Critical Arts-Based Projects for Equitable Emergent Teacher Education Researcher Preparation

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Abstract

This paper captures how four BIPOC student researchers and their Black woman professor used critical arts-based research methods to resist the policies and systems predisposed to BIPOC's dispossession in academia. The arts utilized for our purpose were: songwriting, art collage, theater, and podcast. We determined these methods to be in tune with our researcher selves, which allowed for a more equitable approach preparing teacher education researchers. This work has implications for teacher educators, graduate research programs, and graduate students.

Keywords

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Introduction

Amid the devastating realities of the COVID-19 pandemic and while American urban city centers were ablaze in protest against the continued disregard for Black life, we were tasked with studying critical research methodologies. As emergent researchers and a methods professor, we sought methodological tools capable of engaging in this crucible socio-political moment where it seemed research was of little importance. This paper will explore how we: four student researchers one Latinx woman, one Black man, one Chicanx/Latinx man, and one Brazilian man (referred to collectively as BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color]) and a Black woman professor used critical arts-based research projects to explore how creativity and criticality can aid teacher education student researchers in developing their researcher identities and provide a methodological tool for moments of protest. As resistance and reclamation, we decided to abandon normative research practices in exchange for an embodied approach to scholarship by engaging arts-based educational research (ABER) practices that rendered us and our co-conspirators (participants) as fully human.

This paper will include the analysis of critical arts-based research products grounded by critical race theory (CRT) to demonstrate how these research tools and products transformed the researchers, the learning space, and returned the knowledge gathered from research to communities (King, 2020). These arts-based research projects include a script, a song, a podcast, and an art collage. This research answers two questions**: (1)** What art did teacher education student researchers produce and why? **(2)** How did arts-based research inform student researchers' development as emerging teacher education researchers? Next, we briefly discuss the relevant literature to contextualize our inquiry.

Literature Review

Arts-based research is a postmodern form of research that pushes the qualitative inductive model further into openness and the spontaneity of the unknown (Leavy, 2020). Epistemologically arts-based research assumes that art can (and should) create and convey meaning and as such is based on aesthetic knowledge (Leavy, 2020). "The arts can be conceived of as forms of knowing. This is not a new idea and this section explores art as knowledge and art in, and as, research. Art is the expression of the imagination in a sensory form (e.g. visual, aural or kinesthetic) to produce work or artifacts such as paintings, sculptures, musical compositions or dances. It is a way of representing our world" (Burnard, 2015, p. 101). Aesthetic knowledge is inherently subjective; in this paper songwriting, podcast, theater, and collage-making capture this intensely subjective truth.

Arts-based educational research (ABER) has been documented as a tool to engage *participants* in the research process in a more embodied, creative format that often makes the process more accessible to participants (Davis, 2019; Hammond et al. 2018). For example, Davis 2019, explained how critical poetic inquiry from a spoken word lens aided in fully representing Black youth poets' identities and narratives because the poetic form of the research reflected participant voices. Hammond et. al (2018) identified five primary ways arts-based research can serve research agendas concerning indigenous peoples by centering indigenous values through less culturally relevant research activities that interest participants. "Crucial to an indigenous research agenda is that the research is relevant and engaging for communities" (Hammmond et al, 2018, 268). Similarly, Goopy and Kassan (2019) proposed an arts-based engagement ethnography as a means of reclaiming visual and kinesthetic aspects in order to engage in culturally sensitive research with underrepresented communities. "Thus, an [arts based research] approach enables us to shed light on the research process in an otherwise inaccessible way that focuses on affective, holistic, relational, transdisciplinary, participatory, and artistic aspects (Leavy, 2018 in Jusslin & Østern, 2020, pg 8). This literature focuses on the benefits of ABER for research *participants* but does not explore the role of the arts-based researcher identity and especially not the emergent *student* researcher identity. There is sparse literature that explicates how or if student researchers are engaging ABER methods to help them learn how to become researchers.

Teacher education research requires ethnically and racially diverse, skilled researchers to explicate the challenges of racial injustice and other oppressions, especially during the ongoing context of politicized racial polarization and attacks on critical thinking in schools and universities (Tagami 2020; Tharoor, 2020). Otherwise, inquiries into the most essential questions for teacher education could go unexamined, have ill fitting methodological tools, and leave a generation of researchers underprepared to study these issues. Thus doctoral teacher education programs require training student researchers in criticality and divergent methodological tools that can adequately research these pertinent issues.

Little has been published on ABER specifically in emergent researchers development during doctoral education. The emergent research identity is of particular interest when we examine the landscape of most American universities - which includes predominantly White faculty teaching mostly White teacher educators. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), White students continue to make up the majority of students enrolled in graduate programs in the U.S. Yet when BIPOC graduate students are recruited they are required to assimilate to hegemonic White ways of being and knowing, experience isolation, and are rarely offered culturally informed tools to navigate their experiences. ABER is one tool to address this disparity for emergent student

researchers. This paper articulates the benefits of including ABER in early methods training for student researchers, particularly BIPOC students.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) as used in this project allowed researchers to specifically examine how racial identity operated in the creation of the ABER projects and how they impacted student researcher's development. Additionally, CRT layers criticality onto ABER which does not necessarily evoke issues of race, inequality, or justice. Criticality in research methods asks researchers to contextualize the research within wider social hierarchies, structures and explore power relations (Fitspatrick, 2013). This paper specifically focuses on the CRT tenet of counter-storytelling and continues to explore critical ABER methods at the intersection of creativity, praxis, and protest (Davis, 2019). In outlining the usefulness of counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for a "critical race methodology" for education research, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) defined counter-story as a "method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told [. . .] Storytelling and counter-storytelling these experiences can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (p. 32).

The ABER counter stories presented here tell BIPOC student researchers' experiences. Artistic forms allowed student researchers to name their realities by using tools that elucidated racialized positionalities and collective ethnic epistemological claims (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Similarly, critical arts-based research methods function as counter-stories by affirming the oppressive experiences of BIPOC people in education spaces and, thus, can instigate other change-oriented actions. In addition to the content, artistic forms of re-presenting data also offer literal counter-stories capable of capturing and presenting multi-vocal perspectives in creative ways that can encompass many voices or craft one composite voice representative of and accessible to diverse cultural communities. Especially communities outside of academia where partnerships can be created to combat oppressive policies.

Methodology

The data for this paper includes four artistic projects and a written reflection by the creator of each project. The data consisted of a transcriptive and audio file of a podcast episode, photos of a visual collage, a scene from a short play, the lyrics of an original song and the song recording. Each student researcher had their "why" that determined the modality to express their researcher self. Eduardo had a spontaneous response to the readings and class discussions that as a musician,

songwriting was the most natural choice for self-expression. Julia used an art collage (Image 1) to explore and tackle the BIPOC student experience with White parents maneuvering through the American education system while also exploring her own positionality.

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Image 1 Full Collage

Harold created a one act play when he noticed conversations surrounding methodology took place in academic spaces with academic jargon. Harold wanted to create a dialogue where the information was delivered in a conversational tone in everyday situations. Rodrigo noticed the need to deconstruct and resist the master narrative in his community, creating a community outreach podcast establishing and fostering communicable relationships.

We analyzed data in Dedoose using inductive coding informed by CRT tenets. To establish inter-rater reliability each researcher independently coded each project proceeding with a meeting to discuss coded excerpts, rationales for coding, and synthesize code definitions. After all data was coded the research team conducted a thematic analysis of the data aligned to our research questions. Project creators also provided clarification on the project.

These projects were produced in an advanced doctoral-level critical methods course taught in 2021 at a university in a major urban city in the southern United States. The stated purpose and goal of the assignment from the course syllabus was "to demonstrate competency in critical ethnographic methodology and comprehension of liberationist and humanizing research." Student researchers could choose from a range of methods to accomplish the purpose. We chose to complete our projects using ABER to reimagine the boundaries of teaching and

learning, draw from our deep learning experiences throughout the course, and express our voices as student researchers. Through this project, we are suggesting "new ways of viewing educational phenomena" (Barone & Eisner, 1997, 96). These artistic mediums were most in tune with our emergent research identities and allowed a more equitable approach to our research.

Importantly, using the ABER method required different analytic strategies. Sometimes the arts-based projects were difficult to code and translate to 2D paper format. For example, a play is meant to be performed with directions and tone of voice playing roles in interpretation; however, we were only able to code and read the written script. The visual collage was analyzed using photographs of the original artwork, sometimes making it difficult to see the nuances and small vignettes in the art piece. The podcast transcripts did not originally include the pauses and laughter in the discussion, skewing the data. To illuminate the actual experience of the podcast modality Rodrigo indicated laughter and pauses in the transcript. We also collectively listened to the podcast and song aloud to gain a deeper exploration of the art products more accurately. Thus our collaborative analysis method required frequent discussion during and after coding each project was essential in ensuring the analysis captured nuances incapable of being solely captured on paper.

Next, we describe the key findings derived from thematic analysis of all the projects as one data set.

Findings. Increasing the depth of field: Critical race theory and photovoice as counter-storytelling praxis

Resistance

The initial theme that we noticed was *resistance*. Theoretically, we define resistance as taking a stance against hegemonic power sources as a means to promote social justice. Each scholar used these arts-based qualitative research mediums to demonstrate how they view challenging hegemonic constructs. The podcast highlights the prejudices and intentional microaggressions towards Terminus Highway. Terminus Highway is a multicultural, multilingual transitional corridor that runs through three metro counties in a major urban city in the southern United States. Julia's artistic collage showcases visual representations of resisting the hegemonic narratives by providing counternarratives. Eduardo's song embraces the uniqueness of self, creating an opportunity for true representation. Harold's one-act script demonstrates the importance of a social community that uplifts and highlights the otherness, which we will go into detail next, as opposed to hiding it in the background.

When reflecting on experiences on Terminus Highway, one of the podcast speakers speaks of the importance of challenging. He goes on to explain why having this ability and drive to challenge is important by adding,

> "*They* can't control us if we feel that we're able to challenge things… Challenge the indignity that they put us through right, they want us to take it and eat shit, right. That's the whole plan".

Later in the conversation, one of the speakers reminisces on how an educated college professor instructed them to "be careful" driving on Terminus Highway because "people get their cars stolen sometimes". Resistance is shown in these two examples not only by voicing a plea to promote a culture of challenge itself, but also through the speaker's response to the professor's caution of Terminus highway, resisting the racially-charged belief explaining he feels safer on Terminus Highway that he did in a classroom with someone with that closedness of a community predominantly made up of a social minority culture. Viewing this statement through a CRT lens allowed us to recognize this normalization of racism by someone in power (the teacher) while also acknowledging the student's ability to provide a counterstory to combat the blatant practices of racism.

The art collage boldly instructed the world to "look at us" in Image 2.

Image 2 Collage Excerpt

This section of the collage plays on the notion that BIPOC individuals are often overlooked. Instead, through this command, BIPOC people are forcefully inserting themselves at the forefront of conversations, resisting the practice of omission. A demonstration of resistance by making commands to be seen and

heard is also present in Eduardo 's song lyrics. He explains that his "instrument is [his] very soul" and his goal is to "shake down the status quo." The song continues to add that the author wants to "represent [his] people and that's how they gonna be treated." Times of lying down and taking poor treatment are gone. Instead, this demonstration of resistance commands that BIPOC individuals will be treated the way they both desire and deserve.

The script includes a short soliloquy that explains the importance of a social community when resisting hegemonic ideology. The character explains that a space for like-minded individuals is important when navigating oppressive societal norms. He continues to highlight the stories of Mike Brown and George Floyd and their treatment as Black men. What's unique about the community in this script is that they're not only Black men, but Black men who are also gay. Therefore, this soliloquy ends with the character explaining that he "made sure [the young men] were in a space to create counterstories to those that were spun to the masses creating these oppressive spaces. Doc facilitated opportunities for them to talk with each other about navigating spaces where they were not welcomed BUT deserved to be. AND THEY OWNED IT."

Expression of the "othered" self

A prevalent theme from our analysis was expressing our "othered" selves in these various artistic formats. Each BIPOC student explored their racial identities in academia and beyond. By exploring identity in our art pieces, we were able to highlight the perspective and voice of BIPOC communities in unique ways.

For example, in the podcast there is discussion about Terminus Highway. Transitioning from a BIPOC working-class corridor to a White, middle- and upper-class corridor, immigrants from Latin America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia currently make up the communities surrounding Terminus Highway. The participants discussed the White perception of Terminus Highway as a great place to grab some "ethnic" food but be sure to lock your cars because it is unsafe. However, the participants push back against this perception of Terminus Highway, indicating how comfortable and safe they feel on Terminus Highway. One participant said,

> "I feel safer there than in this classroom with you. That is so wild to me . . .because I didn't know Terminus Highway from my childhood, like, that gave me an idea of how people saw Terminus Highway."

This discussion in the podcast allowed the BIPOC participants to express how they feel at home and safe in opposition to how These explorations and conversations centered around what "safe" means for BIPOC communities are

essential in teacher education programs to serve BIPOC students best. The podcast served as a platform to amplify these voices and their counterstories in a conversational way that others in BIPOC communities can have access to, understand, and most importantly relate to similar experiences. It pushes back against the White normative views of BIPOC communities such as Terminus Highway demonstrating a feeling of safeness and home that should be mirrored in teacher education programs in order to ensure BIPOC students feel empowered about their communities.

The usefulness of ABER was to show our perspectives as "othered" selves and other BIPOC communities' perspectives uniquely that makes each of us and those we spoke with, feel authentically seen. Viewing the art collage with a CRT lens showcases how Julia combats the permanence of racism in our education system that often silences BIPOC voices. There is a literal demand to be seen and heard. Image 2(above), in combination with Image 3, demonstrates the frustrations of feeling silenced by a variety of Eurocentric demands on BIPOC communities.

Image 3 Collage Excerpt

In the script, one character expresses the "Bad Boys Club" purpose, saying,

> "What we worked on in Bad Boys Club? Assert your authority. Assert your dominance. You deserve a seat in this space. Look the person you're talking to in the eyes. Let them know you BELONG."

This quote captures the cry of not just a fictional BIPOC student in the script, but BIPOC communities everywhere. However, a recurring message across the data was we belong and can take up space!

The ability to explore these ideas and express them is unique to using artistic forms. Oftentimes in both academic spaces and in society in general BIPOC people are "othered" leading to hesitation in taking up space because we

do not see a space we belong in. These arts-based approaches allowed freedom from the normative rules in academia allowing us to create that space for ourselves. It also allowed us to delve into complex themes in an accessible way. This exploration of our othered self should be strived for our students, specifically BIPOC students, and therefore incorporate arts-based approaches in our education programs to better understand ourselves and our students.

Implications and Conclusion

As Brooks and Alvarado (2020) explain, actionist teaching lives in a space where students "identify strategies and brainstorm new possibilities of how they can identify and create more just learning environments" (p. 87). Not only did we embrace different expressions of knowledge, but we also challenged and resisted traditional research methods that further oppress and harm than liberate our communities. This is the knowledge we can carry over into our future teacher education programs, graduate research programs, and beyond.

In order to embrace an actionist style of teaching in the classroom and for our students it must begin in our teacher education programs. Using arts-based approaches in learning can support an understanding of both ourselves and explore how we can resist the hegemonic system embedded in our classrooms. Both of which are important goals for our BIPOC communities to be liberated. If we want to liberate our BIPOC communities and BIPOC students, we start by using methods, such as art-based methods, as a way to resist and uplift. It's important to note that the "The language of arts-based researchers is also speech that is directly associated with lived experiences" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 97). BIPOC artistic expression, therefore, offers a form of counter-storying that disrupts the White, heteronormative master narrative. The disruption is what we need in order to create programs both in teacher education and graduate courses in order to enact equity and empowerment for BIPOC students of all ages.

Arts-based research, and the dialogical approaches between art and research, should be encouraged in higher education learning spaces, creating new ways of knowing and posing new emancipatory questions. The purpose of art-based research is to enhance the perspectives to view phenomena through different lenses that validate the lived experiences and knowledges of BIPOC communities (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 97). This kind of liberatory approach to scholarship expands access to minoritized students and knowledges that have been othered or dismissed.

Arts-based research generative element gives the opportunity to express, interpret, and illuminate lived experiences and affirm the oppressive experiences of BIPOC folk, and thus instigate change-oriented actions. Future research must explore how ABER students navigate academic accolades like publication and

conference presentation using art, its important to examine how this method might position new scholars in the field. For example, might this method further marginalize BIPOC emergent scholars if the work is not "acceptable" to academic audiences. Also, there needs to be more inquiry into the analytic logics and tools to study ABER products that are not 2D effectively. Answers to these questions and others related to BIPOC emergent research identities can aid the academy is equipping the next generation of scholars to do critical social justice research capable of tangibly changing their own worlds and informing change in teacher education scholarship broadly.

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