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NÚMERO TEMÁTICO - CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

TRUSTING THE STUDENTS AND EACH OTHER: A STORY OF CRITICAL COLLABORATIVE PRAXIS AND CRITICAL LITERACY PRACTICE IN AN URBAN U.S. CLASSROOM

**CONFIANDO NOS ESTUDANTES E EM CADA UM: UMA HISTÓRIA DE PRAXIS CRIABORATIVA CRÍTICA E PRÁTICA DE LITERACIA CRÍTICA
EM UMA SALA DE AULA URBANA DOS EUA**

**CONFIANDO EN LOS ESTUDIANTES Y EN CADA UNO: UNA HISTORIA DE PRAXIS CRIABORATIVA CRÍTICA Y PRÁCTICA DE LITERACIA
CRÍTICA EN UNA SALA DE CLASE URBANA DE LOS EEUU**

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ABSTRACT

This article explores critical literacy practices that both emerged and were made visible through the collaborative praxis of an elementary teacher and a teacher educator, both working in a U.S. urban school context. Through shared investigations of classroom language and literacy pedagogy, the collaborators developed a mutual focus over several years that investigated possibilities for high-expectations academic learning when students were

positioned students as active, democratic, and participatory knowledge generators who cared about learning and each other. The complementary roles and responsibilities taken up by each researcher that tap both personal and shared areas of expertise over a five-year cycle of critical collaborative praxis-oriented analysis are delineated. Two vignettes are shared using evidence from this analysis that demonstrates intersections between stu-

dent learning as they take up writing and research related to their own critical purposes, as well as the learning of the research partners as they question and investigate theoretical contributions to their own teaching.

RESUMO

Este artigo explora as práticas críticas de letramento que emergiram e se tornaram visíveis através da práxis colaborativa de um professor elementar e de um educador de professores, ambos trabalhando em um contexto de escola urbana nos EUA. Por meio de investigações compartilhadas de linguagem de sala de aula e pedagogia da alfabetização, os colaboradores desenvolveram um enfoque mútuo ao longo de vários anos que investigou possibilidades de aprendizagem acadêmica de alta expectativa quando os alunos foram, posicionados como geradores de conhecimento ativos, democráticos e participativos, preocupando-se com a aprendizagem e uns com os outros, reciprocamente. Os papéis e responsabilidades complementares assumidos por cada pesquisador, que abrangem áreas de especialização pessoal e

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora las prácticas críticas de letras que surgieron y se tornaron visibles a través de la praxis colaborativa de un profesor elemental y de un educador de profesores, ambos trabajando en un contexto de escuela urbana en los Estados Unidos. A través de investigaciones compartidas de lenguaje de aula y pedagogía de la alfabetización, los colaboradores desarrollaron un enfoque mutuo a lo largo de varios años que investigó posibilidades de aprendizaje académico de alta expectativa cuando los alumnos fueron,

KEYWORDS

Critical Pedagogy. Critical Literacy. Praxis. Participatory Action Research. Practitioner Research. School University Partnership.

compartilhada ao longo de um ciclo de cinco anos de análise crítica orientada para a prática colaborativa, são delineados. Duas vinhetas são compartilhadas usando evidências dessa análise que demonstram interseções entre a aprendizagem do aluno à medida que assumem a escrita e a pesquisa relacionadas aos seus propósitos críticos, bem como a aprendizagem dos parceiros de pesquisa ao questionar e investigar contribuições teóricas para seu próprio ensino.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Pedagogia crítica. Alfabetização crítica. Práxis. Pesquisa-ação participativa. Pesquisa prática. Parceria universidade-escola.

posicionados como generadores de conocimiento activos, democráticos y democráticos, participativos, preocupándose por el aprendizaje y unos con otros, recíprocamente. Los papeles y responsabilidades complementarios asumidos por cada investigador, que abarcan áreas de especialización personal y compartida a lo largo de un ciclo de cinco años de análisis crítico orientado a la práctica colaborativa, son delineados. Dos viñetas son compartidas usando evidencias de este análisis que demuestran intersecciones entre el aprendizaje

del alumno a medida que asumen la escritura y la investigación relacionadas con sus propósitos críticos, así como el aprendizaje de los socios de investigación al cuestionar e investigar contribuciones teóricas para su propia enseñanza.

1 INTRODUCTION

I think anyone who stands in front of a classroom has an obligation to know why you should be there you want to bring their talents to the surface meet them where they are. That's my moral obligation. (MORAN apud PAUGH, 2015, p. 136).

Mary Moran is an experienced teacher who daily faces dilemmas that involve meeting the expectations of her school district for student achievement and a responsibility to engage her students as competent and caring citizens. She teaches elementary school in a U.S. urban school district where the student population is highly diverse in ethnicities, races, languages, cultural backgrounds, and income levels. It's important to note that within this diverse population of students, 77% are students of color and 74% of students are low income. As with most large cities, public funding for education is less than in more affluent communities and the pressures for students to perform well on high-stakes testing is a strong influence on teachers' instructional practices.

Mary and I, Pat Paugh, a teacher educator at a nearby university, developed a collaborative research partnership over the course of more than ten years to explore Mary's desire to create and maintain classrooms where the curriculum was a natural extension of her students' lives and where her curriculum was challenging for all students without "imposing too much on their voices" (PAUGH; MORAN, 2013, p. 256). This collaboration also informed my ongoing learning as a teacher educator, in an urban public university, with an interest in how critical literacy practices can shift the discourse and create contexts for asset-focused curriculum. Both Mary and I educate our students (her elementary and my preservice teachers) in the same urban school district context.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Pedagogía Crítica. Alfabetización Crítica. Praxis. Investigación-acción Participativa. Investigación Práctica. Asociación Universidad-escuela.

2 CRITICAL PRACTICE WITHIN THE HEGEMONY OF HIGH STAKES EDUCATION

In this age of accountability, the dominant goals of school reform are linked to preparing students for jobs in the free market. To achieve those goals, reforms focus on standardization in both school and educator preparation practices in communities that are already under-resourced with populations living in poverty or otherwise marginalized. This is problematic as the singular focus on economic outcomes sidelines the equity goals of public education which include preparing all students for participation in a democratic society (COCHRAN-SMITH, 2015).

Teachers in Mary's district have been subject to a revolving door of mandated curriculum implementations as U.S. national policies have linked funding to curriculum choices, and school survival to test score performance. Frequently changing outside mandates for professional practices, which on the surface claim to increase student performance, reduce time and space for attention to student and community focused instruction. Instead, within this urban school district, shifting mandates and policy changes have created instability. In Mary's case, a test-focused school reorganization prompted her to relocate her strong, well-regarded community focused instruction to a nearby school, a loss for students and families in her original location.

Teachers like Mary who wish to provide high expectations academic instruction, while also maintaining curriculum that encourages democratic participation of all students, must find the means to prioritize development of students' agency as a central goal for their learning. Kress, DeGennaro & Paugh (2013) argue that such critically focused instruction happens, but it is often "under the radar and off the

grid” in the privacy of teachers’ classrooms or in programs outside of school. Our collaborative partnership contributes to a body of action-oriented scholarship that highlights that it is possible to teach with such a critical and democratic focus, while also providing students with the rich academic instruction that they need to succeed in school.

As will be outlined with examples later on, Mary’s practice is *high expectations curricula* where she promotes learning that responds to students’ interests and lives, while also expecting complex, innovative, and creative learning. This differs from *low expectations curricula*, that is, narrow and basic-skills instruction that continually dominates less privileged, less resourced schools. Dudley-Marling and Michaels (2012, p. 8) argue that given the right sort of opportunities, “children will confirm our belief that they are competent thinkers, speakers, readers and writers [] Under the right circumstances ordinary people are capable of extraordinary things”. In other words, high expectations must be linked with trusting students’ capabilities and tuning them into purposeful learning.

In Mary’s classrooms, she connected purposefully with her students by teaching them that literacy is a social practice through which they can achieve goals that they care about and have purpose for their lives. Mary outlined the difference between low expectations and high expectations curricula, sharing what she found through experience, “Instead of hammering them into little individualists reading books that are at low level you give them the power and freedom to choose their route and how to get there, [then] the kids are going to rise to the occasion.” Respecting students as learners is central to their investment in learning, “You take them where they are, give couple of suggestions, you show them some ownership [] They start talking about it, they start tuning in fits in the way kids want to be treated” (Mary Moran, personal communication, October 22, 2012).

As a teacher educator working to prepare pre-service teachers for working in urban schools, I found that a collaborative research partnership with Mary resulted in powerful investigations that have informed

both of us as critical literacy-focused practitioners, and has also resulted in shared professional learning with others beyond our local context.

3 “PRAXISING” TOGETHER

Although Mary and I shared similar stances on literacy as a critical social practice, we also brought distinct but complementary roles to a collaborative process of praxis or “reflection in action” (FREIRE, 1993; 1970). That is, we depended on each other due to our different areas of expertise. For example, Mary did the work of teaching and rethinking her classroom teaching based on our collaborative reflection. I provided the tools for data collection, analysis, and academic writing important to my work as a university professor. This interdependency was not without tensions and having to face those tensions was an important part of the work.

Looking in the mirror we were engaged in what Sharkey (2009, p. 125) terms “praxising” as a way of seeing and acting on the world through ongoing cycles of action and reflection as “a transformational process that captures the dialogical, ongoing cyclical, catalytic relationship between theory and practice”. Shifting conceptions of “praxis” from noun to “praxize” as a verb, captures the ongoing process of transformational learning. Praxizing in relationship has afforded opportunities for both Mary and me to develop awareness of what it means to teach as critical practitioners, take up opportunities, and connect expertise inside and outside the classroom.

We addressed our research questions through cycles of action research over the course of four years as Mary taught various writing units with her third-grade students in one school and then, as she moved to a different school in the district and taught a fourth-grade unit on persuasive writing and community advocacy. We continued to stay in touch as we published an article together (PAUGH; MORAN, 2013), as I published another on a second unit (PAUGH, 2015), and as we jointly presented at various conferences and

workshops in between, including Mary visiting my university classes as a guest lecturer.

Our research included my frequent visits to the classroom during literacy units to video record classroom interactions and take field notes. I also located materials to inform us both on a social/semiotic language theory, Systemic Functional Linguistics (HALLIDAY, 1975), that we explored by incorporating it into practice. Mary, as a practitioner researcher, collected and copied student work samples and monitored the daily planning of instruction based on regular meetings where we conducted ongoing review of the data.

I also took on the responsibility of handling the consent process through the Institutional Review Board at the university and through the school district's Office for Research, transcribing video and audio recordings, and organizing our data. Together we analyzed data, consulted theoretical resources, and reinvested our findings into further classroom inquiry through cycles of reflection and action drawing on methods of participatory action research (KEMMIS; MCTAGGART, 2005).

While our questions evolved we maintained a focus on our developing theories of language and literacy in support of Mary's goals to teach with high expectations for all her students while also supporting a classroom culture of agency and care.

4 WHAT DID LITERACY INSTRUCTION LOOK LIKE IN MARY'S CLASSROOM?

Two vignettes, shared below, created from a rich set of data collected from some of the writing units of study in Mary's classroom give a glimpse into the microcultures (KAMBERELIS, 2001) created through dialogue within her classroom activities. Microcultures are spaces where knowledge is generated through interactions between teacher, students, and material resources. Kamberelis argues that when students' funds-of-knowledge are identified and valued in socio-cultural spaces students are encouraged to take up positions as primary knowers and thinkers. Over time,

as we collected and analyzed the data in Mary's classroom, our process illuminated how her literacy pedagogy encouraged agency and also highlighted critical instances where she was able draw on this knowledge to further strengthen her literacy pedagogy.

Vignette #1: Students' Writing "Who They Are"

Mary and I connected as co-investigators through our shared interest in literacy and in social justice pedagogy. I was also interested in literacy pedagogies inspired by Systemic Functional Linguistics or SFL (HALLIDAY, 1975). This theoretical frame positions language as always context-related and language users as agents who select language resources for their own purposes and goals, a critical repositioning of students as active and agentive, rather than passive and receptive. SFL intersects well with critical literacy pedagogies as it espouses the concept of learning language through using language.

SFL theorists believe that no text exists outside of a context of use. Critical literacy practices affirm reading and writing as "ways of being in the world" (GEE, 1990, p. 142) rather than skills learned in order to "do school" or pass the test. Therefore, active learning of language for various disciplinary fields is important and purposeful when students are positioned as knowledgeable and instruction taps important interests and goals. Mary agreed to engage in co-learning with me about SFL theory as a tool for the high expectations teaching described above.

In order to explore teaching writing within a connected SFL and critical literacy model we explored the language features of different writing genres. For example, students who learn to distinguish language useful for sharing information, from narrative language that is more personal or fictional, have a larger repertoire of language choices to select for different purposes (CHRISTIE; DEREWIANKA, 2010). One information genre Mary chose to teach was the language of procedures or writing that teaches a reader "how to" do something. She asked students to consider a topic that they knew well. That is, she positioned them from the start as experts. Children brainstormed top-

ics they might teach others, areas where they considered themselves knowledgeable experts, able to carry out the purpose of informational authors who write information “to be read by someone who does not” (DUKE; CAUGHLAN; JUZWIK; MARTIN, 2012, p. 81).

Natasha’s² work was particularly poignant. Her title was *Washing Hair*. This was a particularly powerful student text because this young author was labeled as learning disabled. Natasha spent several periods a day separated from her classroom community receiving skill-based support for what were diagnosed as multiple learning deficiencies. Yet, her procedural writing, about a topic on which she was an expert (the women in her family ran a hair salon), her organization of the text, her use of language (e.g. imperative verbs and several complex clauses) was well within the more proficient writing samples for the class. This does not negate Natasha’s need for academic support, however, it does question the relationship between access to curriculum connected to students’ lives and their responses as learners. As noted earlier, under the right circumstances “ordinary people are capable of extraordinary things.”

Similarly, Mary also asked students to engage in interviews with family members in preparation for writing essays focused on the genre of biography. She asked students to develop questions, review the interview information, and then compose a biographical essay choosing details that would be important and interesting to others. Following this complex task, third graders produced powerful stories about family members. One of these was Nguyen’s story, *Meet my Father, Tien*, relaying his father’s journey as a refugee who as a child escaped Viet Nam in a boat, then adapted to life in a new country. Another essay by Elizabeth, *Meet My Grandmother, Maria Ferrara*, relayed the journey of her grandmother from Honduras to Boston where she worked her way through community college and eventually nursing school to become a nurse in the surgical department of a local hospital. Along the

way, Elizabeth’s grandmother discovered and successfully battled breast cancer.

Mary herself was amazed at what she and others in the class learned about their classroom community. She noted, “The interview project just blew me away.” She shared her reactions to Nguyen’s and Maria’s stories as examples:

When students brought up topics, I was like, “That is really good.” So, then they ran with it. For example, we had one little boy his father was a boat person [refugee]. And he interviewed his father. His father was four nights in boats, he was crying and praying to be saved and the lights were flashing. The kids [affirmed that Nguyen’s writing] was “like a movie.” And then there was another girl and I just loved her, she interviewed her grandmother and her grandmother had breast cancer and had recovered. And she wrote a four-page interview just about the breast cancer. And I [wondered if it] was too heavy for a third grader but it was great. It was really very good. It was a really profound experience for me to do that interview project with the kids [who] opened up about their homes. (MORAN, 2012)

These examples of teaching to what students know and care about as the focus of academic language instruction revealed high-quality learning in a school considered “at risk” on standardized tests and subject to reorganization in a future year. Yet these students, writing as part of membership in a classroom community, demonstrated quality learning when we scored their writing with rubrics for procedural and narrative language. Mary reflected on how such community focused writing offered access for diverse learners in her class:

Isn’t that way more interesting to have a shared experience? And every time when we did something, we wrote about it. The kids built upon each other’s knowledge. No matter what your level is, if you [have difficulty] planning or you are non-English speaker, you still have the same experiences [where] we are in the same [positions]. And we have talked about it and the kids who have had harder time with [English] can pick up the language faster from the kids who are sharing their experience. They are all sharing their writing and also their opinions. They were talking about their experiences and there was enthusiasm. So, it catches on and it’s easy to do it because kids love each other. (MORAN, 2012).

² Student names are all pseudonyms.

These writing experiences tap into who students are and what they know while also teaching important forms of academic writing. Writing assignments that tap identities align with three perspectives from Hilary Janks's (2000) critical literacy framework. These are: the *access* perspective (providing dominant forms of language without compromising the integrity of non-dominant forms), the *diversity* perspective (attention to how language use affects social identities), and the *design* perspective (the opportunity to use and select from a range of linguistic and semiotic resources).

Mary's words also indirectly point to the community of "radical love" created when critical literacy involves mutual respect – respect by teacher for students, and respect among students (FREIRE, 1993). A fourth dimension outlined by Janks, the *domination* perspective (using language and signs to push back on positions of social and political domination) was evident in another project vignette shared in the following section.

Vignette #2: Learning the Language of Advocacy

In a subsequent year of collaboration, Mary moved to a new school a few miles away. In keeping with her interest in connecting her students to the community, she drew upon a local presidential museum for primary source texts written by notable figures in U.S. history. These texts were letters written by Benjamin Banneker, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr., all advocates for social justice in their day, and all seeking to persuade the reader about a cause. Mary's dual purpose in choosing these as mentor texts was to provide her students with rich examples of persuasive language, but also to demonstrate how these notable citizens utilized their writing for a social purpose, advocating for civil rights. Her purpose was to help her students create their own advocacy letters to a person in power to address an issue of concern in their lives.

After reading each text together and discussing the themes, Mary and her students analyzed how each writer crafted the language to effectively convince the reader of his cause. For example, they noticed language in a letter written by John F. Kennedy

to his father early in life, where he adds a heading, "dedicated to my father." The students discussed the reasons behind this choice. Oliver surmised that this language would convince the author's father "that he is smart" and the father would listen more carefully to his request. Thomas added, "He is trying to persuade his father with fancy words."

Mary wrote the students' comments on an anchor chart with ideas on how powerful language connects with powerful ideas. She also harkened back to the letter by Benjamin Banneker, read previously, noting Banneker's powerful words and confirming that his letter, concerning freedom for enslaved Blacks, was one of the few to be noticed and read by President Thomas Jefferson. She alluded to the letters they were planning to write, reminding them, "An elected official gets many letters, what will make your letter stand out?"

As the reading of the mentor texts continued, Mary began to urge the students to choose their own advocacy issues. Unintentionally she tapped into a current event that was on the minds of many of her fourth graders. Around this time, twenty elementary students were killed in a school shooting rampage in Newtown, CT. Many students were disturbed and frightened by the event which dominated the news media around the December holidays. Many of the students were aware of the debate in the media about gun control laws connected to this event. While Mary did not intend for this topic to be the focus of the unit, she was also sensitive to the desire by many students to talk about the effects of guns, which for them gave a sense of control over a frightening situation.

About half of her class became very involved researching this issue both in and out of school. One student brought in a news article on how the gun industry was specifically marketing to youth. Another boy spent several evenings at home searching statistics on guns and crime, compiling a notebook with printouts of charts, graphs, and bulleted statistics. Mary incorporated these texts into the curriculum. She printed out the news article as a focal text for a lesson on annotation and she allowed students to use the statistics binder as a resource for further

research on one of the classrooms' three iPad tablets. One parent complained to Mary that she did not want her child involved in such a sensitive topic. Mary responded that if the parent could convince her child not to choose this topic, Mary would support this decision. However, the child prevailed, choosing to continue with this focus.

Several of the students, one of whom had a relative serving in the military, shared perspectives on the positive aspects of weapons in society. Ensuing discussions on the pros and cons of gun control permeated the classroom. In one instance, Cory could be heard arguing, "This discussion [on banning weapons] bothers me, some people like the president SHOULD have more gun control than other people." Mary urged him, "Your argument has passion, what's missing? You need evidence maybe from the iPads?" In a few days, a bulletin board appeared. The space was divided under the topic "Gun Control" with two sections, "Pros" and "Cons." Mary asked all the students interested in the topic to research facts on both positions to use in their letters. Index cards appeared with facts such as Annalise's who wrote a fact to support her position that "too many people own guns." She wrote: "About 80 million Americans representing half of U.S. homes, own more than 223 million guns. And yet [only] 60% of Democrats and 30% of Republicans favor stronger gun ownership laws".

While not all the students chose gun control for their issue (some chose to advocate for decreasing pollution in the nearby harbor and one chose to advocate for more technology in their urban classroom), many chose to write letters to President Obama on the issue. Mary continued to keep the focus on the language they needed to be convincing, using graphic organizers for argument writing and anchor charts where the students kept track of effective vocabulary. One such chart, labeled "Muscle Words" listed powerful adjectives and verbs that would "catch the eye" of the reader. In the end, about half of the students packaged letters and mailed them off to the White House. Devan's letter began,

Dear Mr. President, I solemnly believe that there should be gun control in the United States. Guns should only be sold to police and to the military. The reason why is because I have heard of these frightful stories with gun related murders like the shooting in Connecticut and Houston and I want this to stop.

The culture Mary Moran encouraged in this fourth-grade classroom mirrored many of the attributes noted across her teaching of several units. Students were engaged and independent. Collaborative discussions on language and ideas, initiated by the children and maintained over time, indicated their care about their learning. In this instance the "texts" used to teach academic literacy were texts that demonstrated literacy as a social practice, therefore the grammar functioned to support the intentions of the authors. Mary was persistent in guiding her students to make those connections. The curriculum also allowed space for students to voice issues of concern in their lives, to share what was on their minds, and to debate their ideas with evidence. This is all language that is necessary for democratic participation and effective citizenship.

5 CONCLUSION

"Praxizing" together, Mary and I have engaged in what Ritchie & Rigano (2007) describe as a "complementary collaboration," that is, as collaborators our labor is a synergy of skills, efforts, and roles that build on each other's differences. We argue that this complementarity is imperative in our need to consistently question and act with a social justice focus. This critical collaboration provides reminders to continually question ourselves in practice but to question each other. Tensions do arise. We have pushed back at each other with rationalizations about how to organize or present exploratory ideas about the teaching of writing. Tensions also arise between us and the policies and practices within our educational institutions. In these cases, our reflexive interactions provide us with a supportive space to consider how best to negotiate these.

Our learning also intersects with the learning of our respective students as we seek to engage with their perspectives as well as challenge them with new perspectives. A particularly powerful intersection is for the university preservice teachers to see that it is possible for teachers to attend to high academic expectations while also creating room for a democratic education: especially in this political age, where the curriculum is tightly constrained.

Our collaboration is both humbling and empowering. The above examples, demonstrate the value and multidimensionality offered through a lens of collaborative, critical praxis. As a teacher and teacher educator, a praxis orientation has given us room for learning that is active, intentional and participatory and demonstrates the power of pedagogy where professional care – for each other and our students – leads to powerful learning for all.

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