Social Justice Education in the US Rural South: Research and Practice

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Abstract

This paper presents an emerging model of social justice education that has been implemented in a rural K-12 school system in the Southeastern US. The model was developed over a five-year period through a research practice partnership between a state university (e.g., college of education) and the local community. Using a DBR approach, the research team worked closely with teachers and students to take a process of historical inquiry and embed it into the K-12 school system. The result of this effort is an emerging model of learning that attends to different components of social justice education, including the doing of history, the juxtaposing of various narratives, and the development of critical consciousness. These components are then illustrated through a case study that focuses on the interactions between the components and how those interactions supported students’ meaning-making. Implications for the design and study of learning in the context of social justice are discussed.

Introduction

This project involved creating bridges between a state university and K-12 students in rural and economically-disadvantaged Putnam County, Georgia. One goal was to open a discussion of Putnam’s past among those who grew up there decades ago and the students who make up its future. Our hope was that building a model of K-12 education to support and engage in these dialogues would develop students’ critical awareness of who they are and where they come from, and ultimately empower them to realize their potential in the world as fully as possible. Over the course of a five-year research-practice partnership, we, the authors of this paper, have worked together to construct a model of K-12 education in which both teachers and students listen to, uncover, and preserve the stories of the community members while using those stories as a tool for developing critical perspectives about the history of Putnam county.
With that in mind, this paper begins with an introduction to the research-practice partnership and the community in which the partnership was established. After a brief summary of the partnership, we present an emerging model of learning that draws on our experiences over the past five years. The model, which was built through a design-based research approach, is then illustrated through a single case in which two students engaged in the “doing” of history, the juxtaposition of narratives, and the practice of critical consciousness. The individual components of the model as well as the importance of their intersectionality are then discussed.

Research-Practice Partnership (RPP) and Design-based Research (DBR)

The RPP began with a broad goal of building the in-school experience of K-12 students around their local community, where the community served as a place for teachers and students to both meet standards and engage in a democratic society. To guide our work, we drew from design-based implementation research (DBIR) (Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011), which embraces an iterative process of developing, testing, improving, and retesting a research-driven educational intervention through deep collaboration with local contexts (see also Cobb et al., 2003). DBIR emphasizes the value of co-design, meaning researchers and local stakeholders (e.g., administrators, teachers, students) work collaboratively to shape and accomplish the driving goal of the project. Examining a well-designed intervention over time and in a local context leads to the formation of research-based learning principles and practices that advance theory while having relevance in an applied context (Penuel et al., 2011).

The RPP consisted of several entities, including members of the Wilson Center for Humanities & Arts and the College of Education at the University of Georgia, and the public-school system in Putnam County, Georgia. Putnam County Charter School System is a PreK-12 system that serves approximately 3,500 students (44% white, 41% black, and 11% Hispanic). The percentage of families living below the poverty line is between 15 and 30%, while 79% are classified as economically disadvantaged.

The rich and complex cultural history of Putnam County played a significant role in our work as a partnership. Both Joel Chandler Harris (1845-1908) and Alice Walker (b. 1944) were born and raised there, and the county figures prominently in their literary works. While Harris’s 19th-century Uncle Remus tales focus on the time before Putnam’s enslaved residents were freed, Walker’s poetry and prose of the 1970s and 80s, such as The Third Life of Grange Copeland and The Color Purple, embodies the repercussions of the long period of racial and economic inequality and injustice that followed. Walker’s work has been celebrated for creating a literature about those who lived ordinary and hard lives in the segregated South, but, drawn out of her own experiences, it also provides a critical lens for examining the specific history of the place she grew up both before and during the Civil Rights era.

Putnam is in many ways like most rural communities across the Deep South, including that many of its K-12 students are descended from families that have been there for multiple generations. For example, many Putnam residents in their 70s and 80s grew up with Alice
Walker and her siblings and most residents over 60 have clear memories of segregation and the struggle for civil rights. These older generations, who lived through what Walker later wrote about, have their own stories to tell of the hardships, setbacks, victories, and changes that have transformed the place of their childhoods into the one their grandchildren and great-grandchildren are now growing up. The purpose of the project was to create opportunities for K-12 students to engage with those community members and their stories, to open a discussion of Putnam’s hard past between those who grew up there decades ago and the students who make up its future. Our overall goal was to work with teachers and students to capture those stories and use them as both a context for, and document of, the history of Putnam county while also achieving the performance standards to which they are held accountable. The question guiding this research was: *What design perspectives/principles were most salient in this project, and what did they look like in practice?*

**An emerging model**

Through a reflexive design practice, we situated our work within our partnerships with teachers and students in order to center and value the different ways of knowing and knowledge that each partner brought. This reflexive practice included exploring how to navigate the tensions that arose around long-standing racial and economic injustices in the community, and how to support teachers and students in exploring those tensions while being sensitive to the historical context and people in a community as well as attending to our own identities as white scholars. There were no clear-cut answers to these questions. Instead, our work as an RPP focused on continuously developing our own understanding of the design through our interactions with each other, the teachers, the students, and members of the Putnam community. This has resulted in an emerging model of social justice education that consists of three components (see Fig. 1): the “doing” of history, critical consciousness, and the juxtaposition of narrative. We call the model “emerging” for the simple reason that it has been developed and continues to develop through our *relationship* with each other and the other participants (see Lawton et al., 2020; Walters, Kopcha, & Lawton, 2020). That relationship is not static; it grows and shifts each year as new challenges develop and accomplishments are realized.
The doing of history

The doing of history is a phrase used in social studies education that refers to engaging students in the work of real-world historians in the classroom (Levstik & Barton, 2011). From this perspective, history is viewed as something that is constructed by people from the pieces of the past that remain today (Wineburg, 2001). This work is always incomplete and subjective -- as new evidence comes to light, new perspectives on history can be constructed (Rüsen, 2005). Thus, the primary activity in the doing of history is making arguments based on our analysis of the evidence at hand. By creating their own evidence-based arguments, students learn that history is not static, i.e., the “true” presentation of facts in a textbook, but a process of human inquiry into the past driven by current-day interests and questions (Buehl & Alexander, 2006; Rüsen, 2005).

In the context of social justice education, many scholars have introduced critical perspectives to the doing of history. This takes the methods of historical inquiry and layers an additional focus on issues of social justice and equity (Parkhouse, 2018). Activities such as creating narratives that center untold stories and marginalized people (Salinas & Alarcón, 2016), exploring alternate perspectives on dominant and/or traditional narratives (Freedman, 2015; Salinas & Alarcón, 2016), and reflecting on their own perspectives and assumptions (Lim, 2010; Parkhouse, 2018) can support students in critical historical inquiry.

Critical consciousness

Critical consciousness is a philosophical perspective that interrogates long-standing traditions and practices in society. Engaging in critical consciousness means observing and identifying the social and political structures that shape the world, and developing an awareness of how those structures affect different groups of people differently. The notion of critical consciousness is rooted in the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1973; 1974) who worked with illiterate, impoverished adults in Brazil to understand the way oppression becomes
operationalized in society and use this knowledge to create change. For Freire and others who have adopted this perspective (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Paris, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2010), there is a common emphasis on action (i.e., critical action, social change, participation), self- and socio-political efficacy, and critical reflection. Related practices in K-12 include Ladson-Billings’ (1995) Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) and Paris’ (2012) Culturally-Sustaining Pedagogy. These reposition students as ‘knowers’ in the classroom, attempting to disrupt their assumptions about the source and nature of our knowledge. All students’ unique perspectives, experiences, and cultures play a role in the way that students see themselves as agents of knowledge and have space to engage in critical dialogue (Taylor, 2019).

Juxtaposing narratives

The act of juxtaposing two ideas or concepts, such as narratives, is rooted in pedagogical strategies that promote alternative perspective taking (Jonassen, 2011) and cognitive flexibility (Spiro et al., 2011). The general idea is that juxtaposing narratives about the same person, time, and/or place creates an opportunity for students to observe what is similar and, more importantly, where differences in those narratives arise. Those differences are often rooted in long-standing political and social issues that shape the structure and nature of each narrative. Thus, juxtaposing narratives is a powerful way of supporting both the doing of critical historical inquiry and the development of critical consciousness. This work allows for students to engage with multiple perspectives, reveal normative assumptions, and provides spaces of action for critical dialogue and identity formation.

Methods

Broadly, the project has grown over the past five years to include 25 teachers and their students as part of the RPP. In this paper, we present a single descriptive case study (Yin, 2017) of two high school students engaged in a semester-long critical historical inquiry project. The analysis focuses on the meaning-making processes that were evident in their work products, particularly as related to the doing of history, critical consciousness, and juxtaposing narratives. The two students serve as embedded units that represent the phenomena of the meaning-making process (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2017).

Participants

Participants included two students enrolled in an inclusion-level 10th grade U.S. History course. Raymond (all student names are pseudonyms) is an African American male whose family is from Putnam. Ashley is a white female student, also from Putnam. Their teacher, a white male, was among the first members of the project; at the time of this study, he had been teaching history for about 12 years.

Design and analysis

This case focused on the students’ meaning-making process during historical inquiry and was selected because it illustrates the way different components of the model supported the
project goals. Student-produced artifacts, including worksheets, archival research, and written and audio reflections, were analyzed using a social semiotic approach to multimodality. The social semiotic approach centers on a sign-maker’s (in this case the student’s) meaning-making process as presented through the choice, use, and integration of various modes (e.g., color, text, tone, gestures) (Jewitt et al., 2016; Kress, 2010). According to this theory, meaning is communicated through the interaction between the modes rather than any singular mode (Kress, 2010).

Consistent with a social semiotic multimodal approach, our analysis included a focus on how multimodal artifacts related with the social, cultural, and historical context. This was ethnographic in nature, in that we collected and analyzed documents related to these contexts in addition to student work products (Coffey, 2018). We engaged in data collection and analysis throughout the project, continually revisiting our data to inform future collection and analysis choices in a non-linear process (Coffey, 2018; Madison, 2020). This process included a close and detailed reading of all the data to construct a holistic understanding of the case (Coffey, 2018). We then situated the students’ historical inquiry work and reflections within the social, cultural, and historical context of Putnam County.

Meaning-making during critical historical inquiry

Over the course of a semester, the two students in our case study engaged in a high school U.S. history course. The curricular unit addressed here, *Understanding our community’s roots: A beginning lesson plan setting the stage for connecting local and national history*, was built to meet part of the Georgia standards for Reconstruction and the era known as “Jim Crow.” Students explored the political, economic, and social histories of the period by engaging in lessons and projects that focused on historical inquiry in the local community. Through examples, modeling, and practice, students in the course learned to locate and analyze primary sources, collect their own primary sources (e.g., census records, genealogical data, oral histories with local elders, etc.) and conduct historical research in their community. The course was structured to connect students to their community through place-based lessons, research, and reflection.

The doing of history

Throughout the semester, students engaged in collecting, assessing, and interpreting historical source material to construct their own understandings of their community’s past. Students gradually took on the role of historian as they completed activities that scaffolded their inquiry process. The inquiry began as the students and teachers wanted to know more about the families who attended a local Baptist church found in photos of the community taken in 1941. Because the church still stands today, the class began working with 1940 U.S. census documents to collect information about the families who lived there at the time and may have visited the church regularly. To support the activity, they also made multiple visits to the church and the cemetery located on the church grounds. Using census records and the information available on
tombstones, as well as ongoing conversations with the elder deacon, who has been a member of the church since his childhood in the 1940s, they then constructed family trees and composed short narratives about their inquiries. The work of interpreting primary sources is critical to historical inquiry, as is using evidence from these sources to construct historical narratives (Seixas, 2015; Wineburg, 2001).

Juxtaposing narratives

In both our cases, students began by engaging with existing historical narratives before moving towards constructing their own. This process of juxtaposition was informed not only by their research, where narratives were explicitly taught and constructed, but also by allowing space for their lived experiences to enter into analysis. As teenagers growing up in a rural and economically-disadvantaged Deep South community, both students were shaped in part by various metanarratives about race, class, and rural life.

These existing narratives were challenged by the students’ research into the community -- specifically, they began inquiring about the only land-owning African American family in the area at the time of the 1940 census. The family’s land-owning status created an opportunity to juxtapose various existing narratives. The dominant narrative was that African Americans at the time typically occupied low social and economic statuses, particularly in a rural community. The story of this land-owning family, then, offered an opportunity to understand a different narrative, one in which an African American family held a higher status than expected.

Ashley highlighted the family’s economic status in her narrative. She included the amount of money the family’s home was worth and noted how it was “their own home,” [emphasis added]. She then situated these facts in a historical context. Her attention to the fact that, “They are an African American family,” suggests that she is aware of how the family’s narrative runs counter to the existing narrative. The inclusion of the family’s racial identity reveals both her awareness of the dominant narrative of the intersection of race and economic status and her understanding of the historical significance of this family as a counternarrative.

Raymond also engaged with these contrasting perspectives of his community, but in a different way than Ashley. He addressed negative metanarratives of rural communities more broadly, stating, “For years people have said rude things about Putnam County...things like ‘its lame’ and there is ‘nothing to do’ there.” He found these existing negative perspectives contrasted his own gut-feeling that Putnam “was something special.” As he uncovered and constructed a historical understanding of his county, he realized that its history was the “something special” he had been feeling. He stated, “if people took time to learn [Putnam’s] history they’ll see that it's special as well.” The juxtaposing of narratives helped Raymond see how rural communities are often perceived as stagnant places with “nothing to do,” yet new evidence can help reveal such communities as dynamic, diverse, and important.
Critical consciousness

The meaning-making supported during these lessons went beyond a disciplinary focus or understanding. The students made personal connections to the historical narratives they learned and constructed, exploring the ways that power structures influence our understanding of both past and present. At one point, Ashley expressed concern over families having to experience things “they did not deserve” as a result of segregation, as well as acknowledged people’s resilience in getting through difficult times. These empathetic connections enabled her to see the human connection between past and present peoples, as well as to make sense of current-day emotions and actions rooted in past oppression: “There will always be this really dark part of history that lives in the back of some people's minds. There will always be a sense of hatred that lives in some people’s hearts.” Ashley’s reflection suggests that she felt that what happened in the past was unfair. She also recognized how the story of Putnam is actually reflected through multiple stories, and that there are “unspoken” and unheard stories that represent the “heart of Putnam.” She concludes her reflection looking towards action, stating these stories must continue to be told.

Raymond’s reflection similarly wrestled with ideas of power, stories, and action. He recognized the power of historical knowledge, particularly in the stories of those traditionally marginalized. He was upset by his newly-acquired knowledge of the painful history of enslavement, segregation, and reconstruction in the county, especially how this history and its legacy impacted both people in the past and the present. Moreover, he felt angry because the stories represented a missing piece in his understanding of himself “Learning this story so late into my life angers me,” he wrote, adding, “It hurts to learn this now.” Like Ashley, he also expressed a desire to take action and stated that he would use the information he learned and “[do] something” with it, although, “learning it sooner would have been very useful.”

Discussion

Each component of our model represents an important component of learning, with an established body of literature in its own right. In the case above, we have tried to illustrate how each of those components was embodied in the learning activities that the teachers designed, as evidenced through the work that students produced. For example, the doing of history was supported through hands-on field work by the students, who visited a church whose history reaches back to the family they were researching (ca. 1940) and beyond. There, they explored the names of those buried at the church and used various archives (e.g., census data) to learn more about the community. This supported them in juxtaposing existing narratives about the community with other less dominant narratives and engaging in reflective practices that supported a critical position on themselves and their ancestors (i.e., critical consciousness). This study lends support to the importance of activities associated with critical historical inquiry, historical narrative, and critical pedagogy in the K-12 classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012).
While we have presented these three components of our model as separate and distinct entities in our design work, we have an emerging sense that it is the intersection of these three components that is as, if not more, important than each component individually. Simply put, the sum of our model ends up being greater than its parts. While each component introduces a different way of thinking and knowing to the project, it is their integration that supports our participants in developing what we are calling a critical-dialectical-historical perspective. This perspective is not just a reflection of the overall design of the project, but also a mechanism through which all participants -- the researchers, teachers, students, community members -- engage in the process challenging notions of “truth” that exist around the historical and social narratives and artifacts that reflect that truth.

A critical-dialectical-historical perspective demands that one questions what we know, collectively and individually, and how we have come to know it -- whether we are looking back to the past, making sense of the present, or looking forward to the future. It means taking the evidence we have, that is part of the historical record, and ascertaining the social, political, and economic systems that have contributed to that record. Because ultimately, those systems have produced a framework that determines whose stories are permitted to be left behind, and therefore what narratives are available as meaning-making resources in the present (Wineburg, 2001).

In the case we have presented, the C-D-H perspective emerged as one in which students opened conversations about issues not normally addressed in a K-12 classroom. Not only did students and teachers discuss issues of injustice and inequity, they did so in ways that directly connected to students’ out-of-school lives and the broader community. The long-standing
patterns of injustice/inequity from the past were no longer abstract. The students described their findings with phrases like “a sense of hatred,” “it hurts,” and “dark part of history” -- these suggest how they connected with the themes of injustice from their own community by going beyond dates and facts. Their construction of historical narrative came with a sense of empathy and presence within their community, creating an opportunity for them to be more critical of the structures that contributed to those patterns. Comparing what had once happened to their own lived understanding of the present compelled them to engage more deeply with their sense of justice (e.g., “The opportunity to ...give this family and the Harmony community the recognition that is long overdue”) and speak up about the injustices they saw (e.g., “This kind of history is a serious topic and a fragile thing to tell”). It was the tension between the past and present narratives (i.e., dialectic) that created an opportunity for deeper engagement with developing a critical perspective on the history of the community.

Historical perspective taking and identifying continuity and change are two of the major components of the historical inquiry process (Seixas, 2015). In our project, students engaged in both through their juxtaposition of narratives while engaged in the “doing” of history. The doing of history opened up space for student-centered, place-based inquiry. As implemented in our RPP, this inquiry involved community engagement and a focus on historically-marginalized peoples’ stories. Juxtaposing narratives occurred when students compared stories about the past as told from multiple perspectives, as well as when they compared their previous understandings to those gained through inquiry. With teacher support, students developed an understanding of how narratives provide insight into social and political structures and the ways these structures impact individuals and communities across time.

References


