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Creating a Shared Ownership for Learning: Instructionally focused Partnerships

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Abstract

This descriptive case study highlights the development of district-wide student voice program, RunDSM, in Des Moines, Iowa. RunDSM intends to create spaces for marginalized youth to collectively about social injustices and develop common, and individual, voices to disrupt these injustices. Attention is paid to how RunDSM is able to bring ideas from urban arts, critical literacy, and student voice research together to create spaces for local youth to hone their critical consciousness, academic skills, and community/school engagement. This article relies on the narrative of the two teachers responsible for developing and implementing RunDSM as the primary data source; as such, the article is written from their perspective.

Key Words: Student Voice, Social Justice, High School, Program Development

Creating Spaces for Youth: The Case of RunDSM

“I am waiting on my mouth to be born” (Dominique Christina, 2014)

While numerous research highlights the benefits of student voice ranging from ideas for teacher and administrator improvement to heightened trust and improved school climate (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Mansfield; 2014; Mansfield, Welton, Halx, 2012), findings also suggest input from marginalized populations are frequently overlooked, and that intentionality and purpose when including student voice is often lacking (Bertrand, 2014; Mitra, Serriere, & Stoicovy, 2012). Over time the inclusion of student voice in educational settings has continued to expand, evolve, and shift according to the various contexts in which it is studied, analyzed and implemented. As the field of education begins to address issues of social justice in more contemporary contexts, more scholarship must focus on the ability of empowered marginalized high school students to transform pedagogy through their reflective, analytical, ethical discourse and works of art (Boske, 2012).

Research indicates that if students are provided practical means to create safe and brave spaces they are more likely to explore and express their personal viewpoints on social issues by jointly developing a genuine student-centered environment (Phillips, 2011). More importantly, urban arts have the power to assist students in better understanding injustices they might encounter in the larger world, awakening their imagination by offering an aesthetic experience traditionally inaccessible in institutions of public education (Gulla, 2009). Too often, the arts are viewed by marginalized communities as products made by and for the rich and white (Gulla, 2009).

“I vocalize just to close these riffs, these broken tides” (Pro Era, 2013)

Statement of the Problem

With evolving definitions of literacy and the shifting of student demographics in public schools across the country, a divide is widening between teachers and students. Often, creative forms of expression are trivialized within the confines of public schooling or eliminated completely because they fail to fit state and national standards. Numerous educational programs and movements at the local, state, and national level perpetuate the maintenance of strict accountability systems, testing, mandated curriculum, and competency-based education that reflects White, middle-class ideals and culture (Dimitriadis, 2001). Perez (1998), Gee (1992), and Zanger (1994) have been working to expand the meaning of literacy for approximately two decades now, recognizing that literacy extends well beyond the ability to read and write and delves into ways of knowing, thinking, being, and valuing, which are capable of bringing about significant change (Forell, 2006).

Modes of communication are valued differently by people stemming from different communities. Thus, some of the literature concerning the use of student voice highlights this divide. Forell (2006) emphasizes that particular knowledge, thinking, speaking, writing and expression are privileged, not always familiar, and that indicators of “success” are usually based in the reproduction of the dominant academic culture and its policies. As a result, public schools and other mainstream academic institutions tend to view underserved students of color through deficit lenses thus positioning them in such a manner, causing them to feel dismissed and invalidated (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002).

Purpose & Parameters

The purpose of this article is to highlight a specific program intended to engage youth of color in educational spaces that foster their critical consciousness through planning, dialogue,

and expressive arts. First, we provide a brief overview of literature directly addressing barriers and obstacles directly linked to student voice, specifically student voices of color followed by our findings. This article seeks to be positioned within discussions regarding the creation of safe and brave spaces that genuinely honor youth voices and concerns, acting as familial communities where youth are at the center. Ultimately, this article highlights the work a team of educators engaged in to create a program that is intended to support traditionally marginalized students through engaging aspects of critical pedagogy and redefining what is accepted and valued as art. The intention of this programming is for students to gain deeper insight into their lives and the needs of minoritized students in an attempt to help them feel as if they are actually being heard, boost their self-advocacy and awareness, and to contribute to a more socially just school.

Literature Review

Dynamics of power and hierarchy regarding the respect of student voice show themselves frequently in the confines of public education, especially when considering demographic divides, teacher authority, and student compliance. Research strongly indicates the limitations of dialogue and discussion across various differences but most importantly, cultural differences within educational contexts as well as the problems that exist when those in positions of authority speak to, about, or for others (Fielding, 2004; Jones, 1999; Taylor & Robinson, 2009). One major critique considering student voice is that it is often not taken seriously, or properly respected. Thus, it fails to truly develop collaboration, shared inquiry, and understanding among students and teachers (Cook-Sather, 2014; Hutchins, Huber & Ciccone, 2011; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). For example, Mitra and Serriere (2012) indicate that schools traditionally do a good job of getting youth involved in community service projects but truly fall short when providing youth space to be a part of decision making or reform processes.

In addition, there is very limited research containing student voice initiatives, including collaboration between youth and adults with the direct goal of addressing problems, or providing youth extensive leadership roles (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Importantly, Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) add that there is a widespread belief that young people of color are frequently viewed as delinquents, criminals, and menaces to society in need of being controlled and contained, rather than being provided enriched educational opportunities. Neighborhood issues such as gun violence, police abuse, poor health care, and discriminatory school practices tend to be addressed in policies that blame youth and write them off as the causes of societal problems (Ginwright & James, 2002). Therefore, many student voice scholars continue to point out the necessity in looking at whose voices are actually being heard, who is speaking, and perhaps more importantly, who is being asked (Bertrand, 2014; Gulla, 2009; Kozol, 1991; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Mitra, Serriere, & Stoicovy, 2012; Phillips, 2011).

Dillon (2010) states that students have the most at stake, and are experts, when it comes to teaching and learning in schools. In order for student voice to successfully function and take its rightful place in school reform, it must be treated with similar respect and accorded the same level of influence as formal leadership (Beaudoin, 2005; Holcomb, 1997; Jones & Yonezawa, 2002). While traditional power is based on the idea of influencing others, the inclusion of student voice is better situated in relational power where power to bring about change is established through equity in status among all stakeholders, within a larger context of community (Chambers, 2004; Gendron, 2006; Warren, 2011). Lodge (2005) states that the idea of shared narratives between students and teachers has been found useful in the development of strong, trusting relationships that builds community in schools.

When students of color are provided opportunities to engage their voices, more possibilities exist to respond to manifestations of systematic racism and to inform and drive overall school improvement (Bertrand, 2014; Irizarry & Welton, 2014; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Morrell, 2006; Serriere & Mitra, 2012; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). However, research shows that those in positions as educational decision makers respond to student voice, especially the voices of students of color, in a variety of ways that frequently indicate direct opposition and complete disregard (Bertrand, 2014; Cammarota & Romero, 2011). Some scholars have indicated that sometimes decision makers showcase implicit racist, sexist, classist, ageist, and deficit views when considering the implications of utilizing student voices of color as a means to shift school cultures and climate (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012; McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Orellana, 2009). Because decision makers traditionally are the ones holding institutional power in the form of reform and policy, they are the ones ultimately deciding the means of approaching and addressing issues within education, and determining whether or not student voices of color are present in a reciprocal dialogue and interaction in direct connection to those issues (Engestrom & Sannino, 2010; Guitierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995).

Considering student voice work in education, it is necessary to acknowledge the inclusive shift of a more critical pedagogy that passionately embraces empowering students (Giroux, 2010). Critical pedagogy is founded upon the need for critique and hope through the use of human agency and resistance, with the goal to create less oppressive social arrangements (Giroux, 1997; Leonardo, 2004). Mayes (2010) acknowledges that in many cases such work transforms traditional distributions of power and dynamics around how knowledge is acquired and who holds it, breaking long-standing assumptions about the learning process. Often as a result, teachers to feel unequipped, ill-prepared, and lacking understandings of management

connected to teacher student power dynamics when engaging in these critical practices (Currie & Knights, 2003; Mayes, 2010; Smith, 2011).

Critical pedagogy requires a thoughtful approach to shared power and the use of voice by all participants must exist, or traditional routines will easily fall back into place (Islam & Zyphus, 2005). More importantly, research indicates that teachers are often not ready to assist students with concern to the emotional labor necessary for critical pedagogy and student voice work due to conflicts between parties that can show themselves in the form of hostility, intolerance, and insults (Burbules, 2004). Bertrand (2014), suggests resistance might come from the threat of changes in power relations that mirror social inequalities such as race and class. Perhaps, it is deficit thinking from educational decision makers that blinds the idea youth are themselves resources. When educators view students of color through a deficit lens they assume failure in school is the result of familial or internal shortfalls that simply do not allow for learning (Valencia, 1997). Everyday practices of youth, especially concerning those directly tied to views of literacy, are rarely considered by decision makers as tools to be utilized but rather as acts of deviance, meaningless, and even destructive (Moje, 2000). While much evidence establishes that youth of color growing up in low-income, urban neighborhoods are more likely to be exposed to crime, drug and alcohol abuse, low academic achievement, and low quality schools, it also finds that youth in similar circumstances thrive when expressive art forms are used in schools (Jenson, Alter, Nicotera, Anthony, & Forrest-Bank, 2013; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

Expressive art refers to the use of visual art, music, dance, writing, and drama for the purposes of self-discovery and change (Malchiodi, 2013). Expressive arts programming has the potential to truly offer alternative forms of expression for youth who feel confined by traditional school approaches but often are simply unavailable, especially in low-income schools (Hetland

& Winner, 2001; Radbourne, 2002, Ruppert, 2006). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why many youth of color view the arts as for “the rich and white” (Gulla, 2009). By incorporating students’ cultures into spaces where they have traditionally gone unrecognized definitions of literacy are readily challenged and further developed beyond the lens of the dominant culture (Forell, 2006; Kist, 2005). France (1994), suggests that by including the cultural artifacts of students of color in the classroom, schools directly combat “social alienation and insularity,” which promotes the development of “authentic voice.” By providing students creative artistic means for expression, schools support spaces where knowledge about culture and diversity can safely and bravely be exchanged, which leads to youth feeling empowered and emancipated (Goicoachea, Wagner, Yahalom, & Medina, 2014; Wright, 2007; Shelton, 2009; Wallace-DiGarbo & Hill, 2006). Significantly, such spaces provide genuine critique and offer hope through human agency in order to dismantle oppression and construct a new, alternative reality through critical pedagogy.

Student voice must begin to inform educational planning, research, and reform that extends beyond tokenism, and delves into youth presence, participation, and power in the educational process (Cook-Sather, 2002; 2006). When classrooms incorporate a multitude of texts and a variety of communication techniques, students are provided legitimate space to develop voice in creative ways, providing a majority of material independently (Jordan, 2005). For example, if writing is considered both an expressive art and an act of social responsibility (Gilyard, 1996), students who partake in writing connected to hip-hop culture are in fact challenging the hierarchy of order within a system attempting to govern what counts as literacy. Through the authentic inclusion of student voice and deeper exploration of diverse histories and

cultures, students can better address current social situations, developing a better vision for their future (Forell, 2006).

Tiny as a Mustard Seed but Mighty as an Oak: Growing RunDSM

Tilling the Ground and Planting Seeds

In the fall of 2010, a group of educators were hired to fill teaching positions at a middle school on the north side of Des Moines, IA. This school was under “reconstitution” due to the consistent labels of “persistently low achieving” and “school in need of assistance” being placed on the school. Quickly after the school year began, it became apparent to a handful of the newly hired teachers how deeply ingrained the impact these labels had on the school culture and climate. We have always considered school to be a sacred place for exploration, learning, and growth. However, it seemed many students saw school as another obstacle hindering them from reaching their full potential. Even greater were the negative messages we received from adults in the community and school. We were especially disheartened by the callous notion that the young people attending our school were apathetic, disobedient, violent, and illiterate. Further, assumptions were made about students by those who had never stepped foot in the building. So, we were compelled to help dismantle the negative stigmas and stereotypes associated with the youth attending our school and the neighborhood in which it resides. Although many students were not achieving proficiency in literacy on standardized exams, they were showcasing their literacy in ways that were not traditionally recognized within the confines of the public education system, and we sought to highlight and celebrate the creativity being fostered by and within the young adult students. We felt it was important to bring the youth and community together, but we needed a platform to do so.

Germination

RunDSM was born on a small stage at a local coffee shop in the spring of 2011. While brainstorming ways to raise money for a local, feminist non-profit organization, *Geez Louise!*, the first two authors proposed doing a benefit show as a way to merge my passion for both the young people I was serving and the organization I was assisting to help grow. Uplifted by a standing-room only audience, 15 students read poems, mostly by authors other than themselves, breaking countless stereotypes placed on them regarding their literacy abilities. The event was coined “Share the Mic: Community Voices Creating Change,” and students raised \$415 for *Geez Louise!* that night, proving the power they possess simply by using their voices. Although we never dreamed that a single show would be the catapult for an entire organization, this night was the beginning in a long journey toward creating systems that legitimized the worth of marginalized youth and urban art forms.

The vision of RunDSM is to shift the perception of youth by fighting illiteracy, discrimination, and silence, allowing them a greater part in the conversation for change. Through the collective power of the RunDSM Youth Board, student to teacher feedback, and the strategic presence of youth culture, all aspects of the organization are guided by the youth. By relinquishing power and control, as well as actively using our privilege as white middle class educators to provide opportunities often excluded from them, our youth can truly assume leadership roles. RunDSM seeks to provide platforms for youth to shape their personal narratives, as well as opportunities to be socially active within their neighborhoods and greater community. In doing so, we strive to provide safe and brave spaces within classroom settings that allow our youth to see themselves reflected within the system, and this can only be done by

presenting them honest accounts of history, as well as a statistical analysis of institutional discrimination within our systems.

Photosynthesis

The first program of RunDSM, after the foundational Share the Mic performance in 2011, was a 2-week summer program for students of color called Minorities on the Move. Through hip-hop and popular culture, Minorities on the Move examined and deconstructed racial stereotypes as well as the struggles and triumphs minoritized people continue to face. Thereafter, students were energized, traveling to various locations around the Des Moines area, holding adjoining classes at Drake University to share the productive nature of their experiences. The program evolved over the course of four summers, expanding from the pilot cohort of 20 Harding students to 5 individual cohorts of students entering their high school career in Des Moines Public Schools. Facilitating discussions around the students' history with a desire to challenge traditional systems meant to further marginalize people of color, required an energizing component. We found critical pedagogy was foundational in helping students think critically about their identities. In 2014, the last summer the program existed, each cohort was taught by 2-3 students who had either gone through the program previously, or been immersed in the Urban Leadership program at Central Campus. It was a full-circle moment to see the young people who sat in our classrooms assume our roles, providing future generations of leaders a mirror image of themselves and reinforcing the importance of giving youth power and control. It was a perfect example of stored energy: the power possessed by a group as a result of its positionality or circumstance rather than physical or material changes.

Less than one month after Minorities on the Move concluded, we, Emily and Kristopher, packed our bags and hopped on a plane to San Francisco, CA for the 14th Annual Brave New

Voices International Youth Poetry Festival. Immersing ourselves in a culture we had only witnessed through various forms of media, we experienced something that would transform us as individuals, educators, and activists. From the opening ceremony featuring Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale, to intense writing workshops with Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Michelle “Mush” Lee, and Jeff Kass, to sitting in countless black box theaters watching young people lift us out of our seats in joy and anger and human connection, we were awakened to a redefinition of art and literacy. Young people were provided unfiltered, unadulterated spaces where they were empowered to shape their own narratives through language, pushing the boundaries of traditional forms of expression. They were no longer tokenized or generalized by statistics regarding their race, class, or gender but rather, shared space to discuss their experiences and collectively create solutions by and for their people. The culture of the festival was determined by the young people, and we developed a deep desire for the young people we served back home to experience such a transformative space.

Bearing Fruit

The following school year, we piloted a literacy elective, Hip-Hop: Rhetoric and Rhyme, with the goal of building students’ fluency and comprehension skills. Through connections between hip-hop, literacy, and the social sciences, students explored the temporal trajectory of human experience, learning how the past and present directly affect each other. Additionally, through the deconstruction of social myths and stereotypes, students extended their ability to think critically *outside* of the classroom by reflecting not only on the impact these myths have had on their communities, but also strategies to organize true change. Young people, many of whom had inherent leadership qualities, were immersed in music that was born out of their own culture and were empowered to gain literacy skills that would help them perform at a higher

level on state standardized exams. We sought to legitimize forms of literacy and artists of color that had been shunned within the confines of a traditional classroom or reserved only for tokenized months of the school year. For example, we provided students time and space to grapple with their personal truth and express it via hip-hop art forms and less-accessible forms of expression.

The same year *Hip-Hop: Rhetoric and Rhyme* came to fruition, we began building what is now our most well-known program, *Movement 515*. We recognized the need for unfiltered, unadulterated spaces within our community, allowing youth to shape their own narrative, while also legitimizing forms of literacy such as spoken word poetry, emceeing, and rapping. Although the first workshop drew only one young person, over the course of the next month, we slowly built momentum with one or two more youths making their way to us each week. We eventually realized we needed to break down additional barriers so that students desiring such forms of expression would have access. We slowly built a team of mentors, including teachers and local artists, who were committed to providing more safe spaces founded in critical pedagogy. Eventually, we watched a consistent group of 10 young people gain confidence in their poetry by sharing their truth to audiences across the Des Moines area, forming a community around them that relied on energetic reciprocity and unconditional love. Today, there are spoken word poetry and performance workshops offered once a week in each Des Moines high school, as well as an all-district writing and performance community held at the Des Moines Social Club. Additionally, students now have the opportunity to express themselves via breakdancing and graffiti writing workshops. For example, local and national artists (e.g., ASan and Asphate) teach students the history of the art forms, as well as a space to practice and improve upon the fundamental skills. Providing students access to hip-hop art forms within the confines of the

public school system expands traditional notions of what “counts” as “real” art by the dominant culture. Movement 515 continues to address social issues head on, challenging oppressive systems and uplifting marginalized voices through various forms of artistic expression.

Transplanting

After several years of *Hip-Hop: Rhetoric and Rhyme* having a positive impact on the culture and climate of Harding Middle School, district officials challenged us to create an extension course at Central Campus, a hub for special programs serving students across the Des Moines Metro area. Committed to empowering students on their journey to becoming community-based activists, the goal of Urban Leadership, a two-year program, is to immerse students in an in-depth study of social movements shaping U.S. History and urban settings across the United States as well as provide them real-world opportunities to practice their leadership skills. Through the use of various mediums such as the written and spoken word, urban art forms, youth and community summits, students in year one of Urban Leadership have daily, face-to-face conversations about content related to immigrant rights, Black liberation movements, feminism, and the like. They grapple with a variety of non-fiction texts, oral histories, and forms of historical media and popular culture, examining their complex identities and positioning within the world. Students who elect to take year two are immersed in internships in both elementary schools and non-profit organizations, gaining valuable experiences in the fields of education and human services, and furthering their knowledge in how to use their voices to challenge systems perpetuating the oppression and marginalization of vulnerable populations. The culminating project created by students completing both years of Urban Leadership is the creation of a non-profit organization, with the goal of directly addressing an underserved need or population of people within our community. Students present their models to a team of executive

directors of non-profit organizations in our city, with one team taking the grand prize based on the panels votes for the most research-based, viable organization.

In both Urban Leadership 101 and 102, the traditional classroom is redefined by recognizing students as experts, using their lives and experiences as the primary texts of study. By shifting the power from teacher to student, and creating classroom communities that are defined by youth culture, students feel a stronger connectedness within a system that has traditionally silenced and excluded them, making the field of education a more desirable option for future study. The redefinition of spaces is not only beneficial to their success, but crucial in addressing the lack of teachers of color in both Des Moines Public Schools and across the nation.

The major event planned, produced, and executed by all students enrolled in *Urban Leadership* each year is *Teen Summit*, a two-day festival bringing 250 young people from all five Des Moines Public Schools' comprehensive high school together. The goal of *Teen Summit* is to provide safe and brave spaces for teens to discuss issues facing their communities, brainstorm possible solutions and become ambassadors for change. For example, over the course of two days, youth engage in student-led town hall meetings, artistic workshops led by local and national artists, and a public showcase highlighting their work. The students of *Urban Leadership* successfully execute the event through their individual roles on committees such as research and facilitation, artistic visibility, marketing, gaining valuable skills in community organizing, leadership, and event planning.

Cross-Pollination

The newest program offered under the umbrella of *RunDSM* is *Half-Pints Poetry*, a spoken word poetry and performance workshop held twice weekly at 16 elementary schools in Des Moines Public Schools. Piloted at King Elementary in the 2014-2015 school year by local

artist Words Taylor, the program is now a partnership with 21st Century Community Learning Centers, an initiative providing academic programming, recreational enrichment, and family literacy to students and families. The goal of *Half-Pints Poetry* is to build elementary school students' skills in writing, fluency, and performance, while simultaneously providing them mentorship from senior members of *Movement 515*, further legitimizing them as artists and providing them paid positions to build skills in teaching their craft. Additionally, because the program provides the senior members of *Movement 515* a year-long experience in teaching, mentors are afforded a "bigger picture" look at an education career. The hope is, that by exposing students early on, they may be more apt to choose education as their college major, potentially alleviating the deficit of teachers of color in the public education system. *Half-Pints Poetry* encourages adults to relinquish power and fade into the background, allowing the young people attending our programs to truly become the leaders of the next generation.

Discussion: Reaping and Sowing

As the growth of *RunDSM* continues, our sense of urgency to give collective ownership of the organization to the youth increases. For the second year in a row, we have worked closely with a group of 10 young people who comprise the *RunDSM Youth Board*. Meeting bi-monthly, the board assists in program recruitment, workshop lesson planning, event production, marketing, and community building. The board receives transparent information on the annual budget and is given collective power and ownership over expenditures and how the money can be best put to use to grow and sustain the movement. *RunDSM Youth Board* members bring the leadership skills they have acquired back to their home high schools. For example, they serve as senior mentors for their peers, with the goal of leaving their squads stronger than when they joined them.

RunDSM's mission is to provide spaces for youth to have their voices heard as a part of larger conversations that directly impact their present and future. Each program aims to uplift and validate students' personal experiences and testimonies in order to directly address the issue of students of color often being viewed through deficit lenses. It is important for RunDSM programming to provide youth genuine community experiences where they are extensively involved in decision making and planning as leaders, collaborating with adults on equitable terms, rather than through surface community service projects that fail to provide them space to be heard and have their ideas validated (Beaudoin, 2005; Holcomb, 1997; Jones & Yonezawa, 2002; Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Furthermore, RunDSM operates under the framework of critical pedagogy which seeks to empower youth to question traditional distributions of power regarding who holds and determines valuable knowledge (Mayes, 2010). Therefore, youth participating in RunDSM programs are themselves considered valuable resources with the ability to create and sustain safe and brave spaces, challenging traditional ideas of acceptable forms of expression (Jenson, Alter, Nicotera, Anthony, & Forrest-Bank, 2013; Moje, 2000).

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