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Empowering English Language Learners through Social-Action Projects

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Introduction

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) school reforms in 2002 dealt teachers of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) a heavy burden. Policies mandated that ESOL students in elementary and middle grades were to take content-area Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) after only one year of being enrolled in the U.S. public education system. Schools were held accountable for the test scores of these language learners. Insufficient test scores on a large scale has led to loss of funding and even school closure. Recently, new policies such as *Race to the Top* have supplanted NCLB in Georgia. However, these new policies continue to emphasize annual testing and student accountably for the general population and English Language Learners (ELLs) alike. Additionally, *Race to the Top* policies now tie individual teacher salaries to student performance on standardized tests. Public education policies such as these run contrary to contemporary second language acquisition research which state that ELLs need up to seven years to develop English language proficiency in academic content areas (Cummins, 2008). This schism between policy and reality has caused many teachers of culturally and linguistically

diverse students to go into “test panic” and revert to rote teaching strategies that emphasize “teaching to the test” in order to increase the test scores of students. These strategies are in direct contrast to proven student-centered educational theories which emphasize communicative competence, task-based learning, critical thinking skills, authentic inquiry-based project learning, empowering and liberatory education (Dewy, 1916; Ellis, 2003; Freire, 1978; Hymes, 1972; Shor, 1992). “Teaching to the test” strategies are theoretically based in the *banking* concept of education. In this model, students are viewed as an empty account waiting to be filled with knowledge by the instructor. Friere (1970) explains that this type of learning "transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads men and women to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power" (p. 77). It is critical that ESOL teachers avoid these teaching tactics and maintain a high degree of professionalism even during times of the predominance of high-stakes testing accountability.

Instead, curriculum for language learners must be grounded in researched-based second language acquisition pedagogies. This includes a focus on authentic learning that is acquired through communicative, project-based education. This type of learning should allow students to acquire language and content-area knowledge and apply the knowledge to new real-world contexts to create measurable outcomes. ESOL professionals should consider themselves curriculum designers and engineers and use creativity and innovation to create learning environments where this type of learning can take root. It is equally as important, for ESOL professionals to ensure ELLs, a marginalized section of society, are provided with critical skills that serve to empower students (Ajayi, 2009).

Empowering ELLs and providing opportunities for students to critically engage with the world will ensure students mature to fully functioning, democratic participants in society

(Cummins, 1996). In order allow these qualities to grow and flourish in our ESOL learning communities and classrooms, teachers must go beyond "teaching to the test" with the aim of creating fully functioning students, capable of interacting productively in the world. Incorporating social action projects into the ESOL classroom is a way of addressing this need by empowering students as critical participants in society through communicative, project-based learning.

Social action projects provide ELLs with language, literacy, and content-area skills while emphasizing collaboration and critical thinking. Through designing their own student led projects, ELLs learn that they have the ability to affect social change. Initially, students identify a social issue that is impacting themselves or their communities. Next, students investigate the problem through current and historical research of the issue and through accessing their own expertise on the issue. Finally, students, as a group, create a project of their own which aims to provide solutions the problem and raise awareness.

Social action projects are rooted in critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy aims to create a transformative effect within students to cut the bonds of oppressive traditional education and empower students to engage in unfettered thinking and learning, in order to become agents of change. Freire (1970) describes critical education as "'the practice of freedom' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (p.34). Giroux (2010) goes on to say that through critical pedagogy, "students develop consciousness of freedom…connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action." Constructive action is the key to empowering students to become active change-makers in society, and it is the pivotal component of the action project.

Social action projects inspire students to act consciously to make changes for the betterment of their communities and the world through critical consciousness. Students are empowered to create innovative strategies to attack complex, societal issues. Students identify problems in society, create real-world methods of alleviating these problems, and finally implement these solution methods. *Action* is the key to the social action project. Students' main goal within the project is to use the knowledge they learn to take action within their immediate communities and to encourage others to take action, as well, to expand the sphere of influence of the project. This type of education empowers students to take learning into their own hands and use the knowledge they gain to create a better world for humanity and future generations.

Classroom Social Action Project

During my student-teaching experience in a 4th grade ESOL class, my students and I conducted a social-action project. The ESOL Reading/English Language Arts class consisted of seven students: six Mexican American students and one student originally from Ghana. The class's language proficiency level was fairly homogenous, as all students scored with in a level IV, according to World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) tests conducted the previous school year. All of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged by county guidelines.

The project involved the three major steps (1) identifying a social issue, (2) investigating the issue, and (3) creating an action project to alleviate the problem and inspire others to get involved. In the project, students explored real-world issues while developing cross-curriculum language and content-area skills. The leadership roles of the teacher and student alternated during the duration of the unit. The shifting roles of power were used to ensure equity between all participants (Friere, 1979; Shor, 1992). This allowed students to openly express their ideas

through collaborative inquiry, in an environment where their thoughts would be acknowledged and respected by the group. Literacy practices, and their connections to solving real world problems, were a focal point of the project. Students used a variety of literacy practices throughout the three stages of the project to identify social problems, conduct research, and create their final project. Using an interdisciplinary approach to learning, social studies curriculum was tied into the project.

Step 1: Identifying a Problem

The project idea originated in reaction to the escalation of school violence and social violence taking place nationally and locally. Students began the project with a roundtable discussion where they were asked to identify a social problem. This type of discussion ensures every participant has an equal opportunity to communicate with one another. For ELLs, this is an important confidence-building practice that emphasizes listening and speaking skills. This style of discussion encourages students to actively engage with classmates. Students must be active listeners while interacting with one another in the exchange of ideas. Higher order thinking skills are also needed to participate in these discussions as students are encouraged communicate their personal beliefs and understandings as opposed to simply recalling facts. Therefore wait-time is an important aspect of a roundtable discussion. I regarded my role in the group as a *facilitator*, as opposed to teacher, questioning students about the problems they faced in their own lives and drawing out their own expertise on the topic. I often would draw out deeper answers from students by asking leading questions or challenging their current assumptions.

Through this form of discussion, the students identified violence as a major problem in their communities. Students identified many examples of violence, such as the Sandy Hook school shooting, bullying in school, police brutality, deportation, and anti-immigrant prejudices.

This phase of the social-action project gave students a safe space to openly discuss their feelings surrounding these issues.

Students often internalize fear associated with issues that they feel they have no power over, which can lead to a host of future emotional problems impacting school performance (Bower, 1992). In order to promote favorable educational outcomes for ELLs, teachers must address the socio-emotional needs of students within the academic context (Genesee, 1994). The roundtable discussion draws students' emotions out into the open to be acknowledged and even shared by the group. Students openly express their feelings of fear, anxiety, and helplessness surrounding these issues. Our discussions bolstered a sense of community, comfort, and safety, where students were able to identify with one another. Breaking through the isolation opened opportunities for growth and transformation.

Step 2: Investigating the Problem

During this stage of the project, students worked together to become experts on the violence in communities. Students collaboratively worked in small groups to develop research questions and then sought to find answers to those questions. Students were encouraged to take ownership of their own learning throughout this process.

At this time, I introduced fourth grade civil rights Social Studies curriculum to the class. I provided students with texts that discussed how past community violence was dealt with in innovative ways. Students studied literature in the form of books, articles, and websites regarding Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Gandhi and other non-violent visionaries. Integrating our social action project with the fourth grade civil rights curriculum brought the idea of real world social-action movements to life. As the students began to assess the contemporary world within a historical context, the curriculum became less static and more relevant to the students' lives.

During this period of investigation, students conducted online research, outlined texts, took notes, held student-directed literature circles, watched film clips documenting non-violent movements of the past, and acted out non-violent protests through dramatic play. Several students conducted personal interviews with family members. A broad range of Common Core Reading, ELA, and Social Studies standards were explored during this time. This varied approach to investigating the issue motivated students to practice reading writing, speaking, and listening in diverse ways, appealing to the varied learning styles and multiple intelligences.

Step 3: Creating a Solution Project and Inspiring Others

This stage of the project required students to create a solution project and inspire others to get involved in the project. Non-violence was identified as the solution to the problem of violence by students. In another round-table discussion, students discussed the class's vision of non-violence and what their schools and communities would be like if they truly reflected this ideal. Recalling the quote by Gandhi, "Be the change you want to see in the word," students decided that they wanted to make personal non-violent commitments to inspire change in their families, classrooms, and communities. For their action project, students made a banner to display their personal commitments for non-violence to inspire others. Students made thirty day commitments to nonviolent actions such as "not eating animals [that had been violently killed]," "using only kind words," "playing only non-violent video games," and "no more gossiping,"

After the students finished the banner, they presented it to neighboring classrooms. Students first gave a brief history of nonviolent movements involving Gandhi and MLK. Students then explained their own non-violent movement and gave examples of the non-violence commitments they made. Students encouraged the other classes to join the movement and take action themselves. United by a common goal, my students eagerly rallied their peers. The other

classes, inspired by the presentation, felt moved to make their own commitments. Students added commitments to our banner one after the other, until the banner was completely full. Then a classroom down the hall made their own banner, which they presented to other classes. More and more students in my school made commitments to non-violence. By the end of the week, the halls of the school were filled with commitments of non-violence.

The class further extended the non-violence social-action project to a broader sphere of influence by reaching out to members of the community at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Ga. At the time, the college was preparing for an up and coming event that celebrated non-violence which involved a weeklong event of seminars, discussions, and ceremonies honoring peace-building global activists. Morehouse College and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, a peace-building Morehouse honoree, were in the midst of creating a national initiative to promote non-violence. Working with volunteers on the project, I proposed extending the non-violence initiative by promoting non-violence social-action projects in classrooms around the country. My students shared their non-violence project with Morehouse organizers. Soon volunteers from Morehouse and from Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's non-profit organization took up the cause whole heartedly. A task force of volunteers was organized that would work specifically on "schools outreach". We began sending out emails to schools and reaching out to colleagues to get teachers and students around the country involved in non-violence social-action projects. As of today, over a dozen schools from Brooklyn to San Francisco have taken up the initiative to create and implement student led non-violence social actions projects.

Conclusion

For students from my classroom, seeing the far reaching effects of their actions proved to be a truly empowering experience. This action project gave ELLs the understanding that they can

truly have a positive effect on social problems by working together to create change and inspiring those within their sphere of influence to take part in these changes as well.

Embedded within this project were common core standards from content areas. These standards were explored in an authentic manner which provided for a greater transferability of these skills and knowledge to real world aspects of students' lives. Through this project ELLs acquired language skills by engaging in the process of democratic collaboration and problem solving. Students discovered the symbiotic relationship between communication, actions, and the world, thus acknowledging each individual's ability to act and create change in the world.

Social-action project-based learning provides a viable method of empowering ELLs while engaging with content-area discourse. The learner-centered approach to social action projects allow students to take ownership of their learning. Students are the instrumental, creative force behind every step of the project, from brainstorming to final project implementation. Collaboration of class members allows students to exercise communication skills and gain confidence through interdependent relationships with peers. Social action projects address genuine issues that are relevant to students' lives inspiring and motivating students beyond the classroom.

Next Steps

For educators who are interested in conducting social action projects within their own classrooms, I have including a list of critical pedagogical resources below. These resources include content-area curriculum guides, lesson plans, and extension activities that emphasize empowering students through social and community involvement. However, I must emphasize that these should be used only as guides. There is no better resource than your own students.

Truly empowering projects create a space for students to investigate what inspires them, and allows them the opportunity to create original action-projects focused around these interests.

- **Zinn Education Project**
  http://zinnedproject.org/teaching-materials/

- **Education for Liberation Network**
  www.edliberation.org/resources/edsearch_form

- **Highlander Research and Education Center**

  http://highlandercenter.org/about-us/mission/
- **Project South**
  http://www.projectsouth.org/movement-building-projects/trainings-and-tools/toolkits/

- **Teachers for Social Justice**
  http://www.teachersforjustice.org/search/label/all%20curriculum

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