

Voice from the Field

Critical Practitioner Inquiries: Re-Framing Marginalized Spaces for Black Students

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In classroom spaces on a daily basis, students are encouraged to express who they are as learners and demonstrate their own understanding of their learning. Students' ability to contribute to their own learning is an essential characteristic of an engaging classroom space and supports high academic achievement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). Creating engaging classroom spaces where students feel a sense of belonging, have a positive sense of self, and have the confidence to express their thinking about their learning is at the forefront of education research in the province of Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

Specifically, regarding Black students, Dei's (2008) research has illuminated many issues that Black students in Ontario face in schools: deficit labeling and stereotyping, low student expectations, lack of inclusive curriculum, and concerns about discipline. With these conditions, schools become historically marginalizing spaces that do not allow for student voice to reflect the knowledge students bring. Additionally, these spaces do not honor students' identities or provide opportunities for students' thinking to be heard.

Our work highlights one initiative that explores and attempts to re-frame historically marginalized spaces. This kindergarten through grade 12 initiative of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) was named "Improving the Achievement of Black Students." The TDSB is one of the first school boards in Ontario to explore disaggregated census data, focusing on student demographics and achievement. The research compiled in this area highlights the spaces that this board continues to fall short in creating inclusive learning environments that meet the academic needs of racialized and historically marginalized students (Brown & Sinay, 2008; Yau, O'Reilly, Rosolen, & Archer, 2011).

The professional learning for kindergarten and first grade educators spanned the 2014-2015 academic year. It was deliberately designed to focus on board data that spoke to student achievement, sense of belonging, and experiences of Black students in schools. The content was developed to provide educators

with professional learning to facilitate understanding students' identities as well as one's own, focusing on classroom environment, teaching practices, and pedagogical approaches in relation to the achievement of Black students. A core component of the professional learning sessions invited educators to engage in practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) on their own classroom practice and learning environments. Within the professional learning modules, ideas were shared for how to enter an inquiry through a "puzzling moment" (Ballenger, 2009). This moment was defined as one that occurs during daily teaching practice and that perplexes, disturbs, and/or troubles the educator, but also challenges them to question: What is really going on? This critical questioning encourages educators to deeper reflections of students and their work.

Although we are still collecting data in regard to the inquiry work and the perspectives of the educators in the professional learning, we have gathered some artifacts and journal entries of significance that speak to notions of space and re-framing a classroom space to empower students. So far, we have found that several educators within this early years initiative, used the opportunity for professional inquiry to push back against dominant narratives and hierarchies within their classroom spaces. Some engaged with these notions through curricular content, for instance by creating space to explore abilities and racial identities while others engaged in this work with a focus on the voice of students and family as a part of their classrooms. Examples of such inquiries are presented in more detail below.

Sabrina, a kindergarten, special education teacher inquired: *What does student voice look like in a diagnostic kindergarten classroom? How can I use this inquiry to increase confidence and voice from my students?*

Sabrina engaged in an integrated, across the curriculum initiative, that differentiated and personalized the learning and created more space for student involvement and student voices. By engaging families and inviting them into her classroom to share about their lives, homelands, and what is meaningful to them, she learned with and from her students and their families. She focused on the student-family-home connections and she made classroom learning co-constructive and therefore more meaningful for her students. Students showed more involvement and engagement with their families as a part of the curriculum.

Fatima, an early childhood educator in another kindergarten classroom, asked: *What is happening when children chose not to speak their home language in schooling spaces?*

By inviting parents, Black multilingual parents, into the classroom, to share and teach their home languages, as well as increasing home language materials and displays in the classroom centers and texts, students began to share and speak their home languages more. Educational and multiliteracies researcher Jim Cummins highlights that when schools incorporate and demonstrate that they value first and home languages, students are more likely to engage than if they are in "English-only zones" (Cummins et al., 2007, p. 12). Cummins et al. (2007) also notes that the welcoming of first languages indicates that student identity, very closely tied to home language, becomes important and valued in the classroom space. The students more willingly shared their languages in this kindergarten classroom

when their languages became important enough to be a focus of curriculum and intentionally included as a part of their school day.

Heidi, a first grade teacher, inquired: *What happens to student engagement when community members and parents are invited to join our classroom?*

Heidi describes the multi-faceted ways in which parents, caregivers, and families were invited to be a part of the teaching and learning in her classroom. She described the ways that she learned from families and countered some of her own stereotypes about their histories and their current lives. She noted the interest and engagement of the students as they explored issues that focused on their multiple identities, as well as issues of equality, dignity, and prejudice as they impacted the community.

Nora, a first grade teacher, began her inquiry with the question: *What happens to student voice when students are given the opportunity to develop a political stance focusing on higher-order thinking questions?*

Asking the students to think about children with physical challenges, Nora's students explored the school playground and became engineers with a focus on a disabilities justice playground for ALL Black children as part of their intentional work around "ALL Black Lives Matter" in their classroom. Nora wanted to specify that issues of intersectionality within the Black community are important for students to think about as they engage in social justice work. Some Black students have disabilities and this was an important focus of the work in this classroom. The students utilized their integrated learning in social justice and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) to become engineers and create a playground with clear rationales for their decisions.

Summary

In these critical practitioner inquiries, these educators engaged in a process that created possibilities for re-framing their classroom spaces to include their Black students and their families. The process of re-framing required that educators reflect on the resources, curriculum, modes of classroom instruction, and the voices that are heard and valued in the classroom. What they found when they asked their questions is that marginalized spaces can be re-framed to be schooling spaces that honor student voice, knowledge, multiliteracies, and families.

As we continue collecting and analyzing our data, we wonder:

- How do these intentional in-class experiences push against systemic marginalization that occurs in these schooling spaces?
- What is the impact of these experiences on student learning and identity as a learner?
- In what other ways, might educators use critical practitioner inquiry to create space for voice of students, families and communities in traditional classroom settings?
- How might we share this learning in a variety of ways and engage in conversations to further the work of re-framing marginalized classroom spaces?

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2013) states, “student voice is not something that we grant to students, but rather something we tap into” (p. 2). However, as we engage in this work, we find that we may not “grant” voice as educators, but we do hold the power in classrooms to grant space for the voices that are often historically marginalized to be heard. In doing so, we create possibilities for re-framing classroom spaces to include and value the identities of all who are present.

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