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Making Our Voices Heard: Critical Literacy through Song

Scholars have demonstrated that Freire's critical pedagogy is an influential and powerful educational philosophy for those working with migrant workers, refugees, and marginalized high school students. The purpose of this article is to show how adult ESL learners who are immigrants to Canada, in addition to these other groups, have benefited from a critical pedagogy approach to learning through participation in a weekly choir, Global Voices, despite the fact that they are not traditionally considered disempowered. The participants' insights can hopefully inform choir directors, classroom instructors, educational policies, and curricular choices.

Introduction

The Global Voices choir, now in its fourth year of existence, is composed of adult English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners, members of the wider community, and staff and instructors from the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers. It is open to anyone who wishes to participate, regardless of musical talent or language ability. The choir meets for one hour each week to share a lunch and practice singing. In addition to weekly sessions, the choir often performs at public functions when invited. Although the choir receives more requests than it can accept, usually the directors organize about one performance a month. When the choir receives payment for its performance, the money is set aside for bus rentals or for group trips.

The Global Voices choir was formed after one of its founders attended a conference where a choir had performed. The choir

founder had previously wanted to establish an activity where Canadians and newcomers to Canada could interact as equals instead of in tutor-learner relationships, which she perceived as composed of “us” and “them”. Although the choir founder did not establish Global Voices with regular performances in mind, she had hoped that one day, with lots of practice, the choir might be able to perform at a school event. After approximately a year, the choir was invited to participate at the agency’s Annual General Meeting. When this event took place the founder noticed that many of the members were learning new skills. For example, she found that some of the choir members had to figure out tasks such as checking bus schedules and calling to verify performance times. These choir members performed authentic language tasks in a way that they had never done in the adult ESL classroom. This led her to believe that the choir was about more than simply singing.

Research Questions

This research project began as an investigation of literacy and language learning practices in the Global Voices choir. In particular, the choir director and I wanted to know which features of the choir promoted literacy and language learning so that these features might be transferred to other community-based activities. When I spoke with the choir members, they offered many insights about their adult learning experiences and their participation in the choir.

Theoretical Framework

Paulo Freire has been described as the “patron saint” of critical pedagogy (Eskey, 2005). In his classic text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire illustrates how he was able to transform the lives of his students by helping them discover their humanity while learning to read. He argued against the dehumanizing banking

concept of education, in which teachers treat instruction as deposits made in the minds of their students. He encouraged teachers to help students discover meaningful work and reflection so that they might be liberated from oppression. Abrahams (2005) describes five key principles in a curriculum driven by critical pedagogy. The first is that education is a problem-solving relationship between teacher and student. Second, education encourages teachers and students to see the world in a new and better way. Third, education empowers both teachers and students so that they can affect change in their situation. Fourth, education should transform people's perceptions. Finally, education is a political act.

Critical pedagogy is an alternative framework to understanding learning from a positivist perspective. Positivist researchers are interested in understanding how individuals learn (Lantolf, 2005). Pennycook (1990) explains that questions central to second language education are asked by those who see language as a series of positivist systems and not those who wish to make the world a better place. Although some of the critics of critical pedagogy argue that it is difficult to practically implement, Akbari (2008) suggests ways that educators can concretely implement it. He explains that much of the criticism against critical pedagogy in the classroom is that the philosophy seems difficult to use in practical terms; however, he offers solutions such as instructing learners based on their own culture (as opposed to that of the instructor), using the learners' first language as a resource, linking students' concerns to the lessons, and helping learners become aware of marginalized groups.

Some ESL instructors have described how they have used the principles of critical pedagogy with poorly educated migrant workers. Frye's (1999) approach to instructing female English as a second language (ESL) workers in the United States was through critical pedagogy. Her instructional philosophy "to some extent engendered

true dialogue and provided an atmosphere of caring and safety that allowed freedom of expression and reflection for the women who participated in it” (p.503). She discovered that when these women were provided with a safe environment, they were able to open up to one another, provide support, and empower each other. In his early teaching career, Graman was inspired by the works of Freire. He used a critical pedagogy approach to teaching ESL whereby learners discussed systemic exploitation through use of vocabulary terms such as “bonus” and “short-hoe” (p. 437). The first means withholding one’s wages until the job is completed, thereby preventing the employee seeking a more lucrative position; and the second, a tool which causes pain to the employee, but is used because the employer feels it makes the workers do a more thorough job.

There is a more recent body of literature, which describes how certain marginalized high school populations are able to find self-reflection through song. Wishart, Leard and Lashua (2006) describe how rap music has been transformative to Native populations in Canada by providing spaces for these marginalized youth to describe their oppression. Stovall (2006) examined how young high school students of African and Latino ancestry made sense of social oppression through the study of rap music. These students participated in a six-week thematic unit that looked at the role of boasting in rap music, the meaning behind the unspoken curriculum in schools, and promotion of stereotypes through a hidden agenda by record companies. Hones (2007) described how music, among other activities, could be meaningful for new immigrants in an Australian high school. In Milpera School, immigrants and refugees learn literacy through critical pedagogy while studying music which is used by the teacher to transmit cultural values, self-esteem, and beginner literacy skills.

One body of literature thus uses critical pedagogy to teach ESL learners while the other body uses it to teach marginalized youth through song. This article examines how adult ESL learners have used song to transform their world. The remainder focuses on the experiences of the members of the Global Voices choir so that fellow researchers, scholars, and educators can see how adult these ESL learners have actualized this goal.

Method

1. Participants

The Global Voices Choir is composed of immigrants and refugees, staff from the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, community volunteers, and the choir directors. The choir members come from Africa, Asia, South America, Europe and North America. Although the choir is composed of people from around the globe, this study focuses on the experiences of the immigrants and refugees who have studied in an ESL program. Seven choir members were interviewed. These members come originally from Brunei, China, Vietnam, and Japan. They range in length of residence in Canada from 5 to over 20 years. Educational levels in their home countries range from Grade 3 to Master's degrees. The participants' English levels range from high-beginner to high-intermediate. I approached each participant and asked him or her to share experiences. I made it explicit to each participant that participation was completely voluntary and we could stop at any time. Each person that I asked accepted.

2. Instruments

I developed a semi-structured interview guide. The interview questions are attached in Appendix 1. Questions focused on participants' sense of belonging, possibilities for contribution,

personal growth, and learning opportunities. Participants received the questions at least one week before the interview. They were allowed to ask the researcher questions that they might have. I encouraged them to think about what they wanted to say before the interview, and to discuss their answers with others if necessary.

3. Procedures

The director informed the choir members that a PhD student from the University of Alberta was conducting a study on the educational outcomes of the choir. As the researcher, I got to know the participants personally through my involvement in the choir. I approached members and asked them if they would be interested in participating in an interview about their experiences. The interviews usually happened after the choir practices, with two occurring on sites outside of the Edmonton Mennonite Centre. Interviews typically lasted from 20 minutes to an hour. The participants were informed that the purpose of the research was to explore differences in the choir and the ESL classroom. They were told that the results would be used for two purposes: to inform teachers about possible applications in the classroom and to provide information to others interested in creating a choir for newcomers. They were informed that the research project had received ethics approval from the University of Alberta and the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers. They were given a consent form to sign. I read through the form in which each participant explained his or her rights in accepting to participate.

I videotaped and transcribed the interviews. I then analyzed the interviews and coded them for themes. As a result, I found eight themes emerging from the interview data: loneliness, friendship, belonging and equality, multiculturalism, respect of one's home culture and first language, meaningful work, literacy and language

learning, and personal transformation. Throughout the results section, I quote the participants in their own words without changing their syntax, thereby respecting their voices.

Theme One: Loneliness

Five of the seven choir members spoke of the loneliness that they have experienced in Canada. This feeling of loneliness stemmed from not feeling like one belongs in one's new country, from not having pragmatic skills to participate in activities, or from not feeling safe in a new place.

Participant 1 illustrated this loneliness of being in a new country by offering, "The person who is immigrant to Canada here. You are already a citizen, but anyways here is not your country." However, he was not the only one to express the loneliness of newcomers. Participant 2 echoed:

Well, we are immigrants. So we are different than local people. In somehow and somewhere we can't find our own group. Sometimes we are not a real good fit with other 'real' Canadians. I don't know why. Because of the language, the culture...

The ability to interact with Canadians was a challenge that was reported by Participant 3. She explained from her point of view how a particular group of new immigrants were especially challenged with integration into mainstream Canadian society- Chinese mothers forced to go overseas in order to have a second child. She stated that they feel trapped and isolated by their inability to leave their homes because they do not feel that they have the language skills to venture out on their own. This isolation leads them to depression and family problems. She continued:

You know, I have several friends and they are Chinese, same like me and have second child, and they all stay home with their kids. And I know they all want to go outside, they really

want to, they always ask me where I can go. I encourage them to go outside to the choir, and you can make new friends, but they don't want. Just stay home because they afraid of outside. They think home is safety. Yes they are right, but you know if you want your life, your new life, you want to adopt this country, you should go outside, not just stay home. And they get sick, sick, sick and sad, sad, sad. And also the family make some problem because the husband go outside to make the money for the family and the wife stay home and take care of the kid. But I have a lots of friends, especially for the newcomer, they come here they don't know the language, they say "Oh, I can't understand and also I can't speak." Same like me, at first I can't understand them and also I can't speak with people, I can't understanding. But the choir open your mind and open your heart. Like they are a window. But if you stay at home, all seems closed. You think outside is like -40, I can't go outside. But if you open the window, you know how wonderful the outside is. Even if they are snowing, but if you don't open that window, you don't know. Choir like a window.

Theme Two: Friendships

For many of the choir members, Global Voices is a safe place where they are able to practice an activity in the company of others. The choir members reported that they came together with a common interest. As a result, they are able to find, in the company of others, a way to escape some of the loneliness that they feel. For many, the chance to belong to a group was a powerful draw to the choir. When asked about friendships in the choir, all seven members reported that they had established a friendship with at least one other choir member. The comments were similar to what Participant 7 expressed, "It's a gathering time, and meet friends, and I can sing, and I can learn a new song, and with interesting sounds and the sounds wake me up, and bring me up, and cheer me up." Participant 2 stated, "At first when you come into the choir you can make many

friends. They are very happy to make friends with you. If you join in and just sing with us.”

Theme Three: Belonging and Equality

The Global Voices choir is a welcoming environment. When the choir members enter for practice, they are greeted by one another. Participant 5 explained that his involvement in the choir was so “natural” and “comfortable”, that he couldn’t remember how or why he decided to join the choir. Of his decision to participate, he said, “It was so natural. I felt so comfortable there. Singing- you know I was a bit tired everyday’s English speaking life. And my listening was worse than now. So I don’t understand what the people speak and talk. So I just repeat tired at that time when I came to the choir. So, melody was very something familiar and kind of nostalgic for me.”

Global Voices Choir is composed of people who come literally from around the globe. By simply looking at the choir members, the audience is unable to tell which people were born or raised in Canada and which people immigrated here as adults. Because the choir members do not stand out, they are able to simply be. As Participant 1 explained, “Everybody comes here just watching the songs. Who attention to you? Who attention to your beauty? You don’t know English? Nobody attention to you. You don’t know everything. Nobody knows you are a professor or you don’t know nothing.” Participant 2 also shared a similar observation, “But in choir everybody comes from everywhere. So we feel more comfortable, more comfort. We don’t have to worry too much our language is not perfect.”

Participant 3 explained how for her the choir helped her to feel at home in the city. She talked about how she felt afraid to venture out of the house on her own. However, because the performances were

held in various locations across the city, she needed to travel to new places. As she embarked on this adventure, she became more confident in her surroundings. She elaborated:

I am a newcomer, I came this country is new, and I came this city new. And for me, my English is not good, so for me I can't go outside by myself. But with the choir, there are a lot of performance you know, they went to a different place. I just follow the choir. I went to the Citadel, I went to some hotel, it's a very nice place, and I went to the City Hall. ... I went to some school. I went to some place I forgot the name, beside the Kingsmen Support Centre, a very nice house, we have once performance there. So I know this city from the choir. When I have been there once, I think, okay, maybe I can come, so next time I went to there I feel it was comfortable. Not very, very afraid them. ... So, but the choir carry me different place so now I can go everywhere like this, thinking in my mind. Because we are there and I think okay, another place, oh, it's wonderful, another place, it's wonderful. So now you ask me to go anywhere I say yes, but before I said no, I want to stay at home.

Theme Four: Multiculturalism

Six of the participants expressed sincere interest in learning about the culture and backgrounds of the other members. Three choir members shared that they appreciated learning songs in languages other than in English or in their mother tongue. These participants enjoyed learning words in a new language. Participant 1 expressed this sentiment as, "If you come from Africa, you have favourite song. You teach us, so we can follow with you. So you can also teach everyone. So we can follow with you. So we can respect your songs." At performances, choir members are encouraged to wear traditional clothing. For Participant 3, wearing traditional clothing gives choir

members an opportunity to ask each other about their traditions and the meaning behind them. She explained:

Most of the time the clothes, not just clothes. Everything, they are meaning. If I ask them they will tell me. Oh what is this? What's that? What is the meaning? Why is the man and the woman they wear different? And like India, sometime if you are married or not married, they wearing different. So they show you the culture of the different country. Just in the performance they wear and you can see and you can feel.

Participant 2 explained that, to her, the difference between the choir and the classroom was expressed in her opportunity to learn about others. She felt that ESL classrooms, by nature, were to teach Canadian customs and English, thus leaving very little opportunity to learn about classmates:

I think in class we are learning language, in the choir we are learning from people and their culture. For me, in English, in LINC [Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada], we learn only English and Canadian culture. In the choir, we learn about everybody's culture. There's a lot. You cannot learn all that from class, I think.

Theme Five: Respect of One's Home Culture and First Language

In the Global Voices choir, what choir members know is not only acknowledged, but celebrated. Six out of the seven choir members interviewed discussed how sharing their own culture was a powerful experience for them.

For many of the participants who had spent many years in Canada, participation in the choir afforded them the opportunity to reconnect with their first language and culture in a meaningful way. One of the choir members, Participant 6, had very limited educational experiences in her first language. She explained that she felt fortunate to be able to learn her language at an ESL institution because she was not given the opportunity in her own country. She

described how this was a positive experience for her, “That’s why my teacher, he doesn’t know Chinese, but he teaches me Chinese. That’s a miracle for teachers, too. You are a miracle school. You can help us with all kinds of languages.” Participant 4 expressed that learning a song in his first language reconnected him to his past. He said, “I think really different, good for me. Really good for me, like this, because I learned a Chinese song again.”

Participant 3 previously spoke of learning about others from seeing them in their traditional dress. For her, wearing traditional clothes was a personally meaningful activity, which allowed her to share with others who she is. She articulated:

So at that moment, I wear my country clothes and I feel for others, I am Chinese, I am totally Chinese. I am inside and outside. So that feeling make me very happy. For others I am Chinese, and I share with others what kind of Chinese. I show my culture for another. Because this country is multicultural.

Choir members are welcome to bring their children to the practices and performances. Participant 2 explains that she brings her children so that they can learn about valuing their own culture. She stated:

That’s why we feel better when we come here. We are all important, we are all equal. That’s why, every time I come, I spend more than one hour to come here. The other things is good for me, because we are foreign. So I want my kids to know that it doesn’t matter where you come from you are the same. You are nothing different than the other people. Canadians are important, but Chinese are also important. Your language is important. It doesn’t matter where you come from. I want them to know that as well.

Theme Six: Meaningful Work

According to Freire, people differ from animals in that they are able to reflect on the meaning of their work, and that this reflection transforms the reality of humans. Four of the choir members interviewed stated how they benefited from working with the choir. Even small tasks are an important contribution to the choir's success. As Participant 4 says, "I always help the choir if somebody by take out the chairs or clean up the place. And take some glasses to be washed." Participant 7, who volunteers at the choir, also shares this sentiment.

Members practice for an audience not simply as a linguistic exercise. The Global Voices choir has gathered for performances that are paid, multicultural, or beneficial to important causes such as Family Literacy. Any money received from performances goes directly back to the choir so that it can pay for busses and events (Participant 1). Although the choir was not started with this aspect in mind, Global Voices has benefited from sharing its work with others. Participant 3 explained that performing in front of an audience makes her feel as if she contributes meaningfully to Canadian society. She described:

I also with a group and I do some performance with others and also they enjoy our song, so I think, I am important, we are together make feel how wonderful our life, how wonderful our singing. In that way I think I am important, I have value. Value I have I have from the choir. If I am not at the choir, I have no performance, I just stay home. For my family I have value, but for the social I am not. So the choir make me feel like I am a social member of this city, of this country. So I have value, like this. Really important.

Theme Seven: Literacy and Language Learning

In the choir, everyone learns together and from one another. If choir members feel inspired, they are encouraged to write a song based on an event or person to the tune of a familiar song. This voluntary activity began when Participant 7 wrote a song about the choir members' trip to perform at a conference. She described the trip and writing about it as her best experience in the choir. From a language learning exercise she shared this:

Because with music, if you like it you can learn it. Turn into learning English. The choir instructor and the choir director encourage us creating the song and writing and if you have some song you want to bring it in, they accept it. No criticism or no judgment or anything. Just take it easy and encourage us writing and they can help us to fix it.

Participant 1 also wrote a song for the choir, which he described as a blessing. Two choir members felt that they benefited from pronunciation and vocabulary learning. The first stated that singing along helps with pronunciation while another shared: "When we are singing an English song, I didn't understand a lot of words, also sitting beside me are a lot of teachers, so I just ask them what the words is and they explain the words. And from singing a song, you know sometimes my pronunciation is not good, but when you are singing they are long and make you sound perfect. And so from there. I learn a lot."

Theme Eight: Reflection and Personal Transformation

The choir members are reflective people who have thought deeply about their experiences, which have led them towards personal growth. All seven members of the choir had stated that they changed in some way because of their participation in the choir. Participant 1 felt the choir could "draw out your selfishness and help others."

Participant 7 felt that although she was initially shy in appearing before an audience, she has become more comfortable as a result of being in the choir. Participant 2 also described herself as shy, although not referring to performing. She used the choir as a chance to open up, feel like she belonged, and get to know others. She described her personal transformation like this:

Yes, many ways because I won't be that shy to talk to people in here. I think it is a good thing, too. Because I won't feel bad to talk to you sometimes. I sometimes just can't open my mouth. I will just say like I remember teacher told me. Some people just sit here, no one will be saying. You have different ways to say things. I will be, example, people will want you to say something nice for these people, and people might say thank-you, might really appreciate it, or they might do something nice for you, or cook for you, or just say nothing. I don't know. And that I will be feel more comfortable, because I think people is more understandable. I think there are more ways to show yourself.

Participant 3 described how she learned to feel Canadian as a result of being invited to the choir director's home. It was her very first experience to share a Christmas celebration with a Canadian family. She shared this comment:

And also from the choir I learn a lot of Canadian culture. You know first time I have been real Canadian home is [the choir director's] home, at the Christmas day. Like me, when I live in my country we didn't celebrate about Christmas day. When I just get here I just saw around Christmas day that everybody here happy and buy lots of things about Christmas Day. I just think it is not my life- that's not my life. So when [the choir director's] invite me to her house, I am very happy. My husband and my son go together. It is far away, the countryside, you know? It's a very wonderful house, and her husband show everything. And they have a greenhouse outside, even in the wintertime, -40! And I can feel the Christmas tree around, you know like the feeling, and the people together singing the Christmas song and eat the food is

together and also I know about [the choir director's] daughter. And I spend the whole night, from the afternoon to almost midnight, so since that I have known about how important Christmas is for the Canadians. So I feel like the next year, my family celebrates, is the same. So the next year I put a Christmas tree and I bought a lots of stuff, and my daughter and my son and I, we are together and we put in, and we eat some special food, so I'm like a Canadian. So I learn from them.

Reconnecting with their first language was a powerful experience for participants 4 and 6. Participant 6 described this experience: "For culture, you can get together. That's the amazing part, and I am very surprised. I never got this kind of love before. Before I stay at home and only cry. And no school, only Grade 3. And difficult but I don't give up, I keep working hard."

For Participant 5, belonging to the choir was more than simply singing and language learning. He considered his attendance to be a reminder to enjoy the important moments in life as they appear. He explained:

Fortunately, I got the time in the lunch time. If I work like another salaryman guys, I couldn't come. But in the future if I is getting such daytime work, I am not sure, I'll have to choose. But I want to concentrate to sing at this moment so that give me any power. In Japanese, we say ichigo-ichie. Once moment-one time. [Once in a lifetime opportunity] I want to take short time, it's important. I don't know another member think so or not, but I think so, that's why I actually its very I didn't expect singing is one of my favourite, but now I can say joining choir is more fun than a roller coaster!

Conclusion

As stated previously, Abrahams (2005) defines five principles in a curriculum driven by critical pedagogy: (1) establishment of problem-

solving relationships, (2) broadening of reality, (3) personal empowerment, (4) personal transformations, and (5) political elements. It is possible to view the Global Voices choir as an example of Freire's critical pedagogy through the comments of the choir members. These principles will be discussed below in reference to their application to the Global Voices choir.

The choir director explained that she founded the choir in order to create a space for newcomers and Canadians that was based on equal partnerships. She wanted to establish an environment that was not "us" and "them". She saw this dichotomous relationship as problematic and sought to establish a bridge between the two groups through music. Choir members, who spoke of their loneliness in Canada, also shared this sentiment. Through their participation in the choir they were shown how they could meet some of their personal needs and alleviate their loneliness.

Each of the participants demonstrated personal growth as a result of attending the choir. Some participants developed an ability to overcome shyness. Another developed the self-confidence to venture into the community on her own. Others reflected on their childhood experiences. One spoke about how he was able to offer his assistance to others. Another participant described his experiences in the choir as an opportunity to reflect upon the important things in life. These participants have shown that they were capable of making personal transformations and learned to see the world in a new way.

According to Abraham's definition, critical pedagogy is a political act. In the Global Voices choir, newcomers to Canada share their culture, their language, their songs, and their voice. These 7 choir members demonstrate how Canada's multicultural ideal can be actualized.

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Appendix*The Interview Guide*

1. Why do you think someone made the Global Voices choir?
2. When did you start singing in the choir? Are you a student, an employee, a teacher, other? How did you find out about the choir? Who told you to join the choir?
3. Why did you join the choir? Why is the choir fun for you?
4. Who are your friends in the choir? Do they speak the same language as you? Are you now friends inside and outside the choir?
5. How do you help the choir?
6. What do you learn in the choir? What do you teach other people in the choir?
7. Are you different because of the choir? How did you change and why?
8. How do you learn in the choir? How do you learn in the class? How are the classroom and the choir the same? How are the classroom and the choir different?
9. Does the choir help you to be creative? What do you like best: to perform in front of an audience or just to sing on Thursdays?
10. What is your best memory of the choir?
11. Is the choir fun? What is the most fun part? What is your favourite song? Why do you like it?

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