



How Freedom School Works: A Space That Differs From Other Summer Programs

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Introduction

Freedom School is a summer program for low income youth with a strong literacy focus. The program is developed nationally by the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) with 16 sites in the Charlotte community organized in 2017 by Freedom School Partners Inc. Each site is organized into classrooms based on the grade level of participants, known as Scholars. Each classroom is overseen by a Servant Leader Intern (SLI), typically a college student. This was an intensive case study of one of the 16 sites, known as Crossroads Elementary School.

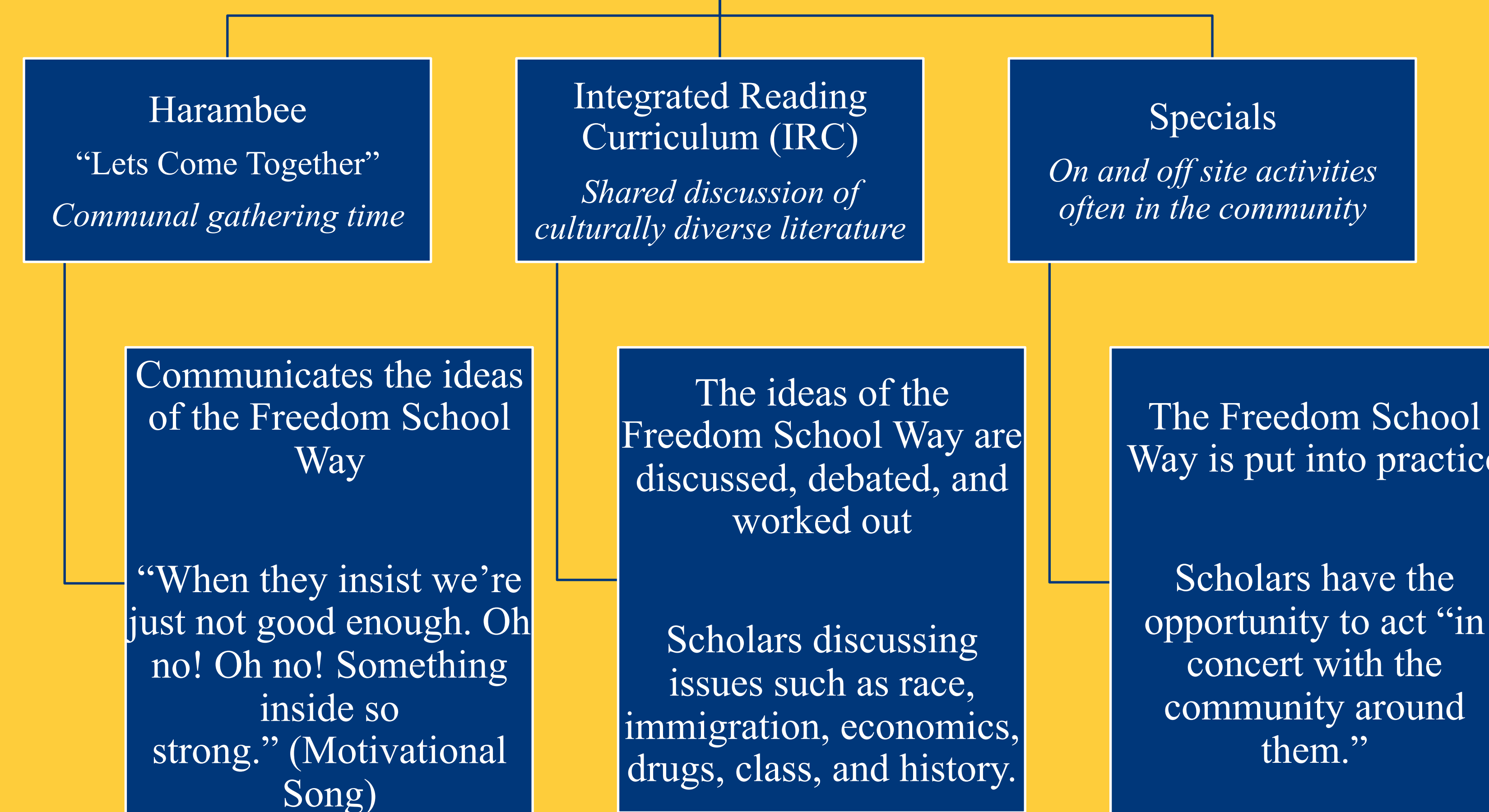
Method

This study was a single site case study using qualitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), what Yin (2013) refers to as an embedded single case. The three member research team conducted observations, interviews, and collected documents related to the program to understand the Scholar experience. Researchers were embedded in three separate classrooms and conducted interviews with Scholars, SLIs, program staff, and parents. The overarching research question was: How do Freedom School Scholars and those who surround them such as family members and program staff describe their experiences in the Freedom School program? Secondary questions included: What expectations do Scholars and their families have for the program? What do Scholars say about their Freedom School experience and, in particular, their experiences with reading?

Discussion

Data gathered from program evaluations show that approximately 90% of participants gain or maintain their reading level over the course of the summer. However, Freedom School is not a skills based literacy program so our research questions focused on how the Freedom School experience contributes to improved literacy and other outcomes. One line of analysis suggests that Scholars have the opportunity to participate in a Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 2002) known in the program as the Freedom School Way (FSW) that provides an increased sense of self efficacy and agency.

Freedom School Way: A Community of Practice



The Freedom School Way (FSW) is "about being fair to one another and treating people the way you want to be treated" (Sierra, Staff Member) and being "valued and appreciated" (James, Staff Member) and having agency in a "bigger community" (Marcelo, Staff Member). "You have to treat them as your teachers and your friends at school, but with 10% more" (George, Scholar).

The Freedom School day includes three parts: Harambee, Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC), and Specials. Our analysis suggests that Harambee is a morning gathering time where the values of the FSW are communicated. IRC is the shared reading and discussion of culturally diverse texts that provide a space for scholars to discuss and work out the FSW with SLIs. Specials are an opportunity for scholars to implement those values in the community.



Analysis

We theorize that Freedom School "works" because it supports Scholars by creating a CoP around the ideal of the Freedom School Way that provides Scholars opportunities to:

Engage with and Learn to Comprehend Text

Working within classroom groups allows Scholars to participate in a shared discussion of culturally diverse materials that encourage Scholars to consider different perspectives, develop and share their opinions, and comprehend texts. This is a transactional process in which ideas are shared, debated and, at times, contested but in which Scholars are engaged without regard to their ability to read.

Resolve Conflict

Many of the texts center around ideas of conflict resolution, allowing scholars to deconstruct and analyze different strategies for resolving differences. The focus is on alternatives to conflict that provide Scholars with tools to assess and deescalate situations and working with those who differ from oneself.

Make Important Connections

Texts and activities focus on the weekly themes of "I can make a difference in my..." self, family, community, country, and world (CDF Summer IRC Guide). These themes are then further enforced through connections made with fellow Scholars in IRC and in the community through fieldtrips and Specials.

References

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