Pathways to resiliency; Understanding challenges and opportunities towards community youth engagement; a case study of rural Nova Scotia

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Cumberland County is located in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, close to the New Brunswick boarder. Cumberland County is made up by the Municipality of the County of Cumberland, two incorporated towns (Amherst and Oxford) and two Villages (Pugwash and River Hebert). According to Statistics Canada (2022) the population of Cumberland County, as of 2021, is 30,538, with the approximate size of the county being 4,248km2 (Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2019/20). The proposed project is a collaboration between Mount Saint Vincent University researchers, the Municipality of the County of Cumberland, the Town of Amherst, and the Town of Oxford in their mission to identify innovative solutions to engage youth in their communities. With this in mind, the research question is as follows,

Option 1: What barriers and challenges are in place that prevent youth from staying and thriving in their home community?

Option 2: How can Cumberland County become a location for youth resiliency?

Option 3:

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire's (1970) book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is foundational in understanding critical pedagogy, as this book is where the theory first emerged (Kellner, 2006). Freire's (1970)

theory turned education on its head by prompting a critical look into pedagogical practices, hence the name. Sandars (2016) defines critical pedagogy as "a philosophical perspective in which critical theory is applied to understand and change the practice of education" (p.351). Indeed, not only does this theory seek to change the institution of education itself, but it seeks to transform the key actors in education; as Kellner (2006) highlights, "Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed seeks to transform individuals from being objects of educational processes to subjects of their own autonomy and emancipation" (p.4). Furthermore, a critical pedagogy strives to foster a critical consciousness in students/youth (Donovan & Tracy, 2017) while committing to the oppressed (McLaren, 1998).

Freire (1970) prompts critical consciousness by first addressing the inadequacies and oppressive nature of the traditional education model, the banking concept of education. Not only does he criticize the current model, but he offers another alternative; problem-posing education. Freire (1970) wished to rebel against the oppressive forms of domination that he saw in the education system, he dreamed of a better, more just and liberating form of education, he strived to "develop a pedagogy of the oppressed that would produce revolutionary subjects, empowered to overthrow oppression and to create a more democratic and just social order" (Kellner, 2006, p.4). Although not all youth in community may find themselves in the traditional education system they are still impacted by oppressive pedagogy – whether it be in school, programs they attend, or organizations they are a part of.

Banking-Model

In order to understand critical pedagogy, one must understand the banking-model of education. Freire (1970) first coined the banking-model and described it as a subject-object relationship between student and teacher, with the student being the object and the teacher the

subject. Our current education system is the banking-model of education which consists of oppressive practices. Teachers are seen as the "bringer of knowledge" (Freire, 1970), while students are merely receptacles waiting to be filled with what is seen as the "right" knowledge. This further relates to educational scholar Michael Apple's (2000) concept of "official knowledge." Official knowledge can be understood as information that is seen as the dominant form of knowledge; it is not questioned but is seen as factual (Apple, 2000). Official knowledge works to reproduce dominant ideologies (Apple, 2000, p.145), thus furthering eurocentrism.

Official knowledge is held by the knowledge bringers, the teachers, who then "fill" the students, also seen as receptacles, with said knowledge. Students begin to see themselves as empty receptacles needing to be filled; "Almost never do they realize that they, too, 'know things' they have learned in their relations with the world" (Freire, 1970, p.63). In accordance with the banking-model of education the better a teacher fills these receptacles, the better the teacher they are. Students begin to become passive objects, as Freire (1970) highlights "The student records, memorizes, and repeats these phrases without perceiving what four times four really means, or realizing the true significance of 'capital'…" (p.71), this demonstrates that in this process students become filled with said official knowledge, failing to properly understand or to be critical of the knowledge with which they are bestowed. The banking-model of education leaves no room for creativity, for authentic thinking, for critical consciousness, or for meaningful dialogue, rather, it is merely a tool of the states continued oppression:

> The educated individual is the adapted person, because she or he is better 'fit' for the world. Translated into practice, this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it. (Freire, 1970, p.76)

Maintaining the banking-model of education is in the interest of the oppressors, of dominant, neo-colonial, neo-liberal, Eurocentric thought (Beattie, 2019; Kanu, 2006; Ross and Vinson 2013). Whether knowingly or not, educators play a role in this process (Cherry-McDaniel, 2016).

It is clear that a plethora of scholars are in agreeance with Freire that education is a vehicle for dominant hegemonic belief systems, morals, and knowledge. Disrupting the insidiousness of the current banking-model of education certainly will not be easy, it will be a transformation that is of immense pain and difficulty, as Freire (1970) discusses;

> Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people. Or to put it another way, the solution of this contradiction is born in the labor which brings into the world this new being: no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom (49).

In order to reach a moment of emancipation, transformation is required, which will indeed be a long and painful process. However, as Freire (1970) highlights in order to reach this liberation we must reject the banking-model of education, which brings us to the alternative; problem-posing education. Opposing current pedagogical practices not only opens up space for meaningful dialogue but it allows for community building.

Problem-Posing

In the problem-posing model of education, the student and teacher dichotomy dissolves. Instead, there are new roles of student-teachers and teacher-students (Freire, 1970). These newly acquired roles demonstrate that both teacher and student have the ability to be learners and teachers simultaneously (Freire, 1970, p.80). Both students and teachers become co-investigators

and present actors in their own learning. This co-investigation takes place through dialogue, which, according to Freire (1970), must be built on a foundation of love (p.89).

It is through these new roles and dialogical approach that oppression can no longer flourish, as the problem-posing model "does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor" (Freire, 1970, p.86). Furthermore, problem-posing education creates critical and independent thinkers; it allows for questions and problems to be posed through dialogue between the student-teachers and teacher-students. This model is a form of liberation education. It is through these new relationships and roles in the new model that dialogue can begin, thus aiding in transformation and liberation; as Freire (1970) states, "Dialogue with the people is radically necessary to every authentic revolution" (p.128). Although a transformation in educational practices may not be the means to an end in terms of a revolution, it certainly is a step forward.

Many scholars have already begun to explore problem-posing methods in education. Merriweather-Hunn (2004) suggests adopting a "conversational teaching style" (p.71), which can also be seen as a dialogic approach. She further suggests that "Giving learners an opportunity to convey how they feel about the material as opposed to just demonstrating what they know about it is key to tapping into the affective dimension of knowledge" (Merriweather-Hunn, 2004, p.72). Ross and Vinson (2013) suggest ways of working in the current model of banking-education that pushes back against it, an alternative that offers problem-posing methods;

> …school 'assignments' that attack school assignments. If schools have a homework policy, for instance, teachers and students might create projects in which they examine critically homework's positive and negative aspects. They might develop 'tests' in which essays ask students to critique standardized testing. (p.33)

Although each of these suggestions and steps may seem small, the reality is that "the revolutionary process is eminently educational in character" (Freire, 1970, p.138); indeed, schools and other educational locations can in fact be sites of liberation (Ross & Vinson, 2013).

Conclusion

The intricacies of critical pedagogy have been explored at length above, shedding light on the dimensions of this theoretical framework and the possibilities it holds. Small steps lead to significant changes, which is why implementing anti-oppressive pedagogical practices into local education systems here in Cumberland County holds the possibility for improved relations between youth and their community, as it is through this approach that dialogue can be opened up, and community can flourish.

Methodological Considerations

The Four Axioms of Methodology

According to McGregor & Munane (2010) there are four axioms of methodology. These include epistemology, ontology, axiology, and logic. Ontology can be understood as your view of the world (Lagenbach et al., 1994), or your perception of the nature of reality (Grix, 2002; McGregor & Murnane 2010). Indeed, ontology is "…the starting point of all research" (Grix, 2002, p.177). Epistemology on the other hand is "what counts as knowledge and ways of knowing (McGregor & Murnane, 2010), and "the study of knowledge" (Ponterotto, 2005, p.127). Both ontology and epistemology or intertwined, for as Usher (1996) states "Epistemological and ontological questions are related since claims about what exists in the world imply claims about how what exists may be known" (p.11).

The third axiom of methodology is axiology, which is your values and morals and how they play a part in your research (Lagenbach et al., 1994; McGregor & Murnane, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). This plays a crucial role in the research process and is thus an important point of reflection. Finally, the fourth axiom of methodology is logic. Logic is defined by McGregor & Murnane (2010) as how "people come to their understandings; what is acceptable as rigour and inference in the development of arguments, judgements, insights, revelations, or social action" (p.426). It is also important to reflect on what is important and what gets to count as logic in the research process. Reflecting on and understanding my own ontological, epistemological, axiological, and logical stances and locations is key in understanding my own methodological approaches.

Ontology

My ontological stance is that of reflection and openness. I will be practicing ontological openness throughout my research process and beyond. Ontological openness can be understood as; "A willingness and commitment to open to ways of knowing and sources of knowledge that may be new and unfamiliar (to me); and to persist through uncomfortable experiences of not-knowing and having my existing ontology challenged" (Emmanouil, 2017, as cited in Hughes & Wilson, 2019, p.10). Being open to new ideas and realities will be crucial in my methodological approach. Furthermore, my ontology will be relational. As Hughes & Wilson (2019) state; "According to relational ontology, we are not searching for an objective truth that we are somehow 'outside of; as researchers'" (p.15). Relational ontology recognizes that we as researchers are deeply connected to the work that we do and the people with whom we work with.

Epistemology

Similar to my ontological approach I will be undertaking a relational epistemology. According to (Huffman, 2018) a relational epistemology is "an approach to knowing that highlights the relationships between knowers" (p.19). The "knowers" in this case are myself (the researcher) and the participants. Both my participants and I have something to bring to the table, as we both exist as "knowers" in the world (Huffman, 2018). This also relates to Freire's (1970) work and discussing dialogic relations; for as we build trusting relationships we can come together to know and name the world together as equals (Freire, 1970; Huffman, 2018).

My work as a scholar is also deeply intertwined with my own personal beliefs and my role as an activist, which leads me to find my epistemological home in relationality, as Huffman (2018) states scholars "who are committed to activism and social justice often do not fit fully into the paradigms of postpositive, interpretive, or critical traditions" (p.19), thus relational epistemology fills this gap. Indeed, relational epistemology leaves room for growth, for relationship building, and for understanding how interconnected we all really are (Huffman, 2018; Lim, 2015). Thayer-Bacon (1997, as cited in Huffman, 2018), sums up my feelings towards my own way of knowing, my epistemology, when he states that "I view knowing as an activity, like dancing, singing, or loving, that is done with others" (p.243). It is my hope that this relational approach to my work fosters feelings similar to dancing, singing, and loving, something we, myself and the participants, can do and create together.

Axiology and Logic

I have already begun to touch on my axiological stance as I am not only a social scientist, but I am an activist as well. I should note that my political stance is deeply tied into my own work as an academic, to say otherwise is, in my belief, a mere myth, a fallacy. Bracketing is

impossible from my ontological and epistemological view. Our personal realities, stories, relationships, and experiences play a key role in how we see and interact with the world. For instance, my positionality as a cis-gendered, able-bodied, bisexual, white-settler, educated woman, deeply impacts how I connect with and see the world. Practicing this kind of reflexivity is crucial to the work that I do. This coupled with the plethora of academic literature that I have discussed above allows for a glimpse into the ways in which I approach my research and my work as an academic. Furthermore, my academic work inspires my political and activist work, and my political and activist work inspires my academic work. It is a reciprocal relationship that is intrinsically tied. My research, similar to my own political underpinnings, comes from a leftist ideology.

It is my belief that research be for the people, that it lead to meaningful change in community (Wilson, 2008). If my work is to be truly relational than it makes sense that my axiology and logical approaches align with community values. I will employ a methodology that encompasses my ontological, epistemological, and axiological approaches that are all relational. All of which leads to my understanding of logic (McGregor & Murnane, 2010). To me, logic need not only follow Westernized modes of thinking and rules, rather, logic can be relational and community focused.

Ethics, Reciprocity, Reflexivity, & Relationships

Before interacting with any participants, I will have to go through a rigorous review process so as to ensure ethical standards have been met. Firstly, I would have to go through the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Board & would further have to follow the Tri-Council Policy Statement, with specific attention paid to working with vulnerable populations as I will be working with youth.

As researchers it is important for us to reflect on reciprocity (Scott & Garner, 2013). Moreover, we must ask ourselves "What is 'in it' for individuals who provide the life narratives?" (Scott & Garner, 2013, p.314). These individuals who will be providing narratives and sharing their own stories in my research should have something to gain from this experience. My research will have a reciprocal, relational element to it. The goal is to go forth, together, as knowers who have something to learn and gain from one another. I want there to be something worthwhile in this experience for each of my participants. Important to reciprocity is building relationships. Specifically with my focus on critical narrative analysis, which will be explored in depth below, it is crucial to build meaningful relationships with my participants (M.J. Harkins, personal communication, 2021, Scott & Garner, 2013). Indeed, this relationship will be "dynamic, flexible, and reciprocal" (Dewey, 1958, as cited in Thayer-Bacon, 1997). Not only will I build a relationship, but I will ensure that my research participants understand that they have something to gain from this interaction. I will work with participants to understand how this working relationship can be a reciprocal one, as I want them to gain just as much from this work as I am.

Methods

As a reminder the question I have chosen to explore is as follows; INSERT

I plan to take a qualitative approach and conduct semi-structed interviews. These will be one on one interviews with chosen program facilitators. Sharing circles, where all participants share and discuss in a circle together, may also be employed with all facilitators and volunteers of each group. This approach will require excellent rapport and relationship building (MJ. Harkins, personal communication, March 10th, 2021; Scott & Garner, 2013). This relationship building is important to me ontologically and epistemologically

Research Participants

Research participants will be youth who reside in the County of Cumberland in Nova Scotia, Canada. The term youth will be defined as the following, anyone between the ages of ‘’’ The youth will have to be willing to take part in the chosen research methods, which will be discussed in detail below. Inclusion and exclusion criteria?

Research Process

The first step of my research process has already begun, as past work that I have done up until this point lends nicely to my research. However, a further study of the literature will need to be conducted, with focus on the following areas;

Once my Literature Review is officially complete, I will have a strong foundation of knowledge from which to start my research. My Theoretical Framework will also lend well to my research process. Indeed, building a foundational knowledge is crucial before presenting my research for approval.

Once I have successfully become a PhD Candidate, have defended my research proposal, and have secured funding from Mitacs, I will then begin to develop relationships with participants. I will then move forward with my research ethics applications. As was mentioned previously I will have to go through the Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. All while following the Tri-Council Policy Statement. Once my ethics applications are approved, I can begin participant recruitment. I will work with the Cumberland Community Youth Development Centre,

It is here where I will begin to explain my own positionality, privileges, and interests. It is my goal to meet with my participants a few times prior to officially conducting interviews, in

order to foster a trusting relationship. It is in these first few initial meetings where I will focus on reciprocity, what can they get out of this experience? I will be conducting research with my participants not on them, so their feedback is important. Once a relationship is further developed then I can begin the official interviewing process. I will be recruiting "HOW MANY?" participants for one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Interviews will occur at the place of most convenience for the participant, one option in particular is the Cumberland Community Youth Development Centre. For instance, interviews could take place in a space as formal as a conference room or in a café with a coffee in hand. This will ultimately be up to the participant.

A questionnaire for these interviews will be crafted by myself with feedback from my supervisor and the rest of my dissertation committee, which is still being formed. The interview questions will then be presented to participants and the Poverty Reduction Committee (PRAC), prior to the formal interview so as to ensure that questions they agree with are included. As mentioned previously this research will be done *with* the participants not *on* participants. The research process will ensure to respect relationships with the participants and to respect their own voices, opinions, and their position of "knowers" for we are coming together as equals who can name and live in the world together (Freire, 1970). Once myself, the participants, my supervisor, PRAC, and the ethics boards have confirmed approval I can then begin to conduct interviews. Interviews will be recorded through a secure recording device. These documents will be on my laptop that is password secure.

As the researcher I will ensure participants are fully informed by orally communicating their rights, safety, and potential risks. Participants will give oral consent for interviews. Participants will be informed that they can stop the interview at any time. If they choose to withdraw from the study and if an interview is underway then the recording will be destroyed.

Participants will also have the opportunity to contact me, up until completion of the research process, and can ask to withdraw their data.

Once interviews are finished being conducted, I will then begin the process of transcription. I will transcribe my own interviews so as to immerse myself in the data and in the narratives that participants provide. I will then conduct Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) and will ensure that my findings are discussed with participants so as to ensure that their narratives were interpreted correctly (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2018). Ensuring that research participants are a part of creating and interpreting interview results is crucial to my work and methodological stance. Along with input from participants I will utilize the unique methodological approach of Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) which I will now explore.

Understanding Critical Narrative Analysis

In order to understand CNA, we must start by understanding the two components that make up this approach; Narrative Analysis (NA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). I will begin by exploring Narrative Analysis.

According to Souto-Manning (2014) "Narratives are how we make sense of what we know, what we feel and experience in the world in which we live" (p,162). Narratives are a crucial part of the human experience. Indeed, narratives allow for us to see what matters and how it matters to the narrator (Kleres, 2011, p.184). Narrative Analysis is ultimately utilized to analyze and dissect "the narrative structure of the interview text" (Kleres, 2011, p.183) which is an incredible tool to employ in qualitative studies like my own.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on the other hand is defined as "an approach to answering questions about the relationships between language and society" (Rogers et al., 2005, p.366).

CDA allows for an examination of power relations, discourse, and social inequality in society by looking at language (McKenna, 2004, p.10 as cited in Souto-Manning, 2014, p.162).

Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) combines both CDA and NA in order to address gaps in discourse analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014, p.162). By doing so it brings forth the possibility of tangible, meaningful change. CNA allows for the analysis of people's stories that are "within the context of institutional discourses" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p.163). Indeed, CNA allows not only for the researcher to make sense of these narratives, but it allows for the narrator themselves to "make sense of their experiences through narratives, they bring together the micro (personal) and the macro (social or institutional) situations in place" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p.163) which is incredibly similar to Wright's (1959) concept of the sociological imagination. As a sociologist myself I deeply connect to both concepts of the sociological imagination and CNA, as connecting individual, micro troubles and experiences to the macro institutionalized structures of society is crucial in the work that I do.

CNA is powerful in the sense that it can lead to transformative change, as Souto-Manning (2014), highlights; "If we are to engage in positive social change, we must start by listening to and analyzing the everyday stories people tell" (p.177). My work of collecting stories and narratives through the interviewing process will allow for my participants and I to engage in social change.

As an overview, CNA allows for relationships to grow as the researcher is a listener, they are on common ground with the participants who then share their experiences, thoughts, and knowledge, through their stories and narratives. This brings forth meaningful insights not only for the researcher but the participants as well, further highlighting the reciprocal relationship that this research encourages. Finally, CNA allows for transformative change to occur as it takes

research a step beyond theory; which further connects to Gramsci's concept of "the new intellectual; "the academic who refuses to stay locked up in the ivory tower and, instead, goes to the streets to work with and on behalf of the least privileged" (DeMeulenaere & Cann, 2013, p.557). As someone who identifies as a "new intellectual" I believe that CNA can allow for myself and others to utilize our research to bring forth meaningful change with and for the communities within which we work and live. It is my hope that through my relationship with my participants we can aim to bring forth change, regardless of size, into the community; as I never want to be an armchair sociologist, rather, I am an activist who values relations which is why CNA is so fitting with my work. Therefore, I will employ CNA as a way to analyze my data, to assess narratives and the stories that my participants tell in order to understand what is meaningful to them. In order to achieve full transparency and to maintain a relational approach I will be discussing my findings from my analysis with the participants themselves so as to ensure that their narratives are being portrayed in an authentic manner.

In conclusion I am aiming for my research to take on a relational approach, something that I believe will be achieved thanks to my epistemological, ontological, axiological, and logical standings accompanied with my methodological approach of Critical Narrative Analysis. Indeed, as researchers we have to ask ourselves, if research is not done for the community than who is it for?

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