Reading the Word and World in Haiti: Literacy Education for Social Justice

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Abstract

The first author, Dr. Altheria Caldera, traveled to Haiti as a member of a group of volunteers from the U.S. whose goals were to provide assistance to children in a privately operated primary school located in the rural community of Lamardelle. For the first author, assistance primarily focused on training in literacy education, with an emphasis on reading comprehension strategies for students who struggle to read. We examine literacy education as a tool of social justice. This paper describes the components of the first summer of this teacher development program and explains how our work was undergirded by Freirean ideas regarding liberatory education (Freire, 2000). A second aim is to analyze ways language impacts the practice of education in Haiti. In so doing, we hope to present a model of how literacy education can be a tool for social justice in similar contexts.

Keywords: literacy education, social justice, language in Haiti, reading comprehension strategies

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Introduction

In June 2017, I joined a group of volunteers from the United States traveling to Haiti to support a non-profit organization that operates a school, orphanage, clinic, and vocational training center. More specifically, I provided professional development to primary school teachers who had requested training in one specific area: literacy education. The teachers wanted to learn pedagogical strategies to support early readers who struggle or demonstrate a lack of interest in reading. The setting was a privately operated primary school[1] located in a rural community. The school serves approximately 500 children annually from early childhood through sixth grade. The organization's website reflects the goal of offering a student-centered education that would increase literacy in the community (Foundation Enfant Jesus, 2017). Teacher development in literacy education directly supported this goal. It is important to emphasize that my efforts at the school were initiated by the teachers themselves. I did not approach this work as an imposing, outside authority diagnosing ills and prescribing remedies to the teachers at the school. I did, however, concur with the school's decision to focus on literacy development among its primary learners.

The value of literacy in the 21st century is indisputable. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report, "literacy is a fundamental human right . . . that opens the door to other rights and contributes to individual empowerment and to social, economic and political integration" (Bella, 2012, para 2). We (Altheria and Tami) believe that early childhood literacy is

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[1] Public education as we know it in the United States is almost non-existent in Haiti. According to U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), "more than 85 percent of primary schools are privately managed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), churches, communities and for-profit operators" (USAID Haiti, 2017).

only possible when teachers have access to quality literacy education. Viewed in this way, literacy education is an equity and justice issue. In order to create a literate citizenry, all teachers, especially those who work with marginalized populations, deserve literacy education that provides them with a wide array of culturally relevant teaching strategies.

My work in Haiti was deeply entrenched in a social justice-oriented philosophy of education. Social reconstructionism, as one of four major educational philosophies, is based on the belief that education should directly address social inequities. Said differently, social reconstructionists believe that education is essential for redressing longstanding systematic imbalances. The authors of this paper are teacher educators who see the purpose and goals of education in this way. More specifically, as former K-12 reading and writing teachers, we believe that the ability to read and write (in this case, to teach others to read and write) is fundamental to the work of individual empowerment and social justice. However, as Greene (2015) pointed out, "Reading and writing, while essential, do not in and of themselves promote questioning, civic involvement, critical thinking, intellectual development, student or teacher activism, or the transformation of conditions that led to illiteracy and inequalities" (p. 30). We believe that literacy must be coupled with critical consciousness in order for it to be a liberatory tool. Together, literacy and critical consciousness enable citizens to interrogate and critique existing oppressive structures. When citizens learn to read the word and the world—text and context—they are engaging in education for liberation, a concept that can be traced back to Paulo Freire (Freire, 1985).

Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, believed that education for liberation demands that we courageously examine the problems of our context. He called this approach "education for critical consciousness" (Freire, 2005). His social-justice related work in poor,

low-in-status Brazilian communities has provided insight to others wanting to influence similar people in analogous settings. Several important ideas can be extracted from his work in adult literacy education: 1) Education is never neutral. 2) Education should be dialogical. 3) Teaching and learning are inseparable. 4) Reflection is key to growth and development (Freire, 2000). These beliefs undergirded the planning and facilitation of the first year of a multi-year teacher development program.

Purpose of this Paper

Although we drew upon theory to help us design the workshop and to glean knowledge from our work, this paper is a narrative reflection of a practical experience, not a theoretical treatise. Important to note, too, is that the paper is not empirical in nature, as we did not collect research data in a formalized way. Instead, our goal is to describe the components of the first summer of this teacher development program and to explain how our work was undergirded by Freirean ideas regarding liberatory education (Freire, 2000). A second aim is to analyze ways language impacts the practice of education in Haiti. In so doing, we hope to present a model of how literacy education can be a tool for social justice in similar contexts. To accomplish these goals, it is necessary to examine place, power, and poverty—all of which are reflected in an analysis of the project's context.

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The Global Context: Place, Power, and Poverty

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Place. Haiti, known during colonial times as the Pearl of the Antilles, is a Caribbean country that comprises the Western third of Hispanola, the island it shares with the Dominican Republic. Arawak natives called the land *Ayiti*, meaning land of mountains. Many people in the United States know Dominican Republic as a tropical, Caribbean paradise full of luxurious resorts, making it the most visited destination in the Caribbean. Haiti, on the other hand, is perhaps best known because of its environmental disruptions. Though Haiti's natural beauty is

comparable to the Dominican Republic's, centuries of political turmoil and natural disasters have wreaked havoc on the nation. U.S. citizens go to the Dominican Republic to vacation. More often than not, people from the U.S. go to Haiti to serve, and it was this call that drew me (Altheria) there in the summer of 2017. The school where I served is in the rural community of Lamardelle, located approximately an hour (by car) east of the country's capital of Port-au-Prince.

Power. While Haiti currently holds the designation as the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, I choose to distinguish it as the first Black republic in the Western hemisphere and the second Western nation to win its independence from European colonial powers. The vast majority of Haitians are descendants of enslaved Africans who were brought to the island to work as unpaid laborers on sugar, coffee, and cotton plantations. It is important to note that Haiti is the only country that gained its independence—the power to govern themselves—because of a successful slave rebellion that not only ended slavery but also ended French control of the colony in 1804. Though colonized by the French, the vast majority of Haitians identify as Black people and embrace their African heritage, as seen in their religion, music, and other cultural practices.

Poverty. Mainly because of centuries of brutal oppression experienced by Africans and their descendants as a result of European capitalist imperialism, Haitians continue to struggle to gain full humanity, and most suffer extreme poverty. According to the World Bank, "in 2012 more than one in two Haitians (59%) was poor, living on less than $2.41 a day, and one person in four (24.7%) was living below the national extreme poverty line of $1.23 a day" (The World Bank, 2015, para 6). Poverty is even worse in Haiti's rural areas (75.2%), like the community of Lamardelle, as compared to 40.8% in urban areas (The World Bank, 2015). Given this context, I

felt that literacy education was an important tool in working towards liberation and economic empowerment.

My Work in Haiti

The Assignment

As a university professor, my primary work responsibility in Texas is teacher education, specifically curriculum and instruction. In other words, I teach and learn alongside graduate students who are either already teachers or who aspire to be teachers. Consequently, the service I provided in Haiti—teacher development—aligned perfectly with my professional work. Further, the teachers in Haiti had a specific request: strategies that they could use to help struggling and reluctant readers. As a former middle school language arts/reading teacher whose state teaching license is secondary English/Language Arts/Reading (ELAR), I felt that my background would serve me well. Because of my inexperience in early childhood education, however, I consulted with Dr. Tami, Morton, a colleague in my department whose specialization is early childhood reading and literacy, throughout the process to confirm my ideas along the way. Tami also helped to provide the Freirean perspective that would shape the workshop we designed in summer one of the multi-year program.

Prior to arriving in Haiti, we spent several months planning: designing the curriculum, locating appropriate materials, getting the materials translated into French, and making copies. Several questions guided the workshop curriculum:

1. Given our time frame, would it be more time efficient to focus on vocabulary development, reading comprehension, or both? (After deciding to focus on reading comprehension, we further cogitated on ways to narrow our topics.)

2. What pedagogical strategies for reading comprehension have the most practical benefits with early readers who struggle?

3. What foundational reading skills are essential to early readers who struggle?

4. What pedagogical strategies would be easiest to demonstrate with teachers who lack formal teacher education?

The answers to these questions led us to design a curriculum for a 4-hour reading comprehension workshop designed to equip teachers with strategies that would help them in their work with readers who struggle and who are disinterested in reading. These strategies

- could easily be put into practice by teachers,

- would help students (and perhaps teachers) develop reading comprehension skills,

- are student-centered, and

- could be explicitly demonstrated with the teachers during the workshop.

I provided teachers with a package (written in French) with detailed explanations of the strategies and various ways the strategies could be used.

Language Considerations

Because I am an English-speaking monolingual, I was worried about conducting teacher development in a country whose official languages are French and Creole. I had been told by organizers that the teachers are fluent in French, so I had all the instructional materials translated into French and was told that I would communicate during the workshop through translators who speak both English and French. At the time, I was not aware of the complex issues surrounding language in Haiti. Haitian Creole (also Kreyol) is the first language of 95% of Haitians (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018) and has been recognized as an official language, along with French, since 1987 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018). When a country's government makes a language official, the language is legitimized, making it acceptable to use in government affairs and education programs (Wagner-Rodriguez, 2014). Although the Haitian government validated

Haitian Creole, French is still seen as the language of the educated and the elite. Zambrana (2017) contended that despite widespread use of Creole, countries like Haiti do not have an official policy for teaching literacy in Creole. Instead, colonial languages like French persist as the official language of the country and the language of education, which likely explains why I was told that the workshop would be conducted in French.

Research-Based Reading Comprehension Strategies

Readers who struggle with comprehending texts are usually unaware of strategies that will help them read more effectively and make meaning of the text. To address this challenge, teaachers need research-based practices that can help students with comprehension skills (National Reading Panel, 2000). The workshop, then, highlighted the following strategies:

1. **Think-Pair-Share** is a collaborative learning strategy in which students think about a question or problem, discuss possible answers or solutions in pairs, and share their answer or solution with the whole group (McTighe & Lyman, 1988).

2. **Discussion Webs** are a strategy that allows for students to engage in thoughtful discussion of the text by creating a framework or outline of different sides of an issue before drawing conclusions. Donna Alvermann (1991) believes discussion webs to be student centered, and the conversation does not need to be lead by a teacher. Teachers generally create graphic or semantic webs for students to complete while reading, and then leads students into an open discussion.

3. The **KWL Strategy** engages students in active text learning. The students start with what they know about the topic to be studied, then what they want to know or query about the topic and then leads to a record of what they learned after engaging with the topic (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011).

4. **Question the Author (QtA)** strategy is designed to have students actively engage with a text by forming questions that they would ask the author. Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, and Kucen (1997) created this comprehension strategy to demonstrate the kinds of questions students need to ask in order to think more deeply and construct meaning. Good readers act on the author's message and they are able to generate the questions to help them understand what the author says and means.

5. **Question-Answer-Relationships (QARs)** strategy helps students understand different relationships that exist among questions. If students know what kind of question is being asked, they are better able to answer the question. In the process of teaching the QARs, teachers make explicit to students these relationships that exist among the type of question asked, the text, and the reader's prior knowledge (Raphael, 1982).

Teaching the Strategies

Perhaps more important than the *what* of the workshop was the *how*. Considering Haitian's history of enslavement, colonization, and their fierce desire for independence, I was intent on using decolonizing pedagogical strategies that were collaborative, liberating, and reciprocal in nature. While it was apparent that my visit to the school was to share my expertise, I strove to balance being a teacher educator with being a fellow learner. To this end, the workshop, which I viewed as more of a dialogue, was characterized by several Freirean principles: respect for the existing knowledge of the teachers, value of dialogue, and teacher ownership of strategies (Horton & Freire, 1990).

To begin, I positioned myself as fellow learner when demonstrating the K-W-L chart by asking the teachers, "What do you already KNOW (K) about teaching reading to young children?" I took this approach directly from Horton and Freire: "You have to respect their

knowledge . . . and help them to respect their knowledge" (1990, p. 55). Showing respect in this manner demonstrated my desire to learn from teachers and to build upon their existing knowledge. To avoid the banking method of teaching, I taught primarily by having the teachers practice the strategies (Freire, 1970). I used children's books written in French and positioned teachers as learners practicing each strategy. For example, to teach a sequencing strategy, I asked teachers to get in groups of four. Then, one teacher read aloud a children's book to the group, and the other three teachers completed a "Beginning, Middle, and End" graphic organizer. Freire believed that "without practice, there's no knowledge; at least it's difficult to know without practice" (1990, p. 98). As another example of how I taught the strategies through practicing, I asked them to stay in their same groups while I explained to them the four kinds of questions asked about a text (QAR). Next, I asked them to discuss with their groups how they could use that knowledge in their own classrooms. As the facilitator, I wanted to explain useful strategies but have the teachers determine how they could best use these strategies. This approach, too, was influenced by Freire as well: "If people who want to be experts want to tell people what to do because they think it's their duty to tell them what to do, to me that takes away the power of people to make their own decisions" (1990, p. 130). It was important that the teachers were empowered with options, not given formulas. To complement these approaches, I also used a PowerPoint presentation, written in French, for visual support. By using PowerPoint slides, teachers could see the material on the slides in addition to hearing it through translators.

Outcomes: Language and Power

Overall, the teachers involved in the training and the school's curriculum specialist, with whom I met individually to provide an overview of the session, responded favorably to the workshop. They anticipated using the materials during the upcoming academic year. However, I find it important to revisit the topic of language in Haiti. As a reminder, I had been told that the

teachers speak French, so the materials I used—PowerPoint presentation, handouts, and books—were written in French. It became immediately transparent that the teachers did not comprehend French as used by the translators, and frequently, the translators used Creole to communicate ideas to the teachers. The teachers' lack of fluency in French was evident, too, when I asked them to read from the children's books written in French. The teachers struggled to read these books. While their inability to read and comprehend in French might be attributed to their own low level of literacy, I contend that their inability to read and comprehend in French points to a larger, more complex national problem—Haiti's continuing colonial legacy and linguistic imperialism that render Creole the lower position on the nation's language hierarchy.

In a 2011 BBC News article, Hebblethwaite asked, "Should Creole replace French in Haiti's school?" According Hebblewaite (2011), only 5% of Haitians speak French, while almost all Haitians speak Creole. Yet, schooling is done in French. Professor Arthur Spears, a linguist and anthropologist at City University in New York, and an expert on Creole, argued that French should be taught in Haiti as a second-language - after children have learnt basic literacy skills in Creole (Hebblethwaite, 2011). This position is shared by Hebblethwaite (2012, p. 256) who described the dominance of French as "one of Haiti's most fundamental problems." Hebblethwaite (2012) maintained that schooling in Creole will greatly benefit the Haitian citizenry. My work with teachers in Haiti suggests that teachers themselves are ill-equipped to provide reading instruction because of French-language dominance. It was evident that they do not speak French fluently and were incapable of teaching in French, as is the reality for 80% of teachers in Haiti (Avalos & Augustine, 2018). Hebblethwaite (2012, p. 257) indicated, "French-language dominance in Haitian schools adversely impacts millions of children and it is the source of broad societal inefficiency." On the other hand, providing access to instruction in

Creole, particularly in the early grades, promotes academic success (DeGraff, 2016). In sum, the question of what language should be used for education in Haiti is a divisive ideological issue requiring conversations among Haitians about the consequences of linguistic hegemony. When Haitian teacher development is done in French, workshop facilitators position Creole-speaking teachers as second-language learners, creating an unjust learning environment. Any work towards social justice in Haiti must attend to challenges presented by conflicting ideologies about language education policies.

Three Considerations for Future Work

As I reflect on this initial work, I've formulated three considerations that will guide my continued work in Haiti and with other marginalized populations.

1) Haitian epistemology. I believe that it's important to understand and respect the epistemological beliefs of non-Western peoples whose ways of knowing are often devalued. Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge and knowing—what we know and how we know it. By knowing more about the epistemological beliefs about marginalized peoples, we are able to validate the knowledge they hold and extend this knowledge through practices that are rooted in their approach to knowledge creation.

2) Culturally relevant texts. I used several children's books written in French as the basis of instruction without regard to their cultural relevance. In addition to the children's books not being written in Creole, the books were not related to Haitian culture. In the future, I will use culturally relevant texts to which readers can relate. These texts enable readers to draw upon their background knowledge and experiences to make meaning (Ebe, 2010). DeGraff (2016, p. 438) noted that "one unavoidable language-and-education problem is that, in the case of Creole languages, preference for the formerly colonial language is compounded by a dearth of quality pedagogical materials in local populations' native

languages." Evidently, there is a need for texts and other materials that reflect Haitian culture, including their language. These materials are pertinent to literacy education.

3) Place-based education. An important aspect of reading the word and the world is situating instruction within a particular context, a specific place. This is the foundation of place-based education. Retrospectively, I realized that the workshop I conducted could likely have been done with any early childhood teachers at any school in the world. While there is value in generic, or decontextualized, instruction, I favor education that is place-based. Placed-based education is the process of drawing upon the local community—its history, culture, and resources—as the basis of instruction (Sobel, 2004). Through place-based instruction, the local community is the starting point for extending learning about global topics. When teaching in this way, learners are able to read the word and their world. As an example, I could have incorporated locally created literature (newspapers, magazines, or flyers) as tools to demonstrate reading skills.

In addition to the complex issue surrounding language, these considerations will help to ensure that literacy education for social justice is itself *just*.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to present a model of how literacy education can be a tool for social justice in developing countries and territories that still suffer the effects of European colonization. This article is instructive for teacher educators and literacy educators who are interested in learning more about developing content of workshops that focus on reading comprehension strategies. However, its deeper value lies in its contribution to knowledge about how to facilitate literacy education for social justice. In order for literacy to be a tool for social justice, literacy education itself must. This is a model, not in its perfection, but rather in its

imperfections, which resulted in significant learning on our behalf. I find inspiration in part of a conversation between Horton and Freire (1990, p. 173):

Myles: We've always done these things imperfectly. Always.

Paulo: All of us work imperfectly.

Myles: Always. I don't think I ever did a workshop in which I didn't think later, my goodness I should've known better than to do this. Or, if I had just thought fast enough, I could've helped people understand this from their experience. To this day, I never have the satisfaction of saying this is a perfect job, well done. I've learned something in this job, I hope I can do better next time, but I just have to keep on learning different things.

Our work was imperfect, but we must "keep on learning different things" to be better equipped to work with teachers, in literacy education for social justice, which necessarily includes reading the word and the world.

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