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Agents of Change: Liberation through the Critical Perspective

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Public education is supposedly situated as an "equalizer" in that all students are presented with the same information and expectations of meeting standards. However, in reality, that is not the case. They are subjected to mis- and dis- education by teachers, curriculum, and education practices that make them question their existence and worth (Brown, 2013; Kozol, 2005; DuBois, 1899; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Woodson, 1933). Pre-service teachers believe that "watered down information... protects [the students] from historical truths," when in actuality, the fear of challenging the classroom dynamic and administrative backlash fuels student learning (Hubbard & Swain, 2017, p. 227). The "Banking Model" of information continues oppressive practices in schooling (Freire, 1970). Allowing the educator to deposit information into the students' minds without allowing the room to critically analyze what they are learning reinforces the extent of knowledge suppression within the school. It restricts the opportunity for the student to question the status quo and for teachers to enact change to eliminate it.

Schools implement a curriculum centered in a Eurocentric mindset; that is, the

education system accepts the social and cultural norms that dominate the White middle class (Banks, 2016; Dancy, 2014; Wiggan et al., 2014). Students who do not fall within the spectrum of norms are placed at a deficit. As previously stated, education is presented as an equalizing opportunity for all. However, schools are capping students because they do not adhere to the dominant group knowledge required to be placed on equal footing as their peers. It is safe to assert that in the case of schools that house a predominant population of Black and Brown students from low-income communities, the pedagogy and practices of schooling do not reflect the culture of its students. As Posner (2004) notes, a curriculum cannot be politically unbiased and neutral. When the content of what all students are supposed to learn and eventually become tested on are set to match a specific type of student, the rest of the class is expected to make great gains or will, unfortunately, fall behind. If the curriculum taught cannot be neutral in any mindset, the testing that aligns with the curriculum cannot be neutral. There is potential for curriculum violence (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2009); students could be harmed due to the restrictiveness of the curriculum.

The pressure of the curriculum weighs down on the students and places them into a box where outside thinking is looked down on because it will not be on the standardized test. As earlier mentioned, the banking concept of education is heavily and consistently reinforced by the incessant repetition of data, exit tickets, or the regurgitation of information through the gradual release model. Moreover, the curriculum is fueled by the teachers, so when teacher perceptions mimic the ideology of a color-blind stance, students face a double-sided mirror of oppression.

Curriculum is the capstone of public education. It sets the foundational layout of standards, testing, and knowledge. It holds the standard to what students should know to be functioning members of society. Democracy will dissipate if there are not active citizens that fully participate in the requirements to their highest potential. This skill must be taught to young people (Fleming, 2011). Levine (2009) highlights a "civic opportunity gap" of the youth across America (p. 20). In the 2008 election, one in four young adults with some higher education voted, while one out of fourteen of their peers with no college experience voted (Kirby, Marcelo, Gillerman, & Linkins, 2008, as cited in Levine, 2009). The lack of young voters brings to question if students are learning how to fulfill their civic duty as citizens at the K-12 levels and be empowered to fulfill those duties. With greater student diversity in today's schools, educational practices have started to shift towards liberation and critical pedagogical practices (Freire, 1970), with the inclusion of a civics-based curriculum. A deep understanding of how democracy works within society is a crucial component in educational praxis (Freire, 1970) that paves the way for culturally relevant teaching within public education.

Through a critical multicultural lens of the public education schooling system, teachers can identify the root causes of racial disparities in achievement and academic outcomes amongst students of color. Historically, and even contemporarily, standardized assessments have been used as a barometer for measuring the intelligence of students of color, which is based on a deficit model perspective (Atwater, 2008; Hursh, 2007; Lazarín, 2014; Shuey, 1958). Critical education scholars Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez (1998) shared how the funds of knowledge approach are used in schools, in that it is defined as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" (p. 133). However, this approach has been underutilized, unrecognized, unacknowledged, and devalued.

However, some programs actively seek to empower students, despite hegemonic practices in traditional school curriculum and practices. In this case, the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools model provides an opportunity to examine how culturally relevant pedagogies serve as a conduit for empowering students. Using the theoretical lens of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2004) and Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) levels of citizenship, this study will examine how multicultural literature influences students to become agents of change. The research question for this study was:

How do scholars demonstrate social justice and citizenship aspects, as developed through participation in the Freedom Schools program?

The use of multicultural literature is realized through exposure to texts by reading and read aloud. The students who participated in the program followed the "Freedom School

Way" as they could read texts in various ways with their peers and teacher. These texts were foundational in the program and could serve as mentor texts for the rest of the program's function. The influence of the books had three possibilities for each of the participants: negative, neutral, and positive. All of the participants in the study recited examples of positive influences. Although it could be argued that an adolescent participating in social justice-related activities is a negative influence, it is not. The literature highlighted that relevant texts are conduits in creating an impactful learning environment and if they find them enjoyable (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Sciarba, 2014; Verden & Hickman, 2009; Zygmunt et al., 2015).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Through the Critical Lens of Education

Recent literature has shown that marginalized youth are placed in restrictive educational experiences. They fall victim to the hidden curriculum (Posner, 2003; Gabbard & Flint, 2013), biased policies, and oppressive learning environments (Kozol, 2005). In many instances, they are deficit scores instead of a tiny human trying to learn. In a country that promotes "leaving no child behind," we are leaving a whole group of people behind to promote a political agenda that promotes a systemic cycle of inequity. The impact of testing weighs heavily on every person associated with a public school, especially on the students and teachers. Pedagogical practices related to multicultural literature and social advocacy can be implemented to combat inequitable systems and to reshape learning in a growing diversified society. This information helps cultivate how students become agents of change through exposure to multicultural literature through a critical lens.

Giroux (2004) proposes that Critical Pedagogy is a "form of political intervention in the world that is capable of creating the possibilities for social transformation" (p. 34). When pedagogy and resistance demonstrate how learning is always situated in the relation of who holds power, understanding the relationship is critical in the expansion of democracy. Giroux (2004) supports that:

Central to such a challenge is providing students with the skills, knowledge, and authority they need to inquire and act upon what it means to live in a substantive democracy, to recognize the anti-democratic forms of power, and to fight deeply rooted injustices in a society and world founded on systemic economic, racial, and gendered inequalities. (p. 35)

Critical Pedagogy needs to be situated in a mindset of problematizing within itself and in a larger frame to contest the situated domination that perpetuates social injustices. It allows students to think critically about the power structures that remain dominant as they move towards a liberated democracy. It teaches students to challenge the systemic inequity placed upon marginalized groups, questioning the authority of what is being taught in the perspective of hegemony.

Education is factory-made to produce –isms and intolerance (Gains 1999, as cited in Giroux, 2004). Freire (1970) highlights that the goal of critical pedagogy is to liberate the oppressed from the oppressor, but to fully complete this process, the oppressed need to be 'critically conscious' of the oppression by the oppressor. Freire's (1970) theory highlights the power structure between teachers and students to exemplify the socialized structures of who holds the

dominant power in education. Ira Shor et al. (2017) places critical pedagogy in the light of equality in the present day as he discusses that "democracy demands equality" (p. 3) because liberation is unfilled without it. He highlights the significance of placing "social justice as an orientation towards democracy, equality, ecology, and peace" (p. 16). A fulfilled democracy cannot be complete without acknowledging the power struggles within the educational framework supported by the dominant regime.

Theorists have challenged that critical pedagogy cannot be done only within the schooling environment (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2004), but it is outside to combat injustice within the democracy of the world. Students placed in marginalized groups are stereotyped to be the cause of the achievement gap when, in reality, it is the complacent and greed of society. Students are not seen as a "social investment" (Giroux, 2004, p. 45) but instead as a way to push the dominant perspectives. Critical pedagogy works to redefine the power to reclaim a truly equal democratic system.

The theory of critical pedagogy stems from the work of Freire (1970) and Giroux (2004) as a way to implement social transformation within the fundamentals of education. Recent events surrounding the death of George Floyd, a man who was murdered on film while being taken into police custody, highlight the importance and necessity of critical pedagogy (Ebrahimji, 2020; Graves, 2020). The *Black Lives Matter* movement is tied to raising awareness about systemic inequities that exist in our society. Critical pedagogy provides an educational lens for students to understand the world around them, specifically, giving them tools to analyze issues that may directly impact them. Freedom School's curriculum ideals align with critical pedagogy (Watson, 2014). Addressing the shift of education and social justice perspective through multicultural

literature can allow the participants to recognize the praxis and advocacy (Freire, 1970).

The Classification of Citizenship

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) classify their levels of citizenship into three distinct categories: personally *responsible citizen*, *participatory citizen*, and *justice-oriented citizen* through the development in educational programs. It is important to note that all three levels are "good citizens," but are distinct in their ways. As an effort to classify the best citizen archetype for the advancement of democracy, but "no single formulation will triumph" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 238). The three modes of citizenships are three educator responses to determining what type of citizen is needed for an effective democratic system. It is critical to define each component because it relates to society and its response to solving social problems.

A *personally responsible citizen* is the epitome of responsible, emphasizing the importance of a single entity's character, and "to solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240)." Simply, it is a person that follows the status quo.

A *participatory citizen* is active throughout the community and its functions. In this perspective, citizens must participate and lead within the established society. Both perspectives find room in the educational system today to flourish and develop to the fullest extent. It can be argued that political agencies support these perspectives as they are encouraged through mandated curriculum, such as the social studies TEKS.

The outlier and least common perspective within the framework is the *justice-oriented citizen*. Arguing that they

need to analyze and understand the forces that intersect within the democracy. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) clarify the

lens of a *Justice-Oriented* citizen:

Its focus on responding to social problems and structural critique makes it somewhat different, however. Building on perspectives like Freire and Shor noted earlier, educational programs that emphasize social change seek to prepare students to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustices. These programs are less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves and more likely to teach about social movements and how to exert systemic change (p. 242).

These citizens address the root of injustices within society and can voice their opinions while weighing other ideals alongside their own. This perspective is concreted in social justice; it shares similarities with the *Participatory* citizen, as “civic participation (has) been historically used to pursue social justice” (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004, p. 245). The democratic society would never evolve without all three types of citizens.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) note the significance of their framework due to conflicting ideas of which type of citizen is best for the greater development of the democracy, as conceptions of “good citizenship” imply conceptions of the good society (p. 238). The overlap of *Justice-Oriented* citizens and critical pedagogy highlights the need for students to have the opportunity to learn how to become social justice. Freedom School implements a critical pedagogy curriculum that supports

the development of *Justice-Oriented* citizens.

FINDINGS

The study will use a qualitative research design to investigate the student perspectives of multicultural literature on their development to become agents of change. Adolescent interviews provide reliable data in educational research, as they recall personable experiences that contribute to the development of multicultural literature. Participants were chosen based on their participation in the Freedom School Program for at least two concurrent years.

Students highlighted the shift of perspective to becoming socially just. When asked about the program's connection to the books they read, all the participants responded that the books did support the over-arching program theme as an Agent of Change. For example, one participant shared that it *supports (ed)* the theme because they read the books that led them to *change themselves and their lives* (Devon). Jack shared is historical freedom movement that happened as people were agents of change during the *civil rights movement*:

Black people would sit at a white-only place and order something, and then leave. Basically forcing them to say yes. You can make a difference by slightly do slight things that kinda make a difference...they would eventually build to make a big difference...they would make up the end of all segregation. It would all end.

The historical and personal examples of the impact the texts made on the students lead them to be *Agents of Change*.

When the participants were asked, “*Did the characters in the book become an*

agent of change?” All of the participants identified a characters’ experience of being an *Agent of Change*. They also identified the paradigm shift as the characters in the texts overcame insurmountable odds presented to them in the texts. Alex responded with, “this book taught me to become an agent of change,” highlighting the influence fictional characters have on their readers through the actions they take in the text. He continued with, “they taught us to March, to put our thoughts out there, even though we're younger. Put our thoughts out there and change something.” Other participants highlighted specific examples of how the characters enacted changes. For example, “he was trying to get rights” (Devon), “he was an agent of change within himself (Dylan),” and “one of them told the person, we need to stop this, we took it to far (Gaby).” The text examples are from books that discuss Dr. Martian Luther King Jr., gun violence, and domestic violence influenced by drugs. All of the characters in the texts are placed in impossible situations, and they highlight how there is still an opportunity to become an *Agent of change*.

The participants were asked if they could become agents of change in their communities and how they would do so. Communities in this question were not clarified to the geographic definition of community, so the community can be referenced as geographical, relational, and identity for this research. The majority of participants revealed it is obtainable to be an *Agent of Change* within their community. Gabby shared, “I wanna do something...I want to adopt kids from people who never had a chance” Two participants (Dylan & Jack) simply responded with an affirmative “yes.” Another participant shared, “Yeah, because they see what kids think and kids are the future. They are the people that are coming up. they can see what they think and they can change it (Alex).” Being *Agents of*

Change was a prevalent theme in the responses from the participants.

When the participants were asked “*What does it mean to be an agent of change?*” The majority shared themes of *Community Change*. Participants shared that they thought becoming an agent of change resulted in the change of the community as a whole and the shift of perspective of the people that it impacts. Dylan revealed, “to help change something, someone or someway. You are helping change something. You might not be noticed but you are still changing something.” Other participants revealed the perceptual shift of being, such as “to be a better person of the outcome” (Gabby) and “to change what people say” (Alex). Devon revealed, “It can change your life, (and) the people around you lives.”

The participants were asked, “*in what ways were you an agent of change during Freedom School?*” The majority shared the examples of being a *Justice-Oriented Citizen* (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Dylan shared:

We did a march towards the end of it, about how we need to stop gun violence even though we probably won't get noticed by everyone, I was still an agent of change because I was protesting with everyone else. By addressing the problem and working hard to change it. (when asked to elaborate addressing the problem) The situation that causes the problem. if you started at the root, when you pull it you get it quicker. When you start at the top, you might pull it out, but you might just pull out some of the leaves. If you dig deep into the dirt, you will pull out the whole thing.

Gabby discussed how they gave a speech about education, “I feel like we have the advantage in America to stay in school, and

like girls around the world don't really have that option." Another participant said, "we found a way to have our voices heard (Jack)," as they lead a demonstration that protested gun violence in schools. The participants revealed ways they were agents of change during the program that made them *Justice-Oriented*.

When asked, "*do you believe you can make a difference?*" All of the participants revealed that they believe they can be *Difference Makers*. The majority of the participants responded "yes," with Jack saying, "I know I can make a difference." After attending at least 60 days in the Freedom School program, all participants believe they can be *Difference Makers*.

The results of the data demonstrated the students feeling empowered to be agents of change within their community. The students hold a Socially Just perspective, highlighting the personal belief that they can enact change within their community. The experiences they have had through the Freedom School program have inadvertently shifted their lens of social justice.

DISCUSSION

This research echoes current literature that there is a positive influence on students as they interact with multicultural texts. The access to multicultural texts allows the students to reduce the systematic inequalities perpetuated by the dominant cultures, ultimately beginning to close the educational achievement gap (Piper, 2019). Researchers hypothesized that students of color dominate the achievement gap because high-stakes testing is reinforced by the funds of knowledge persistent in the dominant groups (Cunningham, 2019).

Action in social justice makes the space for voices that often go unheard. As adults, these marginalized adolescents will enter a world that promotes the same

systemic inequities they face in school. The deck is stacked, and it is not in their favor. The implementation of multicultural literature provides a foundation for using critical pedagogy in the classroom. It provides perspective to identify the oppressed and oppressor within a book that can be translated into the students' lived realities. As the oppressor cannot experience liberation if they do not acknowledge they are being oppressed (Freire, 1970), students will not have the comprehension skills to address their oppression. In alignment with the theoretical framework of Giroux's (2004) work on critical pedagogy, multicultural literature challenges the relations of power with society. The participants highlight how they can challenge the societal power systems as they combat social inequities they face as marginalized youth through being agents of change in which 100% of the participants said they could be. While the data did not show the participants explicitly challenging the power structures of society, they highlight ways they could correct perceived wrong in their community.

In this study, the participants emphasized positive interactions with the books they read during the program. Throughout the interviews, the participants shared how the characters impacted them, that they had "*so many favorite books (Gabby)*," and they learned valuable lessons from the texts. Access to literacy that youth want to read will begin to lessen the achievement gap, and they lean towards texts that are reflective of themselves and their experiences (Hamilton, 2005; Scrubia, 2014; Verden & Hickman, 2009). The data revealed that positive influences of multicultural literature shifted the participants to become agents of change, as the character within the books did. These books were their favorite for two distinct reasons. Both books were relevant to the students and the world they live in, as they recounted how their schools

had been threatened or their friends were in bad family situations. The second is that the characters were cannons of the perfect main character; they were flawed. The students recognized those flaws, and books with the perfect plot and characters are not real. The texts served as a mirror and window to a real-world that they could change.

IMPLICATIONS

This research concluded that the students demonstrated social justice and citizenship as they participated in the Freedom School, leading them to become Socially Just Citizens. Current research has highlighted different programs that work towards students reaching Kahne and Westheimer's (2004) highest level of citizenship, but like Freedom School students are not intellectually developed enough to be classified as Justice-Oriented Citizens. Quinn and Baumel (2018) highlighted that students need authentic experiences to shift towards the highest achievable level, as shown in other relevant studies (Blevins, LeCompte, & Wells, 2016). Socially just citizens are the halfway step towards becoming evolved into Justice-Oriented citizens. Using Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) framework of the types of citizens, the participants' responses directed them past "participatory" but not fully evolved into "justice-oriented citizens. They combated systematic inequalities that plague marginalized groups, specifically low-income students and students of color.

In this study, participants recalled different experiences of social action as they attended the program. Throughout the interviews, the participants discussed participating in a march, social demonstrations, and public speaking to gain awareness of injustices within their community and the world. The findings to this research question that students' inner ideologies of social justice are transformed

when allowed to engage in social justice activities. Opportunities open doors, so when the participants had opportunities to participate in various forms of social justice, such as speeches, demonstrations, and marches in a safe environment, it encourages them to continue participating.

The results of this study are meant to be a pedagogical shift towards using a critical pedagogy curriculum within the classroom (Freire, 1980; Giroux, 2004). There is an abundance of research that supports the implementation of culturally relevant teaching (Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Gay, 2000), and this research is supported and calls for educators to create opportunities for students to fully assimilate into Kahne and Westheimer's (2004) Justice-Oriented citizen. Curriculum that goes unchanged will continue to educate students in the current systematic oppressive ways that promote injustices for marginalized youth.

CONCLUSION

The diversity within the classroom is greater than before, and it will continue to grow (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019), so teacher education must implement culturally responsive teaching practices. Pre-service teachers or current educators need to understand the value of multicultural literature within in classroom. In the study, the participants had shown an increase in reading from the exposure to multicultural texts that encouraged them to read more. Simply have the opportunity for students to read diverse texts will enhance their academic and cultural competency knowledge. Multicultural texts can serve as a springboard between social justice-based projects and the classroom curriculum. The possibilities for children's literature and the uses are endless, and simply not allowing access to these texts is inexcusable.

The dominance of high-stakes testing overshadows students' lack of opportunities to read multicultural literature and participate in social justice in the public-school classroom. When the pressurized stress emitting from standardized testing is removed from the learning environment and identities are integrated with the curriculum, students can thrive and see the perspectives of others through windows and mirrors. They can enact the injustices they see in the communities by walking out the door, which shatters the inequalities perpetuated by the school and the glasshouse that is the public-school system.

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