Re-Engaging Youth: Using Discourse Analysis to Explore Individual Agency and Community Belonging

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Abstract: One of the perennial challenges in public education is how to re-engage youth on the margins of education. One of the strategies for re-engaging youth is guiding them into alternative schools. Using Thematic Role Analysis, this paper examines the ways and timeframes that youth identify as agents and members in two alternative school communities.

Major issues addressed

Currently in the United States, alternative high schools exist as one of the primary mechanisms in public education for supporting "at-risk" youth (Tierney, 2016). When educational systems, officially and unofficially, define success and failure, marginalization and inequity of participation become part of the process of school (Vadeboncoeur, 2009). In this way, alternative schools often serve youth who, in some way or another, have been marginalized, and possibly unsuccessful, in school. The role of alternative schools then becomes to not only support youths' academic success, but also helping youth redefine their academic identities and their role in school (Tierney, 2016). This paper explores the ways youth discuss themselves as participants in education and within the specific learning communities in two alternative schools.

Potential significance

Work on re-engaging youth in education often focuses on either changing the youth or changing the contexts and influences of youths' lives (te Riele, 2007). In both instances, youth are acted upon without a significant voice in the process. This paper looks specifically at how youth discuss themselves and uses discourse analysis to explore the ways they do or do not talk of themselves as active agents in their lives and connected members to their schools. When rethinking learning, the Learning Sciences need to continue to explore new ways to broaden participation and narrow the margins of public education.

Theoretical approaches

Previous research has explored how agency and authenticity can impact youth identity development, providing opportunities for youth to put parts of themselves into their participation in school (Nasir, 2012). Participation in a community of practice simultaneously shapes the identity of the participants and also the community of practice itself (Wenger, 1998). Membership can thus be observed through shifting engagement in the practices and values of a community. Youth discourse was analyzed using thematic role analysis (Finegan, 2011) to look at the timeframes in which youth developed membership in the communities.

Methodological approaches

The data for this paper is from a larger ethnographic study that explored youth identity development throughout youths' first year in two public alternative high schools, Pathways and Redwood (all names in this paper are pseudonyms). This paper reports on findings from a thematic role analysis (Finegan, 2011) that was completed to complement qualitative analysis on youth participation and discourse, reported in Tierney (2016). Pathways is a small one-year high school program (approximately 50 students) where youth school are leaders at the district-run wilderness camp, leading visiting groups of sixth graders. Redwood is a larger high school (approximately 350 students), without grades and with a focus on personalized learning and democratic education. At both schools, students either self-selected into the schools, seeking a learning alternative, or were guided into the schools because of credit deficiency, truancy, etc. At both schools, all incoming transfer students were recruited for the study and case youth were chosen because of previous experiences with marginalization in school. Case youth were interviewed throughout the school year (five to seven hours each) and were observed in multiple school classes and contexts (approximately 20 hours each). Initially, data was qualitatively coded to examine resources and processes of youth identity development (Tierney, 2016). Following that, thematic role analysis was used to reexamine interviews and surveys. The analysis focused specifically on the agents used in their responses ("I", "we") and the action (verbs) connected to the agents. Specifically, interviews from two comparison cases were chosen for analysis – DJ from Pathways High School and Penelope from Redwoods High School. Interviews from the beginning of the year (October), midyear (February), and end of year (May) were used to see shifts in discourse over time. Survey data and interviews from two additional cases were then

analyzed. Surveys were completed by all consented youth in September, following orientation, and focused on their previous education and reasons for enrolling in the alternative schools.

Major findings

As reported in Tierney (2016), while the two sites shared many similar resources for supporting youth identity development, they approached the role of the individual and community differently. Teachers and youth at Redwood focused on personalized learning (self-guided learning, personal responsibility for learning) and community participation (school committee participation). While teachers and youth at Pathways focused on the individual as part of the community (community leadership, team building). Analysis identified differences in how youth oriented to the school community and the timeframe it took to do so.

"I" and "we": Differences in use and action

Throughout the interviews in the study, youth used the pronouns "I" and "we". However, how they used those pronouns differed in relation to whether or not they described themselves as active agents and what goals their use of "I" and "we" were connected to. The use of "I" as an agent followed a similar pattern across the two cases, indicating that both youth talked about themselves as active agents at the alternative schools. Throughout the year, both students employed a range of verbs in relation to the alternative schools, including opinions, observations, and a number of actions for what they saw themselves as able to do in school.

While there were some minor differences across the two cases in how they used "I" as an agent, the bigger difference occurred in the use of "we" as an agent. DJ used "we" to describe actions that the students had done, but also when describing Pathways ("We're all trying to get to know each other and we always call each other family"). Penelope, on the other hand, used "we" when describing actions they had done in class, out-of-school activity (horseback riding), and her experiences at her previous school ("We just wrote whatever the teacher wanted us to"), never when describing Redwood. At the middle and end of the year both DJ and Penelope regularly used "we" as the agent when talking about the alternative schools. However, Penelope typically used "we" to describe actions she and other students took in and out of classes, while DJ used "we" to describe actions he and other students took, but also to describe Pathways and more abstract practices done at the school ("It's because we get to think about how to be a better you"). This use of "we" seemed to show the shared repertoire and alignment with the communities that Penelope developed over the year and that DJ had developed early and then maintained. A second round of analysis focused on surveys interviews from two other cases and produced primarily similar results, with the Pathways students talking about themselves as community members very early in the year.

The patterns that case youth used shows how, over the course of the year, the various ways that discourse around agency and community membership shifted. These findings seem to indicate that the learning contexts of the two schools influenced how youth talked about themselves, specifically how they spoke of themselves as a part of the learning community. This contributes to work that examines trajectories of community membership and belonging (Wenger, 1998), resources for identity development (Nasir, 2012), the utility of discourse analysis to examine engagement and membership (Finegan, 2012), the design and implementation of alternative schools (Tierney, 2016), and the re-engagement of youth as they reframe school and their role in it (te Riele, 2007; Vadeboncoeur. 2009). With the goal of supporting the learning and identity development of diverse, and often marginalized, youth in education, future work would benefit from examining youth discourse on identity development and community membership and the specific community and identity resources available for youth in and across learning environments.

References

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