachers*, and *rules*. The list was meant to provide a starting-off-point for participants to think about and articulate how they are empowered and/or disempowered by school in these areas. In addition, the list was not meant to exclude other important topics that participants found

be a place for either empowerment or disempowerment. Throughout both focus group interviews three common themes related to culturally responsive relationships with teachers emerged: *teachers providing explicit academic support, teacher expectations and affirmations,* and *culturally responsive texts.*

Teachers Providing Explicit Academic Support.

After both groups of participants got settled, had a chance to eat their lunch, and visit casually, I spoke briefly about why they were here. I told them I wanted them to have an added opportunity to express their thoughts on school empowerment in a context other than in an "assignment" or in a whole class setting. I explained the listed topics and mentioned that I wanted everyone to communicate effectively and respectively. I figured that in the first focus group Hannah and Vasha, two of the most verbal students in the class, and Jordan in the second group would have no problem being expressive during this focus group interview. I was, however, concerned yet hopeful that a small group setting would be more comfortable for Raul, Henry, Renée, Brandon, and Luke, participants that weren't as apt to verbally participate in class.

At the beginning of the first focus group Hannah quickly raised her hand and wanted to start. I asked, "OK, Hannah, what do you want to talk about first?"

Hannah responded, "Teaching styles. At the beginning of the year we had to take Cornell Notes in math. It's actually helped."

"How has it helped?"

""Cause it helps you stay organized in the steps that you do."

There was a pause and no other participant added to the conversation so I asked, “Anybody else have anything to say about Cornell Notes or teaching styles in general?... Can you think about a time when a teaching style really helped you? The way in which a teacher taught you something, it really clicked, it really helped you?

Vasha answered, “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.”

Raul picks up on this thread and asks, “Does it have to be how we learned or how we were not learning?”

I answer, “It could be either one. It could be a bad example or a good example.”

Raul continues, “I have a bad example. Like in Math, Mr. Ethridge, usually he gets off subject. You could be talking about, like government, and he’d just start talking about government and take up half the class. And when that happens all he does is slap the work on the Elmo projector thing and he just tells us to do the work. He don’t even explain it. But like five minutes before class ends, that’s when he explains it a little.”

I interject and ask, “So you like it when teachers give you a structure. A step-by-step structure on how to do things. How things… what’s expected?”

Raul answers, “He told us that if we needed help we could just look off the book, but I can’t do it off the book. I like it better when the teacher tells me how to do it. Not tells me to just read it off something.”

Hannah adds, “Me too. I don’t get the steps in the book. ‘Just look in the book.’ I am looking in the book. Then he says look at the answers. How are we supposed to know how to do it if we are looking at the answers?”

I noticed that Luke and Henry hadn’t verbalized yet so I asked them if they had anything on the topic that they wanted to add. Luke responded, “Not really, but there’s one thing that Miss Johnson does like, she’ll show us how to do this one problem then we’ll go to work and they’re be like the same problems and different ways to do them and she doesn’t show us how to do them.”

Similarly, during the second focus group I noticed Brandon not having the opportunity to speak. While the topic was on teachers who connect well with students, I asked, “How about you Brandon? Do you have a teacher?”

“Yeah, Ms. Gina. Like, whenever I can’t get through the work she takes the time to help explain it to me. Or if she gots to help other kids real quick I’ll stay after class and she’ll help me then.”

Brandon’s main reflection towards Ms. Gina was that she was available to provide appropriate help and feedback. This is very similar to how other participants described their need for explicit feedback and support. Participants wanted teachers who would directly, skillfully, and sensitively support them in a way that would further their confidence and learning without being dictatorial in what and how things were done in the classroom.

Hannah, Vasha, Raul and Luke have quickly expressed their desire for teachers to provide resources and personal assistance that is linked to achievement. These

participants are expressing a desire and expectation to learn and a want for teachers who can concretely help them. They want to feel confident going into a task and supported if they have difficulties. When given the opportunity to reflect on a wide variety of issues related to school, the first topic discussed indicated participants' palpable want to learn. Perhaps this opening of discussion started by Hannah and continued by Vasha indicated a "testing of the waters" in which participants became acclimated to sharing certain feelings with a teacher in a school setting. If so, this still does not detract from the general and individual statements the participants were making.

Hannah expressed a positive view of an organizational tool used in her math class, a class that is the basis for much frustration in her life at school. Despite her deep-seeded anger towards math and America's Choice, Hannah acknowledged a benefit derived from a strategy espoused by the establishment-privileged America's Choice. Hannah's analysis that highlights a positive within such a negative authenticates her critique of America's Choice and her teachers as someone who can thoughtfully find positive aspects of something that she deems, on the whole, as negative.

Vasha's comments came from a student who is less cynical and more accepting of the structures of school. She is also very creative and confident in her abilities. Her views regarding the steps that could be taken in order to write a poem indicate her desire to have good work modeled for her and a clear path set before her along with the opportunity to express herself in her writing as she sees fit by selecting the topic. Vasha wants to know what teachers expect of her, what quality work looks like, and then the freedom for her to create.

Raul is less verbally expressive than Hannah and Vasha. However, he still possesses a lot of personal pride when it comes to the work that he does in his classes. Here he connects with Vasha in terms of discussing the need for support from teachers as he alludes to the frustration felt by not knowing what to do or how to do it. However, Raul provides a "bad" example. He mentions how he wants a teacher to be able to explain things to him rather than just directing students to read out of a book. Hannah adds that she can't learn by just looking at the answers in the back of the book. While looking through the book and consulting the answers in the back may be easier, Raul and Hannah communicates that this does not lead to their better understanding and mastery of Algebra.

Luke finds very little creative outlet at school. He likes when things are run efficiently and prefers to be able to do his own thing, and when that can't happen he would rather be told as closely as possible what exactly it is he needs to do so he can do it. Luke's final comments add another wrinkle to the topic of how teachers best support their students, primarily through direct instruction. His math teacher, Miss Johnson, explains one way to do math problems to the whole group, assigns problems to be solved that require different problem solving strategies without providing the support the students require to successfully solve the problems. He wants his teachers to be direct with him and to tell it like it is on a personal and academic level. Miss Johnson's explanation of math that doesn't connect with the textbook assignment is very frustrating.

Teacher Expectations and Affirmations

The conversation turned briefly away from the academic support teachers give or don't give and began to address the multidimensional nature of teaching whereas student-teacher relationships, communication, and expectations were examined. Raul is the first to steer the conversation in this direction when he states:

> 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 strait 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.

Hannah picks up on this shift in topic towards expectations and says, "I have one for expectations. Teachers set expectations because I know they have to, but sometimes their expectations are too hard and they still expect us to meet them. And we're like, 'How are supposed to meet the expectations if we already know we can't reach it, and we're trying to tell you that?' At least at a lower example so that we can actually feel confident and meet the expectation."

Henry finds his opportunity to verbalize in the conversation, "Yeah, Mr. Ethridge, he keeps telling us we're the elite like, 'Act like elite students.' And I'm like, 'OK, we'll do that, stop yelling at us, come on. Why do you have to yell at us every single day?'"

I then ask the group, “So what’s a teacher to do… because he’s sort of doing you all a disservice by having expectations that are too low, and having expectations that are too high. Saying you’re not going to amount to anything and saying you all are elite and you need to do better.

Vasha, who isn’t in Mr. Ethridge’s class, pushes, “He’s probably challenging you all, trying to push you all to do better.”

Hannah is quick to respond, “We already try to do better. Do harder, no matter how hard we try we need to do harder and try harder and just…”

I step in and ask, “So he tells you, ‘try harder, try harder, try harder’, but what more do you need, what is he, what’s missing, I guess?”

“He expects some to fail, but maybe he can just help them”, answers Luke.

Raul states, “We need somebody who believes in us, not somebody who doubt us and puts us down. Because it makes us feel bad. It makes us not want to do anything at all.”

I continue to push, “So what would that look like or what would a teacher who really believes in you do? Like what would they say, how would they act?”

Raul answers, “Teach us. Not just get off subject and not do anything at all and yell the whole hour.”

“We came to school to learn, not get lectured,” Henry adds.

During the second focus group interview Jordan took early control of the discussion by echoing the sentiment of Raul and Hannah stating that Mr. Ethridge viewed his Algebra students as elite and at times his expectations were uncomfortable. Brandon

and Renée both added non-specific insight related to teachers who expect too much and who are unfair. There was a distinct lull in the dialogue and I wanted to gear their thinking and discussion towards more concrete directions so I asked, “Can you talk about a time when a teacher’s expectations, we talked about a time when a teacher’s expectations hurt you, can you talk about a time when a teacher’s expectations helped you?”

Jordan quickly answers, “Ms. Sutton. Like she will help you but if you do something, it’s equal for everyone.”

“So what do you mean by equal expectations?” My question sparks a back-and-forth exchange between Jordan and me.

“Like, let’s say that Brandon does something. He’s going to get the same consequence as I do if I did the same thing.”

“So there’s no favorites or anything?”

“There’s favorites, but everyone’s a favorite.”

“Oh, everyone’s a favorite. That’s pretty cool. How do you know that everyone’s a favorite in her class?”

“’Cause like she jokes around with all of us not just individuals.”

Brandon joins the conversation and says, “It’s not like she just picks on one person.”

I ask, “Pick on one person like in a bad way or call on somebody in class? What did you mean by ‘picking on one person’?”

Jordan steps in an provides an example, “Like Ms. Sutton, if she catches you with your phone she’ll just keep it. She keeps it in her pocket for the rest of the day instead of sending it to the office. But if she catches you with it again she’ll send it to the office. Like she gives you the chance to fix your mistake.”

The idea of fair administration of rules sparked the next topic of conversation with the second group. I asked, “What makes a class and the rules comfortable and empowering for you?”

Renée starts by answering, “When kids pick the rules. Teachers ask, ‘when someone does something wrong, what should their punishment be?’”

Jordan adds, “We used to do that. ‘Raise your hand…’ ‘Cause teachers used to struggle with what to do with students. They didn’t want to sound mean or something so they would ask us what to do for consequences.”

“You had that in other classes before? Why did you like that? What was good about that?”

“Because you got to pick, I mean, granted you’re the one who got in trouble but you still got to pick on what you wanted. Most of the time she would agree with you.”

Brandon interjects, “Sometimes people will do something and the teacher sees them and is like, ‘What do you think your consequence should be?’”

Renée adds, “Sometimes teachers blame kids for stuff that they don’t even do. Like in Ms. Johnson’s class she hears someone talking and she always gets Ricky.”

“She always looks at me too”, says Brandon.

"And she says how she doesn't like to embarrass people, she embarrassed me when I said, 'present'."

"What?" I asked.

"She was like, 'Say here when I call your name' and I was like, 'Present'. 'Go to the back of the line.'"

These two brief exchanges relate to the need of the other participants in receiving comfortable expectations and affirming communication from teachers. Ms. Sutton was clear and consistent with her expectations and Jordan and Brandon viewed her presence in her class as being fair. This fairness resulted in a feeling of respect within the class between students and teacher. Jordan didn't note initially that Ms. Sutton was easy or fun relative to her expectations, both of which might be easily dismissed as a student not wanting to be challenged, but instead Jordan noted that Ms. Sutton was fair in her dealings with misbehavior and with how she interacted with her students. Conversely, Ms. Johnson was described as being inconsistent and arbitrary in how she handled so-called misbehavior in class. Participants noticed unfair treatment towards classmates as well as themselves. The actions of Ms. Johnson alienated Renée and Brandon that resulted in withdrawn engagement and a strained relationship with Ms. Johnson.

Participants express with great passion their current experiences with teachers whom they feel contribute to disempowering classroom climates and relationships with students via expectations. Participants are strongly influenced by teachers' expectations and are very sensitive to the ways in which teachers communicate with them, especially if communication positions students in deficit ways. Through teachers' words and

actions, participants construct teachers' perspectives of them, which influences their levels of engagement in classroom and school activities.

Raul was greatly affected by Mr. Ethridge's claim that some of his students weren't going to amount to anything in life. Personally, Raul has great pride in his Mexican roots. He sees accusations leveled at him that allude to him being incapable or lazy as a direct reflection of how the institution of school often views Latino students. Raul also indicates a want for teachers to positively recognize students in academic and non-academic ways. Raul wants to be able to go to school and know that his teachers respect who he is racially, culturally personally, and academically.

The notion of pleasing the teacher that Raul addresses spurs Hannah's response. In math she feels that there is great pressure placed on her and her classmates to perform to high standards. However, she feels she is unable to meet them. Hannah has expressed her desire for support and want to achieve in school but is now indicating that she is being expected to do something that she hasn't been sufficiently prepared to do. Hannah's reflection speaks to teachers going beyond simply verbally expecting students to learn something and instead fairly matching rigorous expectations with necessary support. All of which is complicated by the fact that Hannah doesn't see that there is room for her to express this disconnection to her teacher and have her teacher address it flexibly and constructively.

As Henry adds to the conversation he succinctly verbalizes the essence of Raul and Hannah's frustrations. Henry is a very sensitive and socially shy young man who has been a frequent target of Mr. Ethridge's public admonishments. In Henry's voice one can

hear the desperation he feels towards not being scolded in class. This feeling of desperation is articulated by Raul's feelings regarding Mr. Ethridge's views towards his Mexican heritage, by Hannah's feeling of not being supported to meet the high standards placed before her, and finally by Henry's feeling of not being emotionally safe in his math class.

After questioning from Vasha and myself, Raul and others are able to construct a positive alternative that includes rigorous expectations but also involves cultural and emotional safety. At the foundation of what Raul needs is simply someone who believes in him and doesn't put him down. Someone who despite perceived student background, strengths, and weaknesses will treat students as capable and worthy human beings without using their social or academic mistakes or cultural affiliations as leverage against them.

I wanted to eventually hear about positive examples of teachers relating with students so I asked if they could reflect on teachers who have comfortable expectations, who are challenging, and who are affirming. Luke was first to respond, "Ms. Sutton. She lets us work in our own speed. She helps us if we need help, she makes sure we always gets 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."

Vasha adds her experiences with Ms. Sutton, "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 says, “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 elaborates, “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.”

Participants articulated a few key characteristics that they associated with good teachers in regards to expectations and affirmations. Teachers were flexible in how time was structured starting with an expectation that students could and would succeed. The classroom climate was more comfortable, teachers were affirming through encouraging and respectful feedback that positively influenced participants’ confidence levels, and participants were engaged by specific classroom curricula that they felt further affirmed their cultural experiences and interests.

Earlier in the focus group Luke spoke to how important it was for him to be more in control and for teachers to be direct with him and provide him with more specific academic support. This assertion is supported by his claim that Ms. Sutton provides help when needed, offers regular and constructive feedback, and allows for students to guide much of their own work. Luke’s need of wanting to be left alone, so to speak, while also

having access to supportive and constructive teachers was a common reflection among the participants.

Vasha speaks to the impact of the ways in which teachers communicate feedback to their students. According to Vasha, Ms. Sutton provides specific feedback that addresses student weaknesses but does so in a way that affirms the students' self-concept and helps them strategize towards the future. Not only are students being treated with respect but they are also being constructive feedback that they can use to support their learning, which reflects the earlier notion of participants wanting specific academic support from teachers.

Culturally Responsive Texts and Instruction

Raul and Vasha further the need the participants have for rigorous and respectful relationships with teachers by illustrating how the chosen text can be a conduit for both. Raul's, Vasha's, and Hannah's eyes have been opened to the possibility of liking reading and a Language Arts class in part because they have had the opportunity to read culturally responsive texts, not just material that has been 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 feel their lives are central to the classroom, they are more respected, and they have greater room to voice opinions. All of which lead to greater confidence and engagement. In addition, Vasha also speaks to the potential of teaching illuminating depth in the connections between student and text. If the students lives are connected in important ways to the text, often via cultural affiliations, and the text can be studied in academically rigorous ways, then there is inherit depth to the lives

of students. Not only are students' lives and experiences being reflected in what is being studied in class, but their lives are being shown as worthy of in-depth study and intellectual.

During the second focus group discussion I wanted to learn more about the participants' feelings towards their relationships with teachers. I prompted, "Talk about a time when the relationship you had with a teacher that really drew you in."

"I don't have her, but Ms. Gina," starts Jordan. "She's not a follower. She's a leader. She has her own teaching style. You know how most Social Studies teachers make you take notes and you study them and you take a test. Well hers is, you get to build stuff. It was hands-on; you got to build it. I guess it was a more fun way of doing something."

Renée then describes her band teacher, "Ms. Lawrence. She's fun, when we get done with our playing she'll sometimes let us have free choice on instruments or she'll have Youtube days and we'll get to watch music-related videos on Youtube. She relates to us. Like if you say something she'll be like, 'Oh yeah, that happened to me.' If there's something wrong with us she'll go to us and ask us what's wrong and like, help us out.

Jordan alludes to the importance of the content of Ms. Gina's class. He marvels at how Ms. Gina, not even his Social Studies teacher, disregards a more traditional mode of curricula delivery and instead thinks for herself and creates hands-on opportunities for her students. To him, Ms. Gina is independent, fresh, exciting, challenging, and relevant, unlike other teachers he experiences. Jordan's reflection of Ms. Gina is reminiscent of Raul, Vasha, and Hannah's reflection of our Language Arts class in which students are

challenged by curricula that has deep meaning in deep ways. Renée's reflection of Ms. Lawrence is in contrast to the reflections of Mr. Ethridge. Whereas Mr. Ethridge scolded his students and demanded perfection, Renée communicated that Ms. Lawrence was flexible with her curricula and sought to listen to and connect with her students on a personal level. Rather than feeling less than Mr. Ethridge like many participants noted, Renée felt equal to Ms. Lawrence.

Both focus group discussions most powerfully captures the participants' thinking towards the content and context of their classes as well as their interactions with teachers and how these interactions influence their feelings of empowerment. Participants want to receive specific academic support when needed. They also want to be treated with respect and flexibility by teachers having positive expectations of them and engaging in affirming dialogue with them. Finally, participants want to feel connected to the texts and curricula of the class. By making students the center of the class curricula in terms of what content is studied, how the content is related to students, how time is used in the classroom, and how feedback is provided to students, participants feel 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.

Also, the focus groups illuminated participants' thinking about fair and accurate personal and academic expectations for themselves and others. Participants expressed an acute sensitivity regarding how they felt teachers perceived them. They have varied degrees of confidence but all require teachers who inherently believe in them no matter what. They want to be judged as capable and know that their teachers are willing to work

with them and for them to insure tangible learning. These messages are perhaps most powerfully sent to students when they are at their worst; struggling with a concept, coming to inaccurate conclusions, or harkening back to pre-established notions of whether they are any good at a certain subject matter. It is how teachers interact with students in their most vulnerable state that conveys to students either a message of hope and possibility or a message of frustration and failure.

Role of the Teacher

Looking at my participants' work and listening to their perspectives as they relate to their empowerment in schools in isolation isn'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 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.

America's Choice

The summer before the school year began I took part in extensive professional development designed to support On Grade Level Language Arts teachers in America's Choice schools. The district was clearly investing a lot of time and resources in the program and wanted teachers to closely follow the prescribed units. America's Choice units strictly followed the clock. Individual lessons were to be timed according to the Workshop Model and units were to be completed in accordance to district pacing guides. In addition, America's Choice units were universalized in what students were reading and what writing and other assignments students were to complete. Student and teacher freedom to co-construct curricula to meet the local needs, strengths, and interests of students, teachers, and the school community was not of importance.

Professionally speaking, I could not follow the prescribed America's Choice curricular expectations. I worked on designing with my students curricula that reflected critical literacy practices and my students, while addressing the state standards that I was hired to teach. This was a difficult task considering surveillance from administration and a quasi-administrative Literacy Coach, in Ms. Davis, was a regular school practice. School administrators and coaches would make formal observations and record data on iPods related to how America's Choice directives were being followed in Language Arts

and Math classrooms. These observations occurred on a monthly basis and teachers were told they were not to be evaluative, just a form of data collection.

However, Ms. Davis, in her role as Literacy Coach, played a more aggressive role in the observation and evaluation of teachers. On a weekly basis Ms. Davis would come in to observe my teaching during the entirety of a class. She would take notes and speak with students and on occasion speak with me during the class period. Ms. Davis would also have follow-up conversations with me during my plan time regarding what America's Choice unit and lesson I was on and how I was or was not following America's Choice expectations. When asked what unit and lesson I was on, I had to measure my words closely. I did not want to be perceived as being completely dismissive of America's Choice curricula for fear that my insubordination would draw more attention to my class from school administration and more strict oversight. However, I did want to explain what I was doing, how it reflected rigorous and relevant teaching practices that related to state standards, and make it sound as closely related to America's Choice as I could in an attempt to ease suspicions I felt Ms. Davis had towards my teaching.

As the year progressed, the professional tension between Ms. Davis and I grew. During our follow-up conversations, Ms. Davis become more probing in her questions towards the critical literacy work we were doing in my classes juxtaposed with how America's Choice was researched-based and offered a clear path towards students' academic success on the State Assessment when there was fidelity to the program. I too

became more defensive in my position and was more expressive in critiquing America's Choice and defining and supporting critical literacy practices.

At one point midway through the year I was called into the principal's office to be reprimanded. As the meeting with Mrs. Thompson began I thought of how I was going to clearly and professionally articulate my teaching practices so as to convince her that the work of my students and I shouldn't be so closely monitored and challenged. As it turned out the basis of the meeting did not have anything to do with me not following America's Choice, per se, but rather that I wasn't following the Workshop Model and more specifically my lesson openings were 10-15 minutes rather than the prescribed 5-10 minutes. I conceded that my openings had been around 10-15 minutes and that I would do better at shortening them. Eventually, Mrs. Thompson did tell me that I needed to follow America's Choice and stated that I had been told at my interview that I would be required to teach it, a point that I didn't remember happening, but a point that I wasn't going to argue.

I left the meeting having said as little as possible so as to diffuse tension and in hopes that administration would want to do the same by not being as present in my class. That was the only conversation I had with Mrs. Thompson specifically regarding America's Choice and for the rest of the year Ms. Davis' observations and follow-up evaluations, while still frequent, were less adversarial and more accepting of my teaching practices. It was disempowering enough not having institutional and professional development resources and support in our critical literacy work, but having to figure out how to circumnavigate America's Choice while also developing and protecting critical

literacy practices in the classroom was extremely difficult. I took refuge in being able to share my frustrations with certain colleagues, but voicing my concerns with administration affected no change.

Prior Pedagogical Experiences in Literacy Instruction

Aside from the repetitive dodging of America's Choice, building a classroom that practiced critical literacy while being populated by a teacher and students who did not have lengthy experiences with this pedagogy was a palpable obstacle. During my life as an urban public student, I remember having a few excellent teachers, but none of whom I would retroactively describe as engaging in critical literacy practices. I definitely didn't grow up experiencing critical literacy in the k-12 urban public school classroom as a student. Moreover, I wasn't given support during my teacher education as a preservice teacher or as a beginning teacher regarding critical literacy. I came to understand that the professional practices I developed as a teacher early in my career were reminiscent of critical literacy after I left the classroom and was exposed to critical pedagogy during graduate school. When I returned to teaching in the urban public school context I sought to further my development as a critical literacy practitioner knowing that I lacked a firm foundation based on years of varied experiences.

As I worked on developing the conditions in which critical literacy would take root and thrive in my class, I regularly had to manage and question my "traditional" proclivities. From seating arrangements to homework expectations, from grading practices to classroom management techniques, from assignment construction to making decisions, I was seemingly questioning and challenging my every move. Accepting my

unfinishedness as a critical practitioner and being patient with my development was an essential step I had to take in order to maintain professional clarity and personal sanity. I knew that there were times that I fell short of the critical literacy expectations I had for myself, but I also knew that I had to make professional decisions that were responsive to what my students and I could comfortably and successfully handle. I found that taking field notes, specifically the digital audio recordings of my post-class reflections, was a valuable tool in my attempt to strike this balance in my classroom. Through the process of actively unpacking the day's class I was able to analyze events and identify the positive and negative conditions I was creating that affected the work of the students, which positively influenced my future decisions.

My students were also inexperienced when it came to critical literacy practices. While many of them outwardly expressed interest in curricula and a learning environment that was less rigid and tied to a linear textbook model and that was more focused on students and being flexible to their surroundings, there was still tension between what many said they wanted class to be like and what they were used to class being like. Many of my students were not used to work that involved stating a nuanced personal position with supporting details and evidence in either an oral or written form. Also, many students were inexperienced in analyzing text in regards to whom or what the text privileged and oppressed. Most students had been trained to consume text for multiple-choice test ends or for the purpose of crafting strictly dictated writing that focused on the regurgitation of unquestioned "facts".

Because my students and I were relative novices to critical literacy, despite general interest and skill towards critical work, we had to challenge to move each other slowly and in flexible, varied ways. For example, I created the circumstances in which my students could think more independently and creatively about text and as students took advantage of more divergent, intellectual work I pushed them to be more proficient in how they communicated their thoughts. However, when students required, expected, and asked for more direct instruction or when I required more structure dictated by me, both the students and I needed to be flexible. In all, co-constructing with students a classroom that engaged in critical literacy wasn't something that could be done overnight, but was rather a process that we had to work on throughout the course of the entire school year.

Assessment

A related offshoot of the dilemma of developing critical literacy practices was the assessing of student learning. Early in the year I made a point to express to my students that assessing their learning was going to be a joint venture whereas learning would be assessed by themselves individually, their peers, and by me. This was a concept that proved to be quite foreign to most students and clumsy for us all. To help structure the concept of assessment as being personal, connected to prior learning, and longitudinal, I introduced portfolios to students that would house their work throughout the school year. Seeing the value in keeping and revisiting work over the course of a school year was a difficult concept to sell to students who had the inclination to immediately throw away completed work that had been viewed or graded by a teacher.

What was easier for my students to embrace was the act of self-assessing their work. While co-constructing with my students rubrics for assignments would have been ideal in a critical literacy classroom, I found it to be cumbersome and a distraction from developing their self-evaluative skills, which I saw as being a more immediate necessity. Many of my students were excited to have the opportunity to rate their own work and did so with seriousness and honesty. Many students also became more interested and skilled at assessing the work of their peers on a rubric. Episodes of favoritism or overt harshness towards oneself or one's peers were the rare exception throughout the course of the school year.

Much of my effort throughout the year in regards to assessment was encouraging the students to look differently at assessment. Overall, most students saw assessment as something handed down by teachers, often arbitrarily, with very little explanation as to how or why a piece was assessed the way it was. In the eyes of most students, learning concluded with assessing work, rather than learning being further illuminated via assessing work. Even with such practices as rubrics and shared assessing many students would still comment on me giving them grades, which indicated to me their deep perception that assessment was mysterious and done by an outside authority figure. I worked at encouraging students to take greater ownership of their learning with assessment as a means to that end, but my efforts were often met with deeply held contradictory assumptions regarding the assessing of learning, despite their general appreciation of the direction I was encouraging them to take.

This task was made all the more difficult when considering the unbelievable amount of dictated, standards-based assessments my students were expected to take during the school year. In just my Language Arts class alone students were to take the NWEA, Gates-MacGinitie, and DRA reading assessments in the fall. They were to write two prescribed writing pieces that adhered to district writing assessments also in the fall. In the spring they took another round of NWEA, Gates-MacGinitie, and DRA reading assessments, along with the State Reading Assessment. This does not take into account the district and State Science, Social Studies and Math assessments that occurred during the school year as well as classroom assessments, most notably America's Choice unit assessments in Math classes. All told, students took a formalized assessment on average once every two to three weeks. Encouraging them to take a more self-defined look at assessing learning in these conditions was a task that rivaled Sisyphus'.

Despite many of my students feeling as if they were being tested to the point of exhaustion, I found it important for them to critically examine the practices of assessment in a heavily standards-based environment. Rather than following the America's Choice prescribed Testing Unit that was to be administered just prior to the State Reading Assessment and was designed to provide students with the tricks and tools to succeed on the State Assessment, I opened the class to conversation and critique of formalized assessments throughout the school year. I wanted students to not just understand their emotional reactions to assessments but to also be able to read formalized assessments as a text and examine in terms of who they privilege and oppress, just like we did with other texts. I wanted students to not just reject assessments wholesale because of the discomfort

they may inflict or accept them without question because the institution of school condones their use. Rather, I wanted students to acknowledge the many layers of their existence; formalized assessments are typically unjust but they are a powerful reality that will be used to one's advantage or disadvantage regardless of whether they are accepted or rejected. Therefore, it is in the students' immediate best interest to gather the resources they have available to them and do the best they can on the tests knowing how privileged formalized test scores are, all a while maintaining intellectual rigor and relevance that is often not reflected on such assessments. Which was often the case when I asked students to consider traditional school practices differently, there was initial interest and traction gained by my engaging students in this conversation. However, there was also a certain level of confusion as to how specifically make this practice a habit and a lack of trust that this strategy would really equate better performance on standardized assessments.

Chapter 6: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary

As 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 No Child Left Behind 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.

No Child Left Behind measures are intended to empower students academically, so say the adults who authored and support the law. But what do students who work within classrooms affected by NCLB policies say about their empowerment in school? This study was designed to address that question. By crafting a critical inquiry unit based on the guiding question, "How does school empower and/or disempower you?" I sought to capture the voices of my participants as they unpacked their thoughts and experiences relative to empowerment within an urban school that was being tightly managed due to NCLB policies.

Primarily, over the course of a two-month period, students examined issues of empowerment in school through the shared reading of and response to varied texts. Students also conducted a critical inquiry research project addressing school empowerment. Participants participated in individual and focus group interviews and I

collected data from participants that included written work, recordings of small group discussions, and observations of students in the form of field notes. Much of my observations and perceptions were shared with the participants in an attempt to more accurately capture their voices.

Conclusions

At the onset of this study I sought out to pursue three key questions: What empowers/disempowers students? How does student empowerment come to be? And, What teacher/school policies and practices empower/disempower students? At the conclusion of this study I'll address the questions acknowledging that I'm unable to answer each in exclusive entirety but can offer implications regarding preservice and inservice teacher preparation and professional development.

What Empowers/Disempowers Students?

Starting with the end in mind and in a very broad sense, what empowers students is having a sense of personal control situated within an environment they do not control to meet positive ends. Students are able to make decisions that have the possibility of shaping their surroundings while their surroundings shape them. Rather than being overwhelmingly manipulated by their environment in ways that stifle their ability to act upon their surroundings, students are empowered when they act with intention and their actions result in positive outcomes for themselves and others.

The above description represents a very general end product in relation to empowerment. More specifically, and within the context of school, students are empowered by a myriad of conditions and experiences. First, students are empowered by

opportunities to take responsibility for themselves in ways that go beyond what they've experienced before during their youth. They want to be able to "be in charge" of themselves and learn how to balance competing interests so as to find what best serves them. Rules involving seemingly trivial issues, as defined by the participants, such as school uniforms, homework, and recess rob students of the opportunity to learn how to reconcile "work" and "fun". Students want to be trusted and want to be given the opportunity to grow into adulthood.

Second, and closely related to students empowered to make responsible decisions, students are empowered by school curricula and experiences that allow them to shape their own knowledge for their own purposes. Instead of being dictated what knowledge is by others who have produced knowledge and being told what knowledge is supposed to mean to them, students want the opportunity to delve into the complexities of concepts and information, grapple with controversial texts with others, and create for themselves what knowledge is. Creating knowledge for their personal pursuits empowers them to develop as independent intellectuals.

Third, whereas students are empowered by teachers who provide for them the space to create knowledge, students are also empowered by teachers who can serve as caring, capable, and challenging resources. In order for students to have the opportunity to develop responsible decision-making skills students need teachers to help them appropriately take on new challenges and opportunities. Students also need teachers who are skilled at guiding students to develop knowledge for themselves with care. Where students aren't yet able to do for themselves, students need teachers whom they can trust

to support them in tangible ways. Given the apparent contradictory nature of these last two points, it is important for teachers to acknowledge and manage the nuances in what students require and act accordingly.

While identifying what disempowers students was a focus of this study at the beginning, it became less so as the research progressed. As a teacher, I wanted students to move beyond complaining and critiquing the structures of schools and think more critically so as to illuminate how they are empowered by school. As a researcher, I thought that focusing more on how students explained their empowerment provided a more important addition to academic understandings of youth than focusing more on how they were disempowered. By engaging in their critical inquiry projects and other activities, participants' did indeed explain what disempowered them in school. For example, Raúl, Renée, and Henry spoke about being disempowered by the denigrating actions of teachers like Mr. Ethridge while Vasha, Brandon, Luke, Henry, and Hannah spoke about being disempowered by demeaning school policies. Because so many of the participants were drawn to devote their research to disempowering school practices, I spent more time developing explicit opportunities for the participants to think about empowering practices in school and to explore the relationships between disempowering and empowering school practices.

Empowerment as a Negotiated Process

Identifying what empowers and disempowers students involves teachers and students establishing the conditions in which student empowerment takes place, which illustrates how empowerment is a negotiated process between students and teacher.

Student empowerment isn't fostered through a process of teachers granting or permitting empowerment. Certainly, teachers are active in shaping the learning environment, discourse, and practices of the classroom, but teachers' enacting their own power in the classroom does not involve "giving power away" to students so that they are then empowered. Rather, student empowerment is a negotiated process between students and teacher whereas student power is acknowledged and valued so that students are able to assert themselves in constructive ways. In addition to the aforementioned conditions, students need time and repetition to allow empowerment to develop. Further, student engagement in critical literacy and inquiry practices can also facilitate the negotiated process of student empowerment.

Having the opportunity to gain responsibility, creating knowledge, and access to teachers who challenge with care doesn't espouse empowerment overnight, so to speak. In order for students to gain empowerment they need time to develop over the course of many years. Just as my participants balked at sharing their critical inquiry projects with school administration, over time they may see that taking similar action in the future may be an illustration of their empowerment. Much of student learning within school cannot be measured within a strictly determined timeframe, usually following the course of a nine-month school year; the same can be said for student empowerment. Students need time for their experiences to impact their short-term and long-term behaviors.

Along with time, repetition is needed for students to develop empowerment. Experiencing repeated and numerous empowering opportunities over the course of a student's school career is essential. As illuminated through this research, too often

students come to know school as a place where they will be disempowered. Instead, students need to see that school is a place where they gain empowerment; therefore consistent opportunities in every grade level and in every school context must be made available for students.

What Teacher/School Policies and Practices Empower/Disempower Students?

While this research didn't focus on teacher empowerment, I assert that teacher empowerment is complimentary to student empowerment. Teachers must be able to reflexively shape the learning environment to best foster student responsibility and knowledge while presenting themselves as resources. Therefore schools need to be more conducive to teachers receiving the needed resources and support to best serve their students.

Specifically, schools and teachers that shift focus away from the textbook or the standards as being the curricula to the students and their environment as the curricula, empower students. Localizing curricular focus creates a more responsive schooling experience for students that allows for students to take greater responsibility over their lives, as they are more central to the work in school. It also would allow for a more relevant context in which to build knowledge. In order for teachers to be able to support students accordingly, they need to become more critically curious and knowledgeable about their students' individual and cultural lives. Along with a shift in curricula, schools need a shift in professional development. Less time spent on adhering to rigid curricular guides and more time given to teachers to creatively and effectively address the lives of students has the potential to greatly empower students.

While schools creating conditions in which teachers can more effectively meet the needs of students leads to empowerment, schools and classrooms need to be structured in a way that actively involves students in decision making processes. Students are engaged and empowered when they are a part of the process of school. This can happen through teachers' critical practices and culturally responsive practices within the classroom and students' appropriate representation when institutional decisions are made at the classroom and building level.

To meet the aforementioned ends, critical literacy practices are viable avenues for teachers to better empower students. Specifically, critical literacy practices have a dual function in the empowerment of youth. First, critical literacy practices empower students intellectually. By engaging students in problem-posing education, students and teachers negotiate through dialogue the process of learning around solving relevant problems that exist (Morrell, 2004, p. 5). Students construct knowledge rather than consume it and are more actively and intellectually engaged in the schooling process. Second, critical literacy practices are a conduit for student communication, which better allows teachers to identify and meet student needs. Stevens and Bean (2007, p. 5) describe critical literacy as being emancipatory in that students ask questions about benefit and marginalization. By engaging students in culture of question-asking and critique, teachers invariably also open the lines of constructive communication in regards to how the institution of school impacts students.

Through the process of conducting this study, three major conclusions can be derived: positive and culturally relevant relationships with teachers can have an

empowering affect on students, critical literacy can empower students while meeting standards-based requirements, and much can be learned through research that aims at specifically illuminating student voice. Repeatedly, through varied contexts, my participants directly and indirectly spoke to the power of relationships with teachers. Henry, Hannah, Raul, and Jordan spoke to the frustrations they felt in regards to the ways in which Mr. Ethridge would communicate and relate to them and how this conflict negatively affected their performance in his class. Conversely, Vasha, Raul, Hannah, Luke, Renée and Brandon spoke to relationships they had with teachers at Pioneer that were personable, comfortable, and culturally and personally responsive. These relationships were described as being key contributors to their success in their teachers' classrooms. In the era of NCLB, there is relatively very little consideration to the potential of building culturally responsive relationships between teachers and students. In fact, in some instances such efforts at the preservice and inservice levels of teacher development are viewed as lacking rigor. In a NCLB classroom simply knowing one's subject matter and delivering it to students will create student success. However, the collective voices of my participants contradict this assumption.

While participants experienced varied levels of proficiency regarding their critical inquiry projects, all participants successfully engaged in critical literacy practices through the course of this unit and this school year. All participants were eager, albeit sometimes clumsily, to take deeper and different looks at texts of wide varieties and connect those texts to their environment and understandings. Hannah, Vasha, Raul, Renée, and Brandon made particular mention of how critical literacy practices in our classroom had increased

their engagement and positively affected their empowerment in class. Not of primary focus, yet still important to note given the currency of NCLB assessments, as 7th graders the performance of four of my participants was rated as Approaching Standards and the performance of four participants was rated as Meets Standards on the 2009 State Reading Assessment. As 8th graders, the performance of four of my participants was rated as Meets Standards and the performance of four participants was rated as Exceeds Standards. While it is naïve to assume that these successes are exclusively attributable to critical literacy practices in my classroom, these successes do challenge the assumption at Pioneer that Language Arts teachers needed to strictly follow America's Choice curricula and pedagogy in order to best prepare students for the State Reading Assessment. Also, the successes of the participants on the State Reading Assessment suggests the real potential in critical literacy being a tangible component to empowering students in many ways, including NCLB mandated assessments.

Stepping back from the product and taking a look at the process, this study highlights the value of student voice in 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 in 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.

My Learning

Earlier, I mentioned the numerous tensions I felt as a teacher researcher, some of which were discomforting. However, as challenging as the tensions I experienced were, they contributed to my learning in meaningful ways. This research provided me the opportunity to look more acutely at the process of teaching in a way that incorporates critical literacy practices within a school that was not pedagogically supportive. This was not my first venture into teaching critically, but it was the first time I was explicitly mindful of how to go about "getting away" with engaging in critical literacy with my students. I also learned as a researcher utilizing the narrative approach, while it is a stated goal to capture as "authentic" a voice of the participants as possible; it is difficult if not impossible to do so. Regardless, the pursuit of authenticity should be done with earnest and with transparency as to the challenges and limitations to the research. Finally, I learned about how teaching can be cathartic. Given my history as a student at Pioneer, my efforts to return to my former school and engage my students in a way that my teachers didn't engage me so many years ago was hopefully empowering for my students as it was certainly empowering for me.

Implications

A study of this nature has the potential to address the needs of preservice teacher education and inservice professional development, while also informing decisions that

districts make regarding NCLB compliance. Regarding preservice teacher education, this study further illustrates the preponderance of the "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975, p. 61) that affects teachers. I found it extremely difficult to develop critical literacy teaching practices having never seen them in action when I was a public school student or as a preservice teacher, let alone been introduced to critical literacy. Not only was I teaching against the grain of Pioneer, I was teaching against the grain of my own experiences as a student and teacher. Preservice teacher institutions can provide specific support and proficient examples of teaching that engages in critical literacy practices to better equip and diversify new teachers as they enter the classroom. In addition, teacher educators can bring to the fore the potential of new teachers being responsive to students' cultural affiliations and voices as new teachers further construct their identities and practices as a teachers.

Once new teachers enter the classroom and inservice teachers it becomes primarily the school and district's responsibilities to professionally develop teachers. If teacher education institutions provide introduction to and proficient examples of critical literacy practices, culturally responsive teaching, and the act of listening the voices of students to inform teacher practice, it becomes the responsibility of the school and district to continue support to meet these ends. At Pioneer, the overwhelming majority of professional development opportunities and resources were directly related to America's Choice curricula and preparing for, administrating, and drawing conclusions from formalized assessments. There was no room for teachers to collectively work on building better relationships with their students, despite the observed need for some teachers, as

well as no space for teachers to develop critical literacy practices, despite the observed interest and potential.

The legalities of NCLB cannot be changed at the district level. However, how school districts choose to address the requirements of NCLB can be shaped at the district level. Our school district chose to make a million dollar investment in America's Choice for schools that failed to meet annual yearly progress as defined by NCLB policy and the district and individual schools chose to enact how America's Choice will be utilized in the schools. What this research can provide districts and schools who are facing similar circumstances as we did at Pioneer due to NCLB policy is the opportunity to think more creatively and possibly quite differently about how to better support students in reaching NCLB mandated goals. Districts and schools don't necessarily have to universalize, depersonalize, and essentialize teaching and learning in order to have students rate higher on state assessments.

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