**Researchers as Thought Buddies: Examining
a Research-Practice Partnership through Design-Based Research**
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Purposes

This study explores how a research-practitioner partnership (RPP; Penuel & Gallagher, 2017) worked to design, iterate, and implement a curricular unit intended to mobilize students' powerful literacies to affect change in their communities. This design-based research connected literacy theory and classroom practice to meet our mutual goal of expanding possibility for youth advocacy through literacy instruction and practice.

By "powerful literacies", we align with Gee's (1991) definition wherein young people enact "a discourse of literacy skills, attitudes, and values that can be used as a meta-discourse to critique personal, popular culture, community, and school discourses in order to think, speak, and act effectively on behalf of themselves and their communities" (p. 8). Yet, a disconnect exists between research and classroom practice. We address this disconnect by asking how Gee's and our own (Marsh, 2018; Authors, 2015) claims about the transformative potential of powerful youth literacies actually impact classroom practice. Our previous efforts to do so, writing "implications" sections in published articles – we decided – was not enough. Instead, we entered into a research collaboration among us - two university researchers (Authors1 & 2) and a high school English teacher (Author3) to study the design and implementation of a unit that amplifies the voices of a historically marginalized student population.

Cayuga High School (CHS), where our study takes place, is located in one of the most economically challenged urban centers in the country. Similar to other urban schools nationwide, CHS's student population is widely diverse (92% nonwhite) and economically disadvantaged (87%) (State Ed data). In 2015, with rates of 33% graduation, 77% attendance, and 87% of students scoring below proficiency on standard assessments, CHS was facing forced closure. At this time, the district, school, and our university entered into a 5-year partnership to revitalize CHS. Our collaboration is situated in the context of this broader university-school partnership.

CHS's persistent struggles to meet mandated benchmarks placed it in a vulnerable – but not uncommon – position to improve student outcomes, efforts typically focused on achievement. When schools are under pressure to improve test scores, a skills-based, autonomous form of literacy instruction (Street, 1984) often eschews opportunities for powerful literacies enactments and related agentic benefits (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Selvester & Summers 2012). This dilemma motivates the need for a different means of connecting research to practice and to persist in finding ways to make room for literacy practices that affirm youth voices, inviting students to critique and imagine new possibilities for their communities.

Set in two sections of Author3's 12th grade Journalism class, the study aims to expand access to powerful literacies for historically marginalized youth through studying the enactment of and design for powerful literacies from the students' and the teacher's perspective. Our collaboration focused on Author3's senior capstone project based on Solutions Journalism (Solutions Journalism Network, 2019), whereby students identify a local problem in their community, research past solutions to the problem, and propose a research-based solution. Author3's students

presented final products as both a research paper and a TED Talk to be posted on the school's YouTube channel.

To examine a means of reconnecting literacies research and classroom practice, this study asks: How does an RPP provide opportunity for a teacher to iterate a senior research unit to meet her pedagogical goals?

Perspectives

The powerful literacies (Gee, 1991) that inspire our research and form the basis of the Solutions Journalism unit we studied are rooted in critical literacies pedagogy (Freire, 2006; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008), which repositions marginalized populations as agents of change whom, through the practice of literacy, can question, critique, and transform oppressive social structures. In this tradition, researchers and practitioners describe the potential of classroom learning as a "practice of freedom" (Coffey, 2015, p. 6), particularly pertinent in urban schools where empowering pedagogies are most needed, yet least often practiced amid pressure to reach projected achievement outcomes. Prioritizing academic achievement over critical awareness and engagement is in fact a false binary, which only further marginalizes youth (Coffey, 2015).

Instead, research suggests a socially responsible pedagogy, that is both academically rigorous and deeply connected to students' lived experiences and concerns. And yet, curricula repeatedly defaults to a skills-driven pedagogy, dictated by pressure to meet accountability standards, especially in struggling schools located in urban areas, with detrimental effects to students and their teachers (Au, 2016; Mora, 2011). These students, who are often frustrated with their literacy instruction, can instead be sources of power in their lives and for their communities (Selvester & Summers, 2012). Practitioners can teach socially responsible pedagogy as a means by which students can critique, question, and change social inequities surrounding them. While critical literacies are historically depicted as focused on critiquing and changing modes of oppression for marginalized people, it is the focus on agency that informs this study, one in which students are examining not only modes of their own oppression (e.g., white privilege) but problems that affect society at large (e.g., climate change).

While the promise of powerful literacies offers hope and inspiration, classroom instruction continues to cling to a traditional, skills-based curricula. RPPs offer an alternative means of connecting research findings to classroom practice (Coburn et al., 2013). RPPs are gaining attention for their effectiveness in bringing research and practice in dialogue to inform pedagogy. These partnerships facilitate practitioners' connection to co-constructed research findings, practitioner access to researchers, and the development of real-time, local innovations (Coburn et al., 2013). RPPs have been described as "trading zones" -- a form of cultural exchange wherein researchers and practitioners cross the boundaries of their respective institutional settings (Penuel, Coburn, & Gallagher, 2013). Each partner in the collaboration steps out of their institutionalized role (e.g., observer, implementer) to exchange ideas and innovate reforms.

Methods

Our RPP between two former English teachers turned researchers/teacher educators (Author1 & Author2) and a 14-year veteran English teacher (Author3) followed a design-based research methodology (Barab & Squire, 2004; Reinking & Bradley, 2008). In that tradition, we designed a

process to closely examine the planning, instruction, and student work for Author3's Journalism unit, which occurred during the 4th quarter of the 2018-2019 school year. We first identified the following pedagogical goals: 1) students will explore solutions to a local or hyperlocal issue that affects them or their community; 2) students will advocate for change as they further the conversation about that issue by producing and sharing digital media messages.

Author3 then shared her unit outline, and together we brainstormed and planned for how her instructional methods and curricular design could meet the identified goals. Once the unit began, we entered into a design-based iterative process involving systematic observation of and reflection on classroom practice and adjustments to instruction based on collaborative, ongoing analysis of data. As such, design-based research allows researchers and teachers to collaborate in planning and implementing a unit, adjusting the unit on an on-going basis, and collecting and reporting data about the process and students' work.

Research Site and Duration
This study took place in both sections of Author3's 12th grade Journalism class at CHS, situated in an urban setting in a mid-sized Northeast city. Data collection began the week prior to the Solutions Journalism unit's start, continued for seven weeks of instruction (capturing Author3's introductory lesson, one or two lessons per week, and the final day that students recorded their TED Talks), and concluded with a final reflective conversation among the research team members the week after the unit's conclusion.

Participants
Author3 had a multi-layered role in this study, serving as the course instructor, study participant, and co-researcher. She has been teaching at CHS for 13 years, and has taught this Journalism class off and on for seven of those years. Table 1 describes the 16 students who participated.

Data sources
Through a variety of data collection methods, we built a data corpus as described below (see Table 2). Author1 and 2 each observed one class period per week and documented participant observation and informal conversations with participants through systematic field notes and researcher memos. We kept researcher journals capturing our noticings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) that we later used to trigger our memories when we wrote more detailed field notes and memos. The three of us met for planning conversations weekly using the Zoom video conference platform, which produced recorded audio files that were selectively transcribed. Throughout the unit, we gathered artifacts of instruction, which included Author3's lesson/unit plans, samples of student work, and final research products (written research papers and TED Talk videos). Much of the students' written work was completed using Google Classroom, and, when possible, the artifacts collected were Google documents shared with the research team, allowing us to see revision history and comments Author3 made to students.

Near the end of the unit, Author1 and 2 also conducted 10-15 minute interviews with nine students, as attendance allowed. We asked open-ended questions to encourage students to share their perspectives about the unit, including thoughts about their research process, their teacher's role in the unit, what it was like to communicate their work via video, and any suggestions they had for future implementation of this unit. Finally, we all met for an approximately hour-long

final reflective conversation at the conclusion of the study. These data were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is following Erickson's (1986) analytic induction method, as we collaboratively developed and tested assertions based upon repeated readings of the data corpus. With our understandings of powerful literacies and RPPs serving as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954), Author1 and 2 made initial assertions about what we read. We then returned to the data to search for confirming and disconfirming evidence to revise, strengthen, and/or reject these assertions and presented them to Author3 for further refinement through discussion. As our analysis continues, we will be writing narratives for those assertions that survive testing. We present initial results of this analysis below.

Results

An overarching theme emerging from our analysis highlights the relational roles we entered as collaborators – becoming "thought buddies." We are pursuing assertions related to the two following categories – both under the thematic umbrella of researchers as thought buddies for a teacher in an RPP:

1. RPP serves as a catalyst for the teacher to plan for future implementations of the unit. Our findings reveal that her participation in the study incentivized Author3 to iterate her planning both in the moment, for the current students' benefit, and for the following year's implementation of the Solutions Journalism unit. For example, our weekly meetings provided the space and time for her to reflect on possible curricular iterations. Knowing she would talk with researchers about how the unit was unfolding provided Author3 with motivation to think critically about how to meet the project's pedagogical goals (Final Conversation, June 25, 2019).
2. Researchers offer broader perspectives on the project (which might include students' perspectives) that complement the teacher's day-to-day management of the unit. Author3 was continually studying and iterating her unit, based on her lesson plans and reflections on implementation, while Authors1 and 2 were studying our process of collaboration. The RPP facilitated conversations that allowed researchers to complement Author3's thinking by connecting our accumulating data (particularly researcher memos and student interview transcripts) to her ideas and questions (Zoom Recording, June 6, 2019). Further, Authors1 and 2 served as resources for relevant literacies research and experience that we put into conversation with Author3's reflections, needs, and challenges as they arose.

Scholarly Significance

By connecting researchers with a teacher, her students, and her classroom directly, our RPP had in-the-moment implications for the curriculum and learning happening in that urban classroom, while also shaping the implementation of the unit in coming years. Findings from our study of the RPP affirm the good that comes from such collaborations, offering insights for others desiring to bring empowering pedagogies to urban contexts. As Author3 continues as a co-researcher and co-presenter in this work, our collaboration answers the call for connectivity in this year's theme.

Tables

Table 1 *Student Participant Information*

Class Period	Total	Genders	Ages*	Racial Distribution	Language Variation	Disability Status
1st	10	6 females 4 males	2 minors 8 adults	5 Latinx 3 Black 1 Bi-racial 1 Other	2 with Spanish as their first language	None
5th	6	3 females 3 males	2 minors 4 adults	1 Latinx 2 Black 3 White	None	1 with hearing impairment; 1 with significant speech difference; 1 with 504 plan

* Age at the end of data collection.

Table 2 *Data Corpus*

Data Source	Quantity
Field Notes	14 field notes documenting participant observations of lessons
Researcher Memos	16 researcher memos
Zoom Recordings	6 audio/video recordings of weekly planning conversations between the 3 researchers
Artifacts	6 samples of student written work 1 recording of all TED Talk videos 8 instructional artifacts (unit plan, teacher-created project documents, student conference sheets) 3 photographs documenting one lesson's outcomes
Interview Transcripts	9 student interviews 1 final reflective conversation between the 3 researchers

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