

Reaching for the Top: Passing the Literacy Key to Marginalized Adolescent Boys

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This paper draws attention to the important role school libraries, teacher-librarians, and principals can and need to play in the lives of marginalized adolescent boys in order to advance the goals of social justice and equity, and to make school libraries more relevant to citizens and communities. As an illustration of how teacher-librarians can intervene in the lives of such students, the author presents preliminary insights from a recent literacy research project that involved a school principal, a professor/school library specialist, and a professor in school leadership. Using a modified, contextually tailored version of literature circles, the researchers explored ways of enhancing the critical literacy engagement of marginalized adolescent boys in an urban school in western Canada.

Social justice and school libraries, marginalized adolescent boys and critical literacy, teacher librarians and principals

Introduction

When I hear of children and youth in crisis, I feel some responsibility, some culpability, some desire to act, and because of my personal and professional identity, I ask: What can school libraries and teacher-librarians do to help, to make things better?

It is early December 2008, and while watching the Canadian Broadcasting Corporations' (CBC) evening news I learn of Greek youths—primarily young men—rioting in the streets. The rioting started in Thessaloniki and then spread to other parts of Greece. This incident caused me to reflect about the role of the school library, teacher-librarians, and principals in the lives of marginalized boys.

This paper is undergirded by the view that the kinds of protests seen in Greece emanate from social inequities that exist in society and its social institutions such as public schools and by extension, in school libraries. Therefore, teacher-librarians, school libraries, and principals need to act with intention to make social justice the centrepiece of daily activities in order to “disrupt, destabilize, and intervene into the racist, classist, sexist, homophobic, and ablest education system” that exist in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere (McKenzie, Christman, Hernandez et al., 2008, p.117).

Social Justice and Schools

Those who work in the education sector should not be surprised at the gendered nature of the riots. For several years now, educators have received information that suggests that certain boys continue to be excluded from scholastic success (Bussière, Cartwright, Crocker, et al., 2001; Lemke et al., 2001; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD),

2009). The boys who did well on the Program for International Student Assessments (PISA) assessments for example were rarely from the ranks of the poor and disadvantaged groups and this was certainly the case for boys in Canada and the United States as well as elsewhere (Bussière, Cartwright, & Knighton, 2004; OECD, 2009; Lemke et al., 2001; Lemke & Gonzales, 2006). The boys who struggle the most in literacy, mathematics and science—all areas assessed by PISA—are those who are poor and experience socio-economic hardships based on their social class, ethnicity, and/or race.

Given the linkage between low educational attainment, poverty, oppression, and suffering, it is difficult for me to imagine why school libraries and teacher-librarians would resist the need to take up the cause of social justice. To resist the call of social justice in educational settings established to care for and enhance the full development children and youth would be unethical, unjust, and would, as Richards (2008a, 2008b) asserts for the Canadian context (and I say elsewhere as well) not only influence and exacerbate the nation's productivity but also its level of poverty, social and "racial tension" (p. 6).

School libraries can do no better than to continue to cite and inscribe their ethical tradition of care and service to children and youth. They can be bold and go further by working with and alongside students in ways that fully reference and respond to the unjust material conditions of learners marginalized by poverty and the staggering duo of race and poverty. Race, social class, as well as gender, sexual orientation, and physical ability influence and shape the identity formation of all learners and therefore must be integral to the pedagogy that is offered in schools. This means that the reality of marginalization (often caused by discrimination or exclusion based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and physical ability) and underachievement in key areas such as literacy needs to be foundational to and woven into the interactions and overall cultural practices that marginalized boys have with teacher-librarians and school libraries.

The Research Project

For several years teacher-librarians have, like many others in and out of schools responded to local and international indicators that show that some boys are underachieving in school literacy (Asselin, 2003; Haupt, 2003; Jones, Fiorelli & Bowen, 2003; Scieszka, 2003; Welldon, 2005). While proactive and necessary, these responses have tended to focus on generic boys; they have not tended to focus on boys marginalized by social class, race, disabilities, language, or boys perceived as trouble makers—the boys who are suspended and expelled from school (sometimes because of the intersections of race, academic achievement, and behaviour), the boys who do not frequent the library, and if they do, may not seek the assistance of the teacher-librarian.

This research project is intended to reveal the critical consciousness that some teacher-librarians have about power, privilege and inequities at the micro level of the library and school and the macro level of the society and a desire to develop this consciousness in students (McKenzie, Christman, Hernandez et. al, 2008).

Together with dropping out and being suspended and expelled from school, marginalized boys are the ones that tend to be underrepresented in literature that addresses teacher-librarians' commendable efforts in the area of boys and reading. The research project that this paper is based on disrupts such a tendency and joins the ranks of librarians such as Fenster-Sparber (2008) with the goal of illustrating that teacher-librarians can, and in the interest of social justice and equity, need to work more closely with those marginalized and oppressed by an unjust social

order. Within the critical framework (Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2003) of this research, the problem of engagement and underachievement (e.g., drop-out) is not located in deficit views of the boys or their families but in the socially skewed society that has produced their marginalization and in the need for schools to have more inclusive practices.

I determined that I was complicit as an individual, as part of the teaching and school library professions, and as a citizen, in the undesirable, and opportunity-limiting engagement and academic achievement of some marginalized boys and set out, with others, to enact transformation by engaging in a research project with them. The research project was an expression of praxis—reflection and action upon the world (Freire, 1970) in order to transform it, to make it better for some marginalized adolescent boys who struggled in school literacy and through it, my colleagues and I wanted, among other things, to use critical pedagogy to engage the participants in their own acts of criticality and transformation. Critical pedagogy serves the goal of social justice because it is intended and can lead to what Freire (1970) refers to as *conscientização*—“learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 19).

Working within Bell’s definition of social justice (2007), this was a cross-disciplinary, interdependent and collaborative research project that involved a professor/library specialist (the author), a male school principal, and a male researcher in education leadership and school administration working together to create social change.

The research project was guided by sociocultural and critical views of literacy (Freire, 1970; Gee, 1996, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2008; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). These complementary views of literacy assert that school literacies are situated, embodied, constructivist, dynamic sociocultural practices (listening, speaking, thinking, reading, writing, responding, valuing, etc.) learned from and between people (e.g., more knowledgeable adults and peers) over extended periods of time as they interact and carry out a variety of activities geared toward constructing meaning, acting in, and upon the world.

The Importance of Dialogue

The research was premised on the belief that critical, emancipatory literacy (Freire & Macedo, 2003) is socially bred and involves changing the consciousness of those who are oppressed through dialogic communication between teachers and students (Freire, 1970). Consequently, we designed a project where the power of the principal could be deployed in non-oppressive ways through the use dialogic communication.

According to Freire (1970), dialogic communication involves the collective or joint construction of knowledge in the service of student *conscientização* and we deemed such a method to be highly congruent with social justice research. As indicated earlier, *conscientização* refers to the inseparable interplay of consciousness, cognition and sensitization that comes from critical consideration and reflection on reality - daily life - and on social, political, and economic contradictions in order to reshape life circumstances and transform them to more humanistic, less oppressive possibilities (Freire, 1970, p. 19). To this end, we opted to use a modified, contextually tailored version of literature circles (Daniels, 2002), an established literacy framework that is commensurate with the democratic, participatory goals of social justice.

My colleagues and I believed that as a sociocultural construct, a literature circle was well aligned and complementary to our goals of student *conscientização*, dialogic communication, and non-oppressive interactions between those with greater power (the principal and the

researchers) and those with lesser power (the students). Also, a study by Greef (2004) served to bolster our belief that a literature circle was an effective mechanism to promote boys' engagement and reflection through reading.

Research Questions

As a way of illustrating the ways in which a school library specialist and a school principal as instructional leaders can work together to promote literacy and social justice among marginalized adolescent boys, we used the following questions to guide the research.

1. Can a principal and a school library specialist be leaders for social justice and literacy?
2. How can a school library specialist and a principal work together to promote critical reading engagement and literacy among marginalized adolescent boys?
3. Can literature circles promote the literacy growth and development of struggling and marginalized adolescent boys?
4. What is the influence of engaging a principal, a school library specialist, and a participant researcher in a literature circle designed to promote critical reading engagement among a group of striving/marginalized adolescent boys?
5. What can we learn from/about the literacy practices and the interactions of adolescent boys engaged in a critical literature circle characterized by caring, connectedness, and explorations of the social construction of gender/masculinities, social justice, and equity?

Research Methods

The process we used for gathering data was a qualitative case study (Stake, 2005; Merriam, 1998). We selected the principal using reputational sampling (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, we worked with a particular principal at a particular school based on his reputation as a caring instructional leader committed to progressive social change and the overall principles of social justice. Also, the principal had a reputation (among students and teachers) for being a caring individual and one who "stood up for his principles." The principal was the leader of a secondary school in a mid-size urban centre that serves a diverse student population (e.g., socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, racial) and offers a broad range of programs.

The principal worked with the classroom teachers of the school to identify and recruit a group of Grade 10 boys experiencing difficulties in school literacy. The principal took on the role of contacting parents and/or guardians of the boys, and to talk to the boys about the research project before the first meeting with the university researchers. After receiving permissions from parents and guardians to audio and video-tape the research sessions, we began to meet with the participants in a literature circle on a monthly basis after school. Along with audio and video-tapes, the researchers and the principal used a reflective journal/log to capture their ideas, feelings, and overall reflections after each literature circle.

Using the cultural process of literature circles (Daniels, 2002), the researchers, principal and students engaged in a book discussion group based on their reactions, thoughts, ideas, and feelings to texts they read. In addition to guiding the students to make personal connections to the literature they read (e.g., social, class, race, culture, and gender), we were very much interested in initiating explicit conversations about social justice issues and the boys' social construction of gender and masculinities.

Therefore, together with the principal, the researchers provided a corpus of young adult literature from which students made their selection but which were also suited to the purposes of

the research. I researched and identified the books and carefully and purposefully selected them to match the reading interests and development of the boys in the literature circle. Since we decided to work with marginalized boys who struggled in literacy, we chose a wide range of texts that were accessible and that were from a variety of genres (e.g., novels, picture books, song lyrics, poetry, and recipes (for smoothies and cookies etc.)). We also invited the boys to make suggestions about the texts they would like to read.

The first meeting with the boys took place after school in a classroom at their high school. After introductions, we talked about the project, answered questions, and showed a video (Daniels, 2001, *Looking into literature circles*) that informed the boys about literature circles and provided vignettes of real students engaged in literature circles. Also, we left the boys with a reading interest inventory that they were asked to complete with the assistance of the principal. The reading interest inventory was used to learn about the reading interests and curiosities of the boys so that we could purchase and provide materials that they wanted to read. Choice in text selection and using texts at the boys' developmental levels in reading were essential components of this research project which was designed to be "democratic, participatory, inclusive, and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change" (Bell, 2007, p. 2).

Role of the Principal

My colleagues and I believed that it was important to enlist the support and participation of a high school principal because we hold that the principal is an instructional leader who has considerable knowledge and power that can be used to intervene in the lives of marginalized boys who struggle in the area of school literacy. Like Theoharis (2007), we believe that the principal is a significant key to the enactment of social justice in schools and libraries because "exemplary leadership helps point to the necessity for change and helps make the realities of change happen" (p. 222). We agree with McKenzie, Christman, Hernandez et al. (2008) "that traditional instructional leadership assumed a focus by the principal on teacher instructional behavior" (p. 124) and not his/her own. Acting contrapuntually to such a tradition, we designed a research project wherein the principal's instructional behaviour as well as that of the teacher-librarian, would be the central focus as they join their considerable leadership resources to meet the needs of all students.

Since we were interested in designing a research project grounded in the work of a theorist who linked literacy to social justice Freire (1970), we sought a principal who believed in social justice leadership, but also one for whom reading and literacy were important and who was prepared to interact dialogically and democratically with adolescent boys who struggled to read.

Collaboration between Principal and Teacher-librarian

The literature on school librarianship emphasizes collaboration between teacher-librarians and school principals (American Association of School Librarians (AASL) & Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), 1998; Asselin, Branch & Oberg, 2003; Doll, 2005; Farmer, 2007; Oberg, 1995). Farmer for instance, suggests that "teacher-librarians need to align their efforts with those of the school in general, and specifically those of the principal" (p. 1). Farmer (2007) rightly contends that "the chief catalyst for

collaboration at the site level [of the school] is the principal, who serves as the vision-maker and curriculum facilitator” (p. 1).

The messages about collaboration with site-based administrators have been influential in helping teacher-librarians secure support and resources for their libraries and ultimately for their students’ learning. This research project is premised on the view that collaboration between teacher-librarians and principals can be extended into the area of research as well as in the joint planning and implementation of an instructional program such as the literacy project described herein. In other words, the teacher-librarian and the principal can model instructional collaboration, by teaching students together in order to challenge inequity in student achievement (McKenzie, Christman, Hernandez et al., 2008). Through such collaboration, each person will better understand their respective roles and see the rich potential of what they can achieve by working together to combat social injustices.

Moreover, in designing the research project, I hypothesized that the principal would gain a deeper understanding of the school library program, and what a teacher-librarian does and could do so from an inside perspective—that is, working in deliberate and intentional ways to implement an instructional program intended to intervene in the scholastic achievement of marginalized boys. I also hypothesized that such collaboration would lead to greater respect and material support for the library and a teacher-librarian concentrated on the academic achievement and well-being of all students. My research colleagues and I believe that a principal committed to the enactment of social justice has a greater possibility of success in the school with a teacher-librarian equally motivated to destabilize the structures that lead to achievement gaps and marginalization induced by poverty, racism, ableism, and homophobia to name a few.

Early Suggestions and Understandings from the Research

The study is not yet over. It ends in mid-June, 2009. As I write (April 27, 2009), I look forward to our next meeting with the boys; it will be at a local book store. We will meet in the coffee shop, tour the store, select some books for purchase and talk about the books read for the meeting. Therefore, I am only able to mention some early understandings and suggestions that I have found from the research thus far.

An important lesson we learned at the beginning of the research process is the need for flexibility in using a literature circle. We designed a dialogic literature circle that would permit lots of conversation flow among the boys, and between the boys and the three researchers. Unlike the teacher as “facilitator” in Daniels’ (2002) description of literature circles, the adults in the research project acted as teachers as well co-learners, and co-constructors of meaning and of knowledge. We believe that Daniels’ vision of teacher as facilitator is apolitical; it is not concerned with *conscientização*. It reproduces the status quo of power relations that favour those students whose cultural practices are congruent with the dominant order and students who do not struggle in school literacy.

In the literature circles described and shown by Daniels in his book (2002) and video (2002), students are engaged in talking about literature for the sake of literature, for the sake of scholastic knowledge, for the sake of learning that does not trouble or disrupt unjust social orders that lead to marginalization and is in part, responsible for underachievement and school failure among many students. Daniels’ conceptualization of literature circles seems to be better suited to the needs of students with well entrenched literacy practices and who, in terms of social goods, are already “socially and psychologically safe and secure (Bell, 2007, p1)—those for whom an

unjust social order is not a pressing concern. The students in Daniels' take on literature circles appear to be self-starters who are able to meet with their peers and teacher-facilitator twice or more per week. The research situation we envisioned and experienced was different.

Circumstances were such that we only met the boys twice per month after school (they were to read during the interim) based on our desire to avoid burdening them, and the time restrictions imposed by our work and personal lives. This proved to be one of the challenges we faced; we needed more time with the boys. However, we saw this initial research as a pilot project and persevered because we believed that the boys' had much to learn with, alongside, and from each other and that they had the same possibilities for engagement with the researchers. In other words, we did not let "perfect" stand in the way of "good" and constructed a teaching and learning situation based on our knowledge and conviction that we were more knowledgeable others that sought to guide, listen, teach and relate to the boys in dialogic, connected, humble, caring, and compassionate ways based on our moral groundings, experiences, training, and aspirations for the project, and for our communities. We were not neutral participants.

As researchers we were partisans; our literacy project was political. It was tied to an agenda: that of social justice through *conscientização* that would come from reading and engaging with texts that connected with the boys' identities (e.g., social class, race, culture, gender etc.) and the need to improve their literacy performance so that they would be empowered to create social change that would be beneficial for them and their society. Overall then, we learned that a literature circle tied to a social justice agenda led to a critique of Daniels' vision of literature circles but to be fair to Daniels, we realize that he has offered us a mechanism from whence to start, a mechanism that is flexible and that can accommodate a social justice agenda.

Foremost among the lessons we have learned from the research project is that a principal, a teacher-librarian, and others can indeed collaborate to plan and deliver an instructional program directly to students and that they can do so for social justice. While the principal was responsible for recruiting the boys, reminding them of the literature circle meetings, involving them in making sure all equipment needed for each meeting was set up and ready for use (e.g., computers, video-tapes, etc.), and preparing for his literature circle role requirements, the professor/library specialist was responsible for selecting and purchasing the reading materials as well as preparing for her literature circle role, and the other researcher for the nutritious snacks. As the project evolved, there were many e-mail communications between the researchers which helped to deepen and solidify their professional relationships. Together, the researchers learned that this kind of collaboration can be a rich, enlightening, and empowering journey.

The design of this research (dialogic, empathic, caring, probing, listening, talking, responding, and guiding) has enriched the lives of each researcher in terms of what we have learned from, about, and with the boys, and in terms of joy that comes from reading quality literature that allows us to make deep, personal connections to self, texts, and world. We can truly say that we have developed great relationships with the boys. Recently for instance, the principal said, "I just love the relationship I now have with that boy!" This was a student he had not gotten to deeply know or understand prior to the research. Of the success that we can most proudly proclaim, is the fact that the boys have read several books, have practiced reading, and have engaged us and each other in rich, intellectual, literary, spiritual, and social justice related conversations. One of the greatest testimonies to their critical engagement thus far, is the sharing of songs and video about social injustice. The boys no longer ask us what social justice is; they can tell us and show us. At our last meeting, one of the boys asked us (without prompting) the following: "what is an immigrant alien?" He explained that this question was put to passengers

by an “official” who had stopped a bus he was traveling on in Los Angeles (in March, 2009). This led to an engaging conversation about the plight of many economic refugees from Mexico, the heated debates about illegal immigration in the United States, and discussions of how social justice applies in such a situation.

Other early messages of the research include an understanding that literacy is a social practice that thrives on seeing people around us doing it, getting encouragement to do it, having an expectation that it will be done, and for the marginalized boys we worked with, having someone to do it with—that is someone to read with and to dialogue about the content of reading and what it means personally, socially, and politically. We also learned that linking reading with activities such as cooking, research, eating, going to bookstores are effective and meaningful ways of entrenching literacy as a social practice and of strengthening the power-conflated reading community that we had formed.

As I move to the conclusion of this paper, I deem it important to address one of preliminary but nonetheless significant understanding we have gained from the research project: the issue of choice in text selection for the boys in the project.

Choice of reading material was paramount to what we were able to achieve and through our discussions we learned that the boys rarely had choice in what they read in their classrooms. Time and time again, the boys would make comments such as “why can’t we read this book or books like this in English?” There were moments of tension around such questions because the principal was hearing this yet could not provide an answer. He could not discuss a particular teacher’s selection with us as that would be unprofessional and unethical.

Through post-literature circle conversations (when the boys had gone home), the researchers acknowledged that we were in a difficult position and probed the topic further. As a result of the boys’ comments about lack of choice in what they read in English as well as other classes, we began to question whether the absence of text choice in the classrooms of the boys did not contribute to further marginalizing, distancing, and limiting their engagement with classroom literacy practices.

From our conversations with the boys, we came to learn that some of the classroom practices they experienced were oppressive: they were asked to read books that were too difficult for them to read and understand on their own and they were asked to read books that often did not connect to their lived experiences, their material realities, and so they became disengaged and received low marks. We saw, and more important, the principal began to learn first hand (from boys who previously had never discussed such issues with him), that some classroom practices inhibited the literacy growth and achievement of boys’ already marginalized by race, class and gender. However, our research situation was suffused with hope and realistic possibilities for change because we had designed a project in which the individual with the most power to create change for social justice at the micro level—the principal—was learning about some of the realities of the boys’ schooling and was in position to intervene in ways that result in positive change. And this is precisely what happened.

With the goal of achieving greater socio-educational justice for the boys in the research and for all students, the principal met dialogically with teachers and began to plan professional development that included the use of literature circles and choice in text selection in the English language arts and social studies classrooms of the school. This inspirational and needed action took place during the final months of the research project and I will have more to say about it in a future paper—Part II—once all the data have been examined and analyzed.

A fitting way to end this section is to briefly state that we are learning that marginalized boys, like all students, are in formation and these students require a holistic pedagogy that is fully considerate of race, class, gender, culture, emotional, and spirituality; the oppressions they face, and the role of literacy/ies in rupturing such oppressions. And because they are in formation, the students need multiple forms of literacies—mediated engagement with texts that value their unique social capital and that will help them grow in each of the areas identified in the preceding (Tatum, 2005). Above all though, these literacies must be critical and need to be embedded in contexts where students have considerable opportunities for social interaction, critical dialogues, and for skill development and well-being accompanied by empathy, caring, compassion, and connectedness. The factory model of education (ŞAHİN, 2007) that operates in many high schools will find it difficult to provide such pedagogy. Preliminary understandings from our research suggest that it is through learning and interacting in small groups with peers and more knowledgeable others (e.g., teacher-librarians, teachers, and principals) that the literacy growth and empowerment of marginalized boys can be best achieved. When teacher-librarians co-teach with and/or work with small groups of students they provide an effective layer of support—guided assistance—that is highly beneficial since this type of teaching and engagement reduces the systems approach/factory model of education.

Conclusion

In the preceding section, I described some initial findings from an on-going social justice oriented and cross-disciplinary, collaborative research project that involved a group of struggling adolescent readers, a professor/school library specialist, a high school principal, and a professor who specializes in educational leadership. The early lessons and understandings from this work indicate that a principal and school library specialist/teacher-librarian can be co-researchers and co-teachers for social justice. Thus far, an equity-oriented literature circle with marginalized adolescent boys has proven to be an inspirational and productive experience in which the boys have critically read and explored several books and other texts, and as subjects have been agents in their own empowerment. Furthermore, we have considerable evidence from the participants that underscore the need to offer choice in reading materials and to select and use texts that are relevant to the identities and material conditions of those who are marginalized. In addition, the research suggests a “new” role for principals: they can be agents of social justice and transformation through active, instructional collaboration with teacher-librarians and that the school library is a site in which and from which principals can enact leadership for social justice. Finally, the successes we have had with this study endorse our initial view that school libraries and teacher-librarians can be moral catalysts and activists for the positive transformation and social and academic well-being of youth in crisis. I believe that this study suggests a model that can be used to make a potential contribution to reducing the kind of marginalization that could culminate in riots in the streets. Part two of this paper, will provide a richer and thicker description of the study and an expanded analysis of the messages and lessons learned from it.

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Statement of Originality

I certify that this paper is based on my original research and was conceived and written by me and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced. I am indebted and deeply grateful to the colleagues who collaborated on the research project with me and acknowledge that I am solely responsible for perspectives shared in the paper.