Reflection Which Reifies Problematic Teaching Practices

Abstract
This critical discourse analysis (CDA) considers the language of the daily written reflective practices of a novice fourth grade Teach For America teacher in an urban public school across one academic year. Greg, through his certification coursework, engaged in written reflections almost daily across an entire academic year yet, according to his university-based coach, he exhibited many of the same problematic instructional and relational practices in April that he demonstrated in August. Findings address both the content and power structures revealed in the discourses of reflection and the ways that Greg’s problematic practices and stances toward learners were reified without meaningful mediation from his coursework or field-based coach. We consider alternative practices or opportunities for accountability for self-directed growth based on authentic reflection which might have been more professionalizing and fostering of personal, dispositional, and instructional growth.

Purpose
Faculty in our alternative certification program have been responding to a call for interrogation of reflection as a practice in teacher development, (Brookfield, 2000; Zeichner, 1996) through longitudinal and systematic analysis of individual cases and reflective practices of novice Teach For America teachers. In this inquiry, we analyzed the language of the daily written reflective practices of Greg, a first year fourth grade teacher in an urban public school. Greg participated in nearly all of the opportunities he was offered to reflect (181 times out of 193 opportunities across the year) in his year-long certification/coaching coursework. However, he grappled with the same issues of instructional practice and classroom culture in April that he experienced in August, rarely taking intentional or informed steps to alter his practice. In order to determine what might have contributed to the problematic nature of Greg’s practice, we systematically analyzed the discourse of his reflections.

Theoretical Framework
Rooted in constructs of critical pedagogy (Apple, 2004; Freire, 1972; Sleeter; 2005) we view education as a highly political endeavor in which questions of power, agency, autonomy, and freedom must be raised. As teacher educators, we are concerned about the ways that power is structured in schools and universities, the impact of those inequitable structures on the development of teachers and learners alike, and the ways that these power structures can be illuminated, reified and/or contested through language.

Method
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to analyze language as it reveals, manifests, reproduces, or subverts structures of power, domination, or inequality. Using CDA (Fairclough, 2001), we analyzed the inter-related spaces of discourse: (a) the text, (b) the process of
production and sharing of the text, and (c) the larger sociopolitical and sociohistoric context which shape and are shaped by these texts. This oscillation reveals and makes visible each of the layers simultaneously as non-neutral spaces of construction. The findings we present within this study are framed around the question: (a) What can we learn through CDA about the reflective practices of a novice teacher who was observed by his coach to have made minimal shifts in practice across the academic year though frequently participating in course-based reflective writing?

**Data Sources and Analysis**

After Greg matriculated, we used CDA to analyze the language and content of his daily, weekly, and monthly written reflective documents noting the highs and lows each day, trends he noticed across the month, and his goals in light of those trends. We crafted a chronologically organized case portrait of Greg’s language (line numbers from this document are evidenced throughout this proposal). Throughout analysis, we oscillated between the levels of the text, the spaces of construction (and mediation), and the ways the data revealed and reflected the larger sociopolitical context. After our first analysis, noting what was present, we returned to the data to attend to what was notably missing from the conversation, as that which is left unsaid and underrepresented in particular contexts embodies a great deal of critical information representing the values and positions of the participants. This *study of absence* was a critical part of this research design as we identified aspects of program philosophy which were notably missing from Greg’s reflections across the year.

**Results**

Results indicated that Greg’s written text of the daily occurrences of his classroom community revealed consistently problematic dispositions toward and engagement with learners. Greg’s language his desire for power and authority and his epistemological stance toward transmitting and depositing information into learners rooted in banking pedagogy (Friere, 1972). The rare times Greg wrote about his instruction, his language was reductive and subtractive toward children and their learning (“lecturing” in 346, 352, 682, 808; students “receive” and ‘retain’ his instruction 796, 989, 1121). He defined students as “successful and engaged” when they were attentive, not disruptive, and achieving on tests (345, 1270). A simple frequency count of the language choices he used during his year-long reflections indicated that he used the word “assess” 109 times and “test” 48 times.

Greg often spoke of “demanding obedience” from the learners in his classroom (“behavior” appeared 71 times in his reflections across the year). He fostered a sense of comparison and competition, offering extrinsic rewards and consequences which would isolate, shame, and punish. More than once, Greg stated explicitly that the students themselves were the problem rather than exploring his own contribution to the sometimes hostile climate using deficit language and labeling learners as “problem students.” In some of the most problematic
statements, his language choices distanced himself from his own actions, removing both responsibility and agency. Essentially, Greg’s reflective practice deprofessionalized him, reified problematic practices, and enabled him to misrepresent himself (to others and to himself).

**Scholarly significance**

The hidden curriculum embedded in schooling structures serving all ages is replete with intended and unintended lessons about whose beliefs, values, questions, knowledge, and interests are valued, and thus, who is valuable (Apple, 2004). Sleeter (2005) argued that in many contexts, “Teachers are not supposed to think or question, but rather to act like clerks, checking to make sure that the requisite topics have been covered” (p. 170). This inquiry illuminated and challenged the often underexplored role of power and agency in the lives of public school alike, uncovering discourses which reify and illuminate unjust practices.

**References**