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Critical Literacy and Independent Learning Routines with Opportunity Youth

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Critical Literacy and Independent Learning Routines with Opportunity Youth

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Education.

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DEDICATIONS

To the YouthBuild Team -

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“When we are young, the words are scattered all around us. As they are assembled by experience, so also are we, sentence by sentence, until the story takes shape.”

- Louise Erdrich

“The paradox of education is precisely this - that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.”

- James Baldwin

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As a GED instructor for out-of-school youth, I seek to provide students the tools, scaffolding, and support to think critically, solve problems, and do so independently. Independent learning skills will aid my students not only in GED prep class, but also in future classrooms and their careers. I hope for my students to be active seekers, creators, and critics of knowledge, rather than passive receivers of knowledge. These hopes guide me to my research question: *How can a curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning strategies engage opportunity youth and empower them as learners?*

Creating an environment for critical and independent learning is important to me because I work with young adult students (ages 16–24) who will be transitioning into postsecondary education or the workforce, after their time in a workforce development and education program: YouthBuild. YouthBuild is a government-funded program which provides participants with GED or high school diploma preparation, hands-on construction training, leadership and career readiness, and case management. These young people have been disengaged from school and work for a period of time. Independence—the ability to self-manage—and progress toward learning goals are imperative for any individual who wishes to engage in the 21st century labor force. I have found that my students are most engaged and motivated when they “buy in” to what they are learning, feel it is relevant to their lives, and understand the path they must take to reach learning goals. As an educator, my mission goes beyond assisting students to earn

their diploma or GED; I hope students will develop transferable skills that can assist them beyond a classroom, as engaged and critical citizens.

This capstone project is a curriculum that incorporates elements of critical literacy with independent learning and thinking strategies. Explicitly teaching and scaffolding independent learning strategies is also necessary for students to first learn and then develop skills for independent learning. Since my students' education was interrupted, many did not have the chance to develop these skills. And through the lens of critical literacy, students can find their own voices, connect with texts in ways that are relevant to their own lives, be empowered to question the status quo, and, thereby, transform it.

In Chapter 1, I narrate my educational history and path to working with YouthBuild. I explain the challenges and opportunities facing students who did not complete high school in the traditional way. I outline my own experience with critical literacy as a student and educator. Then, I describe the challenges that my students face as they attempt to learn independently in the classroom. Finally, I provide a rationale for how a curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning strategies could benefit education and community-based programs that serve out-of-school youth.

Educational History

Coming from a family of educators, I grew up surrounded by positive associations with schooling. My mom frequently reminded me, "No education is wasted." While I still believe this, as an educator I have learned that my students' educational experiences, while varying, are often vastly different from my own. This learning has shaped how I view education. While I still see education as vital and critical for opportunities, viewing education as solely a positive force is an uncritical lens based in privilege.

Despite the utmost support, I disengaged in middle school. The classes were not challenging or relevant to my life, so I grew bored and frustrated. In high school, I was lucky to have an earnest English teacher who inspired me! Ms. Kawecki reignited my passion for language arts by having the class read more challenging texts and leading us to grapple with essential questions regarding social issues and philosophy. She introduced me to Plato, Satre, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou. I argued against fracking, made my own news special, and, encouraged by Ms. Kawecki, started a philosophy club with my close friends. From these experiences, I began to understand the power of my own voice.

Attending a small liberal arts college allowed me the freedom to continue exploring my interests. Coursework in sociology and education pushed me to examine my own educational history. As a white woman who attended K-12 public schools in a primarily white, midwestern, middle-class suburb, I grappled with my own success and questioned whether it was my own or a product of my circumstances. The traditional US school system is based in white cultural norms, mores that I was raised with. Attending this school system, I could move through it relatively seamlessly. There was no dissonance between my own cultural upbringing and the institutions I entered, unlike my peers from different backgrounds.

In college, I met classmates from all over the country and the world, many first-generation and low-income. This new understanding of my position of relative power and access in society motivated me to pursue a career in education. I hope to play one part in providing preparation, resources, and support to shift power and access to

social and economic resources to historically marginalized students, and their communities.

Professional Background

I traveled to rural Tamil Nadu, India, and volunteered as a language arts teacher at Shanti Bhavan, a residential school for students from poor surrounding villages. I was saddled with preparing students for their 10th grade national exam, an integral step to college acceptance. I was daunted by this task and intimidated by bored teens who were much more interested in the soccer game going on outside the window of the classroom than my grammar lesson. How could I, a novice classroom teacher, prepare these students for a high-stakes exam, much less engage them in learning?

The answer was outside the window: students want to critique and cheer and to be part of the commentary! Seeing their lack of interest reminded me of myself in middle school: bored and passive. I disengaged from my classes until I had the opportunity to interact critically with the curriculum content and texts, and to guide my own learning.

Since my first teaching experience in India, I have worked with high school students and young adult students, teaching ACT prep and college & career readiness at a public high school and GED preparation classes at a nonprofit organization. Working with students from diverse backgrounds has broadened my perspective on education because, in my daily work, I am faced with and must reflect on the educational inequities that exist for my students. The education system is designed for students like me: white, cisgender, middle-class, suburban, and from a hetero two-parent household. My current work especially demonstrates that this system does not serve all students equally, something I was not aware of as a student.

Working with students who did not graduate from high school brings educational inequities to the forefront. There are myriad reasons why an individual may stop attending high school, like work or family responsibilities, feeling unwelcome in the classroom, or experiencing trauma that makes learning impossible. Instead of viewing high school equivalency students as “high school dropouts,” a shift has occurred in culturally sustaining adult education. Tuck (2012) dubbed this phenomenon “high school pushout” and describes how public urban high schools push out primarily black male students of color, through strict and racist discipline policies, implicitly racist curriculum, and distracting environments for learning. In an ethnographic study, students in a GED program shared that their “past educational spaces were physically and emotionally unsafe, unchallenging, and latent with injustice but [they] accepted this as the way school is” (Schwartz 2014, p. 118). Not completing high school is not a marker of academic or personal deficiencies, but rather a marker of systems that were not designed to support all students fully—academically, socially, and emotionally.

YouthBuild students are intelligent, motivated, empathetic, active, trendy, and challenge my own perceptions of education each day. Educators, policymakers, and the general public often use the labels *disadvantaged*, *at-risk*, *disconnected*, and *dropouts* to describe this population. This deficit-based language ignores the strengths and resilience that my students exhibit on a daily basis. A new term has emerged to describe this population: “Opportunity youth are young people who are between the ages of 16 to 24 years old and are disconnected from school and work” (Opportunity Youth, n.d.).

Opportunity Youth

Opportunity youth face barriers to completing their high school education, including family responsibilities, poverty, homelessness, addiction, parenting, foster care or criminal justice system involvement, disabilities, and mental health conditions. Many of my students bring a keen motivation to earn their high school diploma or GED and hope to pursue college or a career after graduating.

In my own program, I am impressed with the level of responsibility, independence and initiative my students demonstrate in their daily lives. Like Shonna, a 24-year old single mom of two children, who works full-time outside of YouthBuild and switched around her work hours in order to make it to YouthBuild each day. And Nico, who lives at a treatment center and takes public transportation 50 minutes each way every day in order to get to YouthBuild; he makes sure he can get back by 5 p.m. for required group meetings each day. These individuals and other countless examples manage families, navigate complicated systems like housing and public assistance, all while remaining focused on their educational and career goals. Unfortunately, many opportunity youth have not had the in-class time or support to grow their independent learning skills in academic spaces. For this reason, we need educational spaces and programming that can support these young people holistically.

YouthBuild, and other WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) programs, are designed to re-engage opportunity youth in a supportive environment. In YouthBuild, students ages 16 - 24 spend 50% of their time on academics, working toward a high school diploma or GED, 40% on hands-on construction training, and 10% of their time doing leadership and career readiness training. At the end of our 22-week program

and year of follow-up support, the majority of students have earned their diploma or equivalent, several industry-recognized certifications, and are prepared to apply for jobs, apprenticeships, college or trade school. There are around 5 million opportunity youth in the U.S.—about 14% of the population ages 16 - 24—who are not engaged in school or work (Thompson, 2017). Only a fraction of these young people participate in YouthBuild and similar programs.

While dropout rates in the U.S. dropped significantly from 2010 to 2020, there is not yet enough data to know how the Covid-19 pandemic is or will continue to affect youth. In general, school districts across the country saw a decrease in enrollment, due to families choosing other options for schooling and for some families, the inaccessibility of distance or hybrid learning (Harris & Chen, 2022). This means that more students and families will need access to alternative pathways to achieve high school completion or equivalency in the coming years. The pandemic's effects on students' mental health, coping skills, and learning loss are lasting. These losses make the need for high-quality alternative, community-based, and adult education programs even more pressing. These programs are not merely “second chances” but can be valid choices where students who do not finish high school can reposition themselves as education seekers (Golden, 2017).

Independent Learning Challenges

In my current classroom, for GED and high school diploma students, I have noticed how many of my young adult students struggle with the self-monitoring skills necessary to do independent work or guide their own learning. Many out-of-school youth have negative histories with traditional educational institutions and do not perceive the

classroom as a positive or personal space for learning. Some make an active decision to not learn or cannot learn due to trauma from past schooling experiences.

I have noticed that my students are more comfortable taking notes and doing highly-structured guided tasks than in doing more challenging, student-driven tasks which require critical thinking and application. This pattern is not a reflection of students' abilities, but the opportunities they have had to do similar tasks in past school experiences. Guided by curriculum requirements and traditional pedagogical methods, many classrooms are set up to be teacher-driven, with the teacher providing most of the content and instruction. There is not enough heavy-lifting by students and fewer chances for productive struggle. Students rarely had the opportunities, trust, and belief from a teacher that they could do a self-directed, multi-step task. Therefore, when confronted with higher-level thinking tasks, students do not know where or how to begin.

I questioned how my students could demonstrate so much self-sufficiency in a variety of contexts, yet struggle to do the same in an academic setting. I think back to what inspired independence in my own learning. Reading texts from diverse perspectives about relevant topics, learning that no text is neutral, and learning that I, even at 16, had the power and authority to critique text. I did not know it at the time, but I was practicing critical literacy.

Critical Literacy

In critical literacy, “the goal is for readers to become text critics in everyday life” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a, p. 23). The principles of critical literacy include: 1) focusing on issues of power dynamics and encouraging the reader to reflect on inequities and take action to transform the world, 2) engaging in all complexities presented in an

authentic text instead of a more simplistic version, 3) adapting critical literacy strategies to different contexts, and 4) working to understand and research multiple perspectives, including those that are not presented in the text. Critical literacy is rooted in Paulo Freire's transformative educational philosophy: critical pedagogy. Freire explored how education could be used to reinforce existing oppressive social structures with the student as a passive 'receptacle for information,' and how critical pedagogy could be used as an alternative approach to combat this oppression and learn to "read the world" (Freire et al., 2014).

In my opinion, critical literacy is a superpower because it allows readers to read beyond the text, to understand an author's intentions, and to see when the text is serving existing power structures. My students have often felt like their voices and viewpoints do not matter in educational spaces, so framing my curriculum with critical literacy can engage students not only as readers but as thoughtful citizens.

Additionally, strong literacy skills are required more now than ever in secondary and adult education. The College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) for Adult Education were published in 2013, modeled after the Common Core standards for K-12 education. There are three key shifts in the CCRS that show a shift from adult education for life skills to adult education for the purpose of preparing for college or a career. The shifts include: 1) Regular practice with complex texts and its academic language, 2) Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from text, and 3) Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction (Pimental, 2013). A year later, a new GED test was released, updated to reflect these key shifts. Critical reading and thinking skills

are paramount for any individual who is trying to earn their high school equivalency or take steps to further their education or career.

Rationale

In addition to the self-monitoring and literacy skills required of adults, having a high-quality and engaging curriculum for YouthBuild is an issue from a practical standpoint, because I am the only instructor in a classroom of students at various levels. I have found it difficult to leave students to do independent work while I work with another student. This staff constraint is common at other YouthBuild programs and similar career training and education programs. Therefore, I plan to share my curriculum with other YouthBuild educators affiliated with YouthBuild USA and with adult basic educators in Minnesota. This could result in sharing the curriculum on the YBUSA website for YouthBuild instructors or at a MN Adult Education conference.

Independent learners will be able to guide elements of their own education, and I will act as a supporter and facilitator of learning, rather than sticking to a didactic teaching method, in which students are passive and activities are entirely teacher-monitored. I also hope these interventions will change students' relationships to learning so that they can take ownership over their learning and relate it to their daily lives.

Summary

For my Capstone Project, I researched how Critical Literacy theory intersects with the use of independent learning strategies in the classroom. What are the effects on learners' motivation, engagement, and ability to learn and complete tasks independently? How can engaging in critical literacy in topics relevant to their lives empower my

learners to use their critical voice in and out of the classroom? For my capstone project, I developed a curriculum for opportunity youth guided by critical literacy and independent learning strategies, in the GED subjects: language arts, science, social studies and math. The curriculum is aligned to the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) for adult learners. My research question is: *How can a curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning strategies engage Opportunity Youth and empower them as learners?*

Chapter Overviews

In Chapter 2, I explore the existing literature related to my topic. Specifically, I delve into the history of critical literacy and review studies of how this framework has guided education at YouthBuild, community-based, alternative, and adult education programs. I also research independent learning strategies that can be implemented in the classroom, including explicitly teaching independent learning strategies and providing regular routines for metacognition.

In Chapter 3, I describe my curriculum and explain why a flexible curriculum in the GED subjects is the most useful for other YouthBuild programs to use and tailor to their own programmatic needs.

In Chapter 4, I summarize my research findings and explain the process for creating an academic curriculum based on critical literacy and independent learning strategies for YouthBuild. I describe how I will share my research broadly and with other YouthBuild programs and adult educators. I consider the limitations of my Capstone Project and areas for continued research and curriculum development. Finally, I hope to explain how incorporating more critical literacy and independent learning strategies can

support the academic and overall success of young adult students, leading to increased credential attainment and success in postsecondary education and careers.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

Critical literacy requires all of the skills necessary to be an independent learner and an engaged citizen. Therefore, critical literacy is especially well-suited for opportunity youth, who are looking to redefine themselves from drop-outs to graduates, to engage in authentic worthy tasks that are relevant to their lives, and to critique institutions of power that have shaped their lives. These reasons provide the foundation for the focus of this study: *How can a high school equivalency curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning strategies engage opportunity youth and empower them as learners?*

Chapter Two's first section provides background on out-of-school youth, also known as "opportunity youth," and considers factors that influenced these young people to pause their education. The next section delves into critical literacy theory and practice, including the history and founding of critical pedagogy by Paulo Friere, principles of critical literacy, how critical literacy is implemented in the modern classroom, and most importantly for the purpose of this project, with opportunity youth. The third section discusses independent learning skills, including the relationship between independent learning skills and academic success, how students are taught and develop strategies for independent learning, and connections between critical literacy and independent learning.

Opportunity Youth

This section includes an in-depth description of opportunity youth (youth that are disconnected from school and work). The first section examines factors that lead to

disconnection from high school, including family responsibilities, homelessness and instability, mental health conditions, and other barriers. The second section discusses government-funded and community-based organizations that serve this population, like YouthBuild. Government funding has been reserved for this population, to provide not only academic, but holistic support, so that opportunity youth do not fall through the cracks and are able to re-engage with education or the workforce. The third section summarizes pedagogies and supportive practices that are deemed successful for working with this population.

Factors Influencing Disconnection from High School

Previously referred to as disconnected or at-risk youth, opportunity youth are ages 16-24, and not engaged in school or work. Researchers estimate that there are between 2.4 million to 7.6 million opportunity youth in the US, and about 40% of this population have not completed high school or the equivalent (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012; Thompson 2017). In a 2012 report, Bridgeland and Milano coined the term “opportunity youth,” to describe this population, because despite setbacks, “they seek opportunity for education, employment, and community service; and because they offer an opportunity to the nation to benefit from their talents” (p. 8).

Opportunity youth are diverse, and not easily categorized; they span geographical locations, urban and rural communities, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. However, several trends appear. About 60% of opportunity youth are women, and the majority are people of color. Most opportunity youth come from poverty, most from single-parent households, and many face housing instability. In their survey of opportunity youth, Bridgeland and Milano stated,

Opportunity youth typically have fewer years of education, live away from their parents, have children, and are twice as likely to be poor when compared to their connected peers. Their parents are also more likely to be unemployed and have lower education levels. (p. 10)

Of the opportunity youth surveyed, poor and working class youth were more likely to be pessimistic and skeptical of society than their middle class peers who were also disengaged from school and work. They were less sure about their futures and less interested in college or technical school, due to the cost (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). Opportunity youth are varied and complex, as are the factors that can lead them to disconnect from high school.

Factors that lead to disconnection from high school vary, and several studies found that it is rarely an isolated factor and almost always the complex combination of factors that leads a young person to decide to discontinue in school (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012; Center for Promise, 2014; Thompson, 2017). The list of factors that contribute to disconnection is almost endless, but in their large-scale qualitative study of youth who had left high school, the Center for Promise identified three elements of toxicity that contribute to disconnection: violence, personal or family health traumas, and unsupportive school environments (2014). Nearly all youth interviewed had experienced at least one of these toxic elements inside or outside school. Youth had either directly experienced or witnessed domestic violence, violence at school, or neighborhood violence. Their own or family health concerns caused stress or financial troubles. School environments were unwelcoming, unhelpful, or unsafe: "strict disciplinary policies and fears that such students will hurt their schools' ability to conform to national guidelines

often create incentives for schools to take unnecessarily harsh actions" (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012, p. 16). This phenomenon has been dubbed "high school pushouts," as schools suspend and expel students, primarily male students of color, who are navigating toxic environments and expressing the trauma they are experiencing in schools (Tuck, 2012). LGBTQ+ students experience more bullying and harassment than their straight and cis peers, which can increase the likelihood that they will disconnect from school, and are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary discipline policies in schools (American Public Health Association, 2021).

In addition to coping with toxic environments in and outside of school, 19% of young people left school to provide financially for themselves or their families (Center for Promise, 2014). Instability of place was another risk factor; students who are experiencing homelessness or frequently moving are more likely to miss school days and are focusing on survival ((Bridgeland & Milano, 2012; Center for Promise, 2014). "Disconnection from school is a long-term process, not a sudden event," catalyzed by a combination of social, personal, financial, and other factors (Center for Promise, 2014, p. 17).

Like all human beings, young people seek belonging and social connection. When young people felt alone or abandoned, they were less likely to persist in high school (Center for Promise, 2014). A study on opportunity youth in a YouthBuild program found that:

Participants who come to YouthBuild are often isolated from positive supports...[and] many peers on track for success tend to avoid them, disappointed

parents tend to doubt and demean them, employers reject them, police suspect them, and society in general fears them. (Ferguson et al., 2015, p. 66)

This desire for connection can be what drives youth to disengage with school and to connect with outside peer groups that may take them more seriously and fulfill a social need (Center for Promise, 2014). However, wanting to connect can also drive young people to re-engage in school or other programming.

Programming for Opportunity Youth

Despite a domino effect of complex challenges, most youth who have had interrupted enrollment are incredibly resilient and demonstrate a desire to re-engage with school or work, and an optimism about their future (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012; Center for Promise, 2014; Thompson, 2017). To an extent, the US has recognized both the promise that opportunity youth present, in growing their skills and talents and becoming engaged citizens, and the opportunity cost of not assisting these young people. With the high costs of extended public assistance, unemployment assistance, other social safety nets, and prison, the estimated “lifetime direct cost to taxpayers of one 20-year-old that does not reconnect to education or employment is \$235,680, and the social cost amounts to \$704,020” (Thompson, 2017, p. 11). Considering about 5 million opportunity youth exist, it pays to support them now. Therefore, many government-funded programs provide support for youth to complete high school, gain credentials and training, and secure employment.

Many different funding sources can be utilized to support opportunity youth in different ways. However, the majority of these programs are designed to help low-income people in general, and not opportunity youth specifically: adult basic education, SNAP

(Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) Education and Training, and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) (Thompson, 2017). These adult programs tend to focus on only one aspect of support: academic or career or financial. Research shows that programs specifically aimed at opportunity youth, and those that provide wrap-around services are better. These services go beyond academics, to college and career readiness and leadership development, and include social services to meet diverse needs and help youth overcome barriers to participation. Youth interviewed shared that they are most interested in programs that allowed them to earn money and job skills while going to school. They also demonstrated high interest in improving the lives of others and their communities, and sought successful peers or adults that they could relate to, as mentors (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). “Earn and learn” programs that provide more holistic support and mentorship exist, including YouthBuild, Job Corps, Year Up, Career Pathways Programs, and many others. Unfortunately, these programs tend to have a small cohort size, and nationally, only serve a fraction of opportunity youth.

YouthBuild. YouthBuild is one example of an “earn and learn” program that reengages opportunity youth in academics and the workforce. YouthBuild students are paid a weekly stipend to prepare for high school equivalency, do hands-on training in construction, and take classes on leadership and career readiness. Participants also build affordable housing, and do community service projects. YouthBuild staff help students plan for specific goals, make positive changes in their lives and build self-confidence. A study of YouthBuild participants found that when YouthBuild students have sustained support of the program staff for the length of the program (6-9 months), they become more “industrious and more able to overcome feelings of helplessness, and inferiority”

(Ferguson et al., 2015, p. 36). Whether or not students earned their academic and construction credentials during the program, the majority of youth had more positive views of their identities and future prospects after YouthBuild compared to when they joined the program (Ferguson et al., 2015). YouthBuild is just one example of programs that are specifically designed to support opportunity youth to re-engage in education, training, or the workforce, and to feel more confident in navigating daily challenges.

Effective Support for Opportunity Youth

Effective pedagogy for out-of-school youth demands positive and critical adult support. As mentioned, opportunity youth seek social connection and adult role models that they may not have had in other areas of life (Center for Promise, 2014). Zaff and Malone found that having more adults interacting with youth in organizations and youth programs in a community has a positive effect on youth staying in schools, while areas that have a greater ratio of youths to adults tended to have more violence & civil unrest (2020). It is a community's responsibility to keep young people connected to school and work, and having educators and youth workers who connect with and care for youth is imperative.

For young people who were not successful in the traditional school environment, it is especially important to have teachers and adults who believe they are “capable of being academically successful and becoming valuable contributors to their communities” (Flenbaugh et al., 2018, p. 118). Flenbaugh et al. interviewed educators who worked with disconnected youth in urban areas, and analyzed their attitudes toward working with them. They found that many educators still considered students through a deficit-mindset or with false hope that the students could be successful. The authors argue that this kind

of hope is not sufficient to support opportunity youth, since many lack self-confidence in their own academic abilities. Many educators provided "material hope" in the form of resources and services, but few provided "Socratic" or critical hope that treats "indignation from young people as a strength," or "audacious hope" – a sense of solidarity with the youth. Ferguson et al. found that the most effective YouthBuild instructors firmly believed that their students could do the academic work, set high expectations that they would do that work, and were patient (2015). A YouthBuild participant comments about their instructor(s):

He keeps pushing us. They don't let you give up here. Not in YouthBuild, and I feel like that's good. Because if people don't want to try, they going to make you try. And you're not going to regret it. That's the positive thing about YouthBuild, they won't let you give up. (Ferguson et al., 2015, p. 36)

For youth who have consistently been told they are not smart enough or failed in traditional school, educators must have a critical hope for opportunity youth, and believe in their agency as human beings and learners.

Opportunity youth are disconnected from school and work for myriad legitimate reasons. These young people are resilient, and most feel optimistic about their futures. The nation has recognized the costs of not supporting this group as they attempt to re-engage, and significant funding and wrap-around support is dedicated to opportunity youth. The most supportive programs are different from traditional schools; they provide earn and learn opportunities, access to credentials, education, training, and social services to mitigate barriers. Effective support for opportunity youth does not only include material support, but critical hope and belief that students will be successful in academics

and careers. A curriculum based in critical literacy is active and challenging; students become not only readers but thoughtful critics. Considering the needs and talents of opportunity youth, critical literacy can engage and empower them, while building essential independent learning skills.

Critical Literacy

This section discusses the origin and history of critical literacy, the importance of critical literacy, and how critical literacy is implemented in the modern classroom, including with opportunity youth. Critical literacy began with educator and activist Paulo Freire's work, in which he identified teaching as a political act and critical pedagogy as a liberatory practice (2014). Freire believed education was used to pacify the working classes, and he thought that shifting to critical, student-led practices was the first step to freedom and shifting power away from oppressors. He emphasized reading and thinking critically in order to become aware of power dynamics and to take action against them (Freire, 2014). The second part discusses critical literacy strategies, and how they can be implemented in modern classrooms. Strategies include questioning, seeking multiple perspectives about a topic presented in a text, and creating alternative versions of a text.

Historical Context

Historically, educational theorists noticed a relationship between class and pedagogy (Freire et al., 1987; Freire, 2014; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). The teaching methods and type of literacy taught at schools for working-class students differed greatly from those for the elite. In various countries, these working-class schools emphasized functional literacy for everyday life, vocational skills, moral (often Christian) development, and compliance (Freire et al., 1987). Whereas, schools for elites adopted

more liberal and socially critical approaches. By learning obedience in schools, working-class adults were less likely to have a critical and political lens that could liberate them to speak out against injustice and mistreatment in work and in society.

Brazilian educator and political activist, Paulo Freire, questioned the existing state of education (Giroux, 2010). When a military government took power in Brazil, Freire was exiled due to his political beliefs and activism, and spent 16 years outside of his home country, primarily in Chile, Switzerland, and the United States (Giroux, 2010). Inspired by the works of theorists Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon, Freire wrote the groundbreaking text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1968. He believed that the education system reinforced existing power dynamics between the oppressed working class and the much smaller group of people who hold political and economic authority, like the junta in Brazil. He described this phenomenon as “banking education,” because the teacher merely deposits knowledge into passive students or “receptacles.” In banking education, students are dehumanized objects, and are completely reliant on an expert teacher to impart knowledge to them (Freire, 2014) This student-teacher dynamic mirrors that between the oppressed class and their oppressors, and students are at risk of not developing a critical consciousness. Students learn to be compliant objects,

For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (Freire, 2014, p. 72)

Freire suggested critical pedagogy as the antidote to banking education: teachers and students learn from each other in a critical dialogue and inquiry over texts (Freire et

al., 1987; Freire, 2014). The readers' curiosity and creativity should drive the act of reading. Reading is deeply connected to a reader's experience of reality, thus simply teaching reading rules and grammar does not work. According to Freire, all humans have creativity and the ability to interpret texts, whether or not they are formally literate (Freire & Slover, 1983). Through the lens of critical pedagogy, teaching is an inherently political act, and the ability to read, write, and think critically can liberate peoples and challenge injustices (Giroux, 1992; Freire et al., 1987; Freire, 2014).

To this day, many pre-service and current educators read Freire's work and attempt to put his educational philosophy into practice. Still, critical pedagogy was met with some critique and challenges. Some of the first critics, feminist pedagogues, felt that Freire's critical pedagogy assumed essentialist categories of the "oppressed," and the "oppressors," and did not consider intersectional identities that exist in most classrooms. This binary mirrors that of most patriarchal systems, like man vs women, black vs. white, or rich vs. poor. (Ellsworth, 1989). In the United States, critical pedagogy and its off-shoots, like critical race theory, run counter to neoconservative, assimilationist views that defends a Eurocentric curriculum as the primary one (Giroux, 1992). For example, in the recent debate over Critical Race Theory in schools, conservatives argue for a canonical Western curriculum, and fear students adopting a critical eye to existing systems of power in the U.S. Finally, some educators have questioned the usefulness of Freire's critical literacy theory to everyday teachers, as it lacks specific instructions for how to engage with texts (Luke & Woods, 2009). Despite these challenges and opposition, critical literacy is widely taught, reimagined, and has been adapted for modern multimodal literacies, like critical media literacy.

Principles of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is both a theory and educational practice that has been utilized in diverse contexts to different extents, from liberatory community-based adult education, to use in law enforcement training, to K-12 public schools (Lewison et al., 2002; Majors et.al, 2017; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b). Despite its multiplicity, several authors have identified overarching principles or dimensions of critical literacy. In their article, “Critical Literacy as Comprehension: Expanding Reader Response,” McLaughlin and DeVogd identified four principles of critical literacy (2004a, pp. 54-55).

The first principle is “Critical literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a, p. 54). This principle encourages the reader to reflect on inequities in the text and the world, and to take action to transform the world. Social justice and action are key components of critical literacy for a more equitable and democratic world. However, developing the foundation to take action is necessary, and one must work through critical reflection and consider other perspectives before taking action (Freire, 2014; Lewison et al., 2002).

The second principle is “critical literacy focuses on the problem and its complexity” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a, p. 54). Students seek to deeply understand a problem and ask questions, rather than settle for an easy answer.

The third principle states: “Techniques that promote critical literacy are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used,” meaning that pedagogical methods used to help students develop a critical consciousness are different in every context (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a, p. 54). Critical literacy is a constructivist theory because new knowledge and skills are “constructed” in every interaction, by the student.

Behrman considered this principle in his own research that reviews classroom practices using critical literacy. He cautioned that critical literacy is not meant to be a formulaic pedagogy that could be the foundation for a standard curriculum. Instead, it is important that critical literacy is localized and adapted to the individual classroom, students, and context (Behrman, 2009).

The fourth and last principle is to “disrupt the commonplace by examining it from multiple perspectives” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b, p. 16). Students should not only understand the text from the dominant view presented but also from voices that are missing or marginalized. Considering other, and at times, opposing viewpoints can be uncomfortable, for teachers as much as students (Behrman, 2006; Lewison et al., 2002; Linder, 2006).

As a theory and a pedagogical practice, critical literacy looks differently in different contexts. Still, these guiding principles provide a foundation for any educator who is helping students to build critical literacy skills in the classroom and in their complex lives outside of educational institutions. The following provides an overview of how critical literacy has been adapted in modern classrooms, and each instance hinges on one or more of McLaughlin and DeVogd’s principles (2004a).

Critical Literacy in the Modern Classroom

Critical literacy in the modern classroom is perhaps different from what Paulo Freire had imagined. Critical literacy today has many variations and off-shoots, like cultural studies, critical media literacy, and revisionist history. Despite different approaches to critical literacy, they are aimed at using literacy as a starting point to take

on injustices and inequities, and help students develop a critical mindset to change their worlds (Luke & Woods, 2009).

Problem Posing. Problem posing, or asking critical questions is one strategy that can guide students to more critical engagement with texts. Questions could include: “What does the author want the reader to think?”, “Who is in the text?”, “Whose voices are missing?” “What would an alternative text say?” and any questions that encourage students to consider how and for whom a text is constructed (McLaughlin, & DeVogd, 2004a, p. 41). In her study on using critical questions to develop critical literacy, Simpson found that students were more likely to engage deeply with questions that they came up with over teacher-created questions. Ultimately, “the kind of question did not matter. The children’s understandings were developed through the responses” (Simpson, 1996, p. 123). Critical literacy occurred when students discussed these questions and explored new ideas in conversation.

Alternative Perspectives. Another key strategy in critical literacy is exploring alternative perspectives, different from those presented in the text (McLaughlin, & DeVogd, 2004a, p. 41). This can take many different forms, depending on the students and the subject. For example, students may write an alternative text that explores another character’s perspective or an absent point of view (Lewison et al., 2002; Linder, 2006; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a). Students can chart different character’s perspectives or create mind and alternative mind portraits, showing a visual of two different characters’ thoughts (Linder, 2006). Students can utilize these alternative perspectives strategies not only with fiction, but also with informational texts. A student could write an alternative response to a newspaper article that preferences one viewpoint. Another way to explore

different perspectives is to have students read two texts about the same topic, and to have them consider each author's bias (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a, p. 51). By examining multiple perspectives, especially non-dominant perspectives, students can consider their own perspective on a topic, and develop a more critical lens to view not only texts, but the world.

Choosing Texts. It is important to consider which texts to use when teaching critical literacy strategies. However, "it is not the reading of these texts that generates critical consciousness, but rather the critical analysis and discussion in which we and our students engage" (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a, p. 54). Even so, certain texts can set students up well to ask questions and engage critically: texts which have characters with varying perspectives, multi-culturally and linguistically diverse texts, and texts that focus on social issues are good options (Lewison et al., 2002; Linder, 2006; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a). Groenke et al. (2010) made the case for using young adult novels in the secondary language arts classroom, because these novels are current and relevant to youths' lives, center around challenging and controversial topics, and encourage readers to consider varying perspectives.

In the modern classroom, critical literacy is closely aligned with culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, and choosing diverse, representative texts is essential to validate BIPOC students and students of other marginalized identities. Even so, literacy is not essentially critical when we use texts that represent diverse identities. Texts from the dominant perspective (white, male, middle class, etc.), that exclude certain voices, are pervasive. Through critical literacy, students learn to be critical of all texts, to consider the author's intentions, and why some voices are missing.

Challenges of Implementing Critical Literacy. Implementing critical literacy in the modern classroom poses several challenges to educators. Critical literacy contradicts the standardization and focus on correct answers in most modern schools because it is based on inquiry and co-creating knowledge with students (Berhman, 2006; Giroux, 2010; Lewison et al., 2002). Therefore, incorporating critical literacy can be challenging for most teachers, who have curriculum requirements, standardized tests to prepare students for, and a strict class schedule (Lewison et al., 2002).

Taking on critical literacy often causes teachers to take a critical look at their own stance and positionality in the socio-political world, because content often focuses on social issues. This self-awareness can be challenging for teachers who are used to teaching prescriptive content. In their study, Lewison et al. interviewed teachers who were new to critical literacy and beginning to incorporate it in their classrooms (2002). Some teachers who were interviewed shared that they had a difficult time responding to student comments about controversial social issues, or inappropriate comments from students. Considering the challenges teachers face when implementing critical literacy, teachers need the support of literacy coaches and principles, and the time, practice, feedback, and reflection to develop an in-depth understanding of critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2002).

Without a prescribed curriculum or step-by-step guide, implementing critical literacy into the classroom can be a daunting task for any educator. However, strategies like problem posing and alternative perspectives are essential to helping students develop a more critical mindset for comprehending and analyzing texts. These strategies, along

with choosing diverse texts, are foundational for a curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning strategies for opportunity youth.

Critical Literacy with Opportunity Youth

Critical literacy can benefit all learners and is especially well-suited for opportunity youth because it teaches that their voices matter, and that they can challenge injustices that have burdened them and their communities. Critical literacy can inspire students to engage in critical reading, thinking, conversation, and writing. Through this process, students build self-confidence and self-esteem, especially when it comes to their academic abilities. Youth understand that their perspectives matter and that they can take a critical eye to dominant narratives and rewrite them. Critical literacy has historically been used with vulnerable populations, since it can be youth-led and liberatory. This section explores common themes and results from studies about the use of critical literacy with young people who did not yet complete high school.

Of the studies about critical literacy practices with opportunity or “at-risk” youth, all were student-led or created, and collaborative. Brown and Begoray (2017) studied a project between two schools to create graphic novels about indigenous communities. Students worked together to respond to the media's portrayal of indigenous people and rewrite the narrative in graphic novel format. Students enjoyed collaborating because they could share knowledge and work together (Brown & Begoray, 2017). “Sharing knowledge and collaboration through talking and dialogue is part of Indigenous pedagogies and ways of knowing,” (Brown & Begoray, 2017, p. 47). Since the majority of opportunity youth are people of color and come from more collectivist cultures, it is culturally sustaining and appropriate to engage and motivate students through

collaboration. Students at an alternative high school guided the class and pre-service teachers through a 2-hour conversation about a controversial opinion piece in the newspaper. The students chose key words and phrases that they were curious about to drive the conversation. They asked questions of their peers to find out more about their perspectives. The instructor did not drive conversation, but instead found creative ways to encourage less talkative students to share their voices (Kalbach & Forester, 2006). A collaborative and student-led classroom allows students to co-create knowledge and subverts the traditional power dynamic between students and teacher (Freire et al., 2014).

Studies of critical literacy with opportunity youth utilized authentic topics that the youth cared about. For example, the graphic novel project, discussed previously, “resulted in Indigenous students’ increased engagement, motivation and investment in classroom work,” because students chose their topics and felt passionate in exploring social issues facing Indigenous people, and exploring identity and labels (Brown & Begoray, 2017, p. 51). In two studies, the texts were written by the youth themselves –narratives or spoken poetry about their lived experiences (Jones & Curwood, 2020; Lee & Schoonover, 2020). The use of spoken word poetry in particular meant that students were not confined by grammar and language rules; this created a “third space,” in which a student’s home life and identity is valued in a classroom space (Jones & Curwood, 2020). Jagers and Flanagan (2022) engaged Black youth through critical media literacy, in which students analyzed the roles and identities of Black characters on TV. Many opportunity youth students disengage in school because they are bored or the academic material is not challenging enough; critical literacy requires students to challenge themselves and relate the text to their own lives (Kalbach & Forester, 2006). This can

only happen when the material relates directly to their worlds or when students write the material.

Many studies demonstrated that critical literacy provided opportunity youth a chance to redefine themselves as learners. Asher Golden and Zacher Pandya (2019) analyzed the narrative of a 20-year old GED seeker: "Diego was arguing that his identity had become fixed within the space of formal education; he sought a way to exist outside of the firmly delineated boundaries" (p. 215). This desire to challenge and rewrite labels of "drop-out" and "at-risk" are common in these studies. Similarly, the Bull City YouthBuild program that wrote narratives based on Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech "What's your Life's Blueprint?" aimed to "reposition their past and redesign their future" (Lee & Schoonover, 2020, p. 111). One principle of critical literacy is to "disrupt the commonplace by examining it from multiple perspectives" and these opportunity youth challenged dominant narratives about themselves and their communities through counter-storytelling (Lee & Schoonover, 2020; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b, p. 16). Through critical literacy, students can reclaim their high school education in an alternative space that values their identities, culture, knowledge, and experiences.

Most instances of critical literacy with opportunity youth resulted in youth sharing their skills, contributing to the community or taking social justice action. Through critical conversations about social issues, many young people felt inspired or compelled to take action in some way, and understood their value in contributing to their communities. The graphic novels from the alternative schools were published and shared with younger students, therefore the authors felt validated and were able to not only write about social justice topics, but shared their knowledge in a meaningful way (Brown & Begoray,

2017). There is a significant link between critical literacy and civic engagement in different forms, like voting and protesting (Jagers & Flanagan, 2022). Critical literacy also exists in youth-led activism outside of school spaces, because youth critically think about problems in their communities and take action to correct them (Bishop, 2014). Since there are limitations to implementing critical literacy in traditional schools, especially taking to social action, community-based organization and alternative schools that serve opportunity youth are ideal spaces to “focus on issues of power and promote reflection, transformation, and action” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a, p. 54).

In many ways, critical literacy can engage and empower opportunity youth in ways that traditional education falls short in. These spaces are student-led and collaborative, unlike more traditional classroom spaces in which teachers are the provider of knowledge and students are the receivers. Critical literacy utilizes authentic texts that relate to learners’ nonacademic lives. By “disrupting the commonplace,” “disconnected” youth can redefine themselves as connected diploma-seekers (Asher Golden & Zacher Pandya, 2019; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a).

Born of Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, critical literacy encourages readers to challenge existing hierarchies in text, and broadly, in the world around them. This theory and practice is widely debated, yet holds an important place in education, inspiring iterations, like critical race theory, critical media literacy, and others. Educators who incorporate critical literacy strategies have inspired students to question the status quo, to consider multiple perspectives, and to come up with their own. Critical literacy is an empowering practice that puts decisions and action for social justice in the hands of

readers. For these reasons, critical literacy is well-suited for a GED curriculum for opportunity youth.

Independent Learning Strategies

In addition to critical literacy, independent learning strategies will set up youth who did not complete high school with the skills they need to be successful in their next steps, in college, a career, and life in general. There is a wealth of literature about independent or autonomous learning. Themes in the literature include the relationship between self-monitoring skills and academic success, explicit teaching of strategies, and metacognition. The first part of this section discusses how self-monitoring skills begets academic success, and how students who have more opportunities to learn independently and grow their ability to learn by themselves, and grow academically. It is necessary to first teach learning strategies, and scaffold their use over time, so that students can learn to use the strategies independently. Many opportunity youth have missed out on this explicit teaching of learning strategies or have not had sufficient practice to develop them. Metacognition, or awareness of one's thoughts, is closely tied to the ability to think critically and to apply learning strategies to situations without teacher support. The second part of this section examines intersections of critical literacy and independent learning skills.

Self-Monitoring and Academic Success

Self-monitoring and metacognitive skills are linked with academic success (Joseph, 2009). Students who are able to work independently are able to think through tougher problems, manage their time and workload, and think critically and creatively. Students who lack self-direction fall behind easily, and after the elementary grades,

self-monitoring is often assumed, so older students do not receive the explicit instruction and guided practice needed to develop independent learning skills (Biemiller & Meichenbaum, 1992). With a foundation of these skills, students are set up to be more academically successful.

Biemiller and Meichenbaum's (1992) study examined the behavior of children considered self-directed learners to those who are less-self directed. They found that more self-directed learners talk to themselves, peers and teachers aloud frequently during learning tasks, and their comments center around planning, and decision-making during that process. Less self-directed learners talk about their process less frequently, and often ask the teacher and peers (self-directed learners) for assistance. This creates a continuous cycle: self-directed learners get practice explaining learning strategies to others and become experts, while less self-directed learners get so much support that they do not have the opportunity to develop learning skills independently. Self-directed learners were also more positive and confident about the learning task at hand (Biemiller & Meichenbaum, 1992). In another study, students use the ACT-REACT self-monitoring strategy to monitor their attention every 5 minutes and their academic productivity every 45 minutes (Rock, 2005). Rock found that the ACT-REACT self-monitoring strategy did increase academic engagement & success for students. With more self-monitoring tools, opportunity youth will be able to observe their own focus, and adjust when needed.

In his article, Crabbe (1993) advocated for teaching students autonomy in the classroom. He argued that the modeling and practice that teachers provide in the classroom are often so curated and simplistic that they do not prepare students for problems they face outside of the classroom. Crabbe said that this "minute to minute

classroom practice even discourages autonomy” (p. 444). Many opportunity youth have left school because it was boring or not challenging, or they had more immediate needs like providing for themselves or their families (Kalbach & Forester, 2006). Considering this, skills learned in school must be relevant and immediately transferable to daily life.

Crabbe (1993) provided several recommendations for classroom activities that can help students develop more autonomy. These include: using authentic, unedited materials, being clear about why students are doing a learning task, giving students the flexibility to decide how a task should be done, and not giving feedback readily, but allowing students to practice seeking feedback. Furthermore, students will be more engaged when they can take ownership over the learning task, and constant feedback or overbearing help could actually turn them away from a task.

Explicit Teaching of Learning Strategies. Self-monitoring and independent learning skills must be first taught explicitly, and modeled by a teacher, before students can perform the strategy with gradually increasing autonomy (Biemiller & Meichenbaum, 1992; Costa & Kallick, 2009; Joseph, 2009; Koenig, 2012). Many students miss this explicit instruction and guided practice at the early grades, so when teachers at the secondary level expect them to work independently, learners are not equipped (Biemiller & Meichenbaum, 1992).

Metacognitive Learning Strategies. Students who are independent learners think about their thinking. This process can start by giving students the opportunity to talk aloud or to write about their thinking. Metacognition also relates to explicit instruction and modeling, because teachers create a culture of metacognition by speaking aloud about their thought processes while doing any kind of academic activity (Joseph, 2009).

Students who are strong independent learners have metacognitive skills: they are aware of their thinking and learning process. Some strategies teachers can use to develop metacognition in students include: explicitly teaching metacognitive skills, including mental modeling and questioning, challenging students' perceptions of their learning abilities, discussing thinking processes, problem-solving, and doing self-assessments (Joseph, 2009; Koenig, 2012).

Critical Literacy and Independent Learning Skills

Critical literacy requires students to take an active role in their own learning and to utilize independent learning and thinking strategies. Olin-Scheller and Tengberg (2017) studied the use of metacognition and critical literacy skills when teaching secondary students about argumentative writing. In the lesson they studied, the educator guided the students to reflect on the relationship between their own beliefs and the author's argument. Metacognition assisted students in reflecting on how language was used as "textual power" (Olin-Scheller & Tengberg, 2017). In an online class, students used metacognition to reflect on texts, and their classmates' responses to texts in a discussion forum (Adams & Wilson, 2022). The researchers found that when peers posted using more critical responses, their classmates did too, but when the responses were more fact-based and less probing, the number of critical responses decreased. This demonstrates the social nature of critical thinking and literacy: "when readers build connections across experiences and texts they are reading [metacognition], they are better equipped to scrutinize how, why, and in whose interests particular texts might work" (Adams & Wilson, 2022, p. 354). Answering these questions requires a critical understanding of the author's purpose, and metacognitive skills.

Critical literacy supports students to develop independent learning skills. In *Learning for Keeps: Teaching the Strategies Essential for Creating Independent Learners*, Keonig (2012) advocated for the constructivist approach to learning, in which students construct knowledge and concepts, rather than receiving them. She discussed transactional instruction, in which teachers explicitly teach learning strategies by modeling them and thinking aloud, then gradually let students practice the strategy more and more autonomously. Students are encouraged to ask questions and think through processes verbally during the use of a strategy. Keonig (2012) contrasted this “dynamic learning” method to “inert (passive) learning,” which does not encourage students to apply their skills to problem-based, decision-making, and relevant scenarios. This contrast aligns with Freire’s critical pedagogy as a direct response to the “banking” model of education (2014). Critical literacy is, by definition, constructivist and dynamic because students work together to comprehend, analyze, and critique texts (Freire, 2014; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a). Therefore, the same skills and strategies that critically literate students use to interrogate texts are skills that will aid them to learn independently for years to come.

The correlation between independent learning skills and academic success is reason to prioritize helping students develop the strategies they need to become independent learners. Unfortunately, many students, especially those who have yet to complete high school, did not receive the explicit instruction or enough practice to develop independent skills. These skills include monitoring one’s own attention and academic progress, metacognition, and applying learning strategies to new situations. These skills are used regularly in the practice of critical literacy and in adults’ lives.

Therefore, basing a curriculum in critical literacy and independent learning strategies best suits the needs of young adult learners who are driven to complete high school.

Summary

Opportunity youth, or out-of-school youth have faced barriers to complete their high school education, but many are eager to change that. Many government-funded and community-based organizations exist to support this population, and these programs are flexible to provide for the needs of students, and less limited by grades and standardized tests than traditional schools. They provide an ideal space for critical literacy, which is historically student-led and collaborative, different from the traditional teacher-student dynamic that many students experience. Students can become independent and critical readers and thinkers, able to analyze the inequities in a range of texts, including those they read outside of the classroom. Critical literacy requires independent learning skills that will aid students beyond attainment of their high school credential. These considerations provide the foundation for this research question: *How can a high school equivalency curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning strategies engage opportunity youth and empower them as learners?*

Chapter 3 Overview

The research clearly supports implementing critical literacy to challenge young adult students academically, support them in developing academic skills, and independent learning skills that will aid them not only on an HSE test, but in life generally. Developing a unit curriculum using critical literacy strategies that educators of opportunity youth can use is a key goal of this project.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the process for developing a curriculum for teachers of youth and young adults who did not complete high school to answer the research question: *How can a high school equivalency curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning strategies engage opportunity youth and empower them as learners?* This chapter describes several grounding theories and frameworks that guided the development of this curriculum, including critical literacy theory and framework, supporting research on independent learning, and the curriculum-design framework *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Chapter 3 provides information about the setting of this project: a local YouthBuild program, and the intended audience: educators at YouthBuilds, community-based organizations, and adult basic education programs who work with opportunity youth. Finally, Chapter 3 provides a timeline for the project's design, implementation, and assessment.

Project Description and Rationale

This capstone project involves the design of a curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning strategies. The curriculum includes an interdisciplinary unit in the literacy-based GED content areas: language arts and social studies, and it is geared toward youth and young adults. The unit lasts 12 lessons, with each lesson lasting 1 hour and 15 minutes. The unit will focus on the following essential question: What is the importance and impact of the 14th Amendment? What protections does it provide, and to whom?

Following the principles of critical literacy, these units and the materials used focus on issues of power and voice: whose voices are centered and whose are missing? Critical literacy requires students to reflect on these issues in writing and in discussion. Since the goal of critical literacy is action and transformation, the unit results in a social action project that is student-designed.

Critical literacy is constructivist, so students co-create knowledge through discussion and inquiry. Therefore, most lessons include discussion, and I provide tips for the instructor to facilitate the discussion. Strategies for “critical literacy are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used,” so this curriculum is a flexible guide for instructors, rather than a formula or script for delivering content to students (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a, p. 54).

I chose two primary critical literacy strategies to practice during the short scope of this unit: “problem-posing” and “alternative perspectives.” The strategies are scaffolded throughout the unit, so that students become more comfortable using these strategies independently (McLaughlin, & DeVogd, 2004a, p. 41). The research on developing independent learning skills indicates that strategies should be explicitly taught and then used repeatedly, with less guidance each time.

Since opportunity youth are preparing to take a high school equivalency exam (the GED or HiSET), I utilized the literacy standards from the CCRS (College and Career Readiness Standards) for this curriculum, specifically, Reading Anchors 1, 2 and 6. The CCRS were designed for adult education, but also correspond to the Common Core standards for K–12 education. The GED test is aligned to these standards, as well. Therefore, by basing desired learning outcomes on these standards, students will

experience more continuity between education programs and will be well-prepared for the rigor of college and careers.

The goal of this curriculum is twofold: 1) to engage opportunity youth in their pathway to a high school credential and 2) to empower them as self-directed learners. I believe that critical literacy and independent learning skills are essential for academic success, and have designed this curriculum to help students develop these skills.

Grounding Research

I have chosen a curriculum for this project because it can be put into use immediately with a student population that is eager to complete high school and move on to their next chapter. A curriculum can be shared broadly online and through professional networks in document form. Several theories and frameworks support my decision to create a curriculum for this project. These include critical literacy theory and framework, supporting research on independent learning strategies, and Wiggin and McTighe's 2005 framework for creating curriculum: *Understanding by Design*.

Critical Literacy Theory. Critical Literacy is the foundational theory and practice for this curriculum project. Beginning in the 1960s with educator and activist Paulo Freire, critical literacy is an educational theory and practice in which students critically read and analyze texts in order to reflect on harmful power dynamics, and to take action to transform inequities. Freire (2014) believed education was used to control the poor and working classes, and that more critical, student-led practices were an integral step on the path to liberation. His practices were originally used with disenfranchised adult learners. Similarly, many opportunity youth have also been improperly served by institutions, from unsafe learning environments to involvement in

the criminal justice system. Therefore, a classroom based in critical literacy could provide students with a chance to critique these institutions, share their own experiences, and facilitate positive changes.

Critical Literacy Framework. In their own research which has brought critical literacy to modern K-12 classrooms, McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) provided a framework for teaching critical literacy strategies, by following the “guided comprehension direct instruction process” designed by McLaughlin and Allen (2002) and applying it to critical literacy. This framework guides the instructor to: 1) explain the strategy, 2) demonstrate it by “thinking aloud,” 3) guide students to work in small groups to respond to a text, 4) practice the critical literacy strategy independently, and 5) reflect on the strategy and how it aided reading comprehension and analysis (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004b, p. 40).

McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b) also provided a critical literacy lesson framework (p. 41), which guides educators on how to structure a critical literacy lesson: 1) engage students, activate their background knowledge on a topic, and set up the purpose for reading, 2) guide students thinking to engage with the text as they read, 3) have a critical discussion about the reading and take action on what was read, and 4) have students reflect on the lesson. Since critical literacy is designed to be primarily student-led, these frameworks provide a structure that can support students to transition from a more traditional classroom to one where they are guiding the learning.

Independent Learning Strategies. In addition to critical literacy, the existing research on independent learning strategies, and how to teach them, supports the creation of a curriculum for this project. Independent learning skills are linked with academic

success (Joseph, 2009). Unfortunately, many students who stopped out of high school were not properly taught learning skills so that they could apply those skills to problems independently. Or, students did not have sufficient practice with strategies or opportunities for metacognition.

Explicit instruction and opportunities for metacognition in the classroom are essential for students to shift to learning by themselves. Three metacognitive learning strategies from the book *Reading Apprenticeship* are utilized in the curriculum unit; these include: talking to the text, thinking aloud, and double-entry journals (Schoenbach et al., 2012). The curriculum lays out these steps for instructors to teach these independent learning strategies: how to explicitly teach the strategy, facilitate guided practice, and monitor individual practice.

Understanding by Design (UbD). The primary curriculum-design framework informing this project is Wiggins and McTighe's *Understanding by Design* (2005). The authors asserted that "too many teachers focus on the teaching and not the learning" and provided a method for focusing on the desired results of learning: backwards planning (p. 15). Focusing on the content and learning activities without a clear connection to the learning goals is a disservice to students who are motivated to re-engage with their high school education and apply those skills in a postsecondary or career setting.

The steps of backwards design include: 1) Identify the desired results: "what should students know, understand, and be able to do," 2) determine the evidence (assessments) that will demonstrate that students have met learning goals, and 3) plan learning experiences and instruction that will help students meet the desired results (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 17-19). Opportunity youth have had interrupted

education and may be easily frustrated or confused by lessons that do not have a clear objective. Therefore, this project is a results-focused curriculum based on the essential learnings and skills required for a high school equivalency exam.

Setting

I teach at a large community-based organization in a mixed-income urban area in a large midwestern city. The organization provides career education and training for adults, including a YouthBuild program which provides academic instruction, hands-on construction training and leadership development for opportunity youth. Five staff work on the YouthBuild team, with only one academic instructor. As the one academic instructor at this YouthBuild, I designed my curriculum project with the intention of using it with my own students and sharing the curriculum more broadly with other programs that serve a similar population (adolescents and young adults) in preparation for high school equivalency exams.

At my own YouthBuild program, we run 2 cohorts a year, each running about 22 weeks long. Each cohort serves between 12 and 17 students. Students come from the metro area and surrounding suburbs. With enrollment data from the CASAS test at the start of training, the majority of students scored at an eighth grade level or below in math and/or reading, with some students testing at a 2nd or 3rd grade level.

The following demographic data is based on the past four YouthBuild cohorts, which served 47 students total over 2 years. Students were majority low-income, from high-poverty areas based on the latest census data. About 87% were considered “economically disadvantaged,” and 63% of students or their families received some type of public assistance. The majority of students from the past four YouthBuild cohorts were

people of color: 42% of students were Black, 13% Indigenous, 2% Asian, 13% multi-race, and less than 30% of students were White. About 10% identified as Hispanic. About 70% of students were male. Twenty-three percent of students were pregnant or parenting. About 40% had been involved with the criminal justice system as a youth or adult. A few students had been involved in foster care. Some had experienced housing instability. Over a third of students had a disability or diagnosed mental health condition. As the demographics indicate, YouthBuild serves a diverse population of opportunity youth.

In YouthBuild, students get to choose their academic pathway: a self-paced online high school diploma program or a GED. Generally, about half of the students receive a GED. GED students learn in a classroom setting, but also are assigned individual work since each cohort of students is unique and students have different strengths and growth areas when it comes to the four GED subjects. This curriculum project is focused on students on the GED pathway. Since the cohort size is small and students come in at varying academic levels, it is important that the curriculum is flexible and can adapt to meet the needs of learners.

Audience

This curriculum is designed for instructors who are preparing opportunity youth for a high school equivalency exam, like the GED or HiSET. Youth ages 16 - 24 who have been out of school or the workforce for at least 6 months are considered “opportunity youth.” These young people turn outside of the traditional schools to complete their high school education, to places like alternative schools, Adult Education Centers, community-based organizations, and government-funded programs like

YouthBuild and Job Corps. The instructors teaching these students in community-based organizations come from a variety of backgrounds, some with teaching certifications and some without.

Timeline

The first step for this capstone was to complete background research and Chapters 1, 2, and 3 for this project by May 2023. The next step was to create the curriculum by using backwards design in May, June, and July 2023. Drafts of the curriculum were shared with my content reviewer, peer reviewers, and the manager of YouthBuild. Final changes to the curriculum and Chapter 4 of the paper were finished by the end of August 2023.

Assessment

Assessment of this curriculum goes beyond the scope of its timeline in the Masters program. However, this curriculum will be implemented with the next cohort of YouthBuild students beginning in October 2023. One goal is to gauge student engagement and to understand how use of critical literacy can influence my students' independent learning skills. To assess the effectiveness of my curriculum in answering the research question, the curriculum includes a pre-unit survey measuring students' attitudes toward reading, reading strategies, and any familiarity with critical literacy or independent and metacognitive strategies. Results from this survey will give the instructor valuable information about how students learn and how much time to spend on skill development during the unit. Students will take the same survey at the end of the unit to assess whether their familiarity with critical literacy and independent learning strategies, and their empowerment as readers has increased.

This project will be shared more broadly with other YouthBuild instructors in the YouthBuildUSA network, and with educators in Minnesota Adult Basic Education who teach high school equivalency to young adults. These educators will be contacted to provide feedback about the effectiveness of this curriculum.

Summary

Chapter 3 provided the foundation for this capstone project, a curriculum for teachers of out-of-school youth, in response to my research question: *How can a high school equivalency curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning strategies engage opportunity youth and empower them as learners?* I described the content of the curriculum: two interdisciplinary units. Critical literacy theory and framework, research on independent learning, backwards curriculum planning informed the development and structure of this curriculum. The curriculum is meant for educators who serve opportunity youth at YouthBuild programs, community-based organizations, and adult education centers. This project was designed from January 2023 to August 2023, with plans to implement it with the next YouthBuild cohort.

Overview of Chapter 4

Chapter 4 concludes this capstone project, and outlines major learnings I have gained throughout the process of researching, writing, and designing this curriculum project. I reflect on the background literature that was most important as a foundation for creating this project. I discuss the implications of a curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning skills for instructors who work with opportunity youth, at adult education centers and community-based organizations. I explain the limitations of this project, and finally, examine future research that could expand on this curriculum project.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

I began graduate coursework at Hamline University almost three years ago, taking classes for the adult education certificate to support my work with young adult learners at YouthBuild. I gained so much from those classes: the impact of adult learning theory, a network with other adult educators in the metro, and knowledge of the College and Career Readiness Standards. Even with these helpful new learnings, I struggled as a new teacher to support young adults who had previously been disconnected from school and work, opportunity youth. This population seems to lie on the outskirts of adult education and secondary education, not quite fitting into either category. The tools and strategies I gained in the first part of my master's program improved my planning and instruction, but I still felt unsure of how to engage my students as readers and thinkers, and how to support them to use learning strategies independently.

About halfway through my master's in education, I took a course on critical literacy. In this class, we critiqued advertisements, learned how to choose culturally diverse texts, and collaboratively recognized inequities and biases in what we read and viewed. During the challenging task of creating a 12-text critical literacy text set for my students, I began to believe that critical literacy is the missing piece to engage and empower my students. Critical literacy is especially well-suited for opportunity youth, who are looking to redefine themselves from drop-outs to graduates, to engage in authentic worthy tasks that are relevant to their lives, and to critique institutions of power

that have shaped their lives. The text set I created, focused on the topic of citizenship, became the birth of my unit curriculum for this project.

Along with critical literacy, I also sought ways to support my students in becoming independent learners. In my coursework and conversations with other educators, especially my content expert, I learned about independent and metacognitive learning strategies that complement critical literacy. These learning routines, practiced repeatedly and overtime, become habits, and students can take those routines into college or their career pathway. Combining critical literacy and independent learning strategies is the foundation of this project. My research question is: *How can a high school equivalency curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning strategies engage opportunity youth and empower them as learners?*

In chapter 4, I describe the pertinent learnings I have gained throughout the capstone process, as a researcher, writer, and learner. I revisit the literature that was most important to the development of the curriculum, including Freire's critical literacy theory, McLaughlin & DeVogd's adaptations of critical literacy for the classroom, and research on developing independent learning skills. I discuss the possible implications of this project, including bringing more national attention and funding to serving opportunity youth. I explain the limitations of my project and indicate opportunities for future research. Lastly, I describe how I plan to share the results of this curriculum project, and its benefit to the profession.

Pertinent Learnings

Throughout the research process, I learned more about opportunity youth, an often overlooked population. I discovered just how vast, diverse, and complex this group

is. In 2020, the United States youth disconnection rate was 12.6 percent, or 4,830,700 young people, and about 40% of those young people had less than a high school diploma or equivalent (Lewis, 2022). Opportunity youth exist all over the nation and represent a variety of races, genders, and other identities. Young people who have experienced homelessness, are pregnant or parenting, have a disability, or have experienced incarceration are more at risk to become disconnected from school and work (Lewis, 2022). One common thread among opportunity youth is that it was almost always a complex combination of factors that impacted a young person to discontinue in school (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012; Center for Promise, 2014; Thompson, 2017). No matter the reason an individual discontinues high school, that student is often labeled as deficient in the eyes of society and institutions.

Disadvantaged, at-risk, and dropouts are terms frequently used to describe opportunity youth. The research, and the more recent term “opportunity youth,” reinforced what I already knew to be true about my students—most are eager to reconnect, to finish their high school education, to pursue future opportunities for a career, and to contribute to their communities. Seeing this motivation that my students bring in when they re-engage in school and begin YouthBuild, it is clear that they are not the dropouts or unsuccessful students that they were perhaps perceived as in the past. The stigma around continuing interrupted education to pursue a GED or high school diploma is unfounded. A significant and valuable portion of the youth population, these learners should be encouraged and supported in their endeavors, rather than doubted and ignored.

Another learning involved my understanding of critical literacy and what it means to create a curriculum that is based on Paulo Friere’s transformative theory (2014). The

theory is founded on the idea that classes in power were using rote, teacher-driven education to control and maintain authority over working-class people. As an alternative to this, critical literacy is inherently political in that educators equip students with a critical lens that they can use to “liberate” themselves, and to take action against injustices in work and society. Therefore, critical literacy is meant to be collaboratively created with students, and unique to the context that each teacher and their students are in.

As the literature pointed out, these qualities of critical literacy do not always align with traditional education, and even run counter to my goal to create a user-friendly curriculum for myself and other instructors. Each critical literacy moment is co-constructed with students and dependent on what students notice in the text and discuss together. I struggled with how to accommodate this variation in the curriculum. To account for this and stay true to the principles of critical literacy, I designed the curriculum unit to be very flexible, and for the instructor to use it as they see fit (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a). For example, each lesson minimizes lecture time, includes ample time for group discussion, and a variety of discussion questions that instructors can choose from based on student levels, interest, and the flow of the conversation. Student choice is accounted for in several ways, by allowing student choice in research topics, advertisement creation, and the final social action project. Balancing the qualities of critical literacy with my plan to have a final shareable curriculum project posed a challenge, and my learnings about structuring student choice and flexibility were key outcomes of this project.

Throughout my research, I came across myriad learning strategies that I wanted to include in the curriculum and try out with my students. However, with my project being just one multi-week unit, I knew I could not cover every strategy, nor would that be useful for students. Through conversations with my content expert and research on how learning strategies are developed through guidance and repeated practice. It was clear that narrowing my focus to only a few strategies would be best. Therefore, I focused on two useful critical literacy strategies: problem posing and alternative perspectives and chose three metacognitive reading/viewing strategies that would also support students in comprehending and deeply analyzing text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004a; Schoenbach et al., 2012). This continuity in learning and repeated practice is what students need to develop long-lasting skills.

In the first iteration of this curriculum, I had incorporated critical literacy strategies but had no way to assess whether students were coming into the unit with reading and critical literacy skills of their own. At the recommendation of a peer, I added a pre and post-unit survey of students' attitudes toward reading, independent learning, and critical literacy skills. By assessing students' skills and attitudes prior to the unit, I (and any instructor utilizing the curriculum) can plan the explicit instruction, guided and independent practice of strategies accordingly. At the end of the unit, students take the same assessment, to evaluate whether their attitudes and self-awareness of their literacy practices have changed.

As a researcher and curriculum designer, this addition of a pre and post-assessment was extremely helpful as I planned my lessons. I was held accountable to ensure that the lessons were focused on the skills assessed in the survey. Additionally, the

survey records students' self-awareness of their own skills and struggles in literacy: evidence of the metacognition that students are developing throughout the unit.

In addition to the literature on critical literacy and independent learning, I relied heavily on Wiggins and McTighe's *The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-quality Units* as I planned this curriculum project (2011). With the Understanding by Design framework, I was able to start with the desired results for my students: development of critical literacy and independent learning skills. Next, I planned the assessments that would evaluate whether students had met these results, like the post-unit literacy survey. Finally, with the end goals in mind, I planned lessons that would equip students with these skills and prepare them for the final assessments. This framework provided an essential structure within which I could plan the lessons.

Implications

A main goal of this project is to bring attention to the needs and potential of opportunity youth. What happens to youth who do not complete high school? These young people deserve the support and attention of educators and their communities. Grant-funded programs like YouthBuild only serve a small fraction of out-of-school youth. We could be doing so much more as a society to provide education, training, and other services to young people. Increasing funding for programs that serve opportunity youth is integral to providing this support to a greater number. Additionally, providing more funding for these programs could support educators with curriculum and training opportunities to do more authentic and nontraditional teaching methods, like critical literacy, which are shown to engage and empower youth, especially people of color. Greater focus on the growing population of disconnected youth is necessary (Lewis,

2022). These young people deserve attention, funding, resources, and trained and caring educators, just as our K-12 students do.

Limitations

The greatest limitation of this curriculum project is its scope. A single unit cannot radically change students' critical literacy and independent learning skills. Critical literacy is not meant to be a siloed unit, separate from other literacy skills. Rather, critical literacy can be integrated into all disciplines from elementary education on. Similarly, independent learning skills are developed over time, from guided to gradually more autonomous practice. Therefore, a longer curriculum, spanning multiple units and content areas would be better able to address this research question.

Future Research

Future research could involve the implementation and assessment of this curriculum with a group of students. The scope of this capstone project did not include implementation and data collection, however, I do plan to use this curriculum with the next cohort of YouthBuild students and will use the pre-and post-survey to evaluate changes in my students' engagement and development of critical literacy and independent learning strategies.

Other research could expand on this project, by investigating the impacts of using critical literacy practices with opportunity youth or by developing a longer-term curriculum that spans multiple units. I see a lot of potential for utilizing critical literacy and independent learning routines with my own students and am eager to take the next step in this research.

Benefits to Education

I utilized this curriculum with my own students in the YouthBuild program, and revised the curriculum since its creation, based on feedback from my students. An additional goal of this project was to share my learnings and the curriculum with other adult educators, especially those who work with opportunity youth. I presented key learnings from my project to the Career and Technical Education Department at my organization, which includes adult educators in construction, automotive, business, finance, and manufacturing career pathways. I was also approached by colleagues in Minnesota Adult Education to participate in facilitating a future conference session about teaching young adults, a growing population in adult education. The project is available in Hamline University's database for capstone projects: Digital Commons.

As for the curriculum itself, I believe it is most useful for other YouthBuild academic instructors. Therefore, I have digitally shared the curriculum with other instructors who are members of the YouthBuild USA affiliation. Despite a well-developed program for construction and leadership instruction, YouthBuild's academic component lacks structure, curriculum, and institutional support. The majority of YouthBuild programs have only one or two academic instructors that serve a wide variety of student levels and past educational experiences. Most instructors are tasked with making it work of their own careful planning and implementation. Sharing this project with the YouthBuild USA affiliates was one step to increase resource sharing among academic instructors, and to bring organizational attention to the need for more curriculum resources and training for educators.

Summary

Chapter 4 outlines the path that led me to the creation of this capstone project, and provides rationale for my research question: *How can a high school equivalency curriculum based in critical literacy and independent learning strategies engage opportunity youth and empower them as learners?* My own challenges as a new educator working with young adult students who were previously disconnected from school led me to learn more about opportunity youth. I discovered that this population is diverse, large, motivated to reconnect in school, but under-supported in educational opportunities. My master's coursework on critical literacy and research on personalized and independent learning helped me to address some of the challenges that I faced in engaging my students.

Several sources were especially impactful to this project. Feire's (2014) theory of critical pedagogy and literacy, McLaughlin and DeVogd's (2004a) framework for adapting critical literacy strategies to the modern classroom, and Schoenbach et al.'s (2012) research on independent and metacognitive reading strategies provided a foundation for this project. I relied on Wiggins and McTighe's framework for curriculum design, *Understanding by Design*, to plan this unit, focusing on the desired results first, and working backwards from there (2005).

I share several goals for the creation and dissemination of this unit curriculum. Firstly, I hope to share this curriculum with other adult educators teaching high school equivalency, especially those who serve opportunity youth. This curriculum was designed with the intention to tap into young people's natural curiosity and critique of the world and injustices around them. I use authentic materials and integrate critical literacy and

independent learning strategies for students to develop transferable learning and thinking skills. Secondly, I hope this project and the accompanying research bring more national attention to youth who are seeking to re-engage in school and work. This attention could result in more funding, more training and curriculum for educators, and ultimately the growth of non-traditional, community-based, and alternative, programs like YouthBuild. These programs provide a safe and welcoming environment for students, a place for young people to redefine themselves as learners, scholars, and professionals.

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