THEME 3: THE LEARNER: PERSPECTIVES FROM INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Fourty-Five Learner perspectives on the Youth Millennium Project: Critical Literacy in Pakistan

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Abstract

Advocates of critical literacy encourage teachers and learners to engage critically with the social world. The Youth Millennium Project, which encourages students to address global issues by addressing social issues at a local level, is a contemporary example of critical literacy in action. This paper reports on current research conducted in Karachi, Pakistan, in which middle school students implemented the Youth Millennium Project in their school and community. The paper addresses student perspectives on the project, focussing, in particular, on their engagement in the project before and after September 11, 2001.

If it were possible to define generally the mission of education, it could be said that its fundamental purpose is to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life. Pedagogy is a teaching and learning relationship that creates the potential for building learning conditions leading to full and equitable social participation. Literacy pedagogy, specifically, is expected to play a particularly important role in fulfilling this mission.

Cope & Kalantzis (1999, p. 9)

Introduction

The Youth Millennium Project (YMP), a global initiative of the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada, seeks to provide youth around the world with the opportunity to build self-confidence and community by creating a local plan of action that addresses a global issue. The project was motivated by research which suggested that youth often feel powerless in the face of global events, and believe that they have little to contribute to make to social change. Thus the goal of the project is to encourage students to become more active in their communities, and to share their experiences with "companion groups" in different parts of the globe. Staff at the YMP at UBC advertise the program, put students in different regions in touch with one another, and receive reports of student activities. Local plans of action can be large or small, and include groups of students of approximately 11-14 years of age. The project, which began in 1999, currently comprises over 10,000 young people in 80 countries across the globe. It is beginning to achieve its goal of building communication and community within and across geographical boundaries. (For further details of this project, see www.youthmillennium.org).

This paper reports on student perspectives on the project in a multilingual secondary school, Model Secondary School, in Karachi, Pakistan, which accommodates 1600 girls and boys aged 11-16. The expectation of teachers in the project was to provide students with an opportunity to experience language learning in a social context through active participation in various meaningful activities.

Context

The New London Group (1996, p. 85) makes the case that "people do not learn anything well unless they are both motivated to learn and believe that they will be able to use and function with what they are learning in some way that is in their interest." Language and Social Studies teachers in Model Secondary School were interested in the YMP because proficiency in English communication is one of the most important academic goals
residing in urban areas. Involvement in the YMP offered an exciting opportunity for language learning as well as engagement in both the local and global community. It presented an opportunity to achieve a mastery of English beyond the use of conventions and decoding of text, and it provided an interesting dimension to existing English Language and Social Studies curricula.

The students who participated in the YMP are mostly second, and in some cases third, language speakers of English. Urdu enjoys the status of the ‘national language’ as well as the lingua franca in Pakistan, and almost all the students at Model Secondary School are comfortable in communicating in Urdu orally. At home, the majority of students are used to speaking two or more languages, including Urdu, English, and one of the regional languages. Nevertheless, English is the medium of instruction in Model Secondary School, and having command over written and spoken English is a pressing need for academic, professional, social and economic success in Pakistani society.

Further, the YMP offered the possibility for innovation in classroom practices. In Model Secondary School, many children are reluctant to ask questions of teachers or peers, and students seldom initiate meaningful discussions. In addition, the pedagogy of Language and Social Studies in Model Secondary School is highly-structured, with tests and examinations a central focus of the curriculum. By involving students in the YMP, the Grade 8 teachers were hoping to bring about pedagogical change, and to create the conditions for active engagement in learning. The teachers were enthusiastic about incorporating a more dialogue-based pedagogy into their classrooms.

For the purposes of this paper, we wish to address the following three questions which guided our research:

• How was the YMP implemented in Model Secondary School?
• What were learner perspectives on the YMP?
• To what extent did the events of September 11, 2001, influence student perspectives on the YMP?

Theoretical framework

To establish a theoretical framework for our research study, we begin with the work of Paulo Freire (1972), who advocates active learning that ‘liberating education consists in the acts of cognition, not transfers’ (p. 60). More recent work on critical literacy develops many of the ideas associated with Freire, and influenced the direction of our study. Morgan (1997, p. 6), for example, quotes Lankshear & McLaren (1993) who argue:

... among other things, critical literacy makes possible a more adequate and accurate ‘reading’ of the world, on the basis of which, as Freire and others put it, people can enter into ‘rewriting’ the world into a formation in which their interests, identities and legitimate aspirations are more fully present and are present more equally (ibid: xviii).

Other scholars, such as Luke (1997), describe the focus on critical literacy as arising from an interest in social and cultural understandings of educational practice, rather than psychological and individualistic perspectives. In a similar spirit, Searle (1998) describes critical literacy as ‘a learning and living tool which breaks open the word and world for the learner’ (p.12), while Duzer, Florez, & Cunningham (1999) draw attention to the wide range of critical and analytical approaches associated with the understanding and interpretation of text, both spoken and written.

Methodology

All the students who took part in the YMP in Model Secondary School also took part in our study, which was conducted by both Kamal and Norton. Kamal collected data on site, and Norton communicated with research participants from her institutional base at the University of British Columbia. Research participants included forty male and forty female students in grade eight. The research sample also included four teachers of Language and Social Studies, as well as the Head of the Language Department and the Head of Social Studies. Students began the implementation of the YMP in March, 2001, and our evaluation of the project was carried out in two stages, described below. It is important to note that it was during the implementation of the YMP in Model Secondary School that the world was shaken by the attack on the United States of America on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent war in Afghanistan, a country neighbouring Pakistan. As indicated below, the disruption in Pakistan compromised the students’ efforts to fully implement their local plan of action.

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Stage 1: March 2001 – May 2001

Methods of data collection during this stage included completion of a questionnaire by students and participating teachers, observation of classrooms by Kamal, and interviewing of students. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section dealt with the perspectives of students as language learners; the second explored students' perspectives as agents of social change. Kamal kept diary notes on whole class discussions, and observed students in action. The implementation of the YMP was undertaken in 6 steps:

1. **Group formation**: Two sections of grade 8 students (40 boys and 40 girls) aged 12 to 13 were identified to work on this project with the support of six teaching faculty. Grade 8 students were chosen because they fell within the age group recommended by the umbrella YMP organization at UBC. The group named themselves the "Reformers."

2. **Group discussions**: Brainstorming took place in whole-class discussion, followed by further discussion in smaller groups. Within these sub-groups, students addressed a range of questions, including: *What do you think are the most important global issues that the world is facing in the new millennium? What are the possible causes of these problems? What would you like the world to look like in 2020?*

3. **Create a local action plan**: Students in different sub-groups designed an action plan that addressed some of the issues that they had initially identified. Their local plan was to be a project they could carry out themselves, independent of adult supervision. Their proposed action plans reflected a wide range of social issues including the eradication of illiteracy, poverty, homelessness, drug addiction, pollution, and environmental abuse.

4. **Registration**: Once the groups had developed their local plans, they registered the plans with YMP staff at UBC. As a result, they were attached to three other companion groups for collaboration and sharing. These groups of students were from the Cameroons, Canada and Azerbaijan.

5. **Carrying out the local plans**: The Reformers then selected one of their local action plans to implement. This action plan was specifically focused on the eradication of illiteracy. To this end, they chose to support the literacy development of Afghan refugee children in a local orphanage in Karachi. Their plan was to collect school supplies, stationery, and books for the refugees. All books were in English.

6. **Writing and sharing the summary report**: Once students implemented their action plan, they compiled their learning experiences in a summary report. The students then shared their summary report with their companion groups and with the YMP co-ordinators at UBC.

Stage 2: October 2001 – November, 2001

As the first stage of the project and associated study were underway, and we were in the process of analyzing our data, the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in the United States of America stunned the world. Shortly thereafter, the United States and their allies began attacking Pakistan's neighbour Afghanistan in an attempt to prevent further attacks on the United States. It was after this dramatic change of events, which followed shortly after the students' involvement in the YMP, that we introduced the second stage of our study. Changing events led us to ask students if involvement in the YMP affected the way they perceived current events in Afghanistan, what they thought were the main social problems facing the world, and whether they still considered a focus on literacy an important action plan. For greater insight into the students' responses, Norton interviewed 26 students (13 girls, 13 boys) on a one-to-one basis over electronic mail. These 26 students were identified by Kamal as most comfortable with this technology.

The YMP as Critical Literacy in Action

A day before the first discussion of the YMP, teachers encouraged students to listen to national and international news on television and to read a few newspaper articles. The next day, there was much animated discussion on local and global issues. The first impressions students had in identifying social problems was of distress, "I never realised there are so many problems around us," said one of the Reformers. "I thought a lot about the 'poor children' and the 'homeless' ones even after the discussion was over and when I was at home," said another. "We were extremely confused when we went on talking and discussing about so many problems in the society; we thought it's a bad world and scary too," said a third.
The Youth Millennium Project provided an opportunity for students to improve their understanding of political and democratic processes. After expressing concern about social conditions both locally and globally, students focused on how they could address the inequities they had identified. Some, in despair, looked for magical solutions: As one said, “How come I never knew of anything like this before. I wish I have magic wand to put every thing straight.” For most students, however, it was through debate and discussion that they seemed to regain some confidence. As one said: “Our group members and teachers asked each other what can be done and from here we actually felt better that something can be done.” Through their local action plans, students considered themselves capable of making a difference in their community and were eager to do something beyond chalk and talk. As one of the teachers commented, “By identifying the global issues, their minds opened from self to society, to other communities, from their country to other countries of the world.”

Although the Reformers had identified different action plans, the one they decided to implement in the first stage of the project was a literacy program for about 25 Afghan refugee children in a local orphanage. Because these children lacked school supplies and resources, the Reformers planned to collect storybooks, reading materials and stationery items appropriate for ages 3-13. The texts they chose were all in English. Their slogan was a ‘a pencil a person’. The students’ idea was that if each person on the larger school campus of Model Secondary School, including primary and adult students, donated a pencil, they could collect 4000 pencils. These pencils would make a great difference to the Afghan children. In order to achieve this objective, the students undertook the following activities in April and May, 2001:

- The students designed and displayed posters and memos to publicise their cause and draw the attention of other classes in the school. They invited all students to donate books, stationery, and pencils.
- Pairs of students gave talks in the staff room, Principal’s office, and in all other sections of the school.
- Students collected, sorted, categorized, and packed the collected books and supplies for distribution.
- The Reformers then delivered the packages to the orphanage and interacted with the Afghan children and their teachers.

Perhaps the most important observation during this phase of the project was to witness the Reformers transform from passive learners to active, engaged participants who were willing to present their views and take charge of their own learning. As one teacher said, “Such projects provide opportunities to learners to integrate the prescribed syllabus with the actual realities of their environment” while another addressed students’ growing confidence: “students got an opportunity to get personally involved in activities and have developed greater confidence as well as speaking, writing and listening skills.” During this process, there was no change of textbooks or teachers. The only change was to incorporate critical literacy into the existing curriculum. As the project progressed, we were able to gain interesting insights into the students’ changing perspectives on the YMP, both before and after September 11, 2001.

Learner Perspectives on the YMP: March-May 2001

Janks (1991, p. 191) argues that, “if the study of language is to empower students, it should enable them to say what they mean in order that their voices be heard. It should also enable them to hear what is said and what is hidden. Language study should therefore be tied to its use in discourse.” Data analysis at Stage 1 provided interesting insights into students’ experiences of the YMP, particularly with regard to language learning. Their social studies classes became very meaningful, as students were constantly interacting with other people both inside and outside the school. As students became more involved in the YMP, problem solving and social issues became central to classroom discussions. The participating students experienced learning by exploring, observing, recording, constructing, problem solving, discussing, hypothesising, predicting, and co-operating. As one student said, “I did not have much information about global issues but I discovered a lot during the discussions.” Students further that discussing social issues in groups developed their confidence and provided them with an opportunity to listen critically and participate actively. “Discussion increased my confidence level,” said one student, while another commented, “We have learned about global issues and what is causing them and how can they be solved.”

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Comments from teachers were similarly positive: “Students listened very carefully and raised many how and why questions logically.”

During the implementation phase of the project, the students in pairs and small groups carried out an awareness program and communicated to a variety of groups. They made several presentations (in English) at various forums in and outside the school and enjoyed the opportunity to practise language in a social context. One said “I liked going out of the school to make presentations and to the orphanage.” In making such presentations, students interacted with the children and adults in other sections of the schools and learned to address different audiences. The adult audience included people in various offices on the school campus as well as faculty members. Students enjoyed these activities and noted that their public speaking skills improved. As one student said, “I enjoyed the whole process: giving presentations, physical and mental involvement in action planning and working in teams.” Another, similarly, noted, “giving presentation to other people and answering to their questions was very interesting; while another added,” I developed confidence to interact with different people.”

Further, the students in the YMP were encountering learning opportunities that gave them the opportunity to critically reflect on social issues both locally and globally. Alan Luke (1997, p. 146) defines the term ‘literate’ as the practice of attaining ‘critical consciousness’ and explains that literary education should be “reconceptualised as a site for dialogue, ideology critique and productive cultural action” (p.146). This process of reflection, dialogue and action turned out to be the best part of this project for most of the students. To illustrate, when we asked students which activities in the YMP they enjoyed most, and why, the students identified the following three activities as their favourites: “classroom discussions about the top ten global issues,” “action planning,” and “interaction with the community.” One enthusiastic youth responded, “Despite it created some problems, action planning was the most interesting part of the project. This type of project work can give us more information, involve us mentally and physically in action planning.” Most of the students said that they were shocked to find that there are so many problems and issues in the world that need attention and that the project made them more aware of the world and their immediate environment. As one said, “We got an opportunity to become aware of local and global issues and to think how to solve them.” Although the students recognized that they “cannot solve the problems completely,” they felt sufficiently confident to begin addressing the problems they had identified.

In exploring the major global issues facing the world, the children were asked to visualise and depict through drawings the kind of world they would like to inhabit in 2020. One group sketched all children of Pakistan going to school in 2020; another group drew the school neighbourhood free of lead and noise pollution. Listening to the presentations, Kamal was impressed by insights and recommendations of these students. As one student said, “We expect that by providing education to others, we can improve our environment and community.” Most importantly, students felt that they had the ability and power to bring change. As one student said, “I know now, what is happening around us and how the youth of 21st century can solve these problems.”

Learner Perspectives on the YMP, September – November, 2001

During the second stage of the project, post September 11th, we took the opportunity to ask the following three questions which Norton sent to all the students by e-mail. Thirteen girls and 13 boys responded to the following questions:

1. Has the Youth Millennium Project affected the way you think about current events in Afghanistan?

2. Compared to 6 months ago, what do you think are the main social problems facing the world?

3. In view of current events in Afghanistan and Pakistan, do you still think a focus on literacy is an important action plan?

In response to question 1, the vast majority of students said that their participation in the YMP had affected the way they think about current events in Afghanistan. As one student said, “This project has enhanced our way of thinking about others. We have started thinking in broader perspective.” Many students mentioned that the project had encouraged them to think more about the children of Afghanistan and the threat to their future. One student said, “There could have been better solutions to problems than letting so many kids spend their childhood in the fear of being killed and losing their family”. Another child mentioned “We
fear more orphanages like the one we visited." On a more troubling note, a number of students said that instead of holding pens, children in Afghanistan were holding guns. "We were horrified to see in the news that young Afghani boys of fourteen are holding guns, rather than going to school and holding pens." The students recognized, however, that Afghani children should not be held responsible for the war, suggesting that the children are "just like me" and that "innocent people suffer in wars, there mistake is just that they are born in the country which got into a war."

In response to question 2, although a few students suggested that little had changed in the past 6 months, the majority of the students now spoke of "political disturbances," "terrorism" and "war" as the pressing issues facing the globe. One of the Reformers responded, "The global issues seem increasing day by day instead of decreasing." Students commented on the fact that Pakistan was feeling the effects of the war in neighbouring Afghanistan. As one student said, "As Afghanistan is our next neighbor and a Muslim country, so the effects of this war will fall on Pakistan. Firstly, there will be the problem of food for Afghani and unemployment."

Another student, similarly, said, "We are getting more refugees in our country and we fear lack of resources and increasing rate of poverty." Many students said, however, that it was not only Pakistan and Afghanistan that were feeling the effects of war. As one of the students remarked, "The whole world has become an unsafe area for human life."

Thus when Reformers started discussing the war in Afghanistan, their thoughts were not restricted to the local community or region. One Reformer said: "The children are not only effected in Afghanistan. They are constantly being victimised in Bosnia, Kashmir, Palestine and Israel."

In response to question 3, most of the students agreed that a focus on literacy remains an important issue. They suggested that literacy will help Afghani refugees to be independent when they go back to Afghanistan. As one of them said, literacy will help Afghans decide "what is best for them and how to interact with the rest of the globe peacefully." For refugees who remain in Afghanistan, literacy will help them to earn money and be independent of government help. Students also made interesting observations about the relationship between literacy and development (Street, 2001). First, they said that literacy is not only reading and writing but is about education, more broadly. One Reformer argued, "Literacy plays a vital role in the progress of a country. It makes the citizens broadminded and they start to think and realize their problems and then they try to find their solutions."

Many of the students in fact suggested that a literate person is a "better" person than a person who is illiterate: a literate person can tell the difference between right and wrong, is more broadminded than an illiterate person, and can think better than an illiterate person. Second, for most of the students, illiteracy is associated with underdevelopment of a country. As one student said, "We decided to focus on literacy because it is the problem most underdeveloped countries in the world are facing. Education can lead them to improve their economic and social conditions." Further, many of the Reformers said that developed countries are powerful because people in developed countries are literate: "We know that in developed countries everyone is educated and goes to school that is why they are rich and have no problems." noted one Reformer. Many said that literacy is important not only for Afghan refugees, but also for all the people in Pakistan.

The Reformers unanimously agreed to address the issue of literacy for future projects as well. Such suggestions included developing Internet-based collaborative projects involving participation of Afghan children present in local communities of Karachi. Such a project would give Afghan children a voice to be heard by the world, and it would give their counterparts globally the opportunity to exchange views and ideas directly with them. Many of them recognized, however, that resources are needed to promote literacy in a country. They suggested that education should be free for all children, and that children who are not able to attend regular school should have night schools available.

Conclusion

The Youth Millennium Project proved to be a useful project for developing critical literacy among the youth in Model Secondary School in Pakistan. Participating Grade 8 students, over time, saw themselves as having the potential to investigate and critique social practices in their community and to participate in local plans of action for social change. Furthermore, there is much data to suggest that they had, over time, developed a broader vision of the world, and were concerned not only with their immediate community, but with the...
Why, for example, did these students equate literacy with morality? Why is a person who is literate considered to be more "broadminded" than a person who is not literate?

Both students and teachers also remarked on the language development of the students involved in the project and their developing research skills. Students were extensively involved in seeking information, and in collecting and evaluating data. They gained insights by sharing information with their peers as they worked in teams and collaboratively sought ways to address social problems. Students developed better listening skills, persuasive speaking skills and tolerance for different viewpoints. Their growing interest in civic issues was remarkable.

While the study suggests that the YMP promoted the development of critical literacy among students, there are many questions that still need to be addressed. Why, for example, did these students equate literacy with morality? Why is a person who is literate considered to be more "broadminded" than a person who is not literate? To what extent are we as educators complicit in such views? Why do students consider the development of literacy the main solution to the economic crises in developing countries? How can the developed and developing world engage in practices of mutual support? The Youth Millennium Project has created many possibilities for students, not only in Karachi, but in many regions of the world. It has also raised many intriguing questions for further research.

References


www.youthmillennium.org

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