

Clearing the Clouds: Finding Motivation and Clarity in a Non-Traditional Dissertation Using Arts Based Educational Research (ABER)

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ABSTRACT

By crafting a dramatic script about struggling high school readers that I then shared with real students in my Reading classes, I applied Arts-based education research (ABER) methods. Through the writing, presentation, collection, and reflection on student feedback, as well as during the script rewriting process, I was allowed to engage in a unique and motivating research experience. This approach allowed me to attend to three challenges with my Dissertation in Practice (DiP). First, instead of being part of this big, scary, abstract world called 'research', it allowed me to demonstrate inquiry through a means that I was more familiar and confident with—writing and theatre. My confidence working in these areas allowed me to initiate and remain engaged throughout the dissertation work. Second, it allowed me to take on a problem in my practice—the skepticism of many high school students in Reading classes about being in those classes. This helped me better understand my students, and thus inform and guide in the identification of best practices. Third, it positioned me to work with colleagues and administrators in my building and across our school district to rethink how we offer reading support to the heterogeneous cross-section of students who currently are being identified as needing such support. This account summarizes my DiP and, I hope, positions other classroom teachers who double as EdD students to imagine new and effective ways forward as they engage with problems of practice.

KEYWORDS

ABER, dissertation in practice (DiP), teacher as researcher, adolescent literacy, reading intervention, high school, Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate-informed EdD program (CPED).

For me, the dissertation loomed over the entirety of my doctoral journey like a heavy cloud, ominous, but not yet consequential. Just the notion of having to confront such a task made me hesitate to apply to what the University of Nebraska-Lincoln directly refers to as 'CPED' (i.e., their Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate-affiliated EdD program). When I began courses, I pushed that fear to the back of my mind, reassuring myself that I was in a practitioner-centered program where I would be supported and guided. And I did like that I could still primarily identify as a practitioner, even if I was an increasingly restless one. Still, as I wrapped up course work and was expected to focus on a problem of practice, the dissertation darkness closed in. I found myself nearly paralyzed despite the support of my cadre and the university personnel who believed in my abilities.

As Margaret Macintyre Lata and Susan Wunder (2012) explained in *Placing Practitioner Knowledge at the Center of Teacher Education: Rethinking the Policy and Practice of the Education Doctorate*, CPED works to foster and create agents of professional practice who then become creators of change. It is a tenet of CPED that institutions of higher education should honor and cultivate practitioner knowledge, promoting educators' exploration of various dynamics in their professional environments. It is there, in their classrooms and daily work spaces, where practitioners are best able

to re-envision policy, practice, professional learning, and goal setting in the 21st century.

Ahead of my DiP, throughout my doctoral studies, I found that my daily work in the classroom was valued. My coursework aligned with the real-life needs of and questions created in my day-to-day interaction with staff, students, and curriculum. But in regard to engaging myself in the research, analysis, and writing of a formal dissertation, there remained a disconnect. My experiences did not seem to fit within the parameters of the traditional dissertations that I had learned about up to that point.

MARES' TAILS AND MACKEREL SCALES - FINDING MY PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

An old weather adage goes, *Mares' tails and mackerel scales make tall ships take in their sails*. I knew early on that I wanted to explore high school reading but taking on such a wide topic had me floundering. In a sense, I took *in my sails* - and made little initial progress in my dissertation work because I didn't know where to start research within this great sea of literacy-related information.

I knew that my problem of practice was important, not just for my students, but for students across my district. The experiences in



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my city were likely not so different from those across the country, and the consequences of inadequate Reading intervention with adolescents continue to be concerning (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004; 2005; Wilhelm, 2016). Acknowledging that this term is often used pejoratively, 'illiterate' individuals can find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty with few options for employment. En masse, globally, this population strains health and welfare programs and contributes to higher crime statistics (Cree et al., 2012). As a developed nation, the United States is not immune from illiteracy, nor aliteracy (referencing those who technically can read but don't [Decker, 1986]). According to an American Psychological Association study, a third of U.S. teenagers have not read a book for pleasure in at least a year (Ducharme, 2018).

Reading scores for students in high school continue to decrease, with only a third of U.S. students finding themselves "college ready" after high school graduation (Camera, 2016). Each year the test scores are reviewed revealing the ever-widening opportunity gap between those who are college ready and those who were denied the chance to have the experiences necessary to reach that goal (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Still, teens are putting down books and picking up their phones to text and scroll through social media posts and other forms of digital media (Ducharme, 2018), so an unwillingness to engage with text is not exactly the problem. The solution in most schools is an attempt to remediate these low achievers to help them catch up. In my district this often occurs through placement in Reading classes, including my own.

While the mission of the adults who make these placements is to narrow the achievement gap and build students up, the reality is that the patterned and widespread placement in intervention classes creates greater problems. (I am intentionally using "achievement gap" here rather than "opportunity gap" [Ladson-Billings, 2006; Carter & Welner, 2013] to convey the dominant framing of the problem, even as I find "opportunity gap" to be a more equity-oriented stance and use it elsewhere.) Still, the problem confronted by Reading classes is not the act of intervention per se. Intervention for students who struggle in reading at the high school level is necessary. This is especially true for students with disabilities in the areas of reading and language. As Lovett et al. (2012) noted, "It is easier to address reading disabilities in the primary grades, but it is important not to abandon the hundreds of thousands of adolescents and young adults who are reading impaired and who will still commit to reading instruction" (p. 164).

To understand the problem of current reading intervention practice, one must look past the well-intentioned policy makers and instead look critically at the students this intervention is focused on. It will take only moments for a perceptive 'teacher eye' to identify that students of color, students with disabilities, students identified as ELL (English Language Learners), and students receiving free and reduced lunch are disproportionately represented in these courses.

A Break in the Clouds - The Process of Inquiry

Despite my passion and clear understanding of what quality reading instruction should look like and my strong desire to 'make a difference', how to illustrate these ideas within the confines of a traditional dissertation continued to puzzle me. Thankfully, I had the good fortune to take a class that focused on critical and anti-colonizing theories in education. It was in this class that some of the clouds cleared, and I made a breakthrough in my thinking. Inspired

by the writings of scholars who work to raise the voices of underrepresented populations (e.g., Anzaldúa et. al., 1987; Bhattacharya, 2016; Espinoza-Dulanto, 2017; Huber, 2009, and Ladson-Billings, 1995), I found the means to get to the heart of the problem of practice within my high school Reading classroom. The problem of reading instruction in high school was not mine alone to solve, but something to be conquered by all stakeholders. In order to address the negative aspects of the current system of intervention, I knew I had to hear my students' voices, and provide them with a means to speak, and be heard.

Yet I also knew (even before the COVID-19 epidemic made everything much more complicated) that getting an IRB to focus on my own students and their vulnerable status would be difficult. In lieu of that more conventional route, I realized that I could create a curriculum product and see if students thought it sufficiently described their various realities, aspirations, and struggles. Moreover, I could see if, as their teacher, such a product effectively engaged them.

Teacher-created and teacher-implemented improvements in instructional practices can do much (Latta & Wunder, 2012), but in my own classroom, despite my whole-hearted and professional investment in the process, the work I was already doing was only getting my students so far. I knew that I had to learn their opinions, experiences, and needs to implement more effective reading interventions.

The question was then: How could I go about involving students in the research process? I feared my reluctant and struggling readers would not be able to provide me with the rich narrative data I was hoping for. Countless attempts at collecting student interest inventories about reading have taught me that students who do not like to read also do not like to talk about their reading. I had to find a way to present the concepts and ideas of what it means to be a struggling reader in a way that would urge (dare I say "trick"?) them into talking and writing about their reader identities. I found the solution in Art Based Educational Research (ABER).

ABER dissertations involve an inquiry-rich process and value the perspectives of both researchers and research subjects. Such dissertations offer a:

Commitment to creative ways of knowing and researching as a journey of transformation. They are seeking to spell out in theory and practice how poetry, drama, fiction, visual art, and performance all contribute to ways of knowing and becoming, to conceptions of epistemology and ontology (Sinner et.al., 2006, p. 1237).

Using my years of experience working with high school students as inspiration, I decided to author a 'non-fiction fiction' script, which was composed using the personalities and reader identities of various high school students in my past classes as well as incorporating traits of struggling readers I have encountered through professional readings. (Non-fiction fiction was the strategy used by the late educational reformer Theodore Sizer, in his widely-read *Horace Trilogy* [Sizer, 1984; 1992; 1996] that argued for substantial changes in American high schooling. In it, fictitious aggregations of real experiences are used to convey key points without risking any given individual's privacy.)



The Skies Broke Open: Inquiry in the Time of COVID

My excitement had been restored, but just as I was crafting timelines for writing, reading, and processing the feedback of my students, I found myself, along with the rest of the world, in a state of lock down. The Covid-19 pandemic influenced this research and our school in several ways. After a disrupted Spring that ended with almost two months of remote instruction, all our district high schools began the fall semester of 2020 on a hybrid schedule with roughly half of students attending in-person two days a week and half the students attending three days per week (and then alternating the next week). On the days that students were at home, they were to participate in synchronous ZOOM instruction. Because the split was alphabetical and systemwide (A's-L's last names one day, M's to Z's the other), 'halves' were not always equally sized. Sometimes the splits were pretty equal, but for some of my sections, one half of the alphabet ended up significantly smaller than the other with one of my groups having only two students. I drafted my script over the summer, but I had students use it in the unusual and distracting circumstance of our Fall hybrid model.

I presented the students with a rough draft of my script, complete with spelling errors and miscopied pages. While not initially intentional, the errors proved to add an informality to the material that helped put the students at ease. My classes then read the scripts together, taking time to identify the parts of the piece they connected to personally, as well as sharing what aspects of their reader identities were missing from the short play. This input allowed me to rework and expand the script to better represent the students. Because of this experience, I, as a teacher-researcher, felt better about my abilities to make informed instructional decisions related to curriculum and specific classroom interventions. I also had a new resource with which to engage colleagues and administrators as we try to troubleshoot our current challenges with teaching Reading at the high-school level.

This lack of balance and the challenge of engaging students on ZOOM—some would turn off their cameras and go back to bed, or, as one student confessed, to go fishing—made the initial readings of the play lack-luster. Because students were not present daily in person, I also found that building a classroom community was a slower process. Still, we persevered. At the time of data collection, I did have concerns that the students did not yet feel comfortable enough to provide the open honest feedback essential for the success of this project. So, I was very proud that when it came time to commit to the task, they took their role as critical agents of change seriously and provided engaged, useful feedback for my script revision.

Chasing Away the Clouds: The Work Takes Shape

During the summer, as I began to write the script, the pieces began to come together, and I was able to begin to see my problem of practice developing into an actual dissertation. In the writing of the full script, I made notes of characteristics I wanted to include. I also had a list with daily instructional strategies and activities that could help create a realistic classroom situation. Beyond that, I let my imagination do the work. At the risk of sounding a bit crazy, I admit that, like many writers, I 'see' and 'hear' the characters I write about. This phenomenon has been described by scholars at Durham University. Their work was conducted at the Edinburgh International

Book festival in 2014 and 2018 (Foxwell et al., 2020). In their interviews, they discovered that nearly two-thirds of the authors said that they heard their characters voices. Half identified that they could sense them by other means. Over half reported that their characters possessed agency, making their own choices, even if those wishes went against the author's own.

I cite this research in hopes to help the reader understand the process in creating this piece of non-fiction fiction. As the characters "told me" their stories (in my head), I was connecting to my brain's rich catalog of observations and memories of specific children. For additional ideas, I also pulled reader traits from authors who describe struggling readers well (e.g., Beers, 2003; Mueller, 2001; Strommen & Mates, 2004; Tovani, 2000; Wilhelm, 2016; Willingham, 2009; Woods & Jociou 2013, and likely others).

This premise of a researcher being "in the midst" of the research is not a new concept to academia. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss the concept of the three-dimensional inquiry space and how it allows researchers to move between "intimacy with field participants and a reflective stance" (p.95). In this, they were referring specifically to field texts. While I was not recording in-the-moment live experiences, making the tie to Clandinin and Connelly more analogous than literal, I was immersed and responding critically within the fictional reality I created. There was intimacy and I took reflective stances.

It was in this creative mode that other characters came to me. Characters with rich stories of their own. I could imagine us (teacher and students) in my classroom with students interacting and reacting to instruction. It is through this imaginary that I determined this script was no longer separate student profiles, but in fact an extended one act play, one with stage directions that could further illustrate student and teacher actions that were not captured through dialogues or monologues alone.

I found this intersection between academic knowledge, personal experience, and creative expression to be one of deep reflection. While in the midst of writing, I was fully immersed in the work and able to experience all aspects of the research (researcher and student perspectives, research readings, and practitioner knowledge) I had encountered up to this moment of writing. In the writing I was able to interact with each element simultaneously.

HERE COMES THE SUN: RESEARCH AND ITS OUTCOMES

My students were introduced to the script in different ways, depending on the needs and comfort levels of each class. With one group, student volunteered to read parts, with another I read the script aloud to them. The students were aware that this script and their feedback were part of my dissertation work and that I would be sharing their thoughts and opinions about both the writing and their feelings about reading with people at the University.

Students noted their concerns and likes by hi-lighting and annotating the script. I asked that they use one color of hi-lighter to indicate if something was "like me", and another color to indicate if they found a section of the script to be "not realistic". They were also encouraged to write notes about content within the script. I was delighted to find how seriously they took the read through, and how much feedback they were willing to provide.



That fall, with student feedback on the script and the regular day-to-day reading activities, such as Reading Interest Inventories and Reading Profiles that I also use, I was able to see that students' perceptions about Reading varied based on their needs, their ability to manage the demands of school and society (assignments, expectations, procedures, attendance), their perception of self, and their attitude about the specific class and school more generally.

I was surprised to discover just how many students didn't mind Reading class and who thus felt underrepresented in my initial script. In my re-write, I attempted to address the identities of students who like Reading and feel like Reading is helping them improve their skills. I did so by developing the character Liam, who was added to the second version of the script. Still, the main story line remains that a broad and heterogeneous group of students did not particularly like Reading and/or what it implies about them, their futures, and how they are positioned to negotiate school, but they did like seeing their discomfort, struggles, and anxiety made visible in a script.

This research helped illustrate the complexities of high school Reading. It is more than ever evident to me that there is not a one-shot quick-fix solution for the diverse array of needs facing struggling readers (Deshler et al., 2004; Shanahan, 2004).

One thing prevalent in the literature and in the feedback I received from students, is a need for support to go beyond the walls of the classroom. There is an overwhelming amount of evidence for the increased practice of shared responsibility for literacy (Brozo, 2011; Deshler, et. al., 2004; Fuchs et al., 2008). Teachers in the content areas should not dumb down their texts to meet the needs of struggling readers but should instead partner with reading specialists and Special Education experts in reading intervention to develop and teach reading strategies that will allow all readers to access text in the content areas.

There has been an explosion of research in regard to the importance of explicit and sustained practice in code-based reading strategies for students with dyslexia. (Bhattacharya, 2020, Hanford, 2020, Kilpatrick, 2015; Lewin, 2003; Willis, 2018). The lines of my script that addressed this important (but limited intervention) in high school classrooms were affirmed by my students who struggle with reading because of dyslexia. These students acknowledged teachers' inability to provide one-on-one intensive intervention within a large and busy Reading class. They marked the text in agreement that they appreciated such interventions when they were provided in lower grades. Additional teacher preparation in this area would contribute to the success of these students and students like them.

Good content reading instruction includes practices to increase student motivation and engagement, generic literacy and learning practices, and content-specific literacy practices (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004; 2005). Within the area of literacy practices, four broad areas should be addressed; they are word knowledge/vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing (Shanahan, 2004). Within this range of interventions, code-based reading strategies should not be overlooked, particularly for students with dyslexia, as their instructional needs cannot be met by broad comprehension or segmented phonics instruction (Willis, 2018). This population requires intensive, systematic, multi-sensory instruction if they are to make sufficient gains in reading. Referencing the script and my students' resonance with it, perhaps we should note, as a third dimension of where the research literature and my classroom experience overlap, that students in Reading classes agree that the challenges identified are challenges and thus that responses need to

be comprehensive. They too agree that high school Reading cannot just confront one problem.

The opportunity gap persists for young people of color and those of poverty (Carter & Welner, 2013). I acknowledge that Reading Intervention classes can be a positive intervention, but I, as a white woman of some means, cannot alone assume what is best and I know that students in my class can feel stigmatized, a stigma that may be reiterated in other school experiences they have too. The education-debt remains unpaid (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and we can no longer see students as a problem to be fixed, or a bill to be paid then forgotten. Young people who have been consistently underserved deserve to have teachers and administrators fighting to make sure that their placement in intervention courses brings them closer to their goals, not farther from them. "Too many young people leave our schools with identities as poor readers and failures, a situation that cautions us, first to do no harm. Programs that exacerbate youth's negative identity constructions around ...and there are more positive alternatives" (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009, p. 11).

Reading classes are not the enemy, but these Reading classes must be places where students can receive high academic challenges, asset-oriented teaching, and inquiry-based environments. They should be places where Reader identities are bolstered positively, not cut down by reminders that who they are is not good enough. They need to be able to see themselves, see their voices and experiences respected, and know that you (i.e., me or a teacher like me) see them. My acts of editing in response to their feedback literally showed that I was listening and responding to their expert feedback (and they are experts on what it is like to be in a Reading Support class). At least for the script and script-editing processes, I proved that I was an educator they could trust, which is not automatic in a class that can feel stigmatizing.

Through this project, I hope that their voices were heard, and it is my hope that the world will keep listening and including them in the important conversations that shape their futures. Their words are honest, hopeful, and contain answers for better educational practices.

BLUE SKIES: LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING AHEAD

As I wrote the last words on my dissertation, one of my great disappointments was that in the end, I was unable to solve the problems of high school reading instruction. Given that my time at the University was coming to an end, I accepted the humble findings of the study and committed a final draft to the care of my committee. Then, two weeks before my defense, I received an unsettling email from my building principal.

In this email, I learned that major changes in Reading instruction had been enacted by district level leadership. Reading classes as I knew them were to change drastically. I was delighted to see the very directives for best practice outlined in my dissertation were being put into action. Reading courses were not to be dissolved entirely but reduced to serve only special education students. Placement would be highly data driven and the intervention's impact evaluated regularly. This improved process would reduce if not eliminate the unnecessary remediation and consequential limiting of access to challenging educational opportunities for students who have traditionally been marginalized.



In efforts to provide the best instruction for these students, the district purchased the newest version of the Scholastic reading program, Read 180. The research-based program provides a quality reading program able to flex to match student reading levels and provides teachers with the materials and guidance needed to meet the diverse needs of high school students. Moving forward, buildings were encouraged, but not required to have Reading courses taught by reading specialists, and special education staff with a strong background in reading instruction.

These positive changes were wonderful but Reading teachers across the district were asking an important question, "What about the kids who don't have IEPs who are still not proficient readers?". When the question was shared with district level leadership, their response was to push the responsibility to the multi-level systems of support (MTSS) teams found in each building.

As a member of my building MTSS team, I was quite aware that while our MTSS behavioral (MTSS-B) team was a leader in the district, with data to support our success. The MTSS academic (MTSS-A) branch of the program was yet to be fully developed.

So, here lies my opportunity for the future, or the "next steps" not included in my dissertation (but nestled neatly in an Afterword). I have been asked by my district curriculum specialists to help create materials, training, and intervention plans that will hopefully bolster building MTSS-A services. I am thrilled to be able to put what I have learned from my research into meaningful action.

While I have no definitive links between my research and the changes happening in high school reading instruction, I'd like to think that practitioner insight built from years of experience, knowledge gleaned from current research, and most importantly the role of students in my dissertation journey have somehow created a ripple leading to positive change.

As I reached the close of my doctoral journey, I credited many aspects of the program to my success, caring professors, rich course offerings, and a supportive cadre to name a few. But I credit the opportunity to learn about and explore a non-traditional approach to research as the power source that energized me in the last stretch of my studies.

It is known that 50% of doctoral students leave graduate school without finishing their programs (Cassuto, 2020). Looking back on my own experience, I could have easily ended up as one who stopped my pursuits as 'all but dissertation' (ABD). That dark cloud of a looming dissertation easily could have ended with me ending my academic journey early. Some may argue that my final project with its traditional chapters and familiar tables of contents did not stray all that far from the popular prescribed format academics have found comfortable, but that structure hides the cathartic unorthodoxy of turning to ABER to craft a script about students and then to use their feedback to revise it. I hope that other doctoral students who, like me, may struggle to imagine themselves and their work within the confines of a traditional dissertation, see ABER as a pathway out. That struggling 50% may, with the grace of their committees and university leadership, find inspiration and motivation to move beyond the daunting clouds of a dissertation to enjoy the blue skies of hooding. To do that, they may find that familiar teacher moves (like planning a unit), combined with less familiar ones (like having the unit for struggling readers be a script about struggling readers) is the key means that allows them to persist and finish.

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