

Attempting to Repay the Education Debt: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy at North Florida Freedom Schools

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Introduction

Research Problem

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2007) argues, “we need to change the discourse from achievement gap to what I have termed ‘education debt,’” because “it reminds us that we have accumulated this problem as a result of centuries of neglect and denial of education to entire groups of students” (p. 321). As a response to this education debt, many educators and educational researchers have turned to what Ladson-Billings (1995) has defined as culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), which has three central tenets: “(a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (p. 160). The Children’s Defense Fund’s (CDF) Freedom Schools program is a six-week long free summer program for K-12 students that attempts to address the problem of the educational debt by implementing CRP in its Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC).

Aims of the Research

Descriptive research is needed in classrooms that effectively implement CRP. Given the tendency to overstate the cultural relevance of instruction, and given the aim of Freedom Schools to do more than merely dress up the IRC, educational researchers, practitioners, and administrators alike can benefit from the examples provided by such research. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study will be to describe the implementation of the tenets of CRP in the IRC for the students at North Florida Freedom Schools (NFFS), including barriers to its implementation or competing dynamics.

Research Questions

The central question of this study is: What is CRP for scholars in the context of the IRC at NFFS? The sub-questions of this study are: How do the reading and literacy activities at NFFS address the tenets of cultural relevance?; How do scholars engage in reading and literacy development at NFFS?; Do scholars find the IRC culturally relevant?; What are Servant Leader Interns’ (SLI) attitudes and beliefs about ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity?; and, How do the reading and literacy activities at NFFS encourage scholars to engage with texts, feel empowered, and think about social justice, while also teaching them reading skills that may translate to higher reading scores?

Method

Research Design

This study is a qualitative case study design. I describe my central phenomenon through the analysis of observations and interviews. This design provides answers to my research questions because it allows me to gain insight into the practices and materials implemented in NFFS’s IRC, as well as the views of scholars and SLIs.

Participants

This case study focuses on one of two middle school classes at NFFS (each consisting of approximately ten 6th-8th grade scholars and one SLI), which was selected according to convenience for the faculty/staff of the site. For purposes of data triangulation, I also spent a brief amount of time observing the second middle school class at the NFFS site, and I interviewed the SLI and 4 scholars from that class.

Data Collection and Analysis

I used an adapted version of the existing NFFS Classroom Observation Reflection Guide as my observation protocol, with a particular focus on the cultural relevance of the IRC and its implementation. The interview protocols I used are adapted versions of the existing NFFS Scholar and SLI Interview Prompts.

I observed the primary class of this study 1-2 times per week during the six-week program, for a total of 18 hours. I observed the second middle school class at NFFS (for data triangulation) twice, for a total of 6 hours. In the final week of the NFFS program, the SLI and all the students that had consent to be interviewed from the primary class (5 scholars) were interviewed, as well as the SLI and the 4 aforementioned scholars from the second class.

At this stage, I am listening to the recordings of the interviews to take field notes of what was said, and then coding all my observations and interview notes for emerging themes and patterns. Finally, after all the data is analyzed, I will member check my conclusions with both SLIs in order to increase the trustworthiness of my study.

Results

Findings

Preliminary findings indicate that the tenets of CRP were often implemented at NFFS in uneven ways. Students’ interactions with texts, for example, often overemphasized the first tenet of CRP (students experiencing academic success) by focusing too heavily on ‘getting through’ the novels of the IRC. The tenets of CRP were much more balanced in other aspects of the pedagogical practices of the SLIs, though, such as engaging scholars with supplemental texts and content through a variety of literacy tasks.

Preliminary findings also indicate that scholars found the IRC and SLIs’ supplemental materials more culturally relevant than the curriculum and instruction at their regular schools. And the SLIs’ attitudes and beliefs about ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity seem to be in line with CRP. However, given the relatively short length of the program and the pressure to finish reading all the books in the IRC, the SLIs were not always able to enact those attitudes and beliefs, resulting in some missed opportunities to affirm scholars’ cultural identities, engage more meaningfully with texts, and validate scholars’ responses to texts.

Discussion

A possible limitation of my case study design exists because of the focus on data from only one class, which may yield a narrow (and possibly biased) perspective of the study’s central phenomenon. Another threat exists in the form of researcher bias, since it involves an analysis of observations as well as individuals’ views and opinions. To respond to these threats and increase the trustworthiness of my study, I will triangulate data collected from the first middle school class with data from the second middle school class at the NFFS site, and I will member check my findings with both SLIs.

Key References

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