

SOCIAL JUSTICE PICTUREBOOKS IN CULTURE CIRCLES: CHILDREN'S
DIALOGUE, REFLECTION, AND ACTION

by

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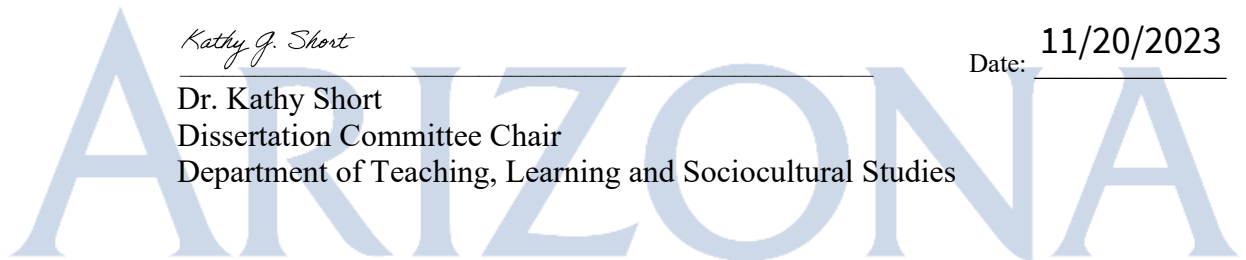
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation delves into the dynamic interaction between picturebooks, culture circles, and social justice discussions in a second-grade classroom. Rooted in Critical Pedagogy, Transactional Theory, and Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy, this study investigates two pivotal aspects. Firstly, it explores the issues raised by students in response to social justice picturebooks, unraveling the depth of their engagement and critical thinking. Secondly, it examines the teacher's agency within and after culture circles, shedding light on the facilitative role educators play in inclusive dialogue. Drawing on a rich literature review encompassing studies from primary to adult education, the research underlines the profound impact of literature and dialogue in educational settings. By integrating diverse theoretical frameworks, the study showcases how their theories can effectively strengthen the utilization of picturebooks within culture circles, offering a nuanced perspective on the intersection of education, social justice, and literary exploration.

Keywords: culture circles, dialogue, student voices, picturebooks, social justice education.

CHAPTER 1:

Introduction and Theoretical Frame

The first day of my graduate studies felt like stepping into a world both familiar and uncharted. Familiar because it was something that I love to do which is learning. Uncharted because I did not know what it really would entail. Our professor posed a question that seemed simple yet profound: “Where should we start in this class?” It was an intriguing way to start our academic journey. I, along with my fellow students, glanced at one another, uncertain about what lay ahead.

In the classroom, an air of anticipation hung heavy. The professor, seasoned in the ways of academia, seemed unperturbed by our collective puzzlement. He held in his hands the blueprint of the semester—a syllabus and a calendar, meticulously planned. Yet, he questioned whether we should simply adhere to this predefined path or chart our own course.

Debate unfolded among the students. Some advocated for the safety of the schedule, preferring the comfort of a structured plan. Others, however, argued for a more dynamic approach, one that would empower us to collectively shape our academic experience. As the minutes passed, the discourse grew richer, and the voices more animated.

Eventually, a consensus emerged—a compromise, really. We would keep a loose timeline but remain flexible about the specific assignments. During it all, I sat in quiet contemplation, absorbing the dynamics of the room. It was a moment of revelation, a realization that this was not just a classroom exercise; it was a culture circle. The professor had not explicitly labeled it as such, nor had it been his initial intention, but the spirit of a culture circle was unmistakable. It

was a moment of collaborative inquiry and collective decision-making that would set the tone for our academic journey together.

Embarking on my journey in graduate school marked a significant turning point in my life. The experience, particularly the encounters with culture circles, served as a bridge that connected my aspirations and my purpose within the realm of education.

In those initial days of graduate school, I found myself at a crossroads, uncertain about which academic path to pursue. My future was a landscape of ambiguity, awaiting direction. Then, the opportunity to enroll in an extraordinary course unfolded before me. It was an experience that would rekindle memories of my own educational journey and reawaken my devotion to the field of education.

This course had a profound impact on me, reaffirming my dedication to the field. It served as a bridge that elegantly connected my love for social justice with the world of picturebooks. Each passing day carried me back to the cherished memories of my childhood—a small public library I frequented every weekend. There, I embarked on countless adventures through the pages of books, immersing myself in their stories. The vivid imagery and thought-provoking narratives etched in the pages resurfaced in my mind.

As my graduate studies progressed, I found myself integrating my passions for law, social justice, and children's literature. This confluence of interests was nothing short of serendipitous, and it invigorated my academic pursuits. The experience was transformative, providing me with both clarity of purpose and a profound sense of direction.

Growing up in the South Side of Tucson, my childhood was marked by an environment where the expectations for a Chicana like me were limited, particularly concerning pursuing higher education beyond high school. In those formative years, I was the quiet kid who sat at the

table or desk, often choosing silence as my refuge. Reflecting on those days, it becomes evident that my silence was, in many ways, a response to the silence imposed upon me by a society that constantly reminded me to “speak more English” or suggested that I should “go back to where I came from.” These subtle yet persistent microaggressions, whether from teachers, peers, or even extended family members, cast a shadow on my identity.

I grappled with the feeling of straddling two worlds, as I needed to be “American” enough for the Americans and “Mexican” enough for the Mexicans. This internal struggle begged the question: why couldn’t I simply be myself, proudly embracing both aspects of my Chicana identity? My personal journey, fraught with these challenges, resonates deeply with the heart of this study. It is important to emphasize that my own story and experiences, while woven into the narrative, do not overshadow the voices of the students whose stories are at the core of this research. Instead, my narrative serves as a beacon, shedding light on the collective journey we all embarked upon and continue to navigate.

Reflecting on those poignant words uttered by the professor during my initial year in graduate school, “Where should we start in this class?” has become a guiding question that permeates every facet of my life. Each day, I find myself contemplating where to begin—should I delve into the depths of academia, lend my ear to the narratives and voices of students, or channel my empathetic spirit into action? These inquiries, though seemingly different, are inextricably intertwined in the textile of why culture circles hold such profound significance.

In essence, culture circles mark the origin of our work, yet they are a journey that knows no destination. Within their circular embrace lies the profound ability to be heard and valued, serving as the nucleus for our exploration of contemporary issues through the prism of social

justice picturebooks. When posed with the question, “Where should we start?” my unambiguous response is here, in the heart of a culture circle.

A culture circle, in its transformation, serves as a versatile tool that enriches both the facilitator and the students, allowing the cultivation of a critical consciousness that transcends the confines of the classroom. It is within this time that a culture circle extends the seeds of praxis that are sown, destined to flourish beyond the classroom’s walls, shaping a more empathetic, aware, and socially conscious world.

Embarking on this journey in graduate school marked the initial step towards unraveling my inquiries, with a central aim of intertwining social justice concerns with children’s literature. It was within the realm of culture circles that I found the means to achieve this synthesis. These experiences inspired the start of my self-study, involving the implementation of culture circles within a second-grade classroom. The frameworks that are utilized for this analysis brought forth the action of what students did in culture circles. This chapter delves into my educational background pertinent to this study, introduces the theoretical frameworks utilized, and outlines the subsequent chapters within this dissertation.

Background of the Study

In the Fall of 2016, I graduated with my bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education. At that time there would be a job fair in the coming Spring 2017, but I had no idea what the outcome or journey would look like. It took 20 interviews to finally land in the small school of Soaring Wings Elementary. My first year of teaching experience was at that school starting the school year 2017-2018. I was going to be a combo teacher teaching first and second grade. I did not know what that meant or the workload that would bring forth, but I said yes. This school was

close to the middle school where I went to as a child, and I had an idea of what the population would bring. I was enthusiastic to just step foot in the classroom, but with that eagerness, I soon found out that the silence and reality of my fears would swallow me whole.

As a child going to public school was the only possibility. There was no financial ability to attend private school. That was seen as a luxury in my neighborhood, and for that, it was never questioned what kind of schooling you would obtain. You attend public school and with that, you had to “deal with it” as I remember those words. Thus, being a quiet child began. I never questioned the teachers or society for that matter. I went with the “flow” as it was called, and I kept silent all too myself. The public library was my escape to not just read and enter new worlds but speak internally with characters that I wish I had the privilege to call friends.

Schooling was a very painful experience at times with the memory of teachers, peers, and even extended family members who would express hurtful words. “Speak English right,” “You are not smart,” and many others. Through these words, my silence became my refugee, where I did not have to say anything but just listen. I shifted my identity in that sense to remain a listener. Through reading and writing, which became my voice, my escape to be who I am. Through these modalities, I was able to speak freely without judgment or ridicule.

As I entered that classroom in Soaring Wings Elementary for the first time, I asked myself, “Am I ready—am I ready to speak and share my experiences with students?” As the month progressed in that first/second grade combo class I stuck by the book and that meant the curriculum to the core. I was exhausted every day. I even caught myself saying similar expressions to students that was my fears. I was looking for a door or window to escape the realities of the distressing experiences I was reliving again. As I sought my sister’s guidance as

she was also a teacher and at that time working on her graduate studies in education, I told myself that my only option would be graduate school.

Entering graduate school in Fall 2018, at the same time teaching became a luxury in the eyes of my neighborhood. “How can this poor Chicana attend a university when her house is all crumbling up and needs maintenance” or “You live in a brown cardboard box.” These words did not discourage me but ignited in me the inspiration to find out why these people would say or think this way. I wanted to know why schooling was still the same as when I attended school. I wanted to know why the curriculum was the same and left no space for fruitful discussions where we could expand our critical consciousness. These were my motivators and questions that I needed to find the answers to.

Reaching the end of my master's and continuing my doctorate was something that I fell in love with. I love learning and finding a combination of merging picturebooks with social justice, as my missing piece. Applying theory to the classroom while teaching in the same district and using its curriculum balanced my efforts of thinking critically. It was not about adopting or changing the district's curriculum, but applying to the already existing curriculum the various theories I was learning in graduate school. This is what culture circles became for me in Soaring Wings Elementary, a voice where I can finally speak not for my own accord, but for others.

As my teaching years were ahead of me, I was acquiring not just the experience of how to “teach” but I was also gaining the tools to be an “educator.” Within this approach, I will further express the very theories that influenced not just the use of culture circles but what I hold close in the classroom. Culture circles were that “light at the end of the tunnel,” for me but it became more than that. It was the tool where I could re-identify who I am. It was a beacon that shone light to be an educator who would stand for those who are voiceless. This is the existential

purpose of this analysis to shine the light on students' memories, experiences, and voices that were possible while utilizing children's literature.

The purpose of this research is to awaken the understanding that culture circles with children's literature can be possible in a classroom setting. Although culture circles have been used extensively in upper elementary through adult education, culture circles need to be invited into K-2 classrooms as well. The theoretical framework and literature review show what culture circles are, the frameworks that guide this research, and the continued experience to continue this research.

This study embodies action research and is also a self-study research. Action research is used to help transform inquiry into praxis or action by becoming co-participants and stakeholders in inquiry. Thus, praxis reflects participants solving problems in the worlds in which the problems are from the lives of the researcher and participants. The knowledge systems are grounded in the participants, and the researcher shares the research process to undertake emancipatory projects. Therefore, testimonios, a narrative authority in the name of human rights (Denzin et al., 2018, p. 319), reflect the duty to listen and to act to hear testimonios as cries to be heard. Using a self-study approach is used to exemplify a narrative inquiry that explores lived experiences in culture circles through a personal narrative that often reveals the aspects of lives previously hidden from view or suppressed. This lens promotes social change, where data is embodied in a "we" rather than an "I" outlook.

My goal was to explore young children's discussions of literature, particularly their discussion of social justice issues in culture circles. I read aloud picturebooks selected around themes that were significant to the students in the classroom such as identity, family, immigration, and other social justice issues. These picturebooks connected to a wide range of

social justice issues as well as to the personal lives of students. Children engaged in collaborative talk about these books to examine the issues that emerged and to decide whether to take up these issues to take action. Given the context of read-aloud discussions of social justice picturebooks in culture circles the following questions were addressed: (1) what issues do students raise in their discussions of social justice picturebooks in culture circles? and (2) what are the ways the teacher acts with agency within or after culture circles?

These picturebooks and themes were selected based on the lives and experiences of students. I had known the students for two years, and our classroom relationships had immensely grown so that connections were made and understood. Together, the families, students, and I as the teacher created an ambiance of trust and *confianza*. This bond not only was established but continued to be maintained where *confianza* in what books are chosen was vital in the circles that took place.

As the classroom teacher and researcher, the role that I took was that of a facilitator. As the facilitator, I took a step back and had children share their thoughts and ideas while in a whole and/or small group setting. A facilitator does not ask specific questions but sets the conditions to encourage talk about social justice because of the books selected for the read-aloud and the knowledge that about how these books connect to children's lives. I started with a broad question of asking children to share their thinking about the book but continued to encourage children to extend their thinking to say more about what they meant. Furthermore, as the facilitator, I participated as a reader, sharing my personal connections occasionally rather than asking questions to steer the discussion in a particular way. I shared and introduced the themes. Once students shared their connections or if they were not raising any connections, I wanted to see if

they took them up for discussion or ignored them. As a facilitator, I encouraged children's thinking rather than directing them or limiting them to only specific topics.

Facilitating student discussions, and balancing student conversations was considered by walking around in small group interactions. First, students wrote and/or drew their connections on paper independently. Then, students shared their connections in video format. A communication tool that I have personally used and enhanced through the COVID-19 pandemic is ClassDojo Portfolios. This tool is well known for positive behavior and parent communication. However, this tool has enhanced an interactive student experience where digital writing tools and/or video experiences can be used. This is like Flipgrid and many other available technology resources. I decided to use this program because all the projects that students created are shared with parents automatically. Students preferred this method to incorporate continued support between the child and family members, just as if they were online. In other words, students coming back to in-person instruction continued to have that connection with their family members through video diaries ClassDojo Portfolios. ClassDojo Portfolios is a free resource for teachers and was not sponsored for this inquiry. Rather, it was a classroom resource that had been used in the past and currently to enrich relationships between teachers, students, and families.

I wanted the conversations to occur organically while also encouraging children to discuss social justice issues. Culture circles are complex and not having set questions is the approach I took. I wanted students to bring their questions and connections rather than answering the constant questions that dominated classrooms, like "Who is the character?" Furthermore, using a more natural approach to dialogue, I wanted students to not feel forced to answer the typical classroom questions, rather I wanted them to make connections and even question the

texts. As the facilitator, the role that I displayed was vital in how students responded and/or had the willingness to share their experiences. In other words, aside from student-teacher relationships, my tone as a teacher and how I established the environment in the classroom was vital in how students responded in a whole class setting and amongst each other. Short et al., (1999) state that students are problem-posers and problem-solvers, thus facilitators need to clarify students' points that they make. This can be done by restating the comments that students have made and/or challenging them. The facilitator also conducts “conversational maintenance that maintains order that can silence other students from participating” (Short et al., 1999, p. 379). This form of facilitating conversation can either be intentional or not.

On the other hand, Short et al., (1999) explain that the types of participant talk by facilitators include the following:

- (a) sharing our own connections to a book ("This book reminds me of Roll of Thunder");
- (b) talking about related personal experiences ("My son was made fun of when he played baseball");
- (c) making broad thematic statements ("We should all be equal, regardless of skin color");
- (d) asking questions about issues that genuinely puzzled us ("I wonder if the daughter ever agreed with John Brown about using force?");
- and (e) expressing personal opinions and evaluations ("I found it interesting that the boy could still hit the ball even though he was stressed out because he was continuously watched by the guard"). (p. 379)

These types of talk offer a deeper understanding of what may occur during a culture circle when reading aloud a picturebook and having students share their connections individually and/or as a whole class. These types of facilitator participant talks offer a place for students to work through personal issues and then share with their peers. Thus, these values propose an opening to praxis within themselves. “School doesn't often provide the space and invitation for this type of discussion” (Short et al., 1999, p. 379). This is what culture circles and literature discussions propose, an invitation where students can discuss social justice issues and evolve praxis amongst themselves and outside the classroom.

As previously stated, the data collection in culture circles was done as a whole class and individually. First, the teacher did do a read-aloud of a picturebook. Then, students went to their seats to draw and/or write their connections and thoughts of the book on blank paper. After they put their ideas on paper, students recorded themselves on a ClassDojo Portfolio telling about what they had created. This idea was decided as a collective to create and share something that may be personal in a different modality. This made more sense since, given the pandemic of online learning, students felt comfortable sharing their ideas behind a screen rather than sharing their ideas to the whole group. However, there continued to be a dialogue about their ideas amongst each other by recollecting ourselves back to the carpet when sitting in a circle to further discuss any more ideas that may have not been shared in a ClassDojo Portfolio.

Moreover, data was collected inside and outside the classroom at least three times a week or more. The process of “when” to collect data depended on who was coming in/out of the classroom. If more adults were in the room, little to no data was being collected via audiovisual recordings, rather teacher reflections were recorded when this occurred. If students were more present in the classroom, audiovisual recordings were more plausible. The “how” process of collecting data involved two audio recorders on the carpet during a read-aloud and a camera on the back of the room to capture the setting. Figure 1.1 is a representation of where the recording equipment was placed during the read-aloud process. Figure 1.2 displays the student's process when individually sharing their connections in a ClassDojo Portfolio to the teacher could see the responses of students. Establishing culture circles in children’s literature throughout an online/in-person learning modality is challenging, but not impossible. The experience may feel different,

however, it's a learning process for both students and teachers to continue to strive to implement culture circles in children's literature.



Figure 1.1 Recording equipment placed during the read-aloud process



Figure 1.2 Student's process in a ClassDojo Portfolio

This research holds immense significance, not only in the academic sphere but also in the practical realm of education. By intertwining culture circles with children's literature, the study pioneers a transformative pedagogical approach that celebrates the voices of young learners, fostering an environment where social justice issues can be discussed and understood deeply. It

signifies not just an academic endeavor but a transformative journey shaping the way we perceive education and social change.

Theoretical Framework

As a researcher and educator, I aspire to learn, reflect, and heal with students, families, and the community. The knowledge systems and ways of knowing have allowed me to (re)center and (re)think how education is perceived and obtained. Three theories embedded in my work are the following: (1) Freire (Critical Pedagogy and Culture Circles), (2) Louise Rosenblatt (Transactional Theory), and (3) Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy (ISJP). These theories allow me to question the systems that continue to “breathe” in our world. Also, these theories help me understand the present and what is yet to come within education. As a second-grade educator, I believe that these theories are in their application to primary education, instead, this work has been primarily applied in upper elementary through high school classrooms. Primary educators are yearning for theories to rely on, not just for themselves, but to incorporate in their work with students.

The theoretical framework that is used in this analysis is based on Critical Pedagogy, Transactional Theory, and Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy (ISJP). The goal of this framework is for educators to understand the process that leads to transformative action in the classroom. Not only are transformative actions vital but sustaining these frames throughout the research and analysis process is essential. This can only happen if the voices of families and students are incorporated into every process of this inquiry. This analysis is not just for the researcher and/or educator, but very much at the hands of the participants to collectively share “knowledge” amongst each other. This practice is what encourages and motivates this approach

to not just collect data and analyze it, but on the belief that stories and words are also “our theories.” Shirley (2017) proposes the terms “cultivating the heart” and “teaching into the risks”. This is what these theories and frameworks offer, the need to cultivate the heart and teach into the risks.

Critical Pedagogy

Freire (1970) focuses on the role of dialogue in considering critical and social issues to examine power structures and roles within our environment. Critical pedagogy is not Freire’s term but his work is the basis for the development of critical pedagogy. One of Freire’s (1970) concepts is a critique of “banking education” which is based on viewing children as “empty vessels” who need adult support to bring awareness to knowledge. In other words, teachers are the carriers of knowledge and need to instruct children. With this in mind, Freire (1970) critiques this concept of banking education and proposes that students read the world around them, not just live in it. Freire (1970) suggested that education should encompass reading words and worlds. Souto-Manning (2010) adds to this by stating:

By becoming educated, individuals should be able to not only read the words printed on a page but to solve mathematical questions and locate geographic regions and borders on a map. They should also be able to read the worlds around them, to contest mathematical and financial inequalities, and to reenvision their locations and challenge boundaries in society. To become educated in such a fashion, to learn how to read the world, to problematize it and to transform it, critical pedagogy is necessary. (p. 8)

Furthermore, Freire (1970) mentions that teaching is political, therefore we need to explore our intentions when it comes to selecting theories as our frame. This allows for further support of our intentions and inquiries in our teaching contexts. Also, Freire (1970) indicates that dialogue is the only means of transforming the world, thus dialogue should be based on generative themes

that are significant to the lives of learners. With this in mind, dialogue is based on love, humility, faith in others, trust, hope, and critical thinking.

Freire (1970) explains that conscientization is a commitment to time and a commitment to historical awareness. It is more than an involvement for the oppressed to become liberated. Action is what leads the oppressed to transformation. The essence of dialogue is the word and then the word is converted into activism. Freire (1970) states that “human beings are not built-in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (p. 69). Having a dialogue is based on love, humility, faith in others, trust, hope, and critical thinking. Defining each term is essential to understand what dialogue is. Love is the foundation of dialogue. Love is an act of courage, thus a commitment to others which is the cause of liberation. Freire (1970) defines love as “if I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love people—I cannot enter into dialogue” (p. 71). Humility is having no act of ignorance. People who lack humility or who have lost it, cannot be part of naming the world. Freire (1970) states that “someone who cannot acknowledge himself to be as mortal as everyone else still has a long way to go before he can reach the point of encounter” (p. 71).

Faith in humankind is not a naïve faith but a belief in the power to create and transform. This leads to trust where mutual trust is a close partnership in the naming of the world. “Trust is contingent on the evidence which one party provides the others of his true, concrete intentions; it cannot exist if that party’s words do not coincide with their actions” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). Moreover, Freire (1970) explains that hope is rooted in people’s incompleteness to search for transformation. A search can only be carried out in communion with others. However, hope is not waiting, rather waiting for hope is considered hopelessness. Furthermore, critical thinking is having discernment between “...an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and

admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as a process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved” (Freire, 1970, p. 73).

Dialogue, love, humility, faith in others, trust, hope, and critical thinking are embedded together and are continuous. All components are needed to understand what critical pedagogy is and how it's applied to research. Freire (1970) affirms “Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education” (pp. 73-74). Freire (1970) further declares that dialogue is not about our own view of the world or attempting to impose that view, but about dialogue “with the people about their view and ours” (p. 77). With dialogue comes praxis. “Only human beings are praxis—the praxis which, as the reflection and the action which truly transform reality, is the source of knowledge and creation” (Freire 1970, pp. 81-82). Further, dialogue and praxis are vital in creating a critical consciousness.

Freire (1970) describes the importance of critical dialogue, communication, and encouraging students to convene with one another to share their stories is essential to social change. Bringing a lens as a teacher to what I learn and apply in the classroom, I want to invite students and families to share their traditions not only with myself but with each other. As educators, we need to understand how critical consciousness empowers and transforms not just the children but educators. As an educator who continues to evolve her critical consciousness, it is my responsibility to immerse myself in theories to apply praxis in the classroom. Freire (1970) introduces “critical consciousness,” which illustrates a critical view of social awareness. Through critical consciousness, you can critically analyze multiple inquiries and take a different lens.

Freire (1970) proposes the theory of Critical Pedagogy that brings to us the concept of problem posing where critical consciousness develops based on decolonizing settler ideologies. Agency, reflection, praxis, and dialogue need to take place. Freire presents that dialogue is initiated through problematization or problem-posing. Problem posing is when participants pose problems as they try to understand a situation. Questions arise while participants become critically aware of their own values and make meaning out of the questions they are posing. The questions of “who,” “how” and “why” are being explored. As these questions develop, a dialogue is created. This technique which Freire refers to as problematization or problem posing initiates dialogue. Once a dialogue is initiated, a possibility of (re)thinking practices occurs. Gradually being able to deconstruct previously conceived notions as absolute truths, a (re)awakening and (re)envisioning a place in society starts to evolve. Having problem-posing creates agency, reflection, praxis, and dialogue within our roles and experiences.

Critical pedagogy has been defined in many avenues by researchers and educators. Souto-Manning (2010) references Joe Kincheloe (2005), who situates four central aspects of critical pedagogy:

- (1) grounded in a social and educational vision of justice, equality, and the belief that education is inherently political;
- (2) dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering, takes first-hand knowledge into consideration, prevents students from being blamed for failing;
- (3) based on generative themes (reading the word and the world in the process of problem posing);
- (4) positions teachers as researchers, as learners. Authority is dialectical; focuses on facilitation and problem posing. (p. 12)

Having these four aspects of critical pedagogy, culture circles play a significant role in Freire’s work and utilization of critical pedagogy. Culture circles allow a space for people to free themselves from oppressive social conditions, thus providing the tools for social change. Additionally, culture circles are not spaces for people to become oppressors or function better within a system, rather, they are a tool to become aware of injustices and to act accordingly to

provide change and/or praxis. In the following section, culture circles are further explained along with how this engagement is vital when teaching literacy in classrooms.

Within the framework of critical pedagogy, the concept of humanizing pedagogy emerges as a crucial component. Osorio (2018) in “Toward a humanizing pedagogy: Using Latinx children’s literature with early childhood students” draws on Freire’s (1970) insights on humanizing pedagogy, emphasizing the value of appreciating students’ backgrounds. This pedagogical approach goes beyond traditional instructional methods, seeking to establish a collaborative relationship where both educators and students play active roles. Humanizing pedagogy fosters shared ownership, transforming students into coinvestigators in the learning process rather than passive recipients of information.

Osorio (2018) highlights the need to recognize and celebrate the cultural richness that students bring to the educational setting. Educators who create an inclusive and encouraging learning environment envision a transformative and liberating aspect that Freire (1970) exemplifies. Having this deeper understanding of creating these spaces for students encourages collaboration and agency, and celebrates students to be seen, heard, and valued.

Gonzales, Moll, and Amanti (2005) introduce the concept of funds of knowledge, a term encompassing diverse theoretical foundations and methodological insights aimed at understanding the social dynamics within households, particularly the social practices and cultural traditions that are central to the households in which children live and learn. Incorporating this notion into this analysis, I aimed to spotlight the linguistic capabilities and cultural reservoirs of students as invaluable contributions to the narratives explored in the classroom. By drawing on the idea of funds of knowledge, the analysis sought to recognize and

harness the wealth of linguistic diversity and cultural richness that students bring with them into the educational setting.

Funds of knowledge as a theoretical frame emphasize a departure from traditional, monolithic views of language and culture in education. Instead, it recognizes the multifaceted backgrounds and experiences that students bring to the learning environment. Funds of knowledge became a lens through which educators can appreciate and integrate the unique cultural assets of each student. Creating these spaces honors the rich diversity of students' backgrounds within learning.

Culture Circles

Souto-Manning (2010) states that “culture circles are based on two basic tenets: the political nature of education and dialogue in the process of education” (p. 18). These tenets are examined by looking at the context of the learner’s environment while analyzing critically and politically through dialoguing to overcome oppression and find solutions. In other words, while (re)examining the location of the learners, analysis of critical and political issues through dialogue needs to take place to overcome oppressive situations along with finding ways to problem solve; hence praxis takes place. This transformation happens through dialogue and problem-solving in a “cyclical and recursive process which leads to transformative action” (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 19), hence, the culture circle are a recursive cycle (see Figure 1.3).

Culture circles are used with students by providing a space for their experiences to be invited, valued, and central in dialogue to construct meaning. Salvio (1998) states that the “process of constructing and working with the curriculum in culture circles is complex because it is literally hand-made from the social fabrics of the students’ lives” (p. 21). From this

perspective, culture circles are complex due to changes being constantly made not just in curriculum, but the “social fabrics of students’ lives.”

Looking at the Critical Cycle in Figure 1.3, each principle has a meaning and representation that can be analyzed. However, for this section, I created a table (see Table 1) where each principle from the Critical Cycle is generalized according to my understanding. This table briefly explains the process of each tenet with some examples that may happen within a culture circle. As this critical cycle is continuous and cyclical, culture circles can take many forms. One particular way I conduct culture circles is through using children’s literature. In the following section on Transactional theory, I focus on Louise Rosenblatt’s process of reader response theory and how I incorporate this theory into culture circles.

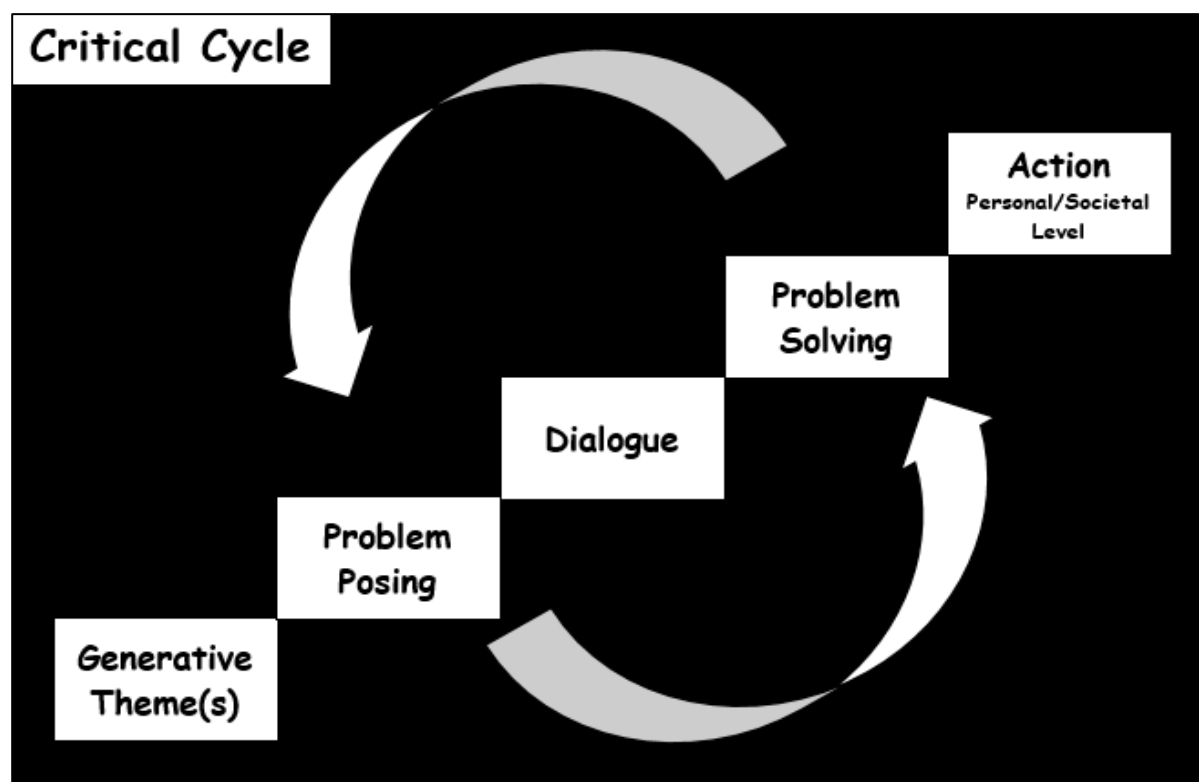


Figure 1.3 The critical cycle

Table 1 Tenets of the Critical Cycle Process

Principles	Generative Theme	Problem Posing	Dialogue	Problem-Solving	Action (Praxis)
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The learner brings up a theme to the circle. A theme may be anything for dialogue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address the questions being raised with the theme. Ask “why” questions and express frustrations with injustices being experienced. Resulting in research and identifying “why” injustices happen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More than a side-by-side monologue Learning process Consider multiple perspectives. More than a debate Understanding of biases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emerges from the dialogue. Geared toward action. Plot ideas for action Personal/ societal level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal/ societal level Taking action
Examples	Own life, past experience, gender, race, identity, etc.	Questions and reflections to self and others	Trust, understanding of self/others	Community evolves, respect	Equity and Action
Role of Facilitator	(1) Setting (comfortable, safe, free to express opinions); (2) Creating a community of learners; (3) Sense of trust; (4) Respect for differences; (5) Equity				

Examining critical pedagogy raises many questions as an educator that pertain to the work that needs to be done. Understanding Freire’s (1970) concepts and embedding them in transactional theory and Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy (ISJP) is something that I continue to contextualize within the work that I apply and construct within this review. Schooling in America has become self-centered in hegemonic beliefs, such as that only one race is dominant over the others. *Prop 203* and *SB 1070* in Arizona are just examples of colonization and oppression. How can educators stand for social change in a place where injustices exist, and therefore you feel voiceless? Although this is a vague question, it can be answered when embedding these three theories: critical pedagogy, transactional theory, and ISJP.

Moreover, from a Western perspective, people have idolized and made the idea of race and ethnicity part of everyday life and even a “trend” to exploit. Rather, theory has reminded me to empathize with multiple communities and invite children in the classroom to share their identity in a way that doesn’t hinder their way of life. It’s not “forcing” children to share their identity with the teacher or their peers, but giving time for healing, connection, and empathy to flower within time. This is not a fast process, but a continuous one that takes time to grow. Providing students with time to share their stories when using critical pedagogy, I have come to apply Freire’s (1970) critical consciousness and dialogue through culture circles.

Transactional Theory

Louise Rosenblatt is the best-known researcher in the teaching of literature. Her literacy views were influenced by John Dewey. Her work focuses on transactional reader response theory, to analyze the transaction between the text and reader. Both the text and the reader are important and necessary in the construction of meaning. Thus, a transaction between the *reader* and the *text* creates meaning. A transaction is when the reader has a relationship with a text. The reader has literary skills, life experiences, and educational experiences. The text continuously transacts with the reader. Rosenblatt stated that ink on pages is a mere symbol, thus readers transform the text to make meaning. The poem is different for every reader. The meaning of the poem resides above reader-text interaction. In other words, having text and a reader creates meaning. Rosenblatt (1994) introduces the meaning of an efferent reading which is a reader stance focusing on the information contained in the text. A stance is not exclusively efferent or aesthetic, but rather a continuum not either/or. An aesthetic reading is a stance by readers that focuses on the experience of a personal relationship, the emotional intricacies of its language to

the text reassure the reader to question the text. Therefore, without an aesthetic stance, the transaction between the text and the reader is restricted and does not engage critical thinking.

Rosenblatt (1994) states that "...a poem should not be thought of as an object, an entity, but rather as an active process lived through during the relationship between a reader and a text. This experience may be the object of thought, like any other experience in life, but it should not be confused with an object in the sense of an entity existing apart from author or reader" (pp. 20-21). Taking this account, the text and reader work collectively to create a transaction, neither is above the other; rather, the poem is the meaning constructed in the reading experience. The poem continuously is active between the reader and the text. All three concepts of reader, text, and poem are continuous and embedded in the literacy process. No one process acts alone but is in constant relationship with each other. This creates the profound work of a transaction.

Furthermore, Rosenblatt (1994) states that "all reading is carried on in a matrix of experienced meaning: efferent reading gives attention primarily to the referent alone; aesthetic reading places the experienced meaning in the full light of awareness and involves the selective process of creating a work of art" (p. 75). Having students emerge in aesthetic reading should be the utmost goal of literacy. Moreover, utilizing Rosenblatt (1994) and Freire (1970) together brings a collective understanding that a culture circle needs to be created to encourage an aesthetic stance by reading where students can become aware (creating a critical consciousness) and be involved in the process of creating a work of art. Additionally, Rosenblatt (1995) in *Literature as Exploration* states that "when the reader becomes aware of the dynamic nature of that transaction, he may gain some critical consciousness of the strengths or weaknesses of the emotional and intellectual equipment with which he approaches literature and life" (p. 101). Both works of Rosenblatt (1994, 1995) bring to light that when the reader has a transaction, a critical

consciousness may form when approaching literature and/or life. This powerful source brings to light what culture circles and critical pedagogy have to offer in the classroom.

“The teacher’s task is to foster fruitful interactions—or, more precisely, transactions—between individual readers and individual literary texts” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 26). Rosenblatt (1995) explains that fostering a fruitful interaction in literacy or transactions needs to happen in the classroom. Again, utilizing culture circles and children’s literature is only one area to incorporate this “fruitful interaction” between readers and texts. Consequently, students’ transactions unquestionably pertain to personal connections from their environment and the circumstances faced. Rosenblatt (1995) explains that “students will undoubtedly come to literature with increasingly strong attitudes toward political and social themes. Such subjects are being discussed frequently and heatedly in their homes, in the newspapers, over the radio, and on television. This suggests a whole complex of definite attitudes and automatic responses that may cause difficulties” (p. 94). Here, Rosenblatt (1995) reveals that students already come to schools with their own lived experiences that are faced daily, thus literacy needs to play an integral part in establishing a sense of understanding to approach these feelings and experiences.

Moreover, Rosenblatt (1995) shares that “no one, however, can read a poem for us. If there is indeed to be a poem and not simply a literary statement, the reader must have the experience, must “live through” what is being created during the reading” (p. 33). Again, experiences must be “lived” when reading. Thus, literacy needs to bridge the experiences students are facing. In other words, children’s literature needs to be meaningful and not something that hinders the experiences that readers have and continue to face. In this connection, “...the teacher must liberate himself as well as his pupils from self-defeating practices” (Rosenblatt 1995, p. 63). Within this context, both teachers and learners liberate themselves from practices that have been

so engraved in schools and view literacy through an aesthetic stance, hence, creating a critical consciousness that questions the very institutions that they are in.

Alternatively, Pradl (1996) states “reading cannot be a social act if readers don’t know or express their responses in conversation with others” (p. 132). Pradl (1996), in *Literature for Democracy: Reading as a Social Act*, profoundly encompasses using literature as a social act. Expression, conversation, and dialogue are fundamental in the reading process. These traits uphold the belief that Rosenblatt’s (1994, 1995) transactional theory is significant in literacy today. Pradl (1996) argues that “when the text becomes open in my classes, students challenge my authority in four ways. They contest my knowledge, resist my agenda, question my procedures, and overthrow my paradigms...this forces me to acknowledge that it’s never just information that’s being learned, but some *stance* toward that information” (p. 34). Once more, Pradl (1996) introduces the use of stance as essential to Rosenblatt’s transaction of the reader, text, and poem.

Lastly, Pradl (1996) asserts that “nothing was sacred once I started to read with another lens” (p. 62). In light of this, utilizing the transactional theory, reading with another “lens,” literacy takes on a different perception; a different stance that leads to finding ways to not only find liberation but also the need to think critically about the text you hold and view in your hands. My goal for all students and myself is to read with an open lens through an aesthetic stance but to also go beyond a stance. When I see a child hold onto a book, especially a book that other adults have criticized and said that “they can’t read”, and turn every page to look at the illustrations, book cover, or words, and their eyes wide open. I know that this is the most important part of literature. I am amazed to see a child hold a new book and create their own democracy in literature. Literacy is an aesthetic stance to create a critical consciousness, to view

their environment as a transaction of text and reader to create a poem as a new understanding that changes themselves and the world.

Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy

Shirley (2017) advocates *Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy* (ISJP) where “rethinking the process of schooling for Indigenous students” (p. 165) is vital in all the work that we do. Having an Indigenous epistemology while promoting nation-building is also imperative. The ISJP process consists of three steps: “(1) deconstructing and disrupting the cycle of colonization in Indigenous communities, (2) promoting, revitalizing, and protecting Indigenous languages and knowledge systems, and (3) envisioning ways to inspire youth to employ transformative possibilities that contribute to nation-building” (pp. 165-166). Furthermore, Shirley (2017) proposes the terms of ISJP, “teaching into the risks” and “cultivating the heart”, which are not just activism alone or thinking critically but encouraging students to dialogue with each other. This is done by understanding colonialism and having time for children and families to heal. Praxis is not an easy subject that can be done within a given day, but takes time; especially now in the online, in-person, and hybrid modes of instruction that everyone is facing. Shirley (2017) reminds us that learned experiences must “engage the heart and mind to address various issues and concerns to promote social change” (p. 164). One must be willing to listen and “teach into the risks.”

Often educators are fearful due to constructed systems of colonization (e.g., losing their jobs) which creates this vicious cycle of silence. Shirley (2017) provides a profound example of teaching critically and for social justice from an Indigenous framework. Through children’s literature, dialogue, and action, children can “connect, extend, and challenge” the frameworks of

Western ways of thinking by developing and sustaining a critical consciousness. Utilizing this framework allows for further consciousness to (re)think and (re)shape education practices. Garcia (2020) reminds us that “the calling to do this work is not easy but it is a beautiful (re)awakening to be in relation with Indigenous knowledge, ancestors, spiritual beings, ceremonies, and land that have been waiting for us to return; not only as a simple act of physically being present but to do so in ways that enact lessons learned to facilitate survivance and sustain the vibrancy of Indigenous peoples” (pp. 580-581).

Stories matter. Datta (2020) describes that “our stories are lived experience. Storytelling becomes an interactive activity between the teller and the listener in which imagination forms the pictures” (p. 63). As a researcher and educator focusing on children’s and adolescent literature, stories are not just a written form but also include oral, environment, land, spirit, and many more modalities within storying. Datta (2020) states that “stories reflect the genuine and authentic experience of an individual, a team, or a community... a story could also describe the challenges faced and overcome—in full or partially” (p. 62). With this in mind, not only do stories live within our community but stories can also face challenges to overcome fully or partially. Datta (2020) expresses that “Indigenous people and their ways of understanding do not receive attention, and, in most cases, Indigenous voices get lost within Western forms of data analysis and academic writing” (p. 59). I too question how teachers can be resilient and continue to sustain a critical consciousness where there are still Western forms of analysis in schools.

Archibald et al. (2019) further give me comfort and hope from the question that I posed beforehand: “... it is time for us to go deeper into our knowledge systems, deeper into our story worlds. We must now go beyond what has been discovered; we must go beyond the colonizing constraints of Western theories and paradigms. Indigenous story work is action, it is process, it is

the seeking of meaning in community...” (p. 11). Within the action, there also needs to be the process of sustaining this belief. I want to focus on the need that we as educators need to keep hoping for sustaining stories and theories within the research and/or environment we are all in. Only then can praxis continue within the work that we all do.

Lastly, Absolon (2011) mentions that stories take many forms and journeys: “We take many journeys: the journey of the thesis; the personal journey; the writing journey; the making meaning journey; the gathering journey of meeting people and having conversations; and the journey with our families along the way” (p. 90). Stories matter and how they are represented and shared matters too. Student and family voices are silenced either in curriculum or classroom conversations to mention a few examples. Absolon (2011) reminds us that “we need to resist and transcend this hegemony by becoming aware of it and engaging to actively bring an authentic Indigenous presence and contribution” (p. 91). Only when we resist Western practices and engage actively in authentic Indigenous presence and contribution can there be a sustaining critical consciousness to evolve our community with powerful stories.

“The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages, and social practices—all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope” (Smith 2012, p. 35). I too am longing and hoping. I too was sitting at the desk where students are now, and I empathize with what they are going through. I too hope and continue to resist structures that continue to oppress and colonize children. Looking at children’s literature and reflecting on stories and dialogues in a culture circle, children are taking the agency to share their stories with teachers.

Garcia, Grande, and Shirley (2020) state that “teachers need to begin the process of decolonization within themselves...” (p. 19). With this in mind, disrupting settler logic and

social norms needs to take place to continue the path to centering theories in the classroom. Only then, can teachers support, extend, and challenge students' Western ideologies into critical consciousness. Consequently, having a decolonized approach in this analysis, I can unravel power relations within teacher-student relationships and have a critical lens to encourage students to facilitate a culture circle. Teachers need to disrupt the hegemonic structures of Western school practices that Garcia (2020) and others have mentioned to become educators. Furthermore, Absolon (2011) states that "for our graduate studies, we enter the academic context, interact with it, and then leave it" (p. 140). With this in mind, entering the academic field and interacting with it is limited, and often we leave it. Thus, Wilson (2008) clarifies the importance of knowledge systems and creating a relationship: "Indigenous epistemology is our cultures, our worldviews, our times, our languages, our histories, our spiritualities and our places in the cosmos. Indigenous epistemology is our systems of knowledge in their context, or in relationships" (p. 74). Moreover, Absolon (2011) profoundly states that "letting go of Western methodologies opens doors to recognize that other real choices exist" (p. 141). This recognition allows me to continue to be an educator in the classroom and connect with children, families, and the community. There are "other real choices that exist" that dismantle the power structures that teachers face.

Garcia (2020) continues to bring to light the importance and significance of embedding Nation-builders when creating a restorative lens that "opens our spirit and minds to engage a critical and community consciousness that is decolonizing" (p. 575). Having a restorative lens that embeds relationships that implore "respect and reciprocity that comes with being good stewards of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies that have been offered to shape our reality and identity" (Garcia, 2020, p. 576). Furthermore, Garcia (2020) engages readers in:

Critical Indigenous pedagogy and praxis creates a pathway that embraces Indigenous epistemologies and the struggles and spaces of resistance, thus generating a pedagogy of hope, agency, and commitment to our relations. It offers a restorative lens that makes clear the (un)known tensions that we feel as we witness and experience the exploitation and unjust circumstances impacting Indigenous communities. It offers a unique and empowering space for Indigenous youth and communities to engage in dialogue about their own struggles, goals, and aspirations. (p. 580)

On the other hand, Absolon (2011) brings to light that our words should “reflect my way of thinking, being and doing, and it’s difficult at times to balance what I think I’m supposed to write with my sense of self...” (p. 15). Academic writing has focused on research terminology that often silences the message and stories that Indigenous communities want to share. Moreover, Smith (2012) proposes a decolonization framework where “deconstruction is part of a much larger intent. Taking apart the story, revealing underlying texts, and giving voice to things that are often known intuitively does not help people to improve their current conditions...” (p. 34). As educators, there needs to be an effort to resist and (de)construct the ideas around research and academic writing.

Simpson (2014) delivers a question that I too wonder: “we need people engaged with land as curriculum and engaged in our languages for decades, not weeks... don’t we deserve learning spaces where we do not have to address state learning objectives, curriculum, credentialism, and careerism, where our only concern for recognition comes from within?” (p. 23). The last phrase that Simpson (2014) provides is cultivating a critical Indigenous consciousness by taking praxis or action by “providing the fire, the compassion, and the loving rebellion to do just that” (p. 23). This is what I continue to hope for in my practice, to continue to be a rebel teacher to cultivate and embed Indigenous pedagogies into our classrooms.

Critical pedagogy, reader response theory, and Indigenous social justice pedagogy are connected and inform each other according to my understanding and research. All three theories

bring a purpose and perspective to think critically and apply action in the field. Taking these three theories allows me to understand how children read the word and the world. Utilizing these theories in the classroom field, I can not only view and select children's literature purposefully but allow space to "teach into the risks and cultivate the heart." Learning these theories is not solely for my own understanding but fruitfully having participants become aware of how to view children's literature, have a sense of belonging, and share their stories with each other. I want these theories to "breathe" not just in the classroom, but having students become *xinachtli*, a germinating seed of hope.

Utilizing these three theories gives strength and brings to life the research that is present and fruitfully coming. These theories purpose and question the importance of creating a critical consciousness, to question, and (re)think what it means to be a teacher when using children's literature. These theories are vital to critically recognizing the importance of discourse through language and power by applying these theories to action. These frames are used to see how to apply a critical lens in our environment.

Overview of Dissertation

The first chapter of this dissertation is a personal narrative that unfolds the purpose of this study and my path as an educator. Reflecting on my past experiences holds significance as to the theories used during my graduate journey. Sharing my personal experiences allows for a deeper understanding of not just the importance of this research but of the value of the stories of students. Every student deserves a classroom environment where their heritage is not only acknowledged but celebrated, where their stories are not just heard but valued. This is what

culture circles offer, the space to not just acknowledge but learn and take action beyond the classroom walls.

The study is rooted in three foundational pedagogical theories: Critical Pedagogy, Transactional Theory, and Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy. These theories are meticulously examined, detailing their integration into the innovative educational methodology of culture circles. The research unfolded within the context of teacher research conducted at Soaring Wings Elementary, a setting that provided a rich tapestry for understanding the practical implications of these theories. The study, conducted over the period spanning January to May 2022, is centered around two key research inquiries:

1. What issues do students raise in their discussions of social justice picturebooks in culture circles?
2. What are the ways the teacher acts with agency within or after culture circles?

The first research question delves into the issues and perspectives articulated by students during their discussions of social justice-themed picturebooks within the framework of culture circles. This question seeks to express student voices contributing significantly to the broader discourse on social justice. The second research question delves into how the teacher exercises agency within and beyond the culture circle sessions. This investigation aims to shed light on the teacher's role in guiding the discourse, as well as their actions following these interactions. Understanding the facilitator's agency is pivotal in assessing the pedagogical approach taken.

Chapter 2 describes the comprehensive literature review conducted as part of this research. Within the existing body of scholarship, examples of educators employing culture circles predominantly emerged from upper elementary to high school education. However, notably absent are substantial research findings about the application of culture circles in primary elementary contexts. This chapter critically examines this literature gap and the potential implications for primary education settings. Furthermore, the review delves into the strategic

incorporation of picturebooks, discourse facilitation techniques, and teacher research initiatives. These elements are scrutinized not only within the realm of culture circles but also in the broader contexts of literature discussions and general community gatherings. By critically evaluating these components, this chapter offers a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted ways in which culture circles are operationalized within educational frameworks, setting the stage for the subsequent analysis and discussion in this dissertation.

Within Chapter 3, a thorough clarification of the research design enacted at Soaring Wings Elementary is presented. This section outlines the chosen research methodologies, offering comprehensive insights into their implementation. Additionally, the chapter sheds light on the specific picturebooks selected for this analysis. Furthermore, it explores the intricate context of the school, providing a nuanced understanding of the environment within which this research was conducted. Simultaneously, the chapter explains my positionality within this academic endeavor, grounding the study in a well-defined research perspective.

In the exploration of Chapter 4, the focus shifts towards the profound analysis of student voices and issues within the context of the picturebooks examined during culture circles. This chapter serves as a pivotal interval, delving deeply into the perspectives articulated by students. Through a methodical lens, the chapter focuses on student voices, unraveling the rich issues that emerged during the immersive engagement with culturally significant literature. By placing an emphasis on the authentic expressions of the students, this chapter strives to translate the complexities of their responses, thereby contributing significantly to the broader understanding of the cultural dynamics embedded within the culture circle.

Chapter 5 is a profound exploration that digs into the heart of the second research question, dividing the complex role of the facilitator within culture circles. This chapter stands as

a testament to the educational environment, illuminating the careful nuances through which the facilitator led the culture circles. This chapter examines the methodologies employed, the subtle intricacies of the environment's configuration, and the comprehensive overview of the culture circle masterfully guided by the facilitator. By unraveling the layers of facilitator engagement, this chapter not only sheds light on the intricate artistry of their guidance but also serves as a critical discourse in understanding the nuanced dynamics that support a culture circle.

Lastly, Chapter 6 synthesizes the study's findings and their broader implications. Returning to the pivotal research questions, this chapter discusses the outcomes, providing not only a reflective analysis of the findings but also pragmatic recommendations aimed not only at the researcher but also at fellow educators. This chapter revisits the core concepts explored in this dissertation, reaffirming the profound significance of culture circles within the context of Soaring Wings Elementary. Through insightful discussions, this chapter not only encapsulates the essence of the study but also offers a roadmap for future practice, underlining the transformative potential of culturally responsive pedagogies in shaping inclusive and enriching educational spaces.

Conclusion

This chapter expressed the beginning of how culture circles became the essence of my work. It also became the very tool that completes the curriculum that is in place at Soaring Wings Elementary. Using culture circles within the theoretical framework discussed in this chapter is the transformation that takes place within culture circles. Students' stories and experiences need to be valued while the facilitator is capturing the tools needed for these discussions to be heard. In essence, the facilitator's role extends beyond the mere selection of picturebooks; it entails the

creation of a safe space wherein students can candidly share their stories and experiences. This chapter thus offers the essential components for taking agency, both within and beyond the realm of culture circles.

Navigating the complexities of this dissertation has been a profound challenge. I am consistently immersed in questions such as, “How do I articulate this effectively?” and “How can I create a document that not only captures the authentic voices of students but also resonates with educators?” These contemplations have given rise to persistent uncertainties, often evoking a sense of trepidation in my writing endeavors. Wrestling with the responsibility of producing a piece meant for a wider audience, beyond my personal scope, has frequently stirred these anxieties.

However, amid these challenges, the dissertation process has emerged as more than a scholarly pursuit. It has become a transformative space—a conduit not just for my academic identity but for the collective narrative. This endeavor has evolved into a shared project, a collective “ours,” where voices, agency, and praxis find resonance well beyond the classroom confines. It encapsulates the essence of overcoming obstacles and aims at creating a profound impact on the broader educational landscape. The ultimate aspiration remains rooted in the ethos of resilience and shared triumph, echoing the very essence of the educational journey embarked upon. This is what culture circles offered, the very space to not be silent, but heard while also listening to the stories that are within.

CHAPTER 2:

Literature Review

This chapter serves as an extensive exploration of the literature review relevant to culture circles. It is structured into two primary sections: Critical Dialogue and Utilizing Literature for Experience. Within the Critical Dialogue section, an in-depth review was conducted regarding how educators engaged in dialogue surrounding social justice topics within the classroom. Existing literature primarily focused on the utilization of dialogue as an instructional tool in a setting ranging from upper elementary through adult education. Unfortunately, there was a noticeable scarcity of research on K-2 classrooms. This section offers insights into the dynamics of culture circles characterized by dialogue and the unique voices of students. Conversely, the section Utilizing Literature for Experience examines how teachers connect written texts within dialogue. It emphasizes the union of literature and dialogue across various educational settings, which is imperative to grasp the application of culture circles as articulated in this dissertation. The ensuing literature review presents a comprehensive analysis of scholarly findings spanning diverse domains.

Reviewing existing research with children related to the theoretical framework reveals that there is limited research, especially for K-2 primary-aged children. Most of the research analyzed in this review is taken from upper elementary to high school-aged children, including youth and adults. In the following segments, the research being analyzed is gathered from older students not just related to these theories but also to how culture circles are used with children's literature and how children's literature discussions of social issue books are depicted. My goal is that K-2 educators are provided with evidence that students can dialogue around social issues when using

children's literature in a culture circle. These theories explore not just a need to implement and embed culture circles and children's literature in a primary classroom, but the agency to do praxis outside the classroom. Children are waiting to be heard and accepted; thus, this review includes a call for voice and action by incorporating the need to apply theory into praxis.

Sharing children's literature while conducting a culture circle provides a safe space for children to dialogue with each other and become critically conscious in the classroom. The "how" process is never a one-way approach but rather evolves. The "why" factor is the most invaluable piece. Reviewing multiple studies related to these three theories brings to light the importance and significance of integrating literature and culture circles in classrooms. Some references solely look at the aspect of literature, culture circles, or both together. Having this review highlights how theory is not only used but why it matters. These theories are used by scholars to locate aspects of data and ethnography, but most importantly locate yourself, the essence of being human.

The following section in this literature review focuses on critical dialogue and using literature for experience. In the section on critical dialogue, there are various studies on teachers and students engaged in discussions in the classroom. Lastly, the section on using literature for experience expresses studies about literature discussions in classrooms.

Critical Dialogue

Although this review does not fully credit and analyze the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis, dialogue is central to culture circles, children's literature, and Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy. Tropp Laman et al., (2012) in "Supporting Critical Dialogue Across Educational Contexts" reviews five different empirical studies to observe how critical dialogue is

expressed in multiple educational spaces with diverse populations. Middle-school students, teacher study groups, teacher-education courses, youth, and adults are included in these studies. Tropp Laman et al., (2012) focused on teacher educators coming together in a mutual interest in critical discourse analysis. For over 2 years of dialogue and research collection, the dialogue was carefully analyzed and questioned oppressive systems that then led participants to new understandings and actions. All five studies are contextually distinct and analyzed thoroughly to better understand the kinds of practices that promoted critical dialogue. Looking at all five practices, common practices were located. Tropp Laman et al., (2012) five studies consist of the following:

(1) Tasha Laman, drawing her research with Mitzi Lewison, examined teachers' talk about homelessness, curriculum, and civic action as they examined children's texts about homelessness in a critical literacy teacher study group, (2) Pamela Jewett sought to more fully understand perceived anomalies in one teacher's talk about race and linguistic diversity in both the teacher's first grade classroom and during her participation in a graduate literature class, (3) Louise Jennings along with Sheri Hardee and De Anne Messias, studies the dialogue of teenagers in after-school service organizations to reveal how they deconstructed and reconstructed stereotyped societal images of teens, (4) Jennifer Wilson studied the language of sixth-grade students engaged in literature group discussions regarding texts on immigration, (5) Mariana Souto-Manning explored how Brazilian adults drew upon their own narratives of work and life to deconstruct social inequities and develop agentive language and actions through their talk within culture circles at an adult education center. (Tropp Laman et al., 2012, p. 201)

These five studies each took an ethnographic stance as a cultural artifact that supported critical dialogue. The analysis was focused on "descriptions and interpretations of what people said and did within these cultural contexts" (Tropp Laman et al., 2012, p. 201). The analysis consisted of a revision of their own and each other's data to examine the discourse of participants across ages, ethnicities, settings, and languages. Artifacts were collected such as transcriptions of participants' dialogue, writings, and photo essays.

The findings of Tropp Laman et al., (2012) across the studies reveal that critical dialogue was supported by time, the role of the facilitator, and the use of tools. These three themes across the studies reflect the need to explain each context extensively. Time was given to participants for talk and critical reflection across sites. Time was not just given in a single meeting, but a commitment to multiple meetings over time was important. For weeks, months, and a couple of years, participants were given ample time to problematize and to take social and personal actions in those realities. Some examples include looking at a themed text set and revisiting ideas, having students examine the complexity of a topic (immigration), and having students revise previous thinking.

The role of facilitator in each study played an important role in “creating a culture of critical dialogue, one of intentionality—thoughtful, knowledgeable action that is oriented to critical inquiry” (Tropp Laman et al., 2012, p. 208). Supporting a culture of critique was vital in all studies where facilitators took an intentional stance toward supporting critical dialogue and not overtaking it. For example, when looking at children’s literature, critical literacy tools were used when responding to books like the use of “whose voices?” where students discussed “whose voices were heard in the book and whose were missing and what they might have said” (p. 208).

Lastly, textual, visual, and quotidian tools were used in all five studies. Picturebooks, young adult literature, photo-essays, verbal texts, printed bills, and paychecks were used to reflect living experiences. Participants used visual tools that helped them to construct visions of youth in the local community. Tropp Laman et al., (2012) state that “these tools brought participants into critical dialogue with each other and with the larger communities in which they lived and worked and encouraged many to ask, why is it like this” (p. 201).

Moreover, Tropp Laman (2006) in “Changing Our Minds/ Changing the World: The Power of a Question” explores how critical dialogue was used either in a culture circle or in settings where youth and adults shared their experiences through artifacts and literacy. Dialogue was used with learners to become critically involved within their communities. “In each setting, it was important to make room for students’ interests and knowledge—not as peripheral but as central to the curriculum” (p. 213). Tropp Laman (2006) indicates that dialogue becomes central to the curriculum. Also, literature is vital in dialogue. Tropp Laman (2006) states that “texts—whether conceptualized as textual, visual, or quotidian tools—in turn, provided access to the knowledge and processes needed to question realities and to revision (a hybrid of revise and re-envision) texts and contexts” (p. 213). Critical dialogue was used as a tool for transformation within texts to create a consciousness.

Tropp Laman's (2006) study was completed in a first through third-grade classroom with Ms. Brice. The study collected and analyzed how children responded as if similarities from the Jim Crow era happened to them, after a read-aloud of *Freedom Summer* (Wiles, 2001). Children were asked to write down their questions and responses that were displayed on the wall throughout the school year. Of the 23 total students in the first to third-grade classroom, five-spoke first languages other than English. Ms. Brice used information from her anecdotal notes, student conferences, and her teaching journal to create a critical learning environment that embraced critical inquiry. This study expanded and sustained inquiry around segregation. The following questions guided data coding and analysis based on discourse analysis using the transcripts of three literacy events:

- (1) what do certain words mean in particular contexts?
- (2) How are people using language in this context, and what purposes does it serve?
- (3) What identities do people take up or are able to take up in a given context?
- (4) What are the storylines that inform this participant’s talk and interactions? (Tropp Laman 2006, p. 205)

Having these questions, a better understanding of what children were thinking and interpreting from *Freedom Summer* and the Jim Crow laws arose.

Martinez-Roldan (2000) in “The Power of Children’s Dialogue: The Discourse of Latino Students in Small Group Literature Discussions” examines the discourse of second-grade bilingual students at Hollinger Elementary in the Tucson Unified School District. Students participated in small group literature discussions over one academic year. The research question analyzed how second-grade bilingual Spanish/English students engaged in talk as they discussed children’s literature in small groups. Martinez-Roldan’s (2000) qualitative research design was conducted in collaboration with a teacher-researcher, Juliá Lopez-Robertson 21 Latinx students and Mexican-American children from working-class families were in 19 literature discussions. Each small group was analyzed for a total of 75 literature circles, heterogeneous groups where both English and Spanish-dominant students talked with each other about children’s literature. The range of nine students’ responses to 11 literature circles was chosen to be further analyzed. Field notes from participants' observations, audiotapes, transcripts, videotapes, and samples of student's written responses to literature were collected.

Martinez Roldan's (2000) findings reflect that bilingual children can have sophisticated literary responses and meaningful decisions about texts when given the opportunity and context. Also, the findings showed that children should not be delayed in developing critical thinking until they know how to decode. In other words, often, educators wait until children can decode literature, and then children can develop critical thinking practices. For example, Guided Reading was often referenced as a classroom tool to help students with decoding and multiple reading strategies, but literature circles promoted critical thinking across all students and were not based on reading abilities. Further, establishing a relationship with the classroom teacher

proposes a model for educational change. Having teachers challenge the reading curriculum by utilizing multicultural children's literature is needed in classrooms. Martinez-Roldan (2000) states that using small group literature discussions "supports a creative dialogue as students are allowed to think with others. Through this curricular engagement, schools have an opportunity to get away from a banking model of education and to create room for a liberatory and transformative dialogue conducive to overcoming different kinds of oppression, beginning with the oppression of not being allowed to think and speak in school" (p. 489). Using small group literature discussions is vital in encouraging students to create a critical consciousness around children's literature.

Lopez-Robertson (2010) in "Lo agarraron y lo echaron pa'tras: Discussing Critical Social Issues with Young Latinas" explores a bilingual classroom using literature discussions about critical social issues that impact children's lives. Using literature discussions allowed children to have the space to discuss and question social issues that were significant to them. This analysis explored two young Latinas and how they thought critically about social issues raised in the books read and discussed. These books raised many connections to their lives through their stories and lived experiences. Lopez-Robertson (2010) explicitly states that children need a critical literacy curriculum that helps children identify and understand social issues in their lives. The methodology included five Latinas who were selected through a purposeful sampling of eighteen children. The classroom unit of study of Migrant Farm Workers was explored. Engagements such as guest speakers, critique of videos, and reading books about immigration were used. Bilingual books were also sent home to send a message to families that "they were readers and writers both at home and at school" (Lopez-Robertson, 2010, p. 46). This led to collecting what families and children were discussing at home through journal writing,

classroom audio recordings, transcriptions, informal interviews, and field notes during discussions.

Lopez-Robertson's (2010) findings explore both Gabriela and Cecilia's stories of a border issue in general and a forced marriage. Cecilia's story reflects how she was playing with blocks with Gabriela and Gabriela was sharing her story about her cousin. Gabriela's story demonstrated to Cecilia that her cousin was forced to marry as a result of extortion. Both narratives help us understand that:

(1) her knowledge about border crossing and issues that affect the emotional fabric of a family, (2) how she positioned Miriam, her cousin, and herself and (3) her awareness of complex family relations and traditions that bring with them conflicting emotions and how these emotions are forceful in light of the wider society's restrictions and sanctions. (Lopez-Robertson 2010, p. 48)

Additionally, Lopez-Robertson's (2010) findings demonstrated the use of language and the sophistication of children's understanding of border knowledge. Gabriela's story revealed her understanding of the impact of border issues within her own family experiences, while Cecilia's story revealed the issues of border crossing through the use of immigration picturebooks. Lopez-Robertson (2010) demonstrated that these young Latinas "did indeed think seriously about the critical social issues raised in the books we discussed...the border and the issues surrounding it are very real for the girls, to not discuss it would render them voiceless" (p. 51). Lopez-Robertson's (2010) study demonstrated that young Latinas could participate in a critical literacy curriculum focused on literature discussions about social issues. Also, this study raises many questions for further research to continue the efforts of using critical thinking in primary-aged classrooms.

Cammarota (2011) in "From Hopelessness to Hope: Social Justice Pedagogy in Urban Education and Youth Development" reviews the Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD)

model that facilitates and enhances young people's awareness of their "personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity" (p. 829). It also requires the process of healing youth's identities by incorporating "social justice activities that encounter oppressive conditions preventing healthy self-identification" (p. 829). With this in mind, Cammarota (2011) offers that adopting a social justice awareness should center on understanding how social and economic institutions policies and practices can either "stall or promote healthy youth development outcomes" (p. 832). Having this awareness of self, community, and others allows students to create a critical consciousness. The participatory action research (PAR) collected for the SJYD model documented students' field notes, exit interviews, and student-produced research. These artifacts illuminated their willingness to engage in social change and praxis.

Moreover, Cammarota and Romero (2014) in *Encuentros with Families and Students: Cultivating Funds of Knowledge through Dialogue in Raza studies: The public option for educational revolution*, reveal the transformation that emerged within the classrooms and students from the PAR program called the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP). Raza studies were targeted in Tucson, Arizona schools, especially the Mexican American Studies program in the Tucson Unified School District. Although this review does not fully go into detail about this vital moment in time, Cammarota and Romero (2014) explain how SJEP was vital during this time and the importance of highlighting that Latinx communities value education. Tucson schools don't have outreach programs for Latinx families to be involved in education; "this failure of outreach leads to a disconnection between families and the students' learning" (Cammarota & Romero 2014, p. 123). Thus, the SJEP Encuentros were spaces for funds of knowledge, creating a safe space where consciousness around injustices in Latinx education was raised. Both studies of Cammarota (2011) and Cammarota and Romero (2014) bring to light the

opportunities we can offer to Latinx students and the ability to create a critical consciousness around social issues that are lived and experienced.

Using Literature for Experience

Freeman et al., (2020) in “Collaborating Towards Humanizing Pedagogies: Culture Circles in Teacher Educator Preparation” portray how culture circles and teatro for teacher education are used during love and humanizing practice. Problem-posing and dialogue were used around a generative theme of humanity within teaching and teacher education. Having incoming teachers participate in these spaces allows inquiry to be used as a stance. Culture circles and Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed or teatro are used to support such means in the teacher educator program. Also, these practices that teacher educators face in the graduate program facilitate justice-oriented actions in the teaching that takes place in classrooms. Freeman et al., (2020) indicate that humanizing praxis honors each individual’s process of transformation, self-love, and reflexivity. Further, Freeman et al., (2020) clarify that “problem-solving does not necessarily mean a final, concrete answer. Engaging in this process showed us that problem-solving is iterative, and the solutions we implement tend to surface new questions” (p. 99). In other words, there is never a finished process within a culture circle, rather is continuous. Allowing teacher educators into these processes, the curriculum in classrooms developed an essential justice-oriented experience.

Osorio (2018) in “Toward a Humanizing Pedagogy: Using Latinx Children’s Literature with Early Childhood Students” discusses a second-grade emergent bilingual classroom where dialogue in culture circles using Latinx picturebooks around immigration was analyzed. Whole-class culture circles and small-group culture circles were conducted during the research process.

Both teachers and students collectively engaged in critical pedagogy around issues of power and privilege related to bilingualism, biliteracy, and biculturalism. Sharing the stories of students during these experiences, students started to evolve a critical consciousness when using children's literature and culture circles. Osorio (2018) states that implementing culture circles brought "students' lived experiences into the classroom" (p. 6). Thus, humanizing pedagogy was manifested in the implementation of culture circles through Latinx children's literature.

Osorio's (2018) study utilized qualitative methods to capture interactions with students around Latinx children's literature in culture circles. Osorio (2018) used an action-reflection cycle process containing planning, acting, observation, and reflection. The study was not to analyze what students had read or what was at value but to learn to ask questions, name problems, and analyze them. This is when the teacher-student relationship needed to change. Data was collected through audio/video recordings, ethnographic field notes, student artifacts, and a researcher's journal. Each culture circle was audio/video recorded and then transcribed. After this process, further field notes were taken especially when not being part of every small group with students. While collecting data, emerging themes came across during the analysis process. After extensively reviewing and coding transcriptions of culture circles, connections were made within and across all culture circles.

Rodriguez (2018) in "Representation of Latinx Immigrants and Immigration in Children's Literature: A Critical Content Analysis" complements Osorio (2018) in using Latinx immigration picturebooks. However, differences exist in how Latinx immigration experiences to the United States are portrayed in picturebooks. Although both researchers have similarities, there are distinct characteristics that pertain to literature experiences. Rodriguez's (2018) study is not with children responding to texts, but rather a critical content analysis of the books.

Rodriguez (2018) references Koss (2015) by stating that “children’s picturebooks are important because they are artifacts that convey cultural messages and values about society and help children learn about their world” (p. 47). Here, picturebooks have the potential to help students understand issues, whether familiar or not, of the immigration experience. Students becoming conscious of immigration journeys expressed both actions and emotions. Rodriguez (2018) illuminates that it is “crucial for educators to understand the importance of including a range of texts that details aspects of Latinx immigration experiences in schools and classrooms.

Immigration is a controversial issue, but for many students, the immigration experience reflects their lived reality” (p. 58). Picturebooks allow students to create a consciousness to foster inclusivity in the classroom and to share their experiences with each other.

Rodriguez's (2018) study is a critical content analysis of picturebooks that include Latinx immigration content. 13 picturebooks that were published between 2010-2016 were used. A LatCrit lens was used to analyze the picturebooks. These picturebooks were selected extensively and purposefully based on immigration and Latinx immigration terminology. Rodriguez (2018) explains that using a LatCrit lens was not just overlaid as a theoretical framework but an analytical guide to exploring how Latinx immigration experiences were portrayed. Furthermore, this analysis explored “race and racism in the ways Latinx immigrant’s protagonists were represented in the text” (p. 52). The following questions guided the initial coding:

- (1) How are Latinx immigrants portrayed in picturebooks that include immigration content?
- (2) How is the immigrant experience of Latinx characters portrayed through the images and text?
- (3) Are there any intersections between gender and immigration?
- (4) How are children’s voices and experiences represented?
- (5) What emotional toll is described as related to the children, and how is it represented?
- (6) What family structures are portrayed in the books?
- (7) What assumptions are made about the immigrants and their reasons for immigrating? (Rodriguez 2018, p. 52)

With these guiding questions, codes were made for the initial discussions that allowed for further reading and the first reading to be verified. Categories were formed based on the multiple codes analyzed.

Keis (2006) in “From Principle to Practice: Using Children's Literature to Promote Dialogue and Facilitate the "Coming to Voice" in a Rural Latino Community explores the tenets of critical pedagogy that are examined in the Libros y Familias Program which is a literacy program for Spanish-speaking families in Independence, Oregon. Children’s literature is used to build community and personal transformation to be an example model to other communities. Keis (2006) carefully walks readers into the Libros y Familias Program by utilizing social issues that either have happened or are currently happening; then, families are centered in dialogue and reflection through writing. The last and most powerful stage of the program is inviting their children to participate in illustrations. In other words, families are the authors and children are the illustrators of their families’ words. This program is an adaptation of the Literatura Infantil model developed by Alma Flor Ada (1988). Keis (2006) states that:

When families are given the opportunity to interact with quality literature that reflects their lived experiences and validates their culture, literacy becomes meaningful to them. They start to see themselves in a new light, and they come to recognize a much greater right than being literate. They will ultimately recognize that, as men [women], they have a right to have a voice. (p. 14)

Keis (2006) welds the possibility of transformation and a “coming to voice” by recognizing the talents and knowledge that exist in families by making them part of the curriculum. Children’s literature is purposeful and provided as a tool that serves as a pathway to transformation.

Serrano (2020) in *Encouraging Dialogue around Social Issues with Latinx Students through Literature Discussion and Culturally Relevant Literature* explored students’ interactions with books in a fourth/fifth grade classroom. Her research focused on social issues that students

discussed in literature groups, how literary response strategies influenced student dialogue, and the tenets used for research that affect decision-making as a teacher. Serrano's (2020) work delves into literature discussion groups when using children's literature organized as text sets emerging from themes for students to think critically and discuss. Therefore, transformation can occur through "reflection, and action, and growth can occur at various points. Theories inform practice as much as practice informs how theories evolve. Taking steps back to reflect enables educators to take steps forward, so that as metamorphosis, pedagogy may also beautifully transform into something completely new" (p. 50). Her use of mariposas (butterflies) as a metaphor throughout her work transcends the beauty and powerful message of hope.

Serrano's (2020) method of data collection was audio recordings from small group discussions. There were only two focus groups, and each group had a tape recorder. Data was also recorded by collecting student responses through graffiti boards (writing or drawings) that reflected students' responses to books read in the classroom. Moreover, data was also collected by having students write reflections. These writings were exclusively student's thoughts, feelings, connections, and/or reflections of the text. After writing, students would share their writing in their small groups, and recordings of their discussions and artifacts were collected. Serrano (2020) as the classroom teacher and researcher, collected and analyzed a teacher research journal and weekly reflective memos. Transcriptions were also coded and analyzed by understanding what students were discussing, what books children were referencing the most, and various themes that arose. Children were having conversations about immigration and family separation. These codes and themes were identified in various sticky note colors that expressed student emotions, student voice, and student response.

Lastly, Souto-Manning (2010) in *Freire, Teaching, and Learning: Culture Circles Across Contexts* is the work that influenced me. Having read this book at the start of my graduate program in 2018, I became (re)awakened to why I wanted to become an educator. This work and theories in this analysis, (re)awakened my calling to seek education. I have been through many life experiences where I want to share my story with students and have them (re) examine their experiences. I am passionate about the work of social justice and children's literature and I was looking for a way to combine both and that is what culture circles offered, a critical cycle where participants can use literature and social justice together. I knew that these topics were a passion of mine, and I was naïve to think that they only happened in upper elementary, when I was placed in a first and second-grade classroom. I was lost. I didn't know if students were going to understand because I was already categorizing students by their age. I now know that primary-aged children can and will talk about social issues around children's literature.

Souto-Manning (2010) conducted a culture circle with first-grade students to problematize the racially and socioeconomically segregated nature of pull-out education programs in schools. This culture circle was raised when naming the issue of pull-out education programs into a generative theme. Students identified segregation by viewing how pull-out programs were constructed by race and class. For example, students identified that gifted programs typically served the rich White children, while lower socioeconomic status (SES) children were in recovery or remediation programs. Once students identified a theme, problem-posing evolved. Souto-Manning (2010) states that "critical conversations took place as the children disagreed with the exclusionary practices proposed by the program" (p. 53). Students took a critical lens and researched how schools became segregated over several weeks. During these findings, students realized that schools were integrated but not desegregated.

Souto-Manning (2010) used the theoretical framework of critical dialogue and critical literacy. These theories allowed both researchers and students to examine how power is exercised and by whom. Participants consisted of 19 students and from their questions posed in the culture circle, praxis reflected how both researcher and students came together to (re)think how pull-out services could be modified into a push-in in the classroom rather than leaving the room. These culture circles were conducted in whole group sessions and recorded. Transcriptions of what children were thinking were recorded and analyzed by their generative theme of a pull-out session.

Conclusion

This chapter has centered on the crucial literature review regarding studies about culture circles. It was partitioned into two significant sections: Critical Dialogue and Using Literature for Experience. These two segments were instrumental because they underscore the vital role of literature and dialogue in the context of culture circles.

In the Critical Dialogue section, a comprehensive exploration was conducted, focusing on how educators harnessed dialogue to address social justice issues within the classroom. It was noteworthy that educators frequently employed diverse modalities, such as sketches and drawings created by students, to amplify their voices. The primary purpose was to convey the essence of what a culture circle entailed through candid dialogues and the voices of students.

Equally, in the Using Literature for Experience section, the spotlight shifted to how teachers effectively incorporated written texts into these dialogues. A compelling example was the integration of picturebooks, leveraging visual illustrations within the texts to address specific issues. This analysis has accentuated the paramount significance of both literature and dialogue

across diverse educational contexts, illuminating their indispensable role in the realization of culture circles. This literature review has emphasized the profound importance of dialogue and literature as indispensable components within the sphere of culture circles.

CHAPTER 3:

Research Methodology

This chapter focuses on the research methodology. This teacher research was conducted in a Structured English Immersion (SEI) classroom in which Latinx students along with their peers were invited to share their stories in a culture circle while using social justice picturebooks. The research conducted from January to May of 2022 captures the stories that students shared through transcriptions and sketches about social issues that were addressed in picturebooks explored through a culture circle.

Moreover, the focus of this chapter is to describe the process of designing this teacher research as well as how data was collected. The first section of this chapter describes my research design as the teacher researcher and how the research was conducted in the classroom. This chapter discusses the methods used to record data, such as teacher field notes and audio recordings of student discussions and student sketches. Also, describing the school and culture circle context is important. In the second section of this chapter, I explain the methods used to collect and analyze the data by how it was sorted and the themes that emerged.

Teacher Research

This is a teacher research study that examines how students respond to children's literature through engaging in a culture circle. A teacher research study evolves from teachers taking an inquiry stance toward their work. Teachers take a stance to research teaching practices that are either present in the education system and/or what their practices have been throughout the years. Also, teacher research bridges theory and practice, research, and implementation. Using this

method allows me as the teacher-researcher to bridge theory and practice while conducting this study. Thus, testing theory in practice leads to reflective practice where the teacher-researcher evolves a critically conscious lens to inquire about the practices that have been implemented in the classroom.

This teacher research fosters a deep and meaningful connection between the theory that informs teaching and the practice that shapes students' educational experiences. As a teacher-researcher, I am not merely a passive observer within the classroom; I am an active participant deeply engaged in the process of inquiry and discovery. Teacher research constantly questions and reflects while gathering information and strategies for best teaching practices. Furthermore, it fosters a culture of collaboration and shared knowledge among educators. Thus, exchanging ideas and strategies amongst educators creates a collaborative approach with educators. This commitment to learning and teaching is reflected in this type of research method. Navigating between theory and practice is what teacher research is about where a responsive educational approach truly meets the diverse needs of students.

Thus, the purpose of this research and the use of teacher research is to awaken the understanding that culture circles with children's literature can be possible in a classroom setting. Although culture circles have been used extensively in upper elementary through adult education, culture circles need to be invited into K-2 classrooms as well. The theoretical framework and literature review indicate what culture circles are, the frameworks that guide this research, and the continued experience to continue this research as stated previously. Using this method, I can reflect and gain an understanding of what students are thinking.

Being a teacher and conducting this research in the classroom, has value not only in what data was collected but how the teacher can approach and address student needs. Also, the teacher

can create a space for classroom community and learning to take shape by listening to each other's stories. Teacher research is a vital tool that bridges the community to take a deeper understanding of what matters, our purpose, and each other. Using this approach also allows me to look closely at my teaching practices and experiences to continue to share with students.

The purpose of this research is to have the opportunity for students to share their stories through the picturebooks explored via a culture circle. As a child, I rarely had the opportunity to see myself in books that teachers expressed in the classroom. The traditional *Three Little Pigs* or *Little Red Riding Hood* were the only stories that you had to rely on. Classrooms and school libraries were filled with many books, but not books of possibilities to learn from stories that also became yours. I want this research to do just that, to embody the need for students not just to see themselves in literature but to have a dialogue with others about their stories.

The following sections further detail the research context. Walking in the halls of Soaring Wings Elementary provides a viewpoint of the neighborhood, population, and classroom. These details are important to fully understand not just the setting, but the background of students.

Research Context

I have been a classroom teacher for seven years in both first/second-grade combo, first-grade, and second-grade classes. Education and what it truly means is a passion of mine to be in the same space with children to enrich their voices and experiences in the classroom. The curriculum of Arizona State Standards has always been presented to teachers via curriculum maps where Arizona standards are targeted frequently with assessments to show student growth. This study was used along with the Arizona curriculum to explore how culture circles and children's literature can be used with districts and Arizona state curriculum and/or standards. In

other words, I am not changing the curriculum but implementing an approach that aligns and supports what students are learning. The following subsections explore further the classroom and school setting.

Soaring Wings Elementary

This school was my last interview where I felt like I had lost hope in finding the right school. It took twenty interviews to finally say “yes” to a school that I thought I was losing hope in the field of education. My desperation and eagerness to enter the classroom quickly filled me with awe of the community and school. Soaring Wings Elementary is located in Ward Five in Tucson, Arizona. Located near the middle of South Tucson, it is centralized between the freeway and an increase in new business complex. The school has gradually decreased enrollment over the years and the population and demographics have changed.

The school was dominated mostly by an African American community in the '90s to middle 2000s, which has now decreased to where the Latinx population is the most represented. About 90% are Latinx students, 5% African American, 2% Caucasian, 2% Indigenous, and 1% other race. The demographic race is not only the alarming factor that has changed; enrollment has also been affected. The school used to have an enrollment of 300 to 500 students, at the time of this study, the enrollment was around 150 students. There used to be three teachers at each grade level from kindergarten to fifth grade. Within this analysis, there were only one to two teachers per grade level. Many factors interplay this scenario of seeing numbers decrease, like generational households, adults not having children, people moving out of the community, infrastructure, and business increasing in the area, and many more. Although this analysis does

not go into detail about Soaring Wings Elementary, I wanted to refer to how these numbers affect this inquiry.

As the teacher-researcher, I am aware of the population and community since I attended the middle school across Soaring Wings Elementary when I was in public school. Although I did not attend Soaring Wings Elementary as a child, I am aware of the community since it was similar to my primary school closer to my house. In this inquiry, I had a total of eighteen students in the second-grade classroom from whom I obtained permission to conduct this study. Pseudonyms were used to keep anonymity. The school setting is a Title One school, meaning that students' backgrounds range from low-socioeconomic status and receiving free or reduced lunch. In the second-grade classroom, the race and/or ethnicity and gender demographics consist of one Black, one White, and sixteen Latinx; eleven are male and seven are female. Seven students only speak English, and eleven students are bilingual in English and Spanish. These brief student demographics only encompass the mirror image of what is seen on the outside of children. I hope that this analysis reflects the very essence of the children, their stories, and who they are.

The following sections detail the research questions and the COVID-19 context. Also, my positionality further describes who I am as a teacher-researcher and why that is important in this study.

COVID-19 Context

Conducting this analysis invigorates the conversation of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 started in December of 2019, while many dispute it had started several months before. An official shut-down started three months later in mid-March of 2020. By this time, I was a first-grade teacher in the same school managing a new teaching modality of online asynchronous and

synchronous instruction, live vs. independent work. At the end of the school year, summer came around for teachers to find independent Professional Development on how to strengthen online education and have everything ready for an almost full year of teaching online.

In the year 2020-2021, I was teaching first grade fully online at the same school with the same 18 students that I had as second-graders for this study, working with them in person. Having the same class for two years strengthened our relationships and we continued to reflect on what we all had been through. I was not only able to share my stories of grief and family loss but was able to empathize with students who too lost their parents, grandparents, and loved ones, and who did not know if they would have food when they came back to school and/or their home. Amongst all these challenges, the situation also brought courage and strength to share our stories and find stories in picturebooks where we could reflect and take action. Continuing to create a space for dialogue in a culture circle allowed children to reflect and take action upon the topics that were essential and evermore present in the lives of each individual.

Mid-year of the 2021-2022 school year, there are two terms that the district used regarding COVID-19: *Classroom Isolation* and *Classroom Quarantine*. *Isolation* was used when a student or adult was in close contact for more than 15 minutes with someone who had tested positive. Isolation usually lasted 10 days but can be less depending on taking a COVID test within three days of close contact. Thus, the individual in isolation can return sooner than 10 days. However, the individual with isolation can transition to quarantine if the test becomes positive. With this in mind, *quarantine* is for someone who tested positive and needed to be on quarantine for the full 10 days, then the COVID test needs to be negative before they can return. These 10 days could fluctuate to more days depending on the specific scenario of each individual. Regarding Isolation and/or Quarantine, these terms are used interchangeably leaving confusion amongst families and

teachers. Also, due to the Health Department working closely with the district, there was a lack of discernment of what needed to be done.

This is an important note because this was the context of the classroom in the months of Mid-September to November where I had 12 students either in isolation or in quarantine. This meant that I only had 6 students in the classroom throughout that time frame of 1 to 2 months. As this continued in the classroom setting, the effects of COVID-19 affected this study. With this in mind, I continued with this study given the circumstances of the uncertainty of the pandemic. Again, knowing this context is important because it brings into perspective a glimpse of what occurred before this study with the same group of students.

Positionality

As a graduate student in academia, there is a need to share your own story and/or positionality. Who am I? This is a complex question that I may not have all the answers to in this short section. I believe that everyone is constantly evolving within their identity and persona and so often we don't know "who we are." That is to say, we may become sure of ourselves of knowing "who we are," but never fully state this publicly to everyone we encounter. Writing my positionality and being given this space to share my story is filled with trauma and healing. I am a Chicana and a teacher in a public school. I continue to learn from my experiences and the stories that have been passed down from my elders, parents, and community. My whole identity and existence are very much present in this research. However, it's not just about my physical presence but that of incorporating all participants' time to establish a relationship and receive their rich feedback.

I am a Chicana a child of immigrant parents. My father was born in México City. He immigrated to North America to not only support his mother but also to aspire to the “American Dream.” My apá lived in Honolulu, Hawaii for almost twenty years before moving to Tucson, Arizona with my amá. After several years in the country, he then became a naturalized citizen. My father instilled his values and ethic of hard work. “Even when you don’t want to get up and do something, the obligation to fulfill the goal makes you get up,” are my father’s words every time. “La obligación mija de cumplir.” My apá’s words are very dear to my heart. His resilience and dedication to hard work and fulfilling his dreams were my daily strength.

On the other hand, my mother was born and raised in Tucson, Arizona. She too encourages and shares her stories about finding the “American Dream.” My amá was immersed and dedicated to school, which became her escape from the everyday challenges she had faced as a child. My amá’s core values in the Catholic faith have been engraved in me. I thank my mother for her tender love and dedication to the field of education. My amá constantly pushed me to reach for books that would take me to worlds. Thanks to her, the public library became my backyard play area. I was able to find the worlds that my amá was referring to.

Both of my parents have instilled in me not just a dream to achieve but the concept of the term “education.” A proverb that my parents constantly remind me of is “Quien es perico, dondequiera es verde” translating to *who is a parakeet, everywhere is green* meaning that being at school is where you receive knowledge, where you can then get a better job and conquer the dream. This idea at that time was something that I wanted to gift to my parents; that dream, to conquer something for them. Now, I can see that this idea that my parents have shared with me is something that is often perceived in a Western state of mind, where colonization continues to happen.

Attending the university, I continued to be faced with microaggressions as a Chicana, thinking that the university was a place to embrace diversity. On the last stretch of my undergraduate work, I took a Social Studies Methods course with Dr. Valerie Shirley. It took this course for me to (re)think and (re)evaluate “why” I was going to be a teacher. Once I entered the classroom alone for the first time, I knew then that all the struggles that I faced were still present in the first-grade classroom. Children were expressing and sharing the same things that I too was feeling when attending public school. This is the reason why I continued to pursue graduate studies, to identify why there was no change to embrace multiculturalism in the classroom and the curriculum.

As a Chicana, schooling for me has not been a positive setting. There are many comments like “go back to México,” “speaking English better,” and “wetback.” I was innocent and naïve. I did not know what all of this meant until later in high school and into graduate school. Being a Chicana born and raised in North America, I never thought that higher education was something that I could do. Villenas (1996) reminded me further that “I am a walking contradiction with a foot in both worlds—in the dominant privileged institutions and the marginalized communities. Yet, I possess my own agency...” (p. 714). Growing up, Chicanas were not supposed to go to school, especially women. This is something that I always saw as a child and as an adult living and continuing to live in the South Side of Tucson. I became the contradiction; thus, I was not part of the “norm” of the community. I was seen as an “other” in the community and continue to face this to this day. I took the agency to evolve my identity to not be submissive to society's norms, but to create a critical consciousness lens by attending higher education.

As a graduate student, my interest areas have been utilizing children's literature to create spaces for students to dialogue amongst themselves about critical issues that have happened or continue to happen. Children's literature was been present in my childhood. Public libraries were my backyard experience. These buildings filled with books to borrow and check out were the safe spaces where I could read and look at images rather than physically playing outside due to unsafe backyards in the barrio. Books were not only tools that I used to learn from stories that I had never experienced, but it was a tool for me to express the need that Chicano/a/x stories needed to be shared. Yet, I rarely saw them in these spaces. Yes, there were plenty of immigrant and farmworker stories, but I was yearning for something greater. While recounting my journey in public libraries, children's literature continues to be present in my personal and professional experiences.

I want students to create relationships not only with me (the teacher) but amongst each other and the community. Therefore, acquiring and utilizing multiple theories and lenses need to be applied not just for praxis within itself, but to sustain the pedagogies amongst the space. Brayboy (2005) states that "there is power in both the written word, and [our] stories" (p. 426). With this in mind, stories are our oral traditions that should be embedded in classrooms and the curriculum. Stories should continue to be shared with the process of praxis because Brayboy believes "stories are our theories." Continuing to immerse myself in theory, my sister Dr. Angélica Serrano has encouraged and mentored me along the way of utilizing children's literature in the classroom. Serrano et. al., (2020) contextualize the role of an educator and provide spaces for students to embrace their identities through literature:

My story serves as a method for contextualizing the role education has played in my life as I reflect on my past experiences. Those experiences enhance my approach as an educator today, so that I may contextualize my teaching practices and pedagogies to best serve Latinx and other marginalized students. I strive to become an educator who enhances what students

bring to the classroom by creating spaces for them to share who they are with each other and to embrace literature as it embraces their identities, to make gains in the educational system. (p. 18)

Having an awakening experience as a graduate student, I have come to know many theorists and scholarly work. Kovach (2009) states that “the deeper that I submerge myself into tribal knowledge systems; the more I resist Western ways of knowing as a given for all academic research, even though I know that this demands a long swim against a strong current” (p.55). This is something that I continue to face within my Chicana identity by resisting Western ways of knowing. Having this thought process, I have (re)awakened to a point where I am thinking critically and finding ways to not just act but to sustain the ways of knowing.

Wilson (2008) shares the significance of being in a relationship with both sides by explaining that “we must ensure that both sides in the relationship are sharing the power going into these new connections. Without this reciprocity, one side of the relationships may gain power and substance at the expense of the other” (p. 79). Therefore, relationships are crucial to what educators and researchers need to acquire within their positionality and the work that we all do. Moreover, I want to continue this journey to resist, heal, and hope. Hope for praxis not only within myself but for all people. Everyone has a story to tell, and that story is powerful and should be acknowledged in the spaces that we each hold.

Lastly, when asked the question “Who am I?” I continue to wonder and hope for a response that I can say: I am a Chicana. I have longed for the “American Dream” and have overcome the need to look no longer for a dream but to become something more. I am a contradiction, which broke many stereotypes and norms. I am an educator, determined for social and critical change. I am much more and, in the process, still finding myself to openly say and share my story for everyone to listen.

Methods

The following section describes the methods used for this analysis. The first section describes the text selection and how culture circles were used by students. Also, further details on how students engaged in culture circles and the process that was used are discussed.

Secondly, I describe the data collection of field notes, student artifacts, and transcriptions and how they were utilized to collect data to analyze it. Finally, the data analysis section describes the process of disaggregating all the information collected to share my findings to the research questions.

Read-Aloud Text Selection

Children's literature was purposefully selected not just on my own experiences, but that of students. Having the opportunity to teach the same students for two consecutive years, I was able to create and continue to build on relationships. Rosenblatt (1995) states that children who reflect may have the desire to "...communicate this to others whom the boy or girl trusts" (p. 67). Also, Freire (1970) uses the word "trust" in student-teacher relationships. Having trust when students have their transactions and reflections when reading creates this space of a culture circle. Culture circles are complex because they are created based on students' lives and the dialogue that takes place around the literature that we seek.

I have given much thought to the text selection and have decided to start with children's literature that has a theme, but I want to see if students refer to this theme or talk about others. Within these texts, there are subsequent subcategories that pertain to their experiences. For example, a book may display a common theme of immigration, but a child may express

otherwise. I started with four main themes to select books: *family and community as togetherness*, *immigration as a journey*, *observance as societal expectations of identity*, and *identifying a safe space*. These themes illustrate the many stories that children were waiting to share. The text selection consisted of a text set (see *Children's Literature References*) of twenty children's literature books about these four themes. These texts were carefully examined individually within the sixteen weeks of data collection and analysis.

The data collection and analysis addressed the research questions directly by providing student artifacts reflecting their responses to the literature and culture circles that were conducted every week. Student artifacts reflect their transactions not just from the text, but also provided students time to reflect and use the critical cycle (see Figure 1.3) as a tool to look for praxis within themselves and the community. Examining student artifacts, labels were created by the four themes regarding the text sets. These labels were used to analyze “what” and “how” students were processing.

The research design of teacher research using a range of qualitative research tools was utilized because it allowed for interpretation of what students were saying and thinking through transcripts, artifacts, and interactions of connections made through the texts. Moreover, the teacher-researcher field notes were used to (re)examine the text selection and further support students with clarifying questions. I organized and analyzed data as I collected it by using sticky notes, tables, and figures. This process allowed for more intensive analysis once data was collected. Thus, utilizing a traditional dissertation format was enacted in writing this dissertation.

Procuring a traditional dissertation format, a need for a timeline supported how much time within each activity of examining a text on a week-by-week basis was applied. The timeline (see Table 2) illustrates dates by week. The text selection (see Table 3) supported the theme and

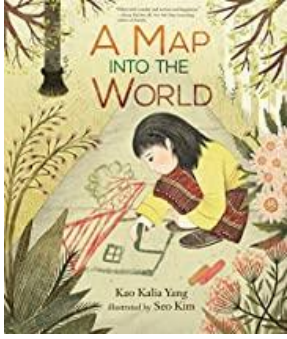


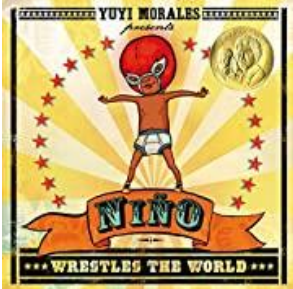
correlated to the timeline by week. The methods described employ the collection and analysis of the data to answer the research questions. As the teacher-researcher, I was an active participant as a facilitator during a culture circle. Using qualitative research tools identifies a more in-depth understanding of participants' insights and emotions when engaging in culture circles through children's literature.

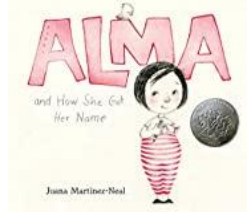
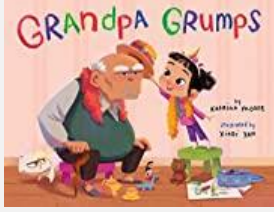

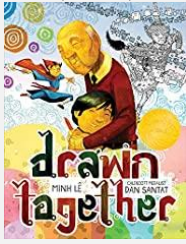
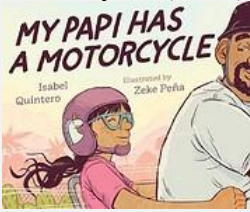
Table 2 Timeline of Culture Circles

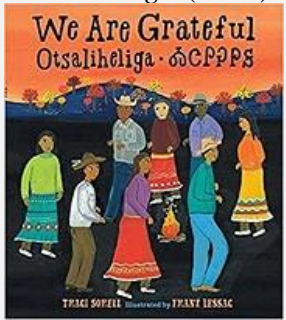


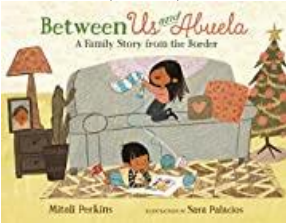
Timeline			
Week	Date	Theme	Text
1	January 10-14, 2022	Identity	<i>A Map into The World</i> (2019)
1	January 10-14, 2022	Identity	<i>Your Name is a Song</i> (2020)
2	January 17-21, 2022	Identity	<i>Julián is a Mermaid</i> (2018)
3	January 24-28, 2022	Identity	<i>Niño Wrestles the World</i> (2015)
4	January 31-February 4, 2022	Identity	<i>Alma and How She Got Her Name</i> (2018)
5	February 7-11 2022	Family	<i>Grandpa Grumps</i> (2020)
5	February 7-11 2022	Family	<i>Grandpa's Stories</i> (2019)
6	February 14-18, 2022	Family	<i>Drawn Together</i> (2018)
7	February 21-25, 2022	Family	<i>My Papi Has a Motorcycle</i> (2019)
8	February 28-March 4, 2022	Family	<i>We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga</i> (2018)
9	March 7-11, 2022	Immigration	<i>Dreamers</i> (2018)
10	March 21-25, 2022	Immigration	<i>Home Is in Between</i> (2021)
11	March 28-April 1, 2022	Immigration	<i>Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from the Border</i> (2019)
11	March 28-April 1, 2022	Immigration	<i>Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale</i> (2013)
12	April 4-8, 2022	Immigration	<i>La Frontera: El viaje con papá /My Journey with Papa</i> (2018)
13	April 11-15, 2022	Social Issues	<i>We Are Water Protectors</i> (2020)
13	April 11-15, 2022	Social Issues	<i>Me And My Fear</i> (2018)
14	April 18-22, 2022	Social Issues	<i>Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad</i> (2007)
15	April 25-29, 2022	Social Issues	<i>When I Was Eight</i> (2013)
16	May 2-6, 2022	Social Issues	<i>Letters to a Prisoner</i> (2017)

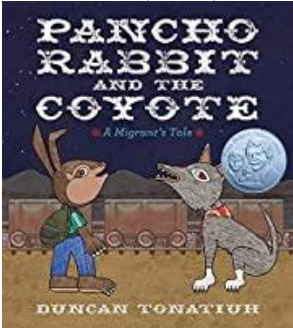
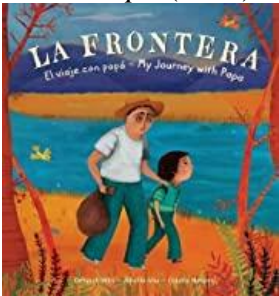
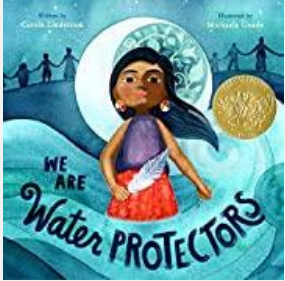

Table 3 Text selection by theme

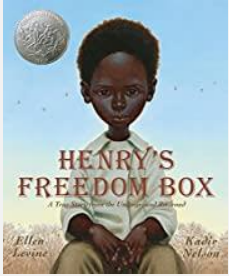
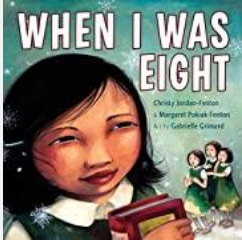
Text Selection by Theme

Week	Title	Author/Illus.	Theme	Subtheme	Synopsis
Jan. 2022 1	<i>A Map into The World</i> (2019) 	Kao Kalia Yang (Author) Seo Kim (Illustrator)	Identity	community, seasons, family, Asia, grief, death, immigration	The seasons change, and a young Hmong girl moves into a new home with her family and encounters both birth and death. This story reflects love, community, and family.
1	<i>Your Name is a Song</i> (2020) 	Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow (Author) Luisa Uribe (Illustrator)	Identity	Acceptance, African American, names, community, heritage, empowering, identity	The little girl feels frustrated when her teacher can't pronounce her name. Her mom takes her to the city and tells her that names have a lyrical beat to them. This story reminds us of the beauty and meaning behind your name.
2	<i>Julián is a Mermaid</i> (2018) 	Jessica Love	Identity	Gender identity, acceptance, diversity, LGBTQ+	Julian rides the bus with his Abuela and sees three women dressed up. Julian is mesmerized and gets home to dress up.
3	<i>Niño Wrestles the World</i> (2015) 	Yuyi Morales	Identity	Diversity, family, siblings, Lucha libre, Mexican culture, identity, imagination	Niño wrestles all the figures that are commonly found in Mexico. This story reminds us about Lucha Libre and the traditions behind figures that are ever-present in our childhood.

4	<p><i>Alma and How She Got Her Name</i> (2018)</p> 	<p>Juana Martinez-Neal</p>	<p>Identity</p>	<p>Family, identity, history, names, Latinx</p>	<p>Alma has 6 names and wonders why it's so long. Her father tells her the meaning and history behind each name and the importance of her telling her story behind her name.</p>
Feb. 2022 5	<p><i>Grandpa Grumps</i> (2020)</p> 	<p>Katrina Moore (Author) Xindi Yan (Illustrator)</p>	<p>Family</p>	<p>Asian American, family, grandpa, love, patience, relationships</p>	<p>Daisy's grandpa Yeh-Yeh is visiting from China. Daisy is excited to spend time with him and can't wait but grandpa does not look jolly.</p>
5	<p><i>Grandpa's Stories</i> (2019)</p> 	<p>Joseph Coelho (Author) Allison Colpoys (Illustrator)</p>	<p>Family</p>	<p>Grandparents, family, death, grief, love, memories, relationships</p>	<p>A little girl remembers the year she spent with her grandpa and all the stories told. Saying goodbye to her grandfather she finds strength in remembering him by drawing all the stories shared.</p>
6	<p><i>Drawn Together</i> (2018)</p> 	<p>Minh Lê (Author) Dan Santat (Illustrator)</p>	<p>Family</p>	<p>Asian American, drawing, imagination, family, grandparents, love, language</p>	<p>A boy visits his grandfather and not knowing the language, he is left in silence and confusion. When sharing their love for art and storytelling, both characters create a bond.</p>
7	<p><i>My Papi Has a Motorcycle</i> (2019)</p> 	<p>Isabel Quintero (Author) Zeke Peña (Illustrator)</p>	<p>Family</p>	<p>California, community, family, motorcycle, Latinx, neighborhood</p>	<p>Daisy sees her neighborhood and the changes that it has faced with her Papi behind a motorcycle.</p>

8	<p><i>We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga</i> (2018)</p>  <p>TRACI SORELL illustrated by FRANE LESSAC</p>	<p>Traci Sorell (Author)</p> <p>Frane Lessac (Illustrator)</p>	Family	Cherokee, community, family, gratitude, Indigenous, seasons	This book illustrates the beauty of seasons and the meaning behind being grateful through the Cherokee community.
March 2022 9	<p><i>Dreamers</i> (2018)</p>  <p>Yuyi Morales</p>	Yuyi Morales	Immigration	Latinx, immigration, Mexico, library, family, hope, culture, biography, journey	This memoir illustrates the things you carry with you when finding a new place that you will call home. This story reminds readers that we are all dreamers bringing our strengths and talents to the places we gather.
10	<p><i>Home Is in Between</i> (2021)</p>  <p>Mitali Perkins illustrated by Lavanya Naidu</p>	<p>Mitali Perkins (Author)</p> <p>Lavanya Naidu (Illustrator)</p>	Immigration	Bengali Americans, immigration, friendship, family, home, two worlds	Shanti moving from India to North America tries to find a balance between her two worlds. She remembers her village and tries to understand her current home.
11	<p><i>Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from the Border</i> (2019)</p>  <p>Mitali Perkins illustrated by Sara Palacios</p>	<p>Mitali Perkins (Author)</p> <p>Sara Palacios (Illustrator)</p>	Immigration	Border, Christmas, posadas, grandma, Mexico, Latinx, immigration, family	Maria travels with her mom and brother to visit their grandmother on the border of California and Mexico during the Posadas. Through the fence, they find a way to exchange gifts and share stories.

11	<p><i>Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale</i> (2013)</p> 	Duncan Tonatiuh	Immigration	Immigration, Mexico, Latinx, family, animals, migrant workers	Pancho a young rabbit waits for his papa's return. After waiting for two years, Pancho sets out to find his papa up north. Pancho collects papa's favorite food and sets out to find him in the desert when he finds a coyote that wants to help him.
12	<p><i>La Frontera: El viaje con papá /My Journey with Papa</i> (2018)</p> 	Deborah Mills (Author) Alfredo Alva (Author) Claudia Navarro (Illustrator)	Immigration	Immigration, journey, Mexico, family, culture	A young boy travels with his father from Mexico to Texas. They take courage in finding a way to cross the border to make a new place a home.
Apr. 2022 13	<p><i>We Are Water Protectors</i> (2020)</p> 	Carole Lindstrom (Author) Michaela Goade (Illustrator)	Social Issues	Activism, conservation, earth, culture, environment, Indigenous, water, pipeline, North Dakota, protectors	A young water protector takes a stand to defend Mother Earth by taking a stand. The black snake tries to destroy the earth but there is the resilience of being a water protector.
13	<p><i>Me And My Fear</i> (2018)</p> 	Francesca Sanna	Social Issues	Fear, feelings, connections, courage, immigration, friendship	A young girl travels to a new country and she is accompanied by her fear. Her fear starts growing bigger and she finds the courage to be stronger than her fear.

14	<p><i>Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad</i> (2007)</p> 	<p>Ellen Levine (Author) Kadir Nelson (Illustrator)</p>	Social Issues	African American, slavery, Underground Railroad, history	Henry Brown does not know how old he is. Growing up, he marries and sees his family being sold at the slave market. One day at the warehouse, he lifts a crate and mails himself to the North. This story tells the journey that many have taken to have a day of freedom.
15	<p><i>When I Was Eight</i> (2013)</p> 	<p>Christy Jordan-Fenton (Author) Margaret Pokiak-Fenton (Author) Gabrielle Grimard (Illustrator)</p>	Social Issues	Autobiography, Canada, First Nations, Indigenous, residential schools	Olemaun is eight and does not know how to read. The nuns at her school call her Margaret and cut her long hair. This book is based on Margaret Pokiak-Fenton's story and the power to pursue the ability to read.
16	<p><i>Letters to a Prisoner</i> (2017)</p> 	Jacques Goldstein (Author)	Social Issues	International, amnesty, letter writing, incarceration, visual narrative, family	This is a visual narrative (wordless) story about the power of hope and the written word. This book is inspired by Amnesty International who have been jailed for expressing their political views.

Data Collection

The research questions surrounding this study are *what issues do students raise in their discussions of social justice picturebooks in culture circles?* and *what are the ways the teacher acts with agency within or after culture circles?* Supporting questions that I hoped to answer the ultimate question were: (1) what are the reflections of students after reading literature in culture

circles, and (2) what actions do students take after discussion in these culture circles? Data was gathered via audio/video recording, teacher field notes, and student artifacts (drawings, notes, writing). Participants were notified first by a parent/guardian recruitment form, and then a permission form (see Appendix A and B) to participate in this study. Consent to participate was sent out via a hard-copy letter. Participants were protected from harm, and they were not exposed to risks by providing pseudonyms and covering any artifact that displays students' identities. Aside from legal guardianship consent to participate in this study, no specific criteria for selecting single or group participants were in place. In other words, having children share their stories and transactions of what topics are covered was the ultimate goal, not excluding any student from how they participate, since the study involved examining our on-going classroom engagements.

Field notes described what happened in a culture circle, while teacher reflection notes were written reflections of how students took a role of praxis and dialogue around action. This teacher reflection journal was utilized for planning if more concepts needed to be explained to students. The field notes captured in writing observations, dialogue, and experiences that audio/video recordings often don't reflect. Furthermore, collecting field notes related to action was used especially since action can take many forms even weeks after the culture circle. On the other hand, student artifacts showed what students were thinking when engaged in a culture circle through literature. Moreover, the field notes and artifacts aligned with the critical cycle (see Figure 1.3) thus the critical cycle is extended with a critical cycle plan (see Table 4) that reflects what students did weekly.

Table 4 Critical cycle plan

Critical Cycle Plan		
Principles	Time¹	Process
Generative Theme	5 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book introduction (author/illustrator)
Problem Posing	10 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read aloud to the whole group
Dialogue	10 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have students reflect independently for 2 minutes. • Then students sit in a whole group circle to share any thoughts
Problem-Solving	10 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students sit at their spots and illustrate or write any final thoughts on paper. • Whole group dialogue on artifact created
Action	Varies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This process can vary depending on the theme, book, and what students share. • Action can take place inside/outside of the classroom

Taking a closer look at the critical cycle plan, the Arizona standards were used to study how children dialogue based on the curriculum and books read. These books were read aloud and I asked students what they were thinking rather than having set questions. When undergoing a culture circle, each circle needed to feel organic. The experience would have felt differently if I relied on focused pre-determined questions. Rather, than experiencing an organic culture circle, participants needed to be the ones to bring their questions, comments, and stories into the space. Once students responded via audiovisual recordings and student artifacts, labels were used for coding. Analyzing the data with these labels highlighted students' ability to identify the theme and examined whether other themes emerged. Also, coding transcriptions of audiovisual recordings focused on analyzing the conversations students had with each other. I wanted the analysis and results of the data to reflect children's dialogue in a K-2 classroom setting about stories and themes that are often silenced. During data analysis, examining closely the

¹ The time will differ for every theme, book, dialogue, and specific day a culture circle takes place.

transcriptions of the audiovisual recordings, student artifacts, field notes, and teacher reflection journals described how students thought about the texts that were read and discussed in a culture circle.

Data Analysis

Analyzing the data, especially through an online modality was complex. I intentionally decided to analyze and categorize the data online with some exceptions to visually seeing student artifacts in-person. The following sections review how I specifically analyzed the data for each research question. Data collection occurred at least one to two times per week on each book that was read and explored in a culture circle via audiovisual recordings, student sketches, and teacher field notes.

Question One: Issues Raised by Students

Capturing students' thoughts on paper is complex yet awakening. Some students often needed more time to finish coloring or expressing their thoughts while other students were done within five minutes. “How do you know when students are officially done with what they want to produce and share?”—this thought was engraved in my mind as the data collection process was taking place.

The first initial step was to create a secure Google Drive Folder to keep security and an organized structure online of all the data. Figure 3.1 reflects the specific-colored folders where categories were made to put the data in. I created the folders *Artifacts*, *Photo/Video*, *Reflections*, *Tables and Figures*, and *Whole Class Recordings* to start the process of organizing larger categories. Within the first category of artifacts came the digital scans of every child's sketches based on each picturebook. The digital scans enhanced a further analysis of seeing the child's

sketch at a larger scale without needing to use a magnifier glass. I was able to manipulate zooming in and out and carefully examining a sketch more vividly (see Figure 3.2).

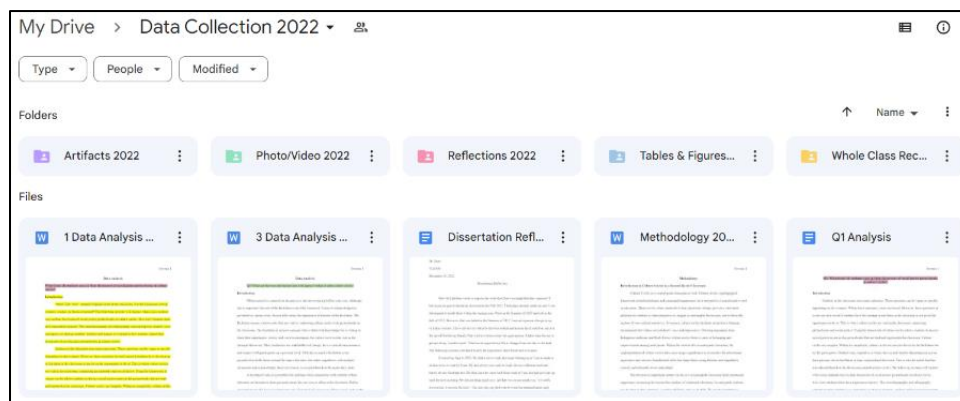


Figure 3.1 Colored folders for data collection organization

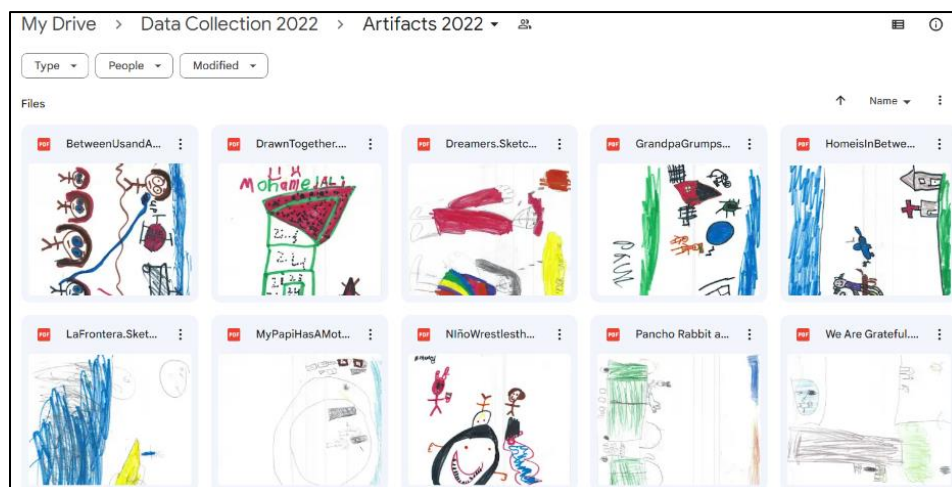


Figure 3.2 Student Sketches folder

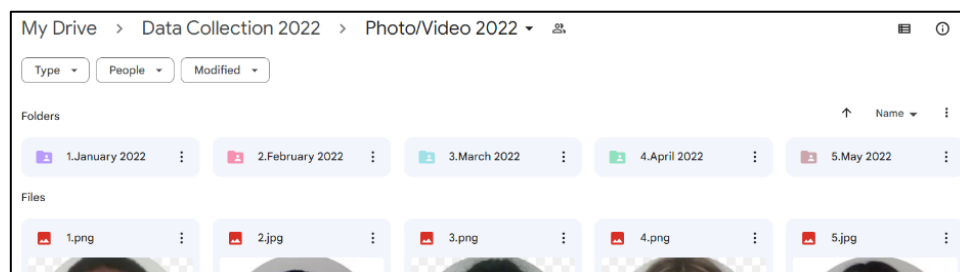


Figure 3.3 Subfolders based on month

The category of photo/video took the longest to categorize and organize. I created subcategories based on month (see Figure 3.3). Within each month, there were subfolders

regarding a specific picturebook based on the date that a culture circle was done. Also, a subfolder may have practice items at the start of a culture circle just to have that time to practice with the data equipment that was used for this dissertation (see Figure 3.4). Inside each subfolder displayed the data (see Figure 3.5). Some of the data ranged between whole class videos, small group videos, individual student videos, audio recordings with no video displayed, and transcripts. The teacher field notes were under the category of teacher reflections.



Figure 3.4 Subfolders inside each month

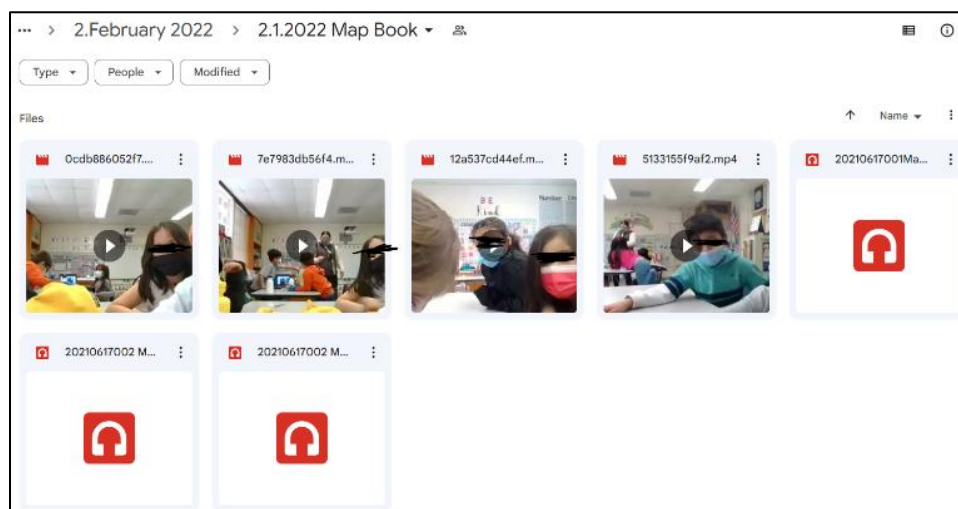


Figure 3.5 Data Collection inside each subfolder based on the month

Capturing student artifacts pertaining to this research question was through examining student artifacts. Using video and audio recordings helped me understand what students were thinking regarding social justice issues. However, using student sketches were mostly used to physically represent and show how students were reflecting through the stories they shared in a

culture circle. It is not to say that other modalities were not used, but student sketches were highly present more so than audiovisual representations as the primary data source.

Question Two: Teacher Agency

Capturing teacher agency is challenging especially when that teacher is also the researcher in this study. Taking a glance at agency is not impossible but something that can't be fully captured with photos, video recordings, or reflections. I believe that agency is within, during, and after a culture circle, not necessarily something to grasp and "show off". Agency within a culture circle is something that happens organically. In Figure YYY, the teacher researcher is constantly walking around and making sure that students are engaged, but most importantly to express to students that she is available to answer any questions or further develop the dialogue within the group or individually.

Being involved and engaged in a culture circle is important and reflects a way of enacting agency. Rather than being the sole source of knowledge and authority, the teacher's role is to facilitate dialogue that creates an open space for all students. Teacher agency within a culture circle means having the autonomy to guide the discussion but also being open to where students take that discussion. This requires that the teacher be an active listener, responding to students' thoughts and questions.

Having agency during a culture circle continues to be relevant. The teacher balances between maintaining the purpose of dialogue while also encouraging students to express themselves freely. Again, it is not about being in control, but rather supporting and encouraging student agency. As the teacher researcher, there were many opportunities that decisions needed to be made on the spot, adapting to the dialogue, and ensuring that all student voices were heard.

Teacher agency after a culture circle doesn't end. As the teacher researcher, there were many moments for reflection. Reflecting on the discussions and their outcomes became prevalent in what was to come in the consecutive days. Reflection is an important component that oftentimes as teachers, there is little to no time focused on this essential category. Considering how you performed as a teacher is vital, but also how students are being impacted, if they are understanding the concepts, or if important questions are raised for a future lesson. Using reflections offers an opportunity from the culture circle into meaningful learning opportunities for all students.

Reflections on teacher agency within culture circles were deeply reflective. Most of the time, there were quick bullet points that later translated into detailed written reflections, offering a comprehensive insight into the setting, experiences, and outcomes of each particular day. Reflections occurred in real-time, capturing spontaneous moments, while at other times, they were recorded after the school day or carried into the next day. Lunchtime observations, where I went to see how students played outside, aimed not just to witness interactions but also to understand what students were learning through the practical application of praxis beyond the classroom.

The playground became a dynamic space for the manifestation of literary themes. Students in moments of wonder identified the black snake from Lindstrom's (2020) book during their outdoor activities. This observation underscored the immersive nature of literature, transcending the classroom and influencing spontaneous interactions among students. Additionally, the feedback loop extended beyond the classroom, with students taking the discussions and lessons from the culture circle back home. The sharing of stories with parents

and grandparents became a bridge, enriching the discourse around border issues and adding a generational perspective.

Collecting data on teacher agency presented a complex challenge. Reflections on the stories students brought with them were documented. Scenarios shared in audiovisual recordings, depicting how students received information from their personal stories, added another layer to the data. The integration of this data with the first research question of the dissertation revealed an organic interweaving of the two questions. Teacher agency emerged naturally, without the explicit focus, illustrating its inherent connection with the unfolding dynamics of culture circles.

The nuanced and often subconscious nature of teacher agency unfolded organically throughout the study. It was not a factor consciously sought or scrutinized for data collection but became evident through immersive experiences within culture circles. This unveils a profound aspect of teacher agency—it arose naturally within the context of meaningful pedagogical practices, reflecting a fluid and interconnected relationship between the facilitator, students, and the learning environment. The reflection process and data collection became integral components of this organic agency, enriching the understanding of the teacher's role in fostering transformative learning experiences.

Conclusion

Conducting this research with primary-aged children is necessary especially where the academic field has limited sources of engaging in culture circles and children's discussions around social issue books with primary-aged children. The research purpose, research questions, context, and methods reflect the continued approach to this research. Moreover, this analysis

highlighted the importance of using children's literature and culture circles with primary-aged children.

Teachers require an understanding of how to utilize children's literature in the classroom with students and collecting this research provides that tool. In other words, teachers are yearning for professional development, tools, and research to rely on and use in the classrooms with students. This research provides that tool that educators have been longing for. Aside from COVID-19, the implication of research consists of having the same group of students, thus if this research were to be done with different students, what would the data reflect? This research needs to be continued and incorporated into the academic field, especially with K-2 students. Engaging in culture circles while using children's literature expresses the ability to voice students' thoughts which they have been yearning for in the classroom.

Explaining my positionality as the teacher-researcher impacts the "why" of this research. My own experiences have led me to become interested in this area of inquiry. Having the privilege of learning these theories and using them as a framework became the basis of my interest in this focus on culture circles and children's literature. Trying to learn and understand what children think, reflect, and act upon children's literature while in a culture circle is a goal that I want to accomplish.

As a researcher and educator, theories have always been centered in the work I do personally and professionally. Incorporating a lens where I use three common theories of (1) Freire (Critical Pedagogy and Culture Circles); (2) Louise Rosenblatt (Transactional Theory); and (3) Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy (ISJP) is pivotal in the classroom and the environment. These theories allow me to question the systems that continue to "breathe" in our

world. This theoretical framework and literature review urge all educators to continue this work, not just with youth but with primary-aged children.

Critical dialogue, culture circles, and children's literature are often used with older-aged students and adults in many different avenues. These theories are hardly ever expressed or seen in K-2 classrooms and need to be incorporated more. Transformation can happen in the spaces that we are in; especially in a place where young children want to express their stories, see themselves in literature, and take agency of a justice-oriented critical consciousness that develops a sense of hope. This is how data was collected and analyzed by using theories that continue to inspire the stories that are centered within culture circles.

CHAPTER 4:

Issues and Action in Discussions of Social Justice Picturebooks in Culture Circles

This chapter explores the research question of what issues do students raise in their discussions of social justice picturebooks in culture circles? This question includes two sub questions of (1) the issues students discuss, and (2) the actions students take. Students in the classroom raise many questions. These questions can be vague or specific depending on the scenario. Within these questions, issues are raised. However, these questions or issues are only raised if students have the courage to ask them in the classroom or are given the opportunity to do so. This is where culture circles are vital in the classroom, connecting picturebooks and social justice. Using the framework of culture circles provides a space for students to discuss social justice issues in the picturebooks that are read and explored in the classroom. Culture circles are complex. Within its complexity, culture circles are not just driven by the facilitator but by the participants. Students may respond as a whole class or individually depending not just on their persona, but on the theme or topic explored and discussed. This is why the initial timeline was adjusted based on the discussions raised in these circles. The following sections explore the issues students raise in their discussion of the social justice picturebooks in culture circles. Also, how students share their experiences matters. This study explores student voice and agency as they share artifacts and images to respond to how discussion of social justice picturebooks in culture circles.

Initially, the sections were categorized based on four themes that organized the student discussions on the picturebooks read aloud in the classroom: *family*, *identity*, *immigration*, and *social justice* topics. These themes evolved based on the timeline for this inquiry. The “what”

and “how” of students responding to these themes were documented in student artifacts, teacher reflection notes, and audio transcriptions. The analysis led to identify four highlighted issues that are discussed in this chapter to respond the research questions, what issues do students raise in their discussions of social justice picturebooks in culture circles? This research question also includes data on action they took related to these issues. The four themes that emerged from data analysis are *family and community as togetherness*, *immigration as a journey*, *observance as societal expectations of identity*, and *identify on safe space*. Culture circles are essential for discussing social justice issues in the classroom (Souto-Manning, 2010).

Family and community as togetherness refers to the essence of who students are and how they see themselves connected to their families and communities. In culture circles, students shared their experiences and perspectives on the different types of families and communities represented in the picturebooks. They discussed the importance of accepting and understanding different family structures and how they related to their experiences. This theme also explored the idea of cultural identity and how it is shaped by family and community. The discussion around family and community as togetherness highlights the importance of recognizing and respecting different family structures and cultural identities.

Immigration as a Journey is another theme explored in the discussion of social justice in picturebooks. Students discussed the challenges that the characters faced in the picturebooks based on their journeys, especially around immigration. They also related these journeys to their experiences and shared their views on how they overcame challenges and obstacles in their lives. The theme of immigration as a journey emphasizes the importance of perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity. It also highlighted the need for empathy and understanding toward others who may be facing similar challenges.

Observance as societal expectations of identity was another theme discussed in culture circles. Students shared their perspectives on the importance of observance and the role it plays in different cultures. Students distinguished between observing from afar and within a certain issue being discussed. They also discussed the challenges of balancing observance with other aspects of their lives and the importance of understanding and respecting different cultures and traditions. The discussion around observance emphasized the importance of cultural competence and understanding. Their comments also highlighted the need for tolerance and respect for cultural practices and beliefs.

Finally, *identifying a safe space* was a theme that emerged in the discussion of social issues in picturebooks. Students shared their experiences and interpretations of what makes a space that is safe and welcoming for sharing their thoughts and experiences. Students discussed the importance of creating a safe space for all participants in a culture circle as well as sharing their thoughts on how physical buildings and internal viewpoints are viewed as a safe space. This theme emphasizes the importance of inclusivity, equity, and the need for valuing and respecting everyone's experiences.

Culture circles provide a space for students to discuss social justice issues and share their experiences. The facilitator played a crucial role in creating a safe and welcoming space for all participants. The issues that students raised in their discussion of social justice picturebooks were based on the themes of *family and community as togetherness*, *immigration as a journey*, *observance as societal expectations of identity*, and *identifying a safe space*. These themes provide insight into the experiences and perspectives of students and the importance of creating a space for them to share their thoughts and experiences.

Family and Community as Togetherness

The theme of family arose due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Having had the same students for two consecutive years all during the pandemic brought forth the connection and understanding of what a family is and truly means. Throughout the time of the shutdown, the meaning of family was a broad image and at that time was only explored through the surface in our discussions. As we approached in-person instruction, families in the eyes of students transformed into *people who care, love, and embrace who you are*. In other words, a family is not just someone who lives in your household but something more. Family becomes the essence of who you are. This issue was approached based on the books read and the stories that were heard, lived, and breathed in the classroom.

In addition to their families at home, the classroom became ours, our family. Although each child, including myself, faced the difficulties and challenges of what a family entails, the classroom became the center of further exploring what a family is. It was not just a place, but a feeling of caring, love, and embracing your whole self. The following stories from children express how they connect their family at home to school and their understanding of this theme. Family as togetherness or the essence of who you are was an issue that students often raised during the read-alouds on the theme of family, but also occurred in other read-alouds. Within this issue, many subcategories were identified, but expressing the issues of the classroom as community and courage are two main issues that are highlighted in the following student examples.

Pedro, Maribel, Lucas, Yandel, and Gabriel shared comments on various issues related to classroom as community and courage within *Family and Community as Togetherness*. A brief example of their sketches reflects their interpretations and stories of what they thought and felt as

picturebooks were read and discussed in culture circles. Pedro's story reflects the connection that he has with his family when going fishing. Maribel expresses that language is not a barrier but a way to communicate and be together as a classroom family. Lucas conveys that a classroom family can be bridged with your home family. There is mutual trust between both families, and they are intertwined in his perspective. Yandel articulates the courage of family stories by sharing while also demonstrating through a sketch. Lastly, Gabriel shares his personal experience about losing his father, yet connecting with the spiritual aspect of a family.

Pedro and Maribel's examples reflect more about issues of the classroom as a community, while Lucas and Yandel shared issues of courage within the family as togetherness. Gabriel shares how he acted with an agency within a family. These student examples reflect the very essence that the theme of "family" was not just observed, examined, or discussed during the read-alouds of family books. In identifying what is a family, these student examples and sketches identify issues of a family from their perspectives.

Pedro and Maribel: Classroom as a Community

We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga by Traci Sorell (2018) was a text used for the theme of family. This book illustrates the beauty of seasons and the meaning behind being grateful through the Cherokee community. It describes the very essence of what seasons are but as a form of life and identity within your community. Not only does it depict the vocabulary of understanding "what" and "how" to be grateful from an Indigenous perspective but encompasses the essence of family. This book brought forth the issues of the *classroom as community* and *courage within a family*.

Pedro's sketch for *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* (see Figure 4.1) resembles the representation of a family being together in his sketch in addition to incorporating animals as part of the family. Pedro wrote *Spring* in both English and Cherokee. Bilingualism is encouraged in the classroom even though officially English should be only spoken. This was the first book to embrace a different language other than Spanish and English. Students were fascinated by the Cherokee alphabet and continued

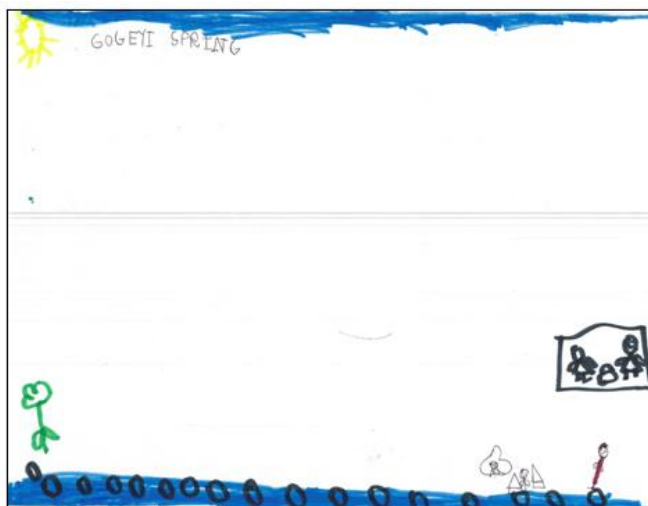


Figure 4.1 Pedro's Sketch to Sorell 2018 book

asking questions about the general structure of the language. Issues of language were brought up in student discussions and sketches. Examining Pedro's sketch, he placed stones at the river but did not finish his sketch that some of those stones were also fish. Pedro incorporated the use of the stones to connect to the book but incorporated the fish based on his own experience. The beauty in that children do not just understand the text but put their own experiences alongside it is evident in this figure. Pedro is very active in class and likes to always share his experiences. Bringing in his family connection of going fishing enlightens the awareness that family identity is vital to the stories being read.

Examining identity within this theme brings to light many factors. It's not just about gender but about knowing oneself and the meaning of family. Family is the center and essence of belonging and knowing who you are. Children identify that their family is essential just as much as their peers in the classroom. These connections are powerful when children can incorporate their home experiences within the classroom. They are not distinct or separated, but rather

integrated as one whole identity. Exploring the theme of identity and having students bring their discussions about identity within the books explored re-examines the need in classrooms to recognize that identity matters and should be encouraged in the classroom. Again, it's not just about gender identity but looking further into the complexity of identity and its interpretation by each individual within the picturebooks read.

In *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* by Isabel Quintero (2019), Daisy is the main character alongside her Papi and notices various changes in a California town when viewing their neighborhood while cruising on a motorcycle. Not only is the town growing into a larger city, but within that growth comes unexpected changes. The Raspados store is closed, newer homes are being built, and familiar smells are no longer prevalent in the community. This picturebook was selected to bring forth the issue of a physical representation of what a family is but it also brought up the issue that the classroom is a community.

Maribel is a native Spanish speaker and is acquiring the English language. Everyone in the class teaches her basic English words, so that she can say simple English phrases. I encourage the Spanish language in the classroom, although our school is not a bilingual school. Maribel lived in Tucson, Arizona on Monday through Friday, and on the weekends, she lived in Nogales, Sonora Mexico. Every Monday morning Maribel crossed the Frontera with her Mami to get to school before the bell rang. There were days when she was late, but I did not penalize her because of being tardy.



Figure 4.2 Maribel's sketch to Quintero 2019 book

Maribel had a charisma that was contagious and made you feel bubbly. She was the only student who created her videos like a *YouTuber* for every reflection she shared. Some of these characteristics include *amigis*, *hola chicos*, and *okayyy... byeee*. Maribel's sketch (see Figure 4.2) in response to *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* (Quintero, 2019) describes how she has "*ice cream*" rather than using the Spanish term *raspados*. Maribel continued to use some phrases in English to describe and share that she knows certain words. She preferred to speak in Spanish but tried to incorporate English into what she said and shared with her peers. Maribel's use of language in the classroom resonates with the theme of a family because Maribel identified herself as part of the classroom family. In other words, Maribel knew that our classroom as a community includes English and some Spanish and wanted to be part of that experience.

Pedro and Maribel's comments on their classroom as community represent how students and educators can together bridge the essence of what a family and community are inside the classroom. I want to caution that this did not just form inside a physical building but happened within daily interactions inside and outside the classroom. This was not just a mere practice or a "goal" to check off on a list, rather students understood critically the value of creating something more together. It was and felt remarkable to be in a space where we could collectively say it was a classroom community.

Lucas and Yandel: Courage within Family

Courage within the family was a theme that occurred naturally in discussions. There was never a hesitation about what could be shared at home or what was omitted from families. In other words, students had the courage and confidence to share their personal experiences with me and take everything that was learned to share at home. Students did not shy away from

sharing with their families at home about daily practices at school. Also, students wanted to share their daily activities that were done at home and very few were hesitant to share their stories. Within this context, Lucas and Yandel shared these stories of courage within a family in the issues that are raised in *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* (Quintero, 2019) and *La Frontera: El viaje con papá /My Journey with Papa* (Mills and Alva, 2018).

Lucas drew a yellow truck saying, “*This is me and my dad*” (see Figure 4.3) in response to *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* (Quintero, 2019). Verbally, Lucas expressed it very simply, but



Figure 4.3 Lucas's sketch to Quintero 2019 book

when he shared his image with me, he had more to say. He told me that he likes to ride with his dad and spend time with him. The simplicity of Lucas as it may appear always leaves me with an awareness of how much he can describe with his drawings. In other words, he may not say much verbally but can express more through his sketches.

Lucas at first was a very shy student who had many emotions at the start of school. His parents told me that his first-grade experience at another school was very negative and that he did not like school. Both parents told me that his teacher from last year called out Lucas in front of the class, teasing and bullying him verbally to the point where Lucas cried every day. “No sé lo que hiciste maestra, pero Lucas le encanta la escuela y no puede dejar de hablar de usted en la casa.” was a comment from Lucas’s dad when dropping him off at school. These comments from families convey the importance of culture circles to students, teachers, and families;

collaboration and consciousness can happen together. Again, Lucas confided in his family to share with them what conversations are like in the classroom. Also, Lucas's connection with family in his sketch resonates with the importance of family relationships.

La Frontera: El viaje con papá /My Journey with Papa by Deborah Mills and Alfredo Alva (2018) is an immigration story about a young boy named Alfredo who travels with his father from Mexico to Texas. This striking true story convey their courage in finding a way to cross the border to make a new place a home. This story was selected to accompany the theme of immigration, but students shared their various distinctions aside from immigration.

Yandel's sketch (see Figure 4.4) in response to *La Frontera: El viaje con papá /My*



Figure 4.4 Yandel's sketch to Mills & Alva 2018 book

Journey with Papa (Mills and Alva, 2018)

represents a similar illustration in the book where Papá gives Alfredo a \$100 bill at the embassy before Alfredo rides the school bus just in case someone in a uniform picks him up. *"It's like the book, but there is more Miss. The boy has a yellow backpack and the courage to carry his story wherever he goes,"* Yandel said. In other words, Yandel's meaning of the backpack that he colored symbolizes courage and story. The courage that the boy and his Papá had along the way evolved into courage to maintain the status of staying

within North America. Also, the point that Yandel has developed the courage to share his story is that he embraces his grandparents and parents for teaching him many life stories. Examining

Yandel's sketch, he drew Alfredo and Papá with the mountains in the background and a small tree. His sketch is done with a pencil and the only item in his sketch that is colored is the yellow backpack. This was done intentionally because he wanted to reflect the power within a story and the courage that not only the characters in the book had, but his connection too.

Gabriel: Acting with Agency within Family

Gabriel shared his sketch (see Figure 4.5) in response to *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* (Quintero, 2019) to depict a blue van. He shared in his video that his “*dad has a blue van because he painted it.*” Gabriel’s use of words was motivating. Using the present tense of “has”

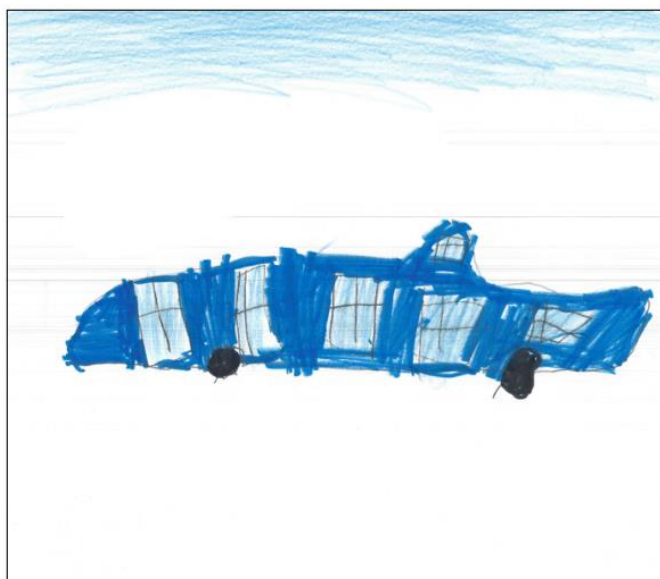


Figure 4.5 Gabriel's sketch to Quintero 2019 book

rather than the past tense of “had” made me think about how Gabriel thinks about his Papi. Unfortunately, in 2021 Gabriel and Ariana (Ariana is also in the class and is Gabriel’s sister) lost their father. Their dad was battling cancer and Covid worsened his health condition. Both children, including the rest of the family, continued to seek outside counseling

services during the study. There was a time when counseling would be done during school, but that was discontinued because of different schedules between the services and school time.

Examining Gabriel’s response, I admire his resilience in the word choice he uses and that even though he does grieve, he always remembers his Papi and knows that his Papi is with him.

Gabriel’s example of not just expressing his feelings about his dad but making clear to everyone

in the class that his Papi is still present with him. This is powerful to witness, that his meaning of family is not defined by the physical presence, but by the spiritual aspect too.

Students acted with an agency within the issues that were discussed. All these examples express the characteristics of the classroom as a community within family, courage within family, and acting with agency within family. *Family as togetherness* is the essence of who you are. This is what these students shared through their sketches. Students had the courage to not just share their family stories, but the courage to incorporate praxis within that meaning. Students showed empathy and compassion toward each other. Courage is not just a character trait that is displayed, rather it is lived and is intrinsic. It was a form of dialogue that was incorporated amongst each other through establishing a classroom family. This is what *family as togetherness* represents, the essence of who you are in the space that we can confidently call home.

Immigration as a Journey

Immigration is complex depending on how its viewed. In this case, immigration was centered between North America and Mexico. Understanding what that border is and why it's there was just several of the discussions revealed by student sketches. The following stories describe the discussions that students had either with the teacher or as a whole group discussion about their understandings of immigration. Immersing themselves into immigration conversations in the classroom, students were aware that there are two places that you need to cross the border to get to those places. Student stories described their understanding and interpretation of immigration. Immigration was expressed as not just a physical border or place, but also an internal border. Multiple characteristics of borders (like friendship), and how others may view immigration as an onlooker were discussed. Students' interpretations of immigration were their own based on their experiences and their connections but also on the factual histories

behind the issues explored in the classroom with the teacher. Student discussions explored the idea of embracing immigration through different outlooks that are rarely explored in school and shared those stories in their sketches for a culture circle. The concept of immigration became a journey that was explored, thus students' understandings of immigration were centered around the theme of journeys in that immigration involves, leaving, moving toward, borders, and connections to friendship.

Three texts were used to explore the theme of immigration: *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018), *La Frontera: El Viaje con papá/ My Journey with Papa* (Mills & Alva, 2018), and *Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from the Border* (Perkins, 2019). In *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018), students explored what immigration is through this autobiographical picturebook that expresses the resiliency of Yuyi Morales's journey to North America. The vibrancy of color and culture is expressed throughout every page turn while the use of animals and nature was one expression that students described in their sketches along with the concept of the library. *La Frontera: El Viaje con papá/ My Journey with Papa* (Mills & Alva, 2018) was the book that made students more aware of immigration within Mexico and North America. Students were resilient and wanted to share the stories of their families' journeys of overcoming danger and adapting to a new place. *Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from the Border* (Perkins, 2019) reflects the image that the border is not just found here in Arizona but extends within North America, in particular the text reflects the San Diego, California border within Tijuana, Mexico. Student sketches reflected the image of an "empty space" between the two countries and questioned that space.

Gabriel: The Difficulty of Immigration

Gabriel's sketch (see Figure 4.6) in response to *La Frontera: El Viaje con papá/ My Journey with Papa* (Mills & Alva, 2018) depicts two people on a raft in a body of water. "Mira Miss hay mucha agua y para que no se unden estan en esta cosa como barco. Es muy duro dejar todo Miss..." Gabriel told me. His

explanation of the water being so gruesome by the scribbles of the tide of the water convey that the water is not always still, but flows depending on the condition. However, people don't drown because there is a yellow "thing" and not a boat. Here, Gabriel understands the need that there can be boats but during the



Figure 4.6 Gabriel's sketch to Mills & Alva 2018 book

journey, the boat may not be present. I want to focus on the last phrase that Gabriel said, "es muy duro dejar todo Miss," meaning it's really hard to leave everything, Miss. Gabriel understands that although you are leaving your home, the journey itself is hard. It's not just about the physical journey of transporting yourself to a new place, but the emotional feeling it entails. Gabriel has heard many stories from his mother about her journey to North America and the struggles that generated it. Gabriel felt comfortable and did not shy away from explaining his story, which is also his mother's, which made him proud.

Lucas: The In-between Borders

In *Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from the Border* by Mitali Perkins (2019) is a story about a little girl named Maria who travels with her mother and brother to visit their grandmother on the border of California and Mexico during the Posadas. Through the fence, they find a way to exchange gifts and share stories. This “fence” or border between Tijuana, Mexico, and San Diego, California represents the unknown “area of the middle.” This book brings to light not only the concept of immigration but in-between borders and the questions that students continue to have about that concept.

Lucas’s sketch (see Figure 4.7) in response to *Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from the Border* (Perkins, 2019) illustrates the ocean, a palm tree, and the sun on the right side of

the image. Towards the middle of the page, people are in three different rows. To the far left, people from Mexico are facing people from North America. To the far right, people from North America are facing Mexico. People in the middle in black markers look at both sides of the border between Mexico and North



Figure 4.7 Lucas's sketch to Perkins 2019 book

America. Both people from Mexico and North America are colored with the same marker.

Lucas’s sketch represents that section from Perkins's (2019) text where the children were flying their kites to the other side of the border. However, Lucas was very inquisitive of the people in the “middle;” “*what do we call that place Miss... in the middle? Is it a place, or what do the people in the middle mean?*” I asked Lucas about his use of color, and he expressed that all

people have the same color and that we are all people, but he kept insisting on his questions about finding out about the “other people in the middle.” He wanted to know what is it named for and what is its purpose.

Lucas’s utilization of color presented a fascinating aspect, particularly considering that individuals from both San Diego and Tijuana share a similar skin tone complexion. The figures positioned in the center symbolize the border patrol monitoring both sides of the border, gazing outward. It became intriguing as Lucas elaborates on his sketch, delving into the complexity of representation. Despite this exploration, the internal question regarding the significance of the middle persisted. Lucas’s sketch not only captured the visual nuances of the shared complexion but also served as a visual metaphor for the pervasive presence of the border patrol, a thought-provoking element that adds depth to the interpretation of his sketch.

Yandel: Taking Action at the Border

Dreamers by Yuyi Morales (2018) is a personal memoir that illustrates the things you carry when finding a new place to call home. This story reminds readers that we are all dreamers bringing our strengths and talents to the places we gather. As Morales takes us through her journey with her son coming to North America, I wanted students to not just focus on the issue of immigration but see the beauty within that journey through the various modalities used in the illustrations. Students used this text to consider action at the border and reflect on their various journeys when overcoming challenges and finding that dream within.

Yandel’s sketch (See Figure 4.8) in response to *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018) depicts a large bird with multiple colors while holding a smaller bird. The small bird is whistling numbers in a rhythmic song. Bowls of fruit are on the right side of the bird, while on the left side, another bird



Figure 4.8 Yandel's sketch to Morales 2018 book

is watching. At the bottom center of the page is a black and brown stretch of road horizontally with another small road vertically that connects both roads. After visually examining the image, I asked Yandel to explain his drawing to me. Yandel said, *“The mom is holding her baby and they are crossing the border. They are hungry and can’t wait to eat. Miss... the lone bird is by himself looking. That’s us here... just watching... oh and a sunny day with the mom.”* The stretch of roads represents the border, and the food is on the other side waiting for the mother and baby to eat after their long voyage.

The small bird with no color represents *“us just watching”* is mentioned by Yandel. I wanted Yandel to explain further his statement and he said, *“You know to miss... when... when you just watch the people and help or no help... ay... miss... you know right?”* Yandel was caught up in his words and struggled to explain but I understood what he meant. Sometimes when crossing the border, people may interact with others. When finally crossing the border to North America, especially from Mexico, people can become a bystander, observing many scenarios that occur. Also, a person who is not from the country can become a “outcast or stranger” as Yandel expressed to the whole class with his personal experience when visiting his family in Mexico. Yandel was observant and shared how that feeling might occur when he does get a chance to visit Mexico. This is what he wanted to express verbally and with his drawings, express these feelings. As the choice for Yandel to use birds, he wanted to connect with how Morales (2018) used multiple animals in her work.

Cameron: Borders are Everywhere.

Cameron's sketch (see Figure 4.9) in response to *Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from the Border* (Perkins, 2019) reflects the border between the San Diego and Tijuana



Figure 4.9 Cameron's sketch to Perkins 2019 book

coastlines. The brown border wall is open through the small window slits with the ocean waves that are up and down on both ends of the pages while the ocean water waves are steady in the middle. The same goes for the border walls, they are higher on both ends of the paper, but smaller in the middle. I saw Cameron become a critical

thinker who questioned his surroundings and why things are a certain way. This is true in his drawings when I asked him about them. *“Look Miss... borders are everywhere just like we learned, but borders have different ways too. There are borders in your heart and how you feel sometimes... and... you can always pass that border without thinking about it. I think Miss... I guess how you see it. It's not just a border but more I think,”* Cameron said. Analyzing his sketch further with what he described is intriguing. Cameron understands the meaning behind a physical border had been indicated in his connections on various texts we have explored; however, he adds his understanding of the internal border within. This is what his image represents, not just a physical border but an internal border too with the waves sometimes being unsteady and the openings of the fence to go through. I can connect with Cameron's idea of *“I guess how you see it”* by not only his drawing but how he thinks.

Marcos: Borders as Enacted in People's Behavior

Marcos's sketch (see Figure 4.10) in response to *La Frontera: El Viaje con papá/ My Journey with Papa* (Mills & Alva, 2018) shares a disturbing view of immigration. Marcos was the only student who shared with everyone his sketch and he represented this notion verbally as well as his views on the topic. The blue

sky and yellow sun frame a person in the middle with another person on the floor. On the left side of the image, a shark is diving down with fish near it. At the bottom of the page, red scribble markings are seen with faded pencil markings of a stick figure and some hands. Marcos explained to the class while pointing to



Figure 4.10 Marcos's sketch to Mills & Alva 2018 book

his sketch: "Look, here is the dad that saved his son from the shark. The shark killed some fish, but there were people too that did not make it. Sharks can kill and are dangerous." Students in the class did not say very much other than visually observing his image. I believe that students were shocked by the explanation and drawing because it was a different perspective that had not been discussed. Marcos was very animated and expressive when he spoke. Other students did not say anything. I asked Marcos, "*What made you draw a shark?*" "*You know miss... people are like sharks with their words or what they do to each other.*" Students were nodding their heads and agreed with what Marcos said. I understood his explanation that symbolically sharks represent human behaviors of how we can treat each other verbally or physically. Marcos's

understanding of immigration was not just the gruesome concept of sharks, but the characteristics of human behavior.

Cameron and Marcos mirror the images that borders can be found in human behavior. It is not just the context of immigration, but human behavior and how we treat people. Students were very aware of how they are being treated by the teacher, but also amongst each other as peers and as part of society. Combining both students' interpretations, the message is that an internal border can be seen as human behavior.

Manuel: Friendship in Immigration

Manuel's sketch (see Figure 4.11) in response to *Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from the Border* (Perkins, 2019) reflects the three sections of a border: Mexico, North America,

and the in-between. Manuel uses two different colors to represent this, black and red. The color black represents both countries, while the red color is in the middle. Both people starting from the middle to the right are smiling, while the person on the far left has a sad face. I



asked Manuel to share his thoughts on his sketch and he said, *"This boy is sad*

Figure 4.11 Manuel's sketch o Perkins 2019 book

because he can't open the door to play with his other friends. His friends waiting Miss."

Manuel's interpretation of the border is the connection he has with his friends. For example, when Manuel and his peers do not share an understanding, there may be a conflict, and thus the

door between friendships may be closed. This is what Manuel thinks about the border, that the door itself may be closed looking at the perspective of friendship. How Manuel understands immigration is not specifically the overview of what immigration is, but how he can connect to it through his own experiences regarding friendship.

Journeys take us to destinations that we have longed for or pathways that are awaiting. This is what students understood about immigration; either something that was hoped for and lived through or something that is still forthcoming. Through journeys, there was a connection between stories about leaving physical places or seeing separation happening. There was dialogue around journeys moving toward the physical location or movements that guided stories to move. Also, there were conversations around identifying borders and relationships to friendships.

Observance as Societal Expectations of Identity

Students reflected and observed in various ways. Through observation, students expressed their ideas in the sketches that were created and shared. Within their stories and journeys that complement each other, there are moments where students connect and express action and empathy. Some chose to observe rather than participate. This formality was observed both from a distance or within. Moreover, students viewed from a distance or within reflected connections and expressed action and empathy. Having a constant representation of what issues students were raising with within the social justice picturebooks impacts what and how students respond. The following students encompassed those issues by taking a stance of observance.

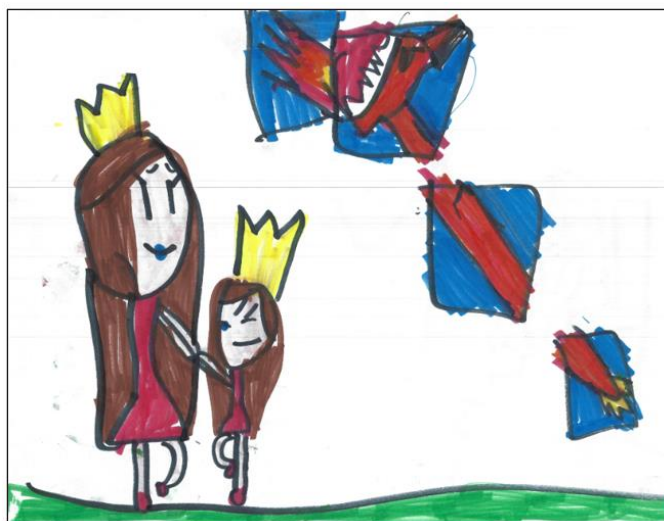
In *Drawn Together* by Minh Lê (2018) the illustrations were the center of our conversations. I was pointing out the many features of picturebooks that I learned with Dr. Short (Spring 2020) in *The Art of a Picturebook* course. I pointed out features like end pages,

focalization, gaze, and graphic novel features. The following figure involves Marisol who was not just describing her image through a video recording but also her understanding of the concepts and features of picturebook making. As Marisol described her illustration based on the features of picturebook making, she was also sharing her stories about family identity.

Marisol, Kassandra, and Joseph looked at each other for societal expectations of what they see for themselves and others. Societal expectations represent the way society looks at you as to whether you are a female, Latinx, tall, short, pretty, smart, and various other physical attributes. In other words, these students were seeing themselves as how they were being defined rather than how they wanted to define themselves. Just as the theme of family was co-constructed by the teacher researcher, so was identity. There was a vague meaning of identity but not an in-depth understanding of what it really meant. After examining picturebooks of identity within families, the following student artifacts and discussion reflected what students thought and shared not only about this theme of identity but also the societal expectations that they faced and continue to encounter. Pairing picturebooks to establish the conversation of family and what students interpret as family was the initial goal regarding identity. However, students' dialogue was not necessarily about family, but about societal expectations. Thus, students' conversations were not just on the concept of identity or gender, but family identity, female roles, challenging societal expectations, and challenging one's potential.

Marisol: Female Roles

Marisol was a very kind and sweet young girl. She liked to share with all her friends but spent her time more with Gabriel. Her older brother by seconds is Manuel. Both Manuel and Marisol are twins, and I had the privilege of teaching their older brother too when I first started teaching. I have known the family prior, and it brings me joy when I get to continue to teach fellow members of the family. Marisol shared her sketch to the camera (see Figure 4.12) in response to *Drawn Together* by Minh Lê (2018), and she said: “mira... tenemos un dragón y



hicimos un dragón de historia cuando la abuela... la abuela estaba en... estaba feliz de la... la... la niña estaba enojada y... y cuando ya sea (inaudible) vieron los dibujos del la dragón y... y ya. Y atrás hice mal.”

Her transcription is in Spanish, and she shares her version of her story where the

Figure 4.12 Marisol's sketch to Minh Lê 2018 book grandmother is happy to see the girl. The girl was angry to see the dragon and when she is grown, she can see the dragon again. I had to question Marisol because there was a word she mentioned that I did not understand, and she said that she continued her version of the story where the girl will one day face the dragon. She also pointed out that on the back of the page, she made an error but that should not be the focus. Here, Marisol continued her version of the story but used female roles as characters. She identified with the female character of Abuela as loving and caring. With this in mind, her meaning of identity is not just gendered in selecting female characters for her illustration, but in identifying her family's identity of female roles in the household. This is what she wanted to bring forth in her sketch.

Learning from Marisol, I have also noticed that she is using the elements of a graphic novel when she drew the dragon. Also, the use of feminine characters describes her stance of having a “motherly” affection between her characters. “*Y los niños*” I told her. “*No miss... nomas... nomas hay niñas sí*”, Marisol said. Specifically, she used female characters on purpose because she wanted to. This observation is important because our culture circles have established a sense of bringing any conversation to our classroom. For example, conversations of the family have also brought conversations of identity and gender characters in picturebooks. Lastly, although Marisol drew her version of the text read to the class, she continued to use the same colors as the illustrator. Indicating the many qualities and features that Marisol displayed, her use of being an observer was taken from within. Not only was she observing from afar, but within by taking her own stance. Her action of observance was not just a physical one through her illustration but with how she manipulated the text to her own connections.

Kassandra: Challenging Gender Expectations

Kassandra’s illustration reflects her version of not just the story but also the use of



identity and pronouns. Kassandra may not verbally state how she feels about the use of pronouns and/or what her views of identity are but she takes on an agency by how she identifies each character in her sketch. Kassandra started her video response while holding her sketch (see Figure 4.13) by saying: “*So this is the boy. The boy is right here. And she likes him... and she likes him... so she...she is nervous to meet him.*” As she spoke, she pointed back and forth

Figure 4.13 Kassandra's sketch to Minh Lê 2018 book

between the two characters. After I witnessed her response from afar and she handed me her drawing, I asked her to describe what she did. Cassandra responded with ease that her characters were both boys and girls. In her audio response, she confirms what she told me in person about the boy being a “she” and the taller character being a “she.” I further questioned her about the use of colors and identity attributes to see what her response would be. *“Why is the boy blushing?”* I said. Cassandra responded, *“Miss... we talk about this all the time... boys can like what girls like and they can wear what they want. Remember family?”* *“Yes, you are right, I love it and I love how you show this to everyone,”* I responded to Cassandra. I was filled with so much enthusiasm, but most importantly proud of Cassandra for understanding the power of literacy and the agency between identity and making that response expressive with her illustration.

Kassandra's response brought up two points: (1) she can recall how often we talk about family in general, but that our classroom is our family too where we embrace our abilities; and (2) she can identify that gender identity is often stigmatized with boys liking “boy things” and girls liking “girl things” when in reality anyone can like what they like, not officially tying anything to gender identity. Cassandra was very outspoken and constantly reminded everyone in class that boys and girls can like the same things. She took initiative in how students treated each other and reminded us often about what family is and looks like in the classroom.

Joseph: Challenging the Potential

In Joseph's sketch (see Figure 4.14) in response to *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* by Traci Sorell (2018) the family at different points is doing multiple tasks. Some members are

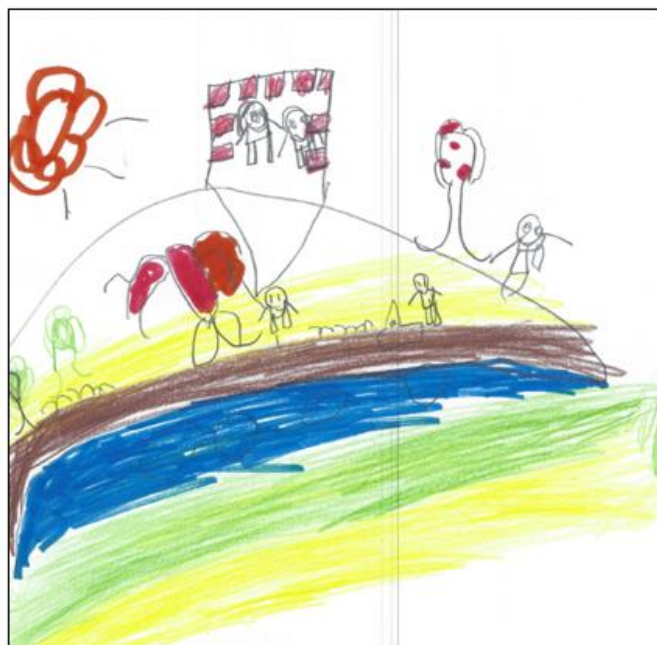


Figure 4.14 Joseph's sketch to Sorell 2018 book

gathered at the table at the top of the hill, children are playing by the trees, and other members are playing with their boats in the river. Here family identity was expressed by having all members represent one family. I asked Joseph to give me more information about the family. Joseph stated, *"You know Miss... they are all family, not just a mom and dad."* Joseph is a white boy

in the classroom. He tended to be shy at times and did not often express his

thoughts freely. His attendance in school was moderate and he constantly reminded people around him that he *"can't read."* He often gave up and sighed when doing any classroom assignment. However, his feelings about school changed based on the books and conversations we held together as a whole class or privately. *"You know Miss... my big brother is going to start college. I want to go to college too. Do you think... I can?"* Joseph said quietly when handing me his sketch. *"Yes, of course. If your family can do it and all the stories that we have read and the stories that I too have shared... yes you can do it,"* I told Joseph while holding onto his sketch. Joseph embraced me with a hug, something that he had never done. I witnessed changes in him especially his confidence, his attendance in school, and how he enjoyed sharing his ideas via his

drawings. Although Joseph did not share many of his thoughts about his sketch, his agency and praxis of opening up to his identity is incredible.

Students were fascinated with the illustrations and how seasons were portrayed from an Indigenous perspective. Joseph's sketch demonstrated an understanding that was his. Joseph utilized the bright colors to represent not just a season from Sorell's (2018) work but expressed his favorite season. An Indigenous understanding and looking at seasons through the roots embodied an awareness that seasons are more than a weather pattern that occurs and/or is defined by a scientific perspective. Seasons are embraced in a change within oneself and within that process having the importance of gratitude. This is what Joseph was able to observe and project in the work that he shared. Joseph's sketch represents the societal expectations of learners who struggle.

Having Marisol, Cassandra, and Joseph reflect on their various stories of observance, indicates the various ways in which children express this notion of observance. Through observance, some chose to take a stance, participate, or rather take a step back to be an onlooker. With this in mind, this was done from a distance or within via the actions the students took. Marisol, Cassandra, and Joseph encompassed those issues by taking a stance of observance in their own unique way.

Identify a Safe Space

Culture circles are spaces where children can dialogue about anything that comes to their minds, but they can also be a space where students don't want to share their stories. Stories are personal and although confianza is established, certain stories became that "void" space where they were not mentioned orally but expressed in student artifacts. Student sketches reflected the very essence of their story rather than sharing them orally. Considering how the school had been

challenging and knowing everyone's scenario of losing loved ones due to Covid and/or other health-related scenarios, I empathized with students' feelings. Some students had been through so much too, such as grief, financial instability, guardianship responsibilities, and many more. Second graders do not shy away from sharing what occurs "behind closed doors" if the teacher is willing to acquire that space of *confianza*. Mutual trust is not just about "keeping secrets" as the students would state but allowing the time and space to hear everyone's story. This is significant in today's classroom, having the time for students to share their stories amongst each other and be heard, thus *confianza* is created. Hence, establishing a safe space where students are heard and embraced is what a culture circle should offer. Once this is indicated, students transform their own spaces to share, either an internal or physical space.

Classroom Community as a Safe Space

A great conversation was held as a whole class after examining Quintero's (2019) *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* and finishing sharing their sketches, our whole class culture circle continued. This discussion was before going outside for recess time and lunchtime and is a great example that witnesses how students continue to take the stories that are read and heard in the classroom outside the class and even into their homes. Everyone was sitting on the gray carpet in a circle. As the dialogue was shifting from *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* (Quintero, 2019), students were expressing how their peers from the other second-grade class would make fun of them if they were to share the conversations we held in our class. The following transcript shares that conversation on the gray carpet:

Serrano: *Say that again. Maahir.*

Maahir: *They just ganna laugh.*

Serrano: *Our other friends are just going to laugh. Why do you think they're just going to laugh?*

Pedro: *Inaudible*

Serrano: *Because they might think it's funny. Maybe they don't have the same experiences. (Repeating Inaudible response).*

Marcos: *Or they think it's not true?*

Serrano: *Or they think it's not true? Yeah. That's another one. What else?*

Anna: *They might not like you.*

Serrano: *They might not like you. Lucas. Go ahead.*

Lucas: *I remember when I was little, um... I remember when I was little um my dad used to um my dad use to get a motorcycle and I... and I hop in, and we went to a neighborhood.*

Serrano: *What else can we say about do you think one time... one day it would be all right to share with our friends from Ms. Johnson's class about what We share.*

All: *No no no no*

Serrano: *Why?*

Maahir: *It's embarrassing again.*

All: *Yeah*

Yandel: *It's weird*

Serrano: *Let me ask this one question. Hold on. What about this is the last one before the timer? (Timer rings)*

Students laughing.

Serrano: *I know the timer. Hold on.*

Allison: *That's funny*

Serrano: *What about...Last question and then we'll be done for just right now. What about your family? Do you think it's okay to share with your family?*

All: *Yeah, yeah yeah yeah*

Serrano: *Yeah, yeah...Why?*

Allison: *They don't cringe, they don't think it's weird.*

Serrano: *They don't cringe. They don't think they're weird.*

Bella: *They are nice and they're into us.*

Serrano: *Okay. Lucas, you had one last thought. Listening skills.*

Maahir: *Everybody be quiet.*

Lucas: *I like to say that I trust them more.*

Serrano: *Oh, you trust them more?*

Lucas: *Yeah, because they are my family that's why.*

Serrano: *Yeah, going to go ahead. (End of an audio recording).*

This brief eight-minute conversation as a whole class describes many factors. First, students are the center of the dialogue. With this in mind, some conversations are about the book or the stance that they make towards the text, while other times students may converse about subjects that are not about the text itself. This brief transcript describes a conversation between students and the facilitator about how students don't like to share with other second-grade peers

from Ms. Johnson's class about the topics that we discuss in our culture circles. In this context, students describe how they will be "*laughed at, whether it is funny, or not true.*" This is vital because second graders can distinguish between who demonstrates an empathetic approach and who does not. Second, students express that their family is their sole source of trust. Family is essential to everyone's sense of safety and second graders have confirmed this by expressing that family will not judge you or think that you are weird but will be trusting and compassionate. Lastly, the dialogue in a culture circle continued to remain with students within the class and their families. After the bell rang to go outside for lunchtime, I went outside with students to see if students continued the conversation outside with their peers. I continued to notice from the beginning of data collection that students only played among themselves and rarely played with their peers from Ms. Johnson's class. Hence, the conversations that are discussed and shared between participants and the facilitator were only taken place inside the classroom and shared with families at home.

Reflecting on the transcript and the recorded dialogue as well as examining the field notes of the constant observations from outside when children play, and noted that student actions of agency involved playing with peers from the same classroom. Students chose to take action by not playing with other students from the other second-grade classroom because of how those students would react to what takes place in the classroom regarding culture circles. Witnessing students playing outside without a "normal" structure of teaching content, I noticed that students cared for, supported, and interacted with each other. If a student got hurt in the playground, quickly other students surrounded the child and sought help rather than being a bystander and waiting for someone else to intervene. Usually, children want to play and don't want to lose vital time playing, instead these students play while constantly watching each other.

Students concluded that their classroom community as a safe space was and continued to be important. Students felt that kids who were not in the same class might make fun of them and their classroom community created a safe space. In other words, it was not about the other children in other classrooms or even the present classroom that created a safe space, rather a classroom community was that safe space children were seeking and accepted daily. Having students connect and share classroom connections across sessions when mentioning “*remember when we talked about...*” exemplifies student connections across past events/connections. This is what bridges that feeling of students creating a classroom community as a safe space.

Cameron: The Library is a Safe Space

Cameron’s sketch (see Figure 4.15) in response to *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018) shows two bookshelves with colorful books on them and a drawing of himself holding a book. “*Look Miss... Miss. This is me in the middle holding a book and these are the shelves with library books. I like the library,*” Cameron said. Cameron connected with Morales’s (2018) pages in her story about the public library. Cameron and the whole class go to the school library once a week to check out library books. Cameron shared that he doesn't go to a public library but enjoyed going to the library at school. “*Miss... I like our class library too... so many places to visit,*” he said. Cameron’s understanding of

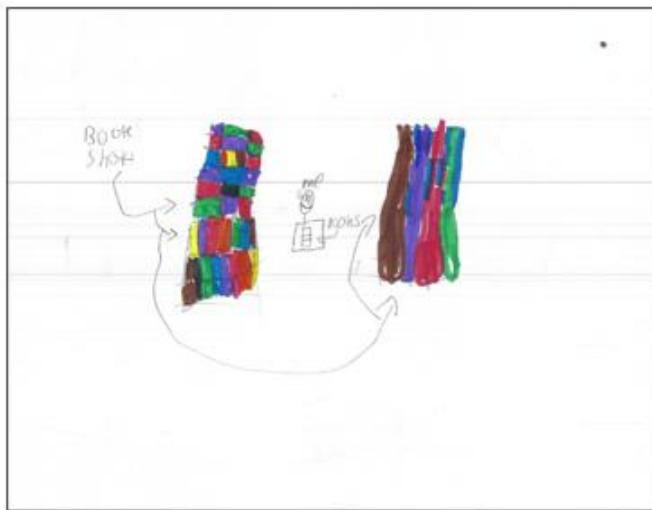


Figure 4.15 Cameron's sketch to Morales 2018 book

immigration was not necessarily discussing the border wall, but sharing fruitful opportunities to encounter something new in the place that you're in. For example, he connected with the idea of finding a library as a safe space where you did not just read but read between borders. Cameron often told me interesting facts about different places he reads about or visually sees with illustrations and photographs.

Cameron identified with the library in Morales's (2018) book rather than expressing the central message of immigration. Cameron's connections to the physical space of a public library were his opportunity to share that a building that houses books and stories is his safe space. He not only shared the physical attributes of how he feels secure being in a library but that each story houses its own border and with this in mind, he feels a sense of security. Depicting visual illustrations or photographs from what Cameron identifies with, reflects his understanding and discussion of social issue books that spaces come in various avenues.

Manuel: Safe Spaces in Friendship

Manuel is the twin of Marisol. He had a similar approach to Marisol but decided to make more of his drawing like a graphic novel (see Figure 4.16) in response to *Drawn Together* by Minh Lê (2018). His image is divided into four frames. The first one starts at the bottom left side of the page. Here Manuel shared that he made two boys. The second frame (bottom right) explains that one of the boys is playing with someone. The third frame (top right) shows a different

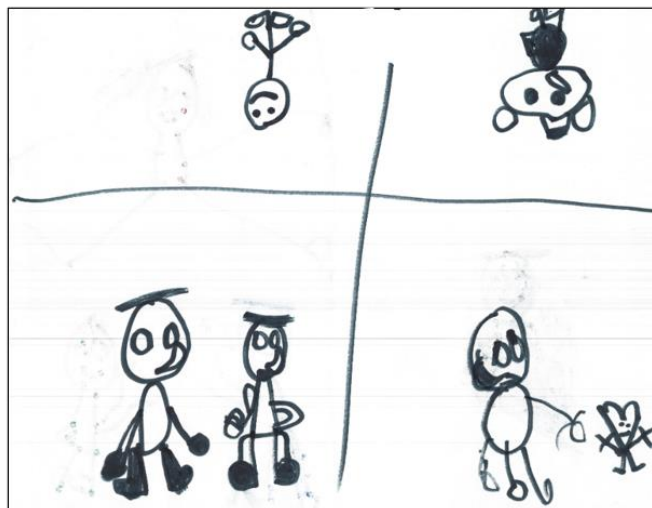


Figure 4.16 Manuel's sketch to Coelho 2019 book

character that Manuel drew. The last frame (top left) shows one of the boys leaving. I asked Manuel to share more information about his sketch because I was seeing each frame individually. Manuel shared his sketch as follows: *“There are two kids playing. Then they found another friend to play... then another one too. Finally, the boy left home.”* Manuel’s explanation was clearer especially if looking at the image from different perspectives. Although he did not number each frame, his explanation makes sense. I was in amazement at what Manuel produced because his sketches tend to be very vague of himself only drawing either a stick figure or writing his name on the page. Usually, Manuel’s sketches did not have any details, and he completed his picture more quickly than any other student in the class.

Manuel’s interpretation of a safe space is found in friendship. The use of friendship is not just a physical one where you have friends and play with them or in this case Manuel's sketch of walking his friends through the various frames, but that of an internal space created within a friendship. It is a safe space that you project to others so that they are welcome and safe with you. A safe space in friendship is a feeling that becomes yours through the various frames that you walk in. It is not just walking with a friend that creates a safe space, but letting that person know that they can come back to you, which together creates a safe space of opportunity.

I realized that the illustrations in the form of graphic novel panels was more intriguing to him than ever before. He was not just engaged but saw a perspective of drawing more than what he had seen before. He noticed that he did not have to draw a picture that was flat on just one frame but could incorporate many frames on one page. This made me think about the books used in the curriculum that often primary readers don't create an enriching text with illustrations that are distinctive from the “traditional book.” Furthermore, Manuel shared that his sketch only had boys because he plays with boys at school. As the classroom teacher, I was very excited and

proud of Manuel because he was able to be inspired and creative with his illustrations, and he was amazed that pictures don't have a “right way” to create something meaningful for them. As the facilitator, I learned that I need to incorporate more stories that are not just fruitful with text but also picturebooks with multimedia illustrations.

Marcos: Dragons as a Symbol of a Safe Space

Marcos was caring, outgoing, and full of adventure. He loved video games and “*dark things*” as his mom told me one time. I think that his style is unique. I believe that his interests came from his older sibling who was in High School but tried to create his own identity too. “*This is my dragon from the book. I don’t know the book, but this is my dragon,*” Marcos said in his video response to *Drawn Together* by Minh Lê (2018) in his sketch (see Figure 4.17). Marcos did not recall the title of the book, but his favorite part of the book was the dragon. Marcos kept

this book in mind often throughout many of his drawings which consisted of small to big sketches of dragons. Either his homework had a dragon, or he would draw a picture and show me. There came a point where his mom knew to not worry about his homework having all these scribbles. Marcos’s mother wanted to reassure the teacher that his homework was complete but had “scribbles” or sketches of his

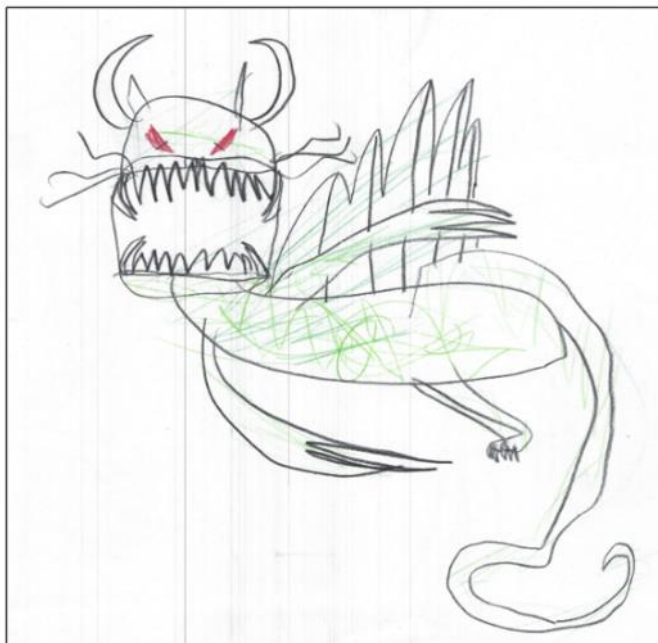


Figure 4.17 Marcos's sketch to Coelho 2019 book

illustrations. I told his mom not to worry about the homework, that I enjoyed his drawings, and that he was very talented. I also shared with her the book that was read and shared that drawing

is not just an art form, but a way to incorporate reading too. Thus, I encouraged Marcos's mother to allow Marcos to continue to draw at home. Looking at Marcos's dragon sketch, he used the conversations of making a graphic novel and a picturebook his sketch with regards to gaze.

Marcos not only uses gaze in his sketches to share the power of his dragons but also shared that each dragon had a meaning and is significant. Viewed in this way, Marcos plays with identity in his perspective by saying that his sketches are dragons, not boys or girls, but dragons. His agency of not labeling his sketches with gender identities resulted in him wanting the teacher to just enjoy the characteristic traits of dragons and not worry about gender traits. He told me, *"Miss look at my dragon, just my dragon nothing else... it's just a dragon with big teeth."* From this expression, Marcos pointed out all the features that he drew on his dragon. I was amazed by not just the use of gaze in his illustration, but the continued resilience of letting the teacher know that nothing else matters, but witnessing a sketch of a dragon. The simplicity of not verbally saying additional features like gender made me reflect that children do pay attention to these features but sometimes that is not the center of their work. This is what I learned about Marcos, yes identity is important but not always at the center of what he draws.

The dragon symbolizes that Marcos' ideas were valued. The social issue that encircles is that all children have different needs for different kinds of safe spaces. With each of these, the children signaled that they need a safe space, and they go about it to find a place where people have a symbol that reminds them that they are safe to express themselves. This is what the dragons represented in Marcos' sketch—the need to create a symbol as a safe space. Within that symbol, Marcos was able to utilize print-making skills that were taught to create a symbol with a strong effect on the gaze. This was powerful to witness because not only his understanding the basic concepts of printmaking a picturebook and various illustrations but he applied this

understanding to his own identity and created a symbol that becomes authentic and personal as a safe space.

Spaces reflected in Cameron, Manuel, and Marcos emphasized an approach to not relating space to a physical one but rather a metaphorical representation. Culture circles are not just physical spaces or representations of dialogue about social justice issues but are also internal spaces. These spaces evolved into safe spaces where students are heard and embraced. Once this is acknowledged, students transform their own spaces to share, either an internal or physical space. Cameron internalized not just the physical space of a library, but broadened that perspective to stories going beyond borders. Manuel shared the notion of illustrating and sketching in a graphic novel style, thus creating his own sense of space that illustrations do not all have to look the same way or have a specific rubric. The space he understood resonated more with the style of illustrations through a graphic novel lens. Marcos integrated the idea of gaze into his sketches when it comes to drawing his dragons. His perception of space uses identity and positions himself through his illustrations, thus an internal space is exposed.

Agency for Taking Action

Social issues are crucial to students through picturebooks that bridge that avenue to think and act critically. Students talking about agency moves them back into a discussion of social issues. Students realized that looking at how they talked about social issues was a reflection of an internal and external agency. These student examples of the agency are more about the examples in dialogue not after the dialogue. Thus, they see the expressions in themselves and reflect on the agency. The following discussion and examples reflect this perspective that students took action within and after culture circles.

What are the ways students acted with agency within or after culture circles? This second sub question addresses the actions students took within or after culture circles by recalling the question that was addressed, and what discussions students have within a culture circle using picturebook. Within this section of the analysis, while using the critical cycle, praxis was also taking place. Hence, the complexity of writing individually about each concept of a culture circle and analyzing it complicates how to further explain the importance of culture circles. In other words, isolating each question of the analysis makes it difficult to incorporate student artifacts and their voices. I want to point out that all these questions addressing the analysis chapter are intertwined and connected.

From the discussions held in a culture circle, students moved throughout the critical cycle and asked questions, shared their stories, and shared ways to incorporate the “next step” or action either in the moment or when time has passed. Time is significant because action either was immediate or took days, weeks, or months. I can say that it has even taken years, but I don't want to make this statement without having sufficient data since I have new students every school year and I don't follow the same students over the years. Action varied on the stories that were read too. Some stories were easier than others where students responded through action immediately, while other stories took time.

Praxis or action is depicted in many scenarios through either a sketch, a physical action, or an internal action, verbally, or unconsciously. The following section explores how students act with agency within or after culture circles related to the issues that they discussed. Student agency was mostly observed through teacher field notes and student artifacts. These observations depict the various ways students' agency within or after culture circles took place. Student agency examples were collected via teacher field notes and student artifacts when collected. As a

teacher/researcher, writing this study during this part of the analysis depicted student voices through the stories that they shared and actions they took from not just what teachers assume of learning but how students connected with a text to create a critical consciousness lens. Student agency was compressed into two sections: *action within or internally*, and *action outside the classroom*. These two sections either happened within or after culture circles. These sections explain the various stories that students shared and acted upon regarding student agency within culture circles and how culture circles continue to be an essential framework to utilize with children in the classroom.

Internal Action: Praxis within the Critical Cycle

Internal action within or internally occurs unintentionally. It is not something one looks for or does to perceive as an “act” of agency or at least that is not the intention of culture circles and praxis. Reaching the extent of the critical cycle of action is either internal or external. In this case, internal action occurs within. This type of action either occurred inside the classroom or outside the classroom. It is difficult to narrow certain scenarios when there is no quantitative reporting. Rather, the teacher researcher had to collect data solely on student dialogue, observation, and field notes. This section of the analysis is written to incorporate student voices through their agency of how they became agents of change internally. It is not to say that the teacher “changed” or “imposed” their views to become critically aware as this is further discussed in the implications section of this analysis, but rather to express to readers and educators that students are making their own understandings and connections based on internal measures through the stories that were read and discussed in culture circles.

Kassandra: Internal Action through Identity Expression

The theme of identity brought many examples of student agency. Kassandra's sketch in response to Minh Lê (2018) text (see Figure 4.18), was described previously around how she reminded and created that physical space with her peers of what family is and why it is important. In this section, I want to address Kassandra's importance as she describes her agency by how she identifies each character in her sketch. How she uses pronouns, and the use of identity reflects the agency that she has within her discussion and sketch. Not only was Kassandra understanding the use of pronouns but drawing fluidly with no guidance or rules of what to draw or how to color her image, led her to express her own identity.



Figure 4.18 Kassandra's sketch to Minh Lê 2018 book

Her agency was very much shown in her sketch, but also her personality. She was unafraid to correct and remind her peers about “*being yourself*” and “*you can like whatever you like.*” Kassandra vocalizing and walking around the classroom to remind her peers was a self-act that not only reflected her agency that showed through, but it was part of who she is. Kassandra's use of praxis was internal during and after a culture circle.

Examining *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* (Quintero, 2019), this text was read through the GetEpic website since it consisted of video animation. Students were engaged by how the motorcycle and the dog's barking sounded. After the read-aloud, I returned to the physical book I had in my hands and shared some insight that the author had left at the back of the book. I described how California neighborhoods were different back then, especially in Corona, California as Isabel Quintero described her experiences in the Author's Note. Also, I shared my

personal experiences with students about my apá, how he too worked in construction building the inside of homes, and how the character Papi expressed “¿trabajando duro, muchachos?” is not just a question to his coworkers but a funny expression that can result in an understatement. The response of the characters is evident in their laughing faces. As I pointed out several of my connections, students shared their connections too. A facilitator's role is to read the text and share their connections with students.

External Action: Praxis Outside the Classroom

An external action occurs outside a culture circle. This may arise outside the classroom, in the playground, at home, or in any physical space that is not within a culture circle. This part of the analysis is challenging to capture due to the complexity of capturing the very essence of how data should look or be disaggregated. This section includes more interaction of the dialogue students shared amongst each other and with the teacher alongside teacher field notes. Students captured the very essence of not just what each story meant, or the text being evaluated during a culture circle but created their own meaning, connection, and interpretation alongside. Thus, critical consciousness became the very core of how students responded and took praxis outside a culture circle.

Marisol: Surroundings Outside our Interpretations

Marisol's sketch in response to *Between Us and Abuela: A Family Story from the Border* (see Figure 4.19) reflects the idea of the story with her interpretation. To the left of the sketch, Abuela and the two children are seen at the border. The border is drawn as three lines. Students understood what the border is but continued to question "the middle" and include that depiction in their sketches. On the left side of the drawing, a woman is lying down by the beach looking as if she is enjoying her time with the umbrella and purple purse nearby. Marisol told me "Miss... esta es Abuela y los



Figure 4.19 Marisol's sketch to Perkins 2019 book

niños aquí y...y... and a girl here. A veces Miss no hacemos caso a los demas... que pasa Miss... and...and... sad." Marisol often used English and Spanish when having a conversation but felt more confident in Spanish. Marisol explained her image and interjected that "*sometimes we don't pay attention to others... on what happens and it's sad.*" Marisol comprehended that "others" may be insensitive to everyone's feelings or the way of life of the female character that she drew.

Examining Marisol's sketch closely, her image exemplifies that many people may not pay attention to their surroundings. Our surroundings help and guide us to various paths to take. This is a version of the agency that Marisol was trying to share. The need to not just care for one another, but the action that is taken to learn from each other. This is significant because students understood the role they play in a society other than their own. Also, students understood the

various concepts that were being discussed in the classroom while continuing to ask questions. Moreover, the questions that students asked were a form of agency. The questions were not an occasional “*Who is the character,*” or “*What is the setting,*” but reflected wonderings of the text and images, self-connections, and critical thinking questions like “*I wonder what would happen if the girl never flew her kite.*” Having students respond this way took time and confianza to be established.

This section of the analysis is based on the belief that a student's voice is at the center of the work that takes place in the classroom. This is what external action looks like inside or outside the classroom. Students navigate the conversations that are always held; thus, the essence of what content is being delivered in the classroom with the support of the school curriculum takes a role. Needless to say, the curriculum is not pushed aside, but rather supported by culture circles with student conversations. Previous examples were raised by students like questioning the texts, explaining further their family histories and stories, and elaborating on their ideas and thoughts of a specific scenario. These are the outcomes and fruitful discussions that become powerful to witness and live through. When discussing action, it's difficult to explicitly answer using terminology that does not represent the culture and lives of students. Therefore, this study encompasses the need to express in writing terminology that represents students' voices. Placing this lens of hearing students and what they have to say brings closer the connection that educators need to take, to take a step closer to getting the time to listen to students and what they have to say once confianza is established to create a critical consciousness of understanding our role as an educator.

Discussion

I have noticed that students share their connections during a culture circle. Their connections and understanding go beyond our designated time and/or day of a culture circle. There is a constant reminder of “*miss remember when we talked about...*” and “*miss when can we do another drawing.*” These brief reminders indicate that a culture circle is a space where there is connection and the time spent together is important. The time for a culture circle although limited at times is significant and fruitful in the lives of children by seeing how children respond with confidence and resiliency through their efforts of wanting to learn more about social issues that are significant now. Student discussions can also lead to student agency. Culture circles evolve and change over time based on student conversations about social justice. This is why a timeline is used as a guide rather than an agenda to follow. Knowing that students keep with them all the stories that are not just read or shared orally, but how students remember the deep conversations within a culture circle is powerful. This is what I learned about student discussions, that students continue to be resilient and share what truly matters in the classroom.

Establishing an external action or praxis takes time and *confianza*. As stated previously with Marisol’s example, having *confianza* and becoming aware of our surroundings is part of praxis. It is something that is taking place outside a culture circle and continues to evolve to maintain a critical consciousness lens. Also, observing students and how they interact outside the classroom with each other and with other peers reflects the principles of how external praxis looks outside the environment of a culture circle. External action looks distinctly different and takes various forms. These chapters indicate how students interact with each other, what students are thinking about their surroundings, how *confianza* is mutual, and stories are not just left in a culture circle but taken with them even to the ears of their families. This is the beauty of culture

circles, to see students move with the critical cycle reach praxis in their voyage, and continue to wonder.

When taking action outside of culture circles, it's important to establish trust and build relationships over time. This is exactly what Marisol and various students did, which is a key part of praxis. As we work to maintain a critical lens, we must also pay attention to how students interact with each other and their peers outside the classroom. This gives us insight into what external praxis looks like beyond the classroom and even culture circles. External action can take many forms, and we can observe how students are thinking about their surroundings, building trust with one another, and sharing stories with their families beyond the classroom and the culture circles taking place. It's inspiring to witness students grow and develop their critical consciousness through culture circles and continue to wonder about the world around them.

Culture circles allow students to create connections between their personal experiences and the text they are reading. By having students share stories, educators can better understand what students are thinking about, how they are making sense of the text, and how these stories that are read in culture circles relate to their own lives. Students were able to take action with the various texts to create a critical consciousness lens. This allowed for student agency to project outside of the classroom through culture circles. Action within or internally includes students stating that they felt empowered to question what was going on in their community and how they could make a difference. This action happened when students were able to see themselves as agents of change who could speak up against injustices facing their communities and beyond. This is important because it means that students are not simply being told what they should think by educators but rather are given opportunities to create meaning through a critical consciousness lean. When reading various texts and analyzing them by creating sketches,

dialogue, and making connections, students were inspired to take action in their communities and beyond. For example, it was not just about cleaning up trash on one day of the school year regarding Earth Day, rather students were cautious about what was put out into Mother Earth and how to preserve nature critically. In other words, students were implementing together as a classroom community in multiple ways how to be agents of change outside the classroom.

Conclusion

What issues do students raise in their discussions of social justice picturebooks in culture circles? Student voice and agency in sharing students' artifacts, images, and responses to their discussion of social justice picturebooks in culture circles were analyzed. Students raised many questions that were explored and shared during classroom discussions. Providing a space for culture circles to take place in the classroom while using picturebooks creates a critical consciousness where various themes are explored. The four themes in student discussions based on the explored picturebooks were: *family and community as togetherness*, *immigration as a journey*, *observance as societal expectations of identity*, and *identify a safe space* topics. These themes evolved based on the timeline for this inquiry and continued past this inquiry. This analysis explored what students were thinking and responded based on the picturebooks, themes, and culture circles that took place.

By using picturebooks as an anchor for exploring these issues, students can raise questions and issues related to family, identity, immigration, and other social justice topics. With the support of a facilitator, culture circles can provide a safe and welcoming space for participants to share their experiences and perspectives. By encouraging ongoing learning and reflection, the facilitator can help to deepen students' understanding of the issue being explored

(Souto-Manning, 2010). Culture circles are essential to encourage students to engage in meaningful conversations about social justice issues and develop a deeper understanding of various issues.

Culture circles can occur fluidly without the need to record them or have participants respond to set questions based on the picturebooks explored. This is the beauty of culture circles: there is no set schedule or structure of “how” to do them. This is why culture circles are complex because educators often rely on the structure of agendas while culture circles are the opposite. Culture circles hardly rely on agendas or schedules, rather should happen fluidly when dialogue occurs. Dialogue leads participants through the critical cycle and what is significant at that moment within the conversations that are held among each other. With this in mind, four issues that students expressed were *family and community as togetherness*, *immigration as a journey*, *observance as societal expectations of identity*, and *identify a safe space*. Within these four themes, various students expressed their ideas and stories through their artifacts based on the various texts that were explored.

Students sharing their voices via their artifacts entrusted the meaning behind these four themes. Students were able to express what is significant in the classroom and their lives at a personal level. The bridge between stories and connection amongst peers and the teacher evolved evermore with *confianza* at hand. The feeling of belonging and creating a family together, the journeys that everyone has faced and continues to evolve, observing from within or from afar, and creating a physical space or an internal one are just some examples that students shared and continued to understand. Throughout these themes, students raised in their discussions the essence of what and how social justice issues in picturebooks are essential in the classroom aside from curricula. These issues became the curriculum alongside the core standards. Students did

not change how learning should be established, rather incorporated their voice into the core standards of everyday learning that became theirs in a culture circle of possibilities.

From the conversations and dialogue that were held as a whole class, students did not just share what they learned or understood but started making personal connections. Students started to question the very building in which we gathered daily. Students started questioning the world around them, like the various black snakes (Lindstrom, 2020) that are physical and internal, how certain peers' behavior was expressed on the playground outside, and inequities regarding certain school events. It was inspiring to see how children who are seven and eight years old can express themselves and their viewpoints without having the fear of the teacher questioning them about “why” or shutting down their perspectives. Having the ability to witness students clean up after others outside the playground, sharing materials, and even showing affection towards each other with simply a hug gave me the same confidence that these children had. It’s easy to fall into the everyday language of other teachers that “children are low learners” or “there needs to be more learning done,” but I stop and ask, “do we need that?” Students have expressed within the classroom setting that they are not afraid to stand up for each other. With this in mind, I still ponder if student agency was just reflected for the teacher-researcher to witness or if it was really in place.

Student agency is a complex topic within itself. Trying to piece together and interpret a definition or express in writing what it looks like and how it's incorporated is something that I continue to understand. Student agency is challenging to gather in pieces of data. Often the credibility of teacher field notes is questioned, but as scholars that is part of what we do, collect field notes as data. Often, we overlook what data is and correlate it with quantitative measures, rather ethnographic ways of collecting research or data an approach to share with multiple

communities that often find it troubling to interpret quantitative measures. This section of the analysis expresses that measure of interpreting student agency by using field notes and/or the previous question examples to bring forward that there is praxis within the critical cycle. Once grappling with the understanding that students can express and share their stories, our surroundings change evermore and how we view them one action at a time.

CHAPTER 5: Teacher Acts of Agency

As an educator, one may question “How do I get students to respond this way, to ask these kinds of questions, or even think this way”? The answer is never easy to explain. As an educator, I strive to get to know students and families. I get the opportunity to hear their stories, their journeys, and what they have endured over their lifetime. It is powerful to witness students engaging with each other in stories. Where they are not scared or shy to share their stories, this evolved, and I as the teacher-researcher had to establish a community setting in the classroom where *confianza* was created and maintained. From *confianza*, there was a teacher-student relationship where students were not afraid to share what was on their minds. The teacher needs to create a place in the classroom, where students' voices are heard and encouraged. After establishing this setting, then comes the critical cycle within a culture circle using picturebooks. Within the critical cycle, students may have stopped mid-way and never fully reached praxis. However, praxis started evolving based on the stories read and the conversations that continued.

Often research is centered on the practices that are occurring before your eyes. Although that is important, the role of the facilitator is not fully examined. It may be acknowledged or presented in various ways, but not fully detail the importance of the role of the facilitator. The facilitator ensures various roles that are vital to conducting culture circles with picturebooks in the classroom. The facilitator is not just someone who is filled with knowledge but is willing to share their experiences, stories, and voices to encompass the culture circle to take root in the dialogue that arises. Thus, facilitators are stakeholders of change, have a critical consciousness, and connect with participants on a personal level. With this in mind, a facilitator is not

prejudiced or holds biases around the topics that arise, but rather empathizes with multiple viewpoints and acknowledges that every learner is accepted based on the points they make.

A facilitator's role is to read the text and share their connections with students. Often, educators are hesitant to share personal stories that are seen as taboo in the classroom. Rather personal stories of *what is your favorite color, favorite food, movies you like to watch*, and maybe *your journey of living in the same state as students* are only brief examples of sharing personal stories that create a bond between the facilitator and participants. This interaction becomes the essence of what will drive and make a culture circle a safe space. Hence, it brings the facilitator outside of the “comfort zone” of an authoritative role to someone who is within the circle. In other words, it's not about the teacher being an observer or an “outsider” but rather being within the culture circle and part of the classroom with students. It's easy to catch yourself as a teacher only to view yourself as a “teacher” and not as an “educator.”

Garcia (2020) defines an *educator* as “inclusive of community members with multiple roles and responsibilities, such as elders, parents, aunts, uncles, clan and cultural advisors, and relatives serving Indigenous youth” (p. 575). Garcia (2020) explains that educators within Indigenous cultural contexts are distinct from teachers who are individuals who have met state criteria. Rather educators are inclusive of the broader community wanting to work with youth, families, and the community. In the following scenarios, there will be examples of how the facilitator facilitated conversations with students within culture circles and how the teacher acts with agency within or after culture circles. Therefore, the term “educator” as Garcia (2020) describes will be used interchangeably slightly than the term “teacher”. As an educator, taking this stance and agency to support the dialogue and learning process will forth come the journey

that was taken to pursue a critically conscious lens within the work that is done in the classroom with students.

The following sections are comprised of two subcategories: *the facilitator's role* and *the facilitator's agency within or after culture circles* to explore the research question, what are the ways the teacher acts with agency within or after culture circles? In these two subcategories, a reflection on several ways to support these categories will be addressed. For example, creating a safe environment, facilitating discussions, modeling critical thinking, nurturing empathy, documenting, and reflecting on learning, and taking action are just some topics that are conveyed within these two subcategories. Actively engaging in these roles as an educator within or after culture circles fosters a collaborative and transformative learning environment that empowers students to think critically and embrace an active role in change within the critical cycle of a culture circle.

Establishing a classroom culture where all voices are valued and respected is the foundation of a culture circle. Setting norms where active listening, empathy, and open-mindedness can occur is crucial. As an educator making sure that students feel safe to share their perspectives and stories, and asking questions without fear of judgment or ridicule is crucial. Taking the role of a facilitator leads to guiding students to dialogue. This ensures that everyone has an opportunity to contribute. Within the dialogue, students may pose thought-provoking questions, encourage deep reflection, and share ideas, and stories. With this in mind, the facilitator may paraphrase their responses to ensure understanding while connecting those ideas to broader concepts or themes within a culture circle. Educators need to demonstrate critical thinking skills by asking questions, challenging ideas, and encouraging students to critically

analyze those ideas. Thus, educators may provide additional information to further understand the topic and/or theme.

The facilitator helps students connect their personal experiences and prior knowledge discussions from previous culture circles which fosters deeper engagement and reflection. Encouraging students to empathize with each other is vital. This occurs when personal stories or examples are shared mutually. Moreover, documenting and reflecting on a culture circle is important. This allows the facilitator to capture key points for ongoing discussion, jotting down insights raised, and allows time to plan a theme or topic during a culture circle. In this regard, students may also create artifacts to represent their learning but more so the experiences that are meaningful to the self. This allows time to consolidate their learning, identify areas of growth, and set goals for future discussions.

Lastly, educators support students in translating their learning into meaningful action. Guiding students to brainstorm ways to address social issues discussed in culture circles, both in the classroom and outside the classroom. Empowering students to take ownership or in this case, agency, makes a positive change based on their newfound knowledge and understanding, hence establishing a critical consciousness lens. By actively engaging in culture circles, educators, and students alike act with an agency within and after a culture circle that fosters a transformative learning environment. In the preceding segments, student artifacts are used in several ways to support these two subcategories of the facilitator's role and agency. Actively engaging in a culture circle as a facilitator and educator encompasses the evermore role to be called and seen as an "educator."

The Facilitator's Role and Process

Facilitators need to encourage conversations within culture circles. At first, conversations on social issues may be brief and not last very long. Other times, students are hesitant to share, shy, or confused. Once culture circles are in place students start acquiring more confidence and willingness to share their stories. How did this occur? Facilitators establish a community in the classroom in which *confianza* is sustained. It is more than trust that leads children to open up about who they are and to share their ideas and purpose from various viewpoints. There needs to be a mutual nurturing of love, hope, and a sense of belonging as described in the theoretical framework for this analysis (*see* Theoretical Framework). Having these traits is not just an attribute that facilitators should already have but continue to elaborate on within a culture circle.

It is challenging to describe physical or internal characteristics that educators should have in the classroom that also transpire to an everyday approach outside the classroom. It's more than morals or values that gets teachers to transform into an educator. One may say they are a "nice person," however in the classroom, one may appear differently. As an educator, you have to constantly have the willingness to become transformative in a positive way to sustain a critically conscious lens. To some, it may come naturally to collaborate with various educators and children due to various factors, but to others, it may be difficult to feel "exposed." I believe it depends on educators on how much and what they want to share with students in a professional matter. Furthermore, when you expose your vulnerability aspect of who you are and the strengths and challenges you have faced as a person, and a human being; students empathize and feel that you are not just a "regular teacher," but a teacher who understands who they are too.

Sharing information about a facilitator as a person, then the process of a culture circle can take effect. Facilitators, in this case, teachers and educators use the critical cycle as a tool within

culture circles. Teachers must know their students at a personal and societal level. This means teachers have to know students' interests and what occurs around their society and/or neighborhood. What kind of issues have happened or are currently taking place? This question is always in mind when creating a text set on issues that are occurring. For example, in this analysis, I created four text sets on four themes: *family*, *identity*, *immigration*, and *social justice*. Within these four themes, student conversations arose across multiple texts. Some books became anchors, while other books looked at the historical context of an issue, related to students' experiences, and some were of no interest. Selecting texts either intentionally, while others were selected by students' interests, choice, or “feel of the moment.”

Having texts selected, then comes the read-aloud. Many scholars guide us into what literature discussions are and how to use literature discussions to plan, have text discussions, and support literacy skills. Incorporating literature discussions into culture circles bridges various concepts of awareness and praxis. Literature discussions and culture circles are distinct, and I want to center on culture circles. The facilitator is becoming aware of texts that will be used in circles and being read to the class opens the opportunity for questions and comments to be asked and shared. There is more time to think, and collaborate, and for stories to be heard. It very much becomes oral at first, but then facilitators can guide the circle to take different forms or modalities. There may be a space for sketches to occur, writing, smaller circles within a whole class circle, or various forms that there is to imagine. Again, these different modalities depend on the scenario of the classroom and the participants.

Amongst everything stated, facilitators have an ultimate purpose which is to guide and mentor participants within a culture circle. I want to caution that a facilitator's role does not end after a culture circle is complete, rather is indefinite outside a culture circle. The facilitator's

purpose is to guide and mentor students. Educators guide and mentor students when there are questions, concerns, not understanding a certain subject, or when comments arise. Also, educators mentor and praise students when accomplishments are made or not made, are encouragers, and support students by listening to their stories. Many tasks take place in the role of the facilitator within a culture circle, but one of those tasks that I believe is vitally important and often overlooked is expressing to participants a positive affection that “you matter.” It is these words that should remind us “why” we are in the field of education and these words that bring forth the fruitful impacts of the agency.

The facilitator’s role and process vary in the classroom and age range of participants, yet similar attributes may be acquired. As a facilitator and educator in this analysis, five categories support the process of facilitating a culture circle: *(1) book selection, (2) facilitating conversations, (3) sharing own life experiences, (4) visual responses and communication, and (5) actions taken as an educator.* These categories organize not so much a chronological process that was taken of a facilitator’s role within a culture circle but is an overview that was approached. Within these categories, the representation of the facilitator process is that of my own experience of this analysis and not a general procedure that can be found within culture circles. Due to culture circles' complexity, I will project more of my efforts that were established for this analysis.

The facilitator’s agency within or after culture circles varies within the context that arises. Various examples of using teacher field notes and transcripts will explain further the role of the facilitator and the facilitator's agency within or after a culture circle. Examining the teacher's field notes, there was one section that puzzled the idea of closing a circle for the first time. There are also other examples that reflect what the “next steps were” based on students' dialogue and if

the culture circle needed to continue or if there was flow within the critical cycle. These student examples project their sketches to identify these very issues that arose from their perspectives. Students shared their connection and courage by reading not only the text but reading the author's notes and sharing their own stories too. The following texts were selected as examples of not just student agency that took place, but what the facilitator's agency within or after culture circles portrayed: (1) *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* (Sorell, 2018), (2) *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018), (3) *Grandpa's Stories* (Coelho, 2019), (4) *We Are Water Protectors* (Lindstrom, 2020), and (5) *Henry's Freedom Box* (Levine, 2007). These texts provide fruitful examples of what it truly means to be a facilitator with an agency within or after a culture circle.

Book Selection: The Process of “How” and “Why”

Selecting picturebooks within culture circles has a distinct process that is different from the type of culture circle that will take place. As I selected the books I took into consideration a theme, researched the background of the authors/illustrators, and combined various texts into a text set. Within the criteria that I created, I also carefully selected books based on my own knowledge and student needs. Once the books were selected, I comprised a table (see *Table 2*) that detailed the book selection. This table is organized by themes: *identity, family, immigration, and social issues*. Each theme consisted of five books, with a total of 20 books. Of this book list only 18 books were read and explored in the class due to time constraints within the timeline of this analysis.

Examining each book and theme took time. Each book was analyzed and explored by students in a culture circle within the school week. Some weeks gave ample time to reflect on the books for the full five days of the week of school. In other books, there was limited time to only

reflect two days of the school week. Each book lends itself to layer the theme or topic across books, comparatively than calling it a “spiraling effect.” A spiral curriculum or effect in this matter is mostly a cyclical continuous approach, rather than a layered curriculum or effect, which builds amongst each other. I like to view culture circles, although a cyclical process within a circle, is perceived at times as a layering process. Where knowledge, dialogue, and action are constantly layered to produce a critically conscious lens.

Carefully selecting the books based on my knowledge and students' needs was important to carry out in a culture circle. Selecting the theme was carefully considered based on student needs. Having the privilege to teach the same group of students for two consecutive years allowed me to better understand the student's culture, language, and background. Not only was I familiar with their academic needs, but I cultivated an experience with students that I had during the Covid-19 pandemic during online, hybrid, and in-person instruction. I was able to witness those experiences that allowed me to better understand their viewpoints that are different from mine. From the various texts that are in libraries, these 20 books were only selected. These books outperformed others in their potential for dialogue and connection based on student experiences, based on stories that I heard, based on personal issues that were encountered during and after the pandemic, and stories that too offered a moment to heal and become a greater purpose once we collected together at school. With this in mind, these books became an initiative and an integral part of everything else that was taking place in the classroom.

The classroom became a “home away from home.” It was a new feeling and experience to do that together as both students and teachers. It was trying to re-learn what school is and its purpose. These books became that first for us all, the bridge to becoming aware of a new journey. Amongst these 20 stories, our own stories were given that space to take light. Thus,

these books became somewhat of an “anchor text” where we can rely upon them considerably more than simply having only one text as an anchor to look back to and reflect on. In other words, all of these stories became anchors that were reflected upon and shared. There was no one story bigger than the others. All the stories were spoken about constantly and students reflected on that continuously.

As an educator, selecting books is never easy. I believe that selecting texts is the most difficult process within the culture circle because texts are used as a guide to conduct a culture circle. Culture circles can take place on their own without the need to use picturebooks. However, using picturebooks in this analysis bounds the fruitful experience to better understand the various conversations that will be held within a circle. I want to caution that picturebooks were not purposefully selected because of the student's age range, rather picturebooks were intentionally selected for this analysis. Picturebooks are important in this classroom, and I wanted to bring that representation into the culture circle based on student experiences and needs on the stories that were selected. I too believe that these books also brought more infinite discussions that opened up more of the need to dialogue amongst each other. These books were not selected to “stand-alone” a conversation for a day or two, instead, they created a constant layered conversation that can take place any time within or after a culture circle.

Selecting these texts, although arduous to narrow down, was a process that got easier within the dialogue that was occurring. Some books were of interest, while others were not so much talked about. Some were on topic and other times; students shared the opposite of what the initial intention of that book should have reflected. I presume that this too was carefully planned because I wanted this analysis to be explored based on students' takeaways rather than what I wanted a culture circle to lead up to. Again, the text selection was interesting but not impossible

to narrow down. Due to time limitations, there were only 20 books for this analysis, but as educators text selection can be extended and unlimited to the number of picturebooks chosen for a specific culture circle.

The process of “how” to select books varies but selecting them is a vital and constitutive part of a culture circle within this analysis. How books are selected within this analysis is based on students' needs and experiences given the relationship of knowing them for two consecutive years. The process of “why” the books were selected is interwoven with the “how” process. These books and/or stories matter. They are important because they became our stories too. These stories are the foundation of the student's identity and culture that evermore reflected the beauty of their academic success. It was an opportunity to not just speak about the stories or our own stories, but the privilege to experience a classroom that became our “home away from home.”

We Are Grateful: The Essence of Being Human

In *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* (Sorell, 2018), students explored what the word “grateful” meant from an Indigenous perspective. I used the framework of *The Petal Flower* from Absolon (2007) where Indigenous methodologies in search of knowledge are used. The word “grateful” was the root of this picturebook, but I had students explore this term and think internally and use their family knowledge of how they can understand the meaning of this term based on what they and their families know. Absolon's (2007) Self, mind, body, heart, and spirit were used to make connections to current and past experiences. Students were becoming self-agents in deciding what books are read and explored by how students respond and interact

outside the classroom. Dialogue is at the center of a culture circle, and Sorell's (2018) work encompassed and reassured the essence of being human.

Using Absolon's (2007) framework on *The Petal Flower* (See Figures 5.1 and 5.2)

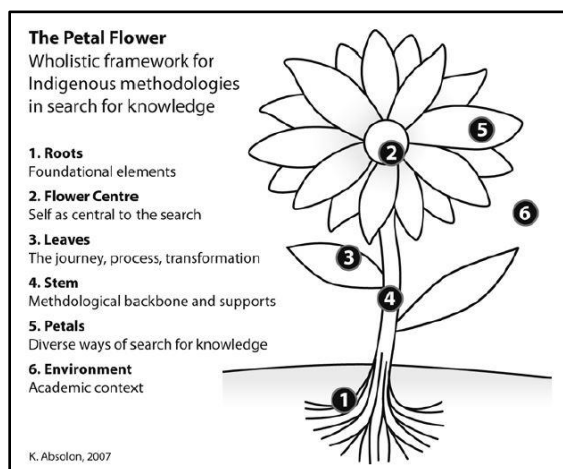


Figure 5.2 Absolon's Framework on the Petals

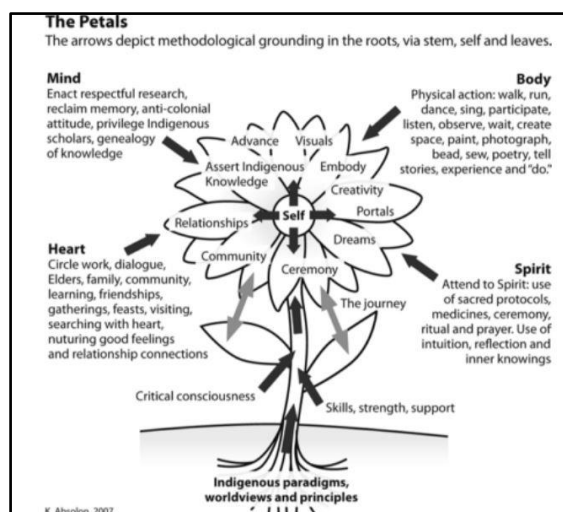


Figure 5.1 Absolon's Framework on The Petal Flower

provided something that students can use together with the facilitator. Students were understanding the concept of *Otsaliheliga* (Sorell, 2018), and what it truly means to be grateful. Using Sorell's (2018) text, students brought in elder stories from abuelitos and abuelitas that ever were powerful to experience and listen to. Students shared not just how they gathered with their family in Tucson, Arizona, but also in México. As the facilitator immersed in this framework, I was not only able to teach students about how to think critically using Indigenous methodologies, but students connected more with the aspect of bringing their families' stories into the classroom. Students were able to feel each other's stories. It had been a powerful experience given that previously Covid had diminished these abilities through online instruction where that specific "feeling" was muted for a moment.

The following two student examples explain how Ariana and Ana both explained their sketches by using the concept of being grateful. Ariana's and Ana's sketches (see Figures 5.3

and 5.4) reflect in written form not just what they are grateful for but how they feel. Ariana's sketch reads "Love Ms. I am brave."

Ariana was someone who had overcome many challenges, including the loss of her father, speaking the English language without the fear of mispronunciation, and becoming more confident. Ana's sketch reads "I I'm grateful that I have the best teacher. I I'm grateful that I have great



Figure 5.3 Ariana's sketch to Sorell 2018 book

friends." Ana's sketch not only shows the people she is grateful for but is also using different forms of pronouns. The pronoun or reference of "I" is used to signify that "I am" here as a person. When I asked her about this, she told me "You know miss... I am I... just like what we have talked about. I am not just a girl, but I am I a person." This is incredible to witness not only in the moment but in her writing that she is trying to find her identity without the teacher imposing on it. Books are read and discussed, but students' stance on the text is their own



Figure 5.4 Ana's Sketch to Sorell 2018 book

without the teacher mentioning their perspectives. This may become controversial because others who are not aware of the research and theoretical frames being used in the classroom may perceive that the teacher is changing students' perspectives. Rather, students themselves

are questioning their identities and what they interpret on their own based on the texts being discussed.

Looking at Ariana and Ana's examples, exemplify the power of sketching to express gratitude. Ariana's sketch reflects her journey of overcoming challenges, including the loss of her father, language acquisition, and growth in confidence. Her sketch is accompanied by the words "Love Ms. I am brave," portraying her growth and resilience. Ana's sketch expresses gratitude for her friends and teacher while using different forms of pronouns to express her identity. These examples demonstrate how students interpret and reflect on their experiences and emotions through their perspectives.

The facilitator's immersion in this framework not only taught students critical thinking through Indigenous methodologies but also allowed them to bring their own family stories into the classroom, fostering a strong sense of connection among students. This was especially impactful as it provided a moment of reconnection and shared experiences after the disruptions caused by online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. This specific culture circle encouraged students to become self-agents in selecting and engaging with books, allowing their responses and interactions to shape the exploration of literature both inside and outside the classroom. The dialogue within the culture circle and the essence of human experience illustrated in Sorell's (2018) work played central roles in the discussions. The concept of *Otsaliheliga* (Sorell, 2018) was the message that portrayed the essence of being human.

Facilitating Conversations: Encouraging Student Dialogue

Facilitating conversations displays various scenarios. Educators need to encourage dialogue while facilitating, ask thought-provoking questions, explain unfamiliar concepts/terms,

and interact within the circle with students. These are brief highlights when it comes to facilitating conversations in a culture circle. A facilitator is not someone who just does a circle to do one or someone who is an observer the majority of the time. Rather, a facilitator entrusts the necessary tools where students are guided within the critical cycle and expand beyond their ideas and stories to collectively encourage praxis within and outside a culture circle.

Encouraging dialogue comes from within. If the facilitator is not engaged or passionate about the topics that students will discuss, then the dialogue within a culture circle will be meaningless. In other words, doing a culture circle without having the chance of being a facilitator that is open to listening and being aware of students' stories then the effort of being an educator is lost. Encouraging dialogue needs to come from within the facilitator. Once this is acquired encouraging conversations becomes clearer. Encouraging students to share their voices is the utmost goal as a facilitator. This is accomplished by explaining to students the norms of the culture circle. Norms are expectations that are set not just by the facilitator but accomplished together as a community. For example, equity of voice, sharing stories without being judged, and not being pressured to share are just brief norms that were established in the culture circles that were taken place.

Establishing norms supports the facilitator by glancing at the whole class while also being in the circle. It's like being in a swimming pool, you dive in to swim or watch the classroom discussions, all at the same time getting outside the pool to get ready to dive again. While outside the swimming pool, you take the time to reflect and see who needs support. This brief metaphor hopefully explains the approach that I took as a facilitator. Being outside students' conversations, I was able to review and see the students who had more status than others. I was able to analyze who shared more than others. But I also had the opportunity to reflect on what I

would be responding to immediately or within the coming days. Encouraging dialogue is a mutual approach from the facilitator and students. The facilitator is not the sole provider of the knowledge holder or who leads conversations. Rather, the facilitator encourages conversations where both students and educators can become facilitators without having to rely on one person specifically.

Asking thought-provoking questions arises while facilitating student dialogue. Questions are to support student ideas. Questions are used to learn more information about student experiences. Also, questions are used to see if students understand the concepts being discussed. Supporting student ideas with questioning helps students clarify what they are trying to share. Questions are used as guides in this matter. Guiding students is important to clarify what stories they want to share instead of using questioning as a prompting mechanism. With this in mind, questioning students supports students and the facilitator by knowing more information about them and their stories. Not only is questioning used to know more information about student experiences but also to see if students understand the concepts being approached in a culture circle. Questions support students to reflect rather than to give an answer to a question to respond as students are accustomed to doing in a traditional classroom. Reasonably, questioning in this matter approaches students to reflect on the previous and current topics of discussion within a culture circle. Questions are important to not just know more information about the students, but it support how facilitators facilitate student conversations in a culture circle.

Facilitating student conversations also encompasses the task of explaining unfamiliar concepts and/or terms. Explaining unfamiliar concepts is not always something new that students have not been exposed to. Rather, as the facilitator you are clarifying the concepts and introducing the academic vocabulary that students can use. For example, the term immigration

was introduced, but it does not mean that students did not know what it was, but students knew the academic language of the term “immigration” before our oral discussions and student independent sketches. Furthermore, students needed to be guided to what the vocabulary is to what their personal stories were being expressed. Having the time to explain unfamiliar concepts and/or terms as a facilitator leads students to understand each other's dialogue and have their voices heard.

Interacting with students in the culture circle is the ultimate goal of a facilitator during student conversations. There is a time to speak, but there is a time to listen too. Teachers often are the center of conversation and are the talk-doers. Rather, educators take a step back and listen to students' stories. Listening to students is a call for action, it is a form of agency that educators need to take. Not only is listening being centered within student dialogue, but students are visually looking at the facilitator doing this action. This takes the agency that students need and yearn for, the call to action to speak. In other words, students see how the facilitator is speaking less which allows students to speak more. Again, there need to be precautions when taking this approach, especially with student status of who speaks more frequently and if students are not sharing as a collective. Interacting as a facilitator and as a participant too, reflects this concept of being part of the community within the culture circle. You will not be considered an “outsider” or a sole facilitator but a participant and facilitator within the circle.

Facilitating student conversations within a culture circle, educators play a crucial role in creating an environment that encourages dialogue and promotes learning. Facilitators should actively engage with students by asking thought-provoking questions, explaining unfamiliar concepts and/or terms, and interacting within the culture circle. These examples are just brief highlights of the facilitator's responsibilities. A facilitator goes beyond simply conducting a

culture circle or observing passively. Instead, facilitators provide the necessary tools for students to navigate the critical cycle and expand their ideas and stories. The facilitator's ultimate goal is to foster collective praxis within and beyond the culture circle which empowers students to apply their knowledge in real-world experiences. By fulfilling these roles, educators can effectively facilitate conversations and contribute to meaningful learning experiences for students.

Dreamers: Love in the Journey

Dreamers (Morales, 2018) was not just an autobiographical story about immigration, but brought forth the idea of need for love to continue a journey. Amongst the challenging features of leaving your home country to embark on a new one with new rules, expectations, and language, there is that love within that journey. For example, in *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018) amongst the road and long journey to embark coming to North America, there is that poise, grace, and love to continue a journey that is filled with your culture. It was not about leaving your identity behind but bringing in that love for your identity into the journey that was taken. This reminded me of how I, as the facilitator did not push students to just feel the text, but express it in their sketches, in dialogue, and the actions that were taken. The following example is about Anna's response to Morales (2018) and how as an educator I provided that space for non-verbal communication to take place where reading her response with the eyes which is the need for human contact.

Anna's sketch (*see Figure 5.5*) of a heart embraces the love that people have for their culture and embarks on a new journey. Anna was hesitant to verbally share what she drew with the class and even with the teacher privately. Her eyes began to water, and I knew all she wanted was to embrace me with a warm hug. Anna had been through a journey herself being in foster care and trying to adjust to a new home. Seeing her respond when I was reading the book aloud,

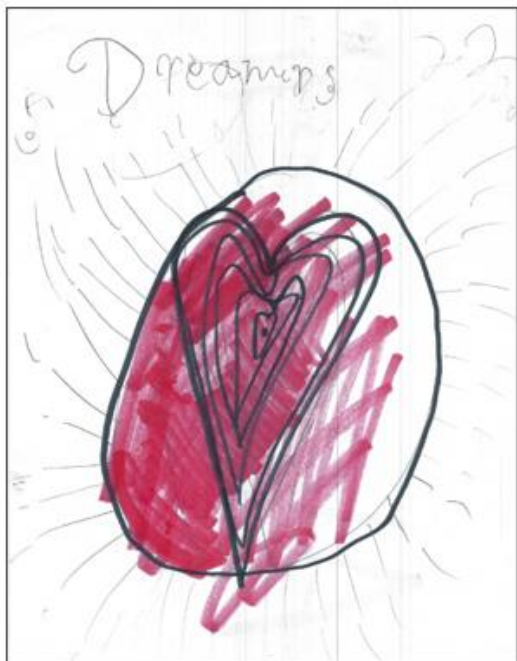


Figure 5.5 Anna's sketch to Morales
2018 book

she was very quiet and looked in amazement at the illustrations. This was a first for me to witness Anna like this. Anna tended to be more outspoken and liked to share, but I believe given her circumstances she did not want to share her thoughts with anyone. I wanted to include her in this analysis purposefully because although she did not share verbally, her sketch leaves the audience with their interpretation. The heart-embracing culture and personal journey led the audience to embark on and reflect on their own stories. This is a form of agency that Anna wanted to

depict although she did not share this verbally. Student verbal discussion is often not needed, but a picture says all the words to be interpreted independently.

Moreover, students may not verbally share with the teacher about their sketches which is a form of agency. This is what I learned with time as both the researcher and teacher. Students may refuse to share not because they want to, but because they may not have that “feeling” to do so at that time. It may come to be that this time will never come, thus agency continues to evolve within the self. Anna showed an internal action where she made her stance without the need to vocalize her response to her sketch. It was not about her refusing to share with the teacher or her peers but what she felt during that moment.

Anna demonstrated internal action through various characteristics. These examples expressed how internal action can be reflected and depicted using student artifacts through their sketches. These students showed student agency by expressing their viewpoints on self-identity,

family connection, and non-verbal expression of what a journey is. Having an internal praxis within a culture circle emphasizes how students are connected not only to these texts but beyond the text. The texts are used as anchors within a culture circle to move along the critical cycle to therefore reach the goal of praxis within oneself internally. Having the privilege to witness how students responded internally, students were more caring amongst each other and willing to continue to share their stories.

The facilitation inspired by *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018) and its message, encouraged students to express their understanding and connection through sketches, dialogue, and action. Anna's response serves as an example. Although she hesitated to share her sketch verbally, her heart-shaped drawing symbolized the embrace of culture and the courage to embark on a personal journey. Anna's non-verbal communication revealed her need for human connection and conveyed her experiences in foster care and adjusting to a new home. Her sketch allowed the audience to interpret and reflect on their own stories, demonstrating Anna's agency and the power of visual expression.

As a facilitator and researcher, I learned that students may choose not to verbally share their sketches, and that is a form of agency. Some students may not have the inclination or readiness to share their thoughts at a particular time, and that should be respected. The agency continues to evolve within the self, and students like Anna assert their agency through internal actions. Although she did not vocalize her response, her sketch communicated her emotions and perspective at that moment.

In summary, *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018) inspired students to express their understanding and connection through various means, including sketches and non-verbal communication. Anna's heart-shaped sketch exemplifies the power of visual expression in conveying personal

journeys and embracing one's culture. Students' agency is respected when they choose not to verbally share, and their internal actions reflect their experiences and perspectives. This culture circle creates a supportive space where students connect with the texts and each other, promoting praxis and the continued sharing of stories. This represented the love in the journey.

Sharing Own Life Experiences: Stories That Matter

As a facilitator and educator, sharing personal stories is vital in culture circles. It may appear “taboo” that teachers get at a personal level with students and share their stories with them. Rather, shifting this idea into a powerful resource is priceless. There are many benefits and positive outcomes to sharing personal stories with students. Not only do you see students become more compassionate but more understanding. There is more self-respect toward students and educators. The shift is no longer an authoritative one, but a balance of being a classroom community. Sharing personal stories also guides students to better understand the topic and/or theme of the culture circle and picturebooks that are used.

Sharing personal stories is simple yet meaningful. Some of these stories can be the story of becoming an educator, what you like to do in your spare time, the story of struggles and challenges that you have overcome, and many more examples. Personal stories in this case don't have to be all that personal but to some extent stories that are not often shared with students. I like to share with students the story of how I became a teacher. When I share this story and my perspective, it brings more understanding and awareness to students. Students can identify with the teacher more and acknowledge that we are people too. Often lower elementary students think that teachers live at school, but when you become personal and share your background students can connect and even relate with the same struggles and growths that you have had. Having and

displaying these feelings and stories with students evolves a classroom community where acceptance and empathy can be nourished in a positive outcome, not to please the teacher, but oneself and each other in the classroom.

Having these conversations of sharing your life experiences and stories relates to the topic or theme of a culture circle. When talking about immigration in a culture circle and reading stories that support and voice those stories, students bring forth their voices to share their stories too. Dialogue becomes cohesive rather than centering the facilitator which establishes more status in the classroom. Once a dialogue is cohesive, the facilitator can take that approach of standing back and becoming a listener and an observer. By taking this approach, you are providing a space for dialogue and collaboration among students. In these spaces, students come together to discuss their experiences, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds. By engaging in open conversations, students learn to respect and appreciate diverse viewpoints, fostering a sense of community.

Having the time to think critically and reflect on student stories, students are encouraged to question and analyze social and cultural issues, challenging the status quo. Having this outlook, students develop a deeper understanding of social justice, equity, and inclusion. I want to caution that it's not about changing the curriculum or having the language of "woke education," rather it's about analyzing and viewing our everyday surroundings through the stories read in the classroom, and the self-stories that are shared. Having the privilege to hear student stories allows for an ever more bond that feels like a family away from home. It's an experience that is hard to describe and put into words. Instead, is a feeling that can only be felt in a culture circle that is intimate and personal to freely express your story without being ridiculed or judged.

Establishing the time to share stories during a culture circle enables students to explore their own identities and cultures. In a school setting, students are in the process of forming their self-identities. Culture circles and sharing personal stories provide a platform or framework for students to share cultural heritage, traditions, and various stories. This supports students in building their self-image and self-esteem while cultivating an appreciation for diversity within the classroom and outside the classroom walls. With this in mind, students are empowered, and it gives them agency to voice their learning process. Instead of being passive recipients of knowledge, students actively participate and contribute to the discussions. This fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility for their education and engagement in learning. Instead of the facilitator creating an atmosphere of banking education as Paulo Freire (1970), describes students are taking the initiative of sharing their stories and taking a stance on their learning.

Sharing own life experiences, and stories that matter support the development of critical literacy skills. By engaging in conversations around diverse texts and media, students learn to analyze and interpret information critically. They become skilled in recognizing biases, stereotypes, and systemic inequalities present in various forms of media. This allows students to become more informed and discerning about what type of information should be discussed. Referencing various scholars in this regard of how using picturebooks enriches and enhances literacy skills in students is vital, however, my viewpoint is more on expressing that using picturebooks in culture circles and sharing personal stories embodies the opportunity to continue to enrich students' literacy skills.

As a facilitator and educator, sharing personal stories in culture circles is invaluable. Despite it sometimes being considered taboo, it can be transformed into a powerful resource. Sharing personal stories with students has numerous benefits and positive outcomes. It fosters

compassion and understanding among students, as well as promotes mutual respect between students and educators. This shift moves away from an authoritative stance and towards creating a balanced classroom community. Furthermore, sharing personal stories helps students grasp the topic and themes of the culture circle and the picturebooks being utilized. It enhances students' understanding and engagement in the learning process. By sharing personal stories, facilitators create a connection with students, making the learning experience more relatable and meaningful. It also encourages students to share their own stories, fostering a sense of belonging and creating an inclusive learning environment. Sharing personal stories in culture circles fosters empathy, understanding, and student engagement, while building a sense of community and creating meaningful connections between facilitators and students, thus sharing the expression that stories matter.

Grandpa's Stories: Sensitivity Topics About Grief and Loss Coming to a Close

Grandpa's Stories (Coelho, 2019) was the first book in which I did not rely on technology to record students' responses. This book was the first book that generated what a culture circle would be like, without the use of any artifacts and/or collecting any student responses. This was done intentionally since it was a short three-day week due to the district's Rodeo Break. Also, the intentionality of doing this was to see how students responded without the need to look out for devices in the classroom. Thus, the data collection for this specific culture circle is based on teacher field notes of students' responses and the classroom setting. Moreover, this examination of text not being audiovisual recorded but only using teacher field notes expresses how culture circles can take on multiple modalities by not having to rely on technology or having students be distracted by it.

The day started with getting our culture circle started. Students were all gathered on the gray carpet around the brown rocking chair. I started to read aloud. During this time students may ask questions or share their connections not just with the teacher but with each other. While reading, students were sharing how they too help their family at home with chores. When getting to the middle of the book where the grandpa is not shown anymore, students gasped. Some asked, “*Where is the grandpa?*” While others responded, “*He’s dead.*” I stopped reading and wanted to know what made students think about this theory. Some pointed to the illustrations, others looked at the text stating the different seasons. Students rely on illustrations to identify where the grandfather is. This is where student conversations are essential because conversations do not just come up, rather dialogue takes place by using the illustrations and/or text to find clarification or ask meaningful questions.

While students were coming up with multiple scenarios as to where the grandfather was, the final agreement was that the grandpa was not there anymore but left a new notebook where the granddaughter could draw and write their stories together. This made the students sad. Some students did not want to keep talking about this book because of the look on their faces. This was the first for me, to notice students feel sad about a story that was read and discussed. I did not have students cry or share their emotions. Once the book was being read aloud, students went to a whole group circle where students could further ask questions or share their connections about the text. Again, some students shared their personal stories of how they helped their families, while others did not want to share.

I believe that students who were hesitant to share were because of how sad they felt learning that the grandpa did not continue the story. In other words, not seeing the grandfather’s physical presence on the remaining pages, is what made students somber. Students are so used to

“happily ever after” type endings from the curriculum that often that is not the reality of children’s lives. There was a circle that had to come to a close because I had one student mention *“Miss can we talk about something else? I don’t want to share, and this story reminds me of so many things.”* I then had everyone agree that they wanted to move on with our day. As the facilitator, I realized that culture circles are spaces where children can dialogue about anything that comes to their minds, but also a space where students are not ready to share their stories. Stories are personal and although *confianza* is established, certain stories of sadness or grief were a topic that the majority of the class did not want to talk about especially if it had to do with the topic of family.

Using this example, I as the facilitator had to act with an agency by not just ending the culture circle but explaining why it needed to come to a close. Students' emotions were very much feeling and looking somber, and I knew that even though it was not a scary book or inappropriate, students still had a very deep connection personally to all that was lived through the pandemic. Although there were some points throughout the school year that addressed the topic of COVID-19, students were hesitant to share that perspective at that moment in time.

Visual Responses and Communication: Visualizing Their Story

Facilitating culture circles consists of recognizing the need for visual thinking and encouraging visual responses in different forms. Having students communicate with visual responses is welcomed and accepted rather than having solely oral or written responses. Although, second-grade students can produce written responses, as the facilitator I encouraged multimodal representations that were mostly visual forms when it came to conducting a culture circle. A culture circle can stand alone with oral dialogue without the need to expand into visual

representations. However, for this analysis, incorporating visual representations allows students to think critically and broaden their thinking and viewpoints of the various stories shared.

Visual responses provide a powerful tool for students to communicate their thoughts and ideas. By incorporating visual representations, such as drawings, sketches, or graphic novel elements, students can tap into their creativity and express complex concepts in a more accessible and engaging way. This allows students to explore different aspects of the story, such as characters, settings, emotions, or themes, and communicate their interpretations visually. This approach encourages students to think critically about the content and make connections between visual elements and the underlying messages in the stories.

Moreover, having students use visual responses in culture circles provides an inclusive platform for all learners, regardless of their verbal or written abilities. Students who may struggle with articulating their thoughts verbally or in writing can still actively participate in the culture circle by expressing themselves visually. Using art to produce sketches to connect with texts and their own stories allows for illustrations of their message to come to fruition. This promotes a sense of empowerment and ensures that every student's voice is heard and valued. With this in mind, having students create sketches also promotes engagement and active involvement in the discussions, as students can physically demonstrate their ideas and contribute to a more vibrant and interactive culture circle experience.

Incorporating visual responses in culture circles enhances students' communication and self-expression abilities as stated previously. It allows them to tap into their creativity and an engaging manner through visual expression in sketches and illustrations. This stimulates critical thinking, enabling students to delve deeper into the content and make meaningful connections from the text, student dialogue, and their own stories. Additionally, acquiring students to use

visual responses offers an inclusive platform that empowers all learners to actively participate in their unique way rather than being forced to participate and produce something. Often in elementary settings, having students produce visual representations or do art is slim because the focus is more on producing writing, reading, and math skills. The expression, creativity, and connection with physically touching materials to create a sketch are limited which often students are yearning for. Allowing students to freely express and touch art with their hands to connect their thinking and understanding to the text and stories shared allows for a culture circle to shape into a visualized story.

Similarly, in culture circles, if students implement visual responses with an addition to dialogue, this supports the development of visual literacy skills. Students learn to interpret and analyze visual representations, enhancing their ability to make meaning from images and symbols. Visual responses also foster a deeper level of engagement and active participation, as students can physically represent their ideas, making their thinking visible to others. This visual communication promotes dialogue and facilitates a richer discussion, as students can respond to and build upon one another's visual representations, leading to a more comprehensive exploration of the topics and themes. Students can interchange their sketches to receive feedback and more importantly hear everyone's journey. Students can witness the impact and heartfelt stories that are physically represented, and that experience is powerful to witness.

Facilitating culture circles involves recognizing the importance of visual thinking and encouraging students to express themselves through visual responses. While second-grade students are capable of producing written responses, as the facilitator, I emphasized the use of multimodal representations, particularly visual forms, during culture circles. While oral dialogue is valuable on its own, incorporating visual representations adds another layer of critical thinking

and expands students' perspectives on the stories being shared. This allows one to grasp and visualize their story coming to life.

We Are Water Protectors: The Need for Agency Within

We Are Water Protectors (Lindstrom, 2020) was first read as a whole class that evolved into a discussion through the critical cycle during a culture circle. The following transcript depicts the classroom discussion in three sections: (1) how students were responding throughout the text (2) students sharing their sketches about the text as a whole class and (3) the culture circle coming to a close and the next steps students suggest. Throughout the transcript, the three sections are conducted as a whole group class on various occasions. Students were sitting down in their seats and had already the tables combined as conference style. This was intentional so that way everyone could see each other and have more of an intimate conversation and feel of being in dialogue. The transcript is as follows:

Marisol: *Why does the mom have a baby?*

Cameron: *Is the black snake real Miss?*

Yandel: *Miss are we gonna do break?*

...

(Students start to share their sketches in our culture circle).

Pedro: *This is the big snake with the oil dropping and a feather. I'm done.*

Cameron: *Miss Miss Miss... this was a long time ago remember. I was standing by myself, and I found a black pipe."*

Serrano: *Yeah, outside in our own backyard we find those black pipes, those black snakes. Yeah, that's an interesting connection, Cameron.*

...

(The circle is coming to a close and a student mentions a last remark).

Serrano: What else, what else can we connect?

Gabriel: We have to protect the water so we can survive.

Examining the transcript and looking at segment one, students had many different conversations about the text and various moments of wanting to take a break. Students asked critical questions about the mother having a baby and if the black snake was real. As the facilitator, I had to prepare students with facts about not just what happened in 2016 in Standing Rock but also share with them the solidarity within Indigenous communities coming together to protect Mother Earth. Finding out the research together and talking about it as a collective prepares us to further understand the text to not just personal connections but create the opportunity to be agents of change. Moreover, some students were interested in the topic but there were several who were not engaged with it by asking frequently if we were going to have a break. Aside from having various opinions about whether students were interested in the topic or not, students created their sketches and were able to share their experiences.

Using the example of Lindstrom's (2020) text, as the facilitator I had to acquire additional materials to create context before reading the book and after reading the text. Some of these sources were as simple as looking up geographical maps and images on *Google*. At times, students were interested in the topic and asked various questions. Students showed agency outside the classroom by being more cautious of what is taken outside and what needs more attention regarding cleaning up garbage. There was also the case where students were uninterested and just wanted to take a break. The facilitator's role, in this case, is complex. There needs to be a balance between what gets to be shared and examined in the classroom and when

students need a break. The break may be needed, or it may be an indicator that the text is not relevant to students. Moreover, this example expressed not just student agency but that of the facilitator, what is the next step and how can we get there as a collective.

Examining closely the concept of the black snake as Cameron had questioned earlier in the transcript, there is a student example that elaborates more on the use of what the black snake represents in a school setting. Johnny's sketch (see Figure 5.6) shows a small person illustrated in pencil looking straight at a pole. The bigger illustration that takes up the whole space is

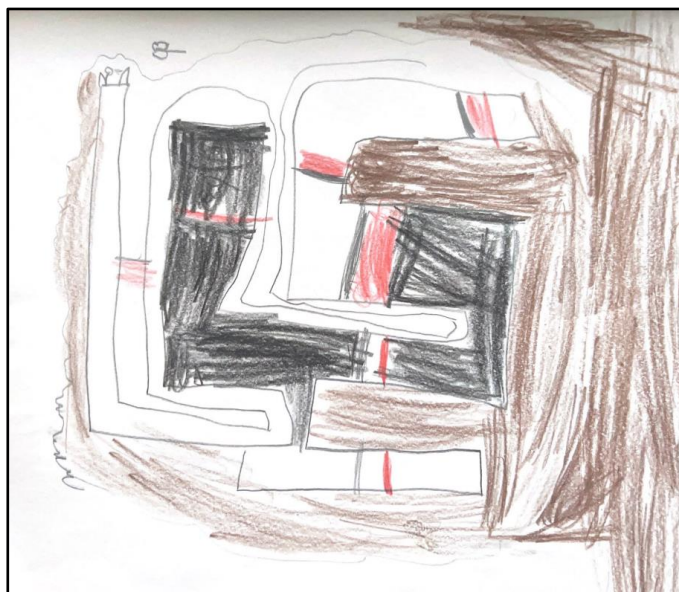


Figure 5.6 Johnny's sketch to Lindstrom 2020 book

multiple black pipes that mirror a maze. The brown crayon scribbles represent the dirt or underground. The black pipes are purposefully underground, and Johnny mentioned that the pipes are the “black snake” and that these pipes are very rooted and deep into what we don't see often in our society. Johnny also stated that the black snake is also in our schools but in a different way. I asked Johnny what he

meant by his reflection, and he said, *“Yeah Miss... like all the things that we need to learn and... and... when people are coming to check the classroom... and when our friends are leaving the class. You know Miss.”* Here, Johnny is connecting three various issues that are visible in a school setting; (1) the constant curriculum content being taught and learned without the freedom to express personal stories or what students want to learn, (2) school personnel occasionally coming into the classroom to observe or disrupt the flow of the class, and (3) students being

pulled out of the class to receive additional services aside from classroom instruction. Examining closely these three principles that Johnny is referencing as the black snake in school reflects that students are paying attention to what is occurring behind the scenes of teaching. They are looking at how the teacher behaves when there are people in-and-out of the classroom, seeing the body language and expressions that people express when coming into the classroom, and the fact that students are hardly present in the classroom because they are being pulled outside the classroom to receive additional curriculum support. These are the very issues that are concerning and visually displayed in Johnny's sketch.

Additionally, Gabriel's sketch (See Figure 5.7) reflects the concept of the black snake differently. In his sketch you see a girl with long black hair at the top, then the remaining hair is blue. The character is also holding a feather, while the green grass is at the bottom of her feet. It looks like the page from Lindstrom's (2020) text; however, Gabriel's reflection and description of his sketch have more meaning that is hidden. Gabriel shared:



Figure 5.7 Gabriel's sketch to Lindstrom 2020 book

“The girl is holding the feather, but her hair is black, but it’s like the black snake the thinking of it in your head... when you think Miss and... and the blue hair is the water that we must protect. The green grass is there... but you need to know Miss que ayi esta el black snake too, y ya es todo.” Here, Gabriel shared that there is always that thought in your mind about the meaning and hidden concept of the black snake all while holding close the concept of protecting Mother Earth

and the water. Also, the hidden message that the black snake is very much present but often not visible in society.

Johnny's and Gabriel's examples provided not only the agency of these students but also that of the facilitator. It highlights the importance of collective action and determining the next steps within the culture circle. By closely examining the concept of the black snake raised by Cameron, the student examples further explore its significance in a school setting. Johnny's sketch revealed the hidden issues present in the education system, such as rigid curriculum content, external disruptions, and the removal of students for additional services. This demonstrates how students keenly observe what happens behind the scenes of teaching and raise concerns about their learning environment. Moreover, Gabriel's sketch offers a different perspective on the black snake. Through symbolism, he portrays the idea of internal reflection and the need to protect Mother Earth and its resources. Gabriel emphasizes that the presence of the black snake may not always be visible in society but remains a constant underlying concern. Both examples demonstrate students' critical thinking and their ability to interpret complex concepts in their own unique ways.

Overall, these sketches highlighted the power of visual representations in culture circles. They provided valuable insights into students' thoughts, concerns, and interpretations, going beyond what can be expressed verbally. The facilitator's role in encouraging and valuing these visual responses enables students to engage deeply with the content and express their agency. It underscores the significance of creating a safe and inclusive environment where students feel comfortable sharing their perspectives through various modalities. As the facilitator, guiding and mentoring students is crucial in fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Through these practices, culture circles become essential for creating social change among students.

As the facilitator there needs to be that time to examine what students are saying not just about their thinking, but how the information that they are giving you can better support the culture circle and your practice as an educator. Reflecting on students' voices to inform curriculum decisions is something that I take initiative on. As the facilitator, I try to investigate and incorporate texts that are not just meaningful but incorporate more detailed supporting evidence that the curriculum may lack. It's as if you pair the two concepts side-by-side rather than eliminating the curriculum. In other words, it's not about reflecting as an educator on student feedback and eliminating the curriculum but thinking about how I can best support the already given curriculum so that students will make their interpretations and connections from it. This is where you need to know students well enough to see how students react and respond. This is where the classroom community is constantly taking root in everyday lessons. Furthermore, by becoming a participant with students you are sitting alongside them being part of the daily conversations, and not just "supervising" students, but being in the community with them. This is what a facilitator needs to incorporate, finding that common balance of being observant and facilitating teaching.

As the facilitator, having agency within or after culture circles relies on having a theoretical grounding by having and developing a strong critical consciousness. Having this lens forms the way you think about dialogue and all the other topics taking action as an educator. Taking graduate courses to develop a theoretical grounding to act continuously as a theoretical educator was the foundation for this dissertation and topic of culture circles. Bringing in what I know and learned, I wanted this for students too, to have the ability to become critical thinkers

and question the world around them. I completely don't want to see students just become water protectors but grow a need for agency within.

Actions Taken as an Educator: Offering Spaces for Journeys to Take Place

Many key features distinguish what specific actions are taken by an educator through culture circles. Respecting students' rights to not share verbally is a foundation in dialogue. It is not about forcing students to share their stories or viewpoints on the texts being explored. It is about encouraging students to share their perspectives uniquely. This can be through dialogue, visual representations, or even in silence. Allowing non-verbal forms of communication gives students enough time to interact with peers and interpret their thinking. Some students swiftly respond immediately, while others take time for them to open up and express their thoughts. For students to respond consistently, there needs to be a safe and inclusive environment. The environment is not solely for the educator but for students. Students need to feel welcomed, accepted, and invited into these spaces so that students can express their identity within. This offers a space for journeys to take place.

Respecting students' rights to not share verbally takes time. The environment set-up allows students to feel comfortable expressing themselves in their own way and at their own pace. Again, it is not about forcing students to produce or share their stories at your convenience because not all students may feel comfortable or confident sharing their thoughts verbally. Educators need to honor their unique ways of processing and communicating their thoughts and ideas. Just because students are quiet does not mean that they are not processing information or are engaged with the content being displayed. They are generating more profound insights

internally. With this in mind, alternative forms of communication should be offered as stated above with visual responses.

When students are not sharing verbally, there is also a different perspective of what happens when you become an active listener. When students are not focused on formulating their responses, they can give their full attention to their peers. This action leads to an open dialogue where mutual learning can occur. The constant pause to stop and listen to one another shows empathy and mutual respect to listen rather than to speak. Offering silence and ears to listen to one another reflects the humble nature of a human characteristic that expresses to participants that you care and have a sense of belonging. This continues to enlighten the classroom environment into a classroom community that feels like a family.

Moreover, by respecting participants' right not to share verbally, there is an understanding of identity and connection. By understanding students' identities by sharing or not, you are allowing students to express themselves without setting expectations of how to respond or act within the classroom or culture circle. This approach recognizes that each student has a different journey and pace for self-expression. By creating an environment that values diverse forms of communication, educators contribute to students' individual growth and self-discovery, fostering a sense of empowerment and ownership over their learning experience. It becomes less of trying to rush students into getting school services because of lack of communication and more into how I can as an educator best support students' identity and give them ample time to share. This is valuable in a classroom setting where students feel safe and inclusive.

A safe and inclusive environment allows students to feel comfortable, accepted, and respected. Students are more responsive if the physical setting feels and looks safe. Students can share their thoughts and perspectives openly which encourages taking risks in their learning

and/or social status in the classroom. Educators need to set expectations where students have an equal opportunity to share regardless of status or what has been placed by others beforehand. This nurtures empathy and respect among students. It encourages students to listen actively and engage with each other without making assumptions. This not only enhances cultural understanding but also promotes critical thinking and prepares students for the diverse and interconnected world that we share.

Lastly, promoting an inclusive environment leads to a space where students feel heard, valued, and supported. The emotional well-being of how students should feel in a classroom setting and a culture circle is challenging to describe without experiencing it firsthand. When students feel safe, they are more likely to take intellectual risks by expressing their opinions and engaging in dialogue with each other. Having a positive environment supports students' well-being and contributes to their social and emotional development. Thus, students' attendance of being at school increases, and students can depend on and rely on each other for moral support. This expression is authentic and fosters a caring and loving community when students feel their voice is valued and respected. They become active contributors within the culture circle when educators offer spaces for journeys to take place.

Creating a safe and inclusive environment within cultural circles offers several benefits for educators and students. This environment allows conversations to flourish and encourages students to share their stories and perspectives. Facilitators play a crucial role in establishing a community in the classroom where trust and *confianza* are sustained. This goes beyond just trust; it involves nurturing love, hope, and a sense of belonging. Resting such an environment is an ongoing process that requires educators to continually elaborate on and cultivate these traits within the culture circle.

Becoming an effective facilitator in creating a safe and inclusive environment is not solely about having good morals or values. It requires educators to be transformative in a positive way, embracing a critically conscious lens. Collaboration with various educators and students may come naturally to some, while others may find it challenging to feel “exposed.” The extent to which educators choose to share their personal experiences professionally depends on their comfort level. However, when educators are vulnerable and share aspects of their journey, strengths, and challenges, students empathize and view them as teachers who truly understand and connect with them.

In the process of facilitating culture circles, educators must have a deep understanding of students at both a personal and societal level. This includes being aware of their interests, as well as the issues and events happening in their society or neighborhood. Text selection plays a crucial role in facilitating culture circles, and it can be intentional or driven by students' interests and choices. The facilitator guides the culture circle through read-aloud sessions, allowing questions, comments, and stories to be shared. As the culture circle progresses, different forms or modalities, such as sketches, writing, or smaller circles within the whole class circle, can be incorporated based on the classroom scenario and participants.

The role of the facilitator extends beyond the completion of a culture circle. Facilitators have an ongoing purpose of guiding and mentoring students. They provide support, and encouragement, and listen to students' stories. Expressing a positive affection and conveying the message that “you matter” is vital but often overlooked. These words remind us why we are in the field of education and can have a profound impact on the participant's agency and growth.

In summary, creating a safe and inclusive environment within culture circles supports meaningful conversations and encourages students to share their stories. It requires facilitators to

establish a sense of trust, love, hope, and belonging. Becoming a transformative educator involves being critically conscious and willing to share personal experiences to build authentic connections with students. Text selection, read-aloud sessions, and the incorporation of various modalities contribute to the culture circle process. The facilitator's role extends beyond the circle as they guide and mentor students, providing support and expressing the importance of each participant.

Henry's Freedom Box: Stories Often Silenced in Classrooms

Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad (Levine, 2007) depicts a story about a man who could not even know his birthday. Henry Brown is the main character in this story. While introducing this book and making the appropriate decision to introduce and read this book to students, I searched online, and the reading Lexile measured this book at a second-grade level while other online sources measured the book at a fourth-grade level. Finding out the reading Lexile was important because it was my source of security to continue implementing this book within the school curricula. In other words, relying on the reading level would guide the essence of following the curricula but in a modified approach by continuing to incorporate culture circles in the classroom if I were to be approached or questioned about the selection of such text. I wanted students to understand not just the concepts of enslavement, but how our world has been affected by various occasions in history. Due to the time and challenging events in history, this book was read aloud as a whole class. The book was read slowly and paused on various occasions that way students had enough time to ask questions and comments. I did not just want students to understand the Underground Railroad concepts but also to think critically about stories often silenced in elementary settings.

The following transcript has been divided into four segments, (1) students visually seeing the book and/or book cover around the school while the teacher is explaining concepts about the book, (2) the teacher explaining various concepts while adding examples, (3) two students shared their own experiences about people that need help, (4) students asking questions while the teacher facilitates in asking to follow up questions while students want to start their sketches. The transcript below was initially a 30-minute session, thus the ellipses in the transcript condense these four points that are critical in this analysis to further elaborate and discuss. The transcript is as follows:

***Cameron:** I've seen this book before.*

***Serrano:** Miss Serrano is going to pause along the way to explain certain things while we're listening to the book.*

...

(Serrano explains the term "slave" as enslavement and a student shouts, "Like poor people." Serrano continues to add examples of what the term means and how it's used).

...

***Kassandra:** One time I saw on YouTube a man gave candy to the poor.*

***Maahir:** One time my mom went to the store, and she found a man outside the store, and we tried to help him with money.*

...

(Serrano continues to explain through the book the concept of slavery and how students relate that to "poor" people who have no possessions).

...

Lucas: *I want to know about both sides Henry and the Doctor because he helped him escape.*

Serrano: *I want to know what happened between people of color and like Dr. Smith who helped Henry. Were all people mean? This book reminds me of kindness, were all people kind to share and help one another? What should our next step be?*

Maahir: *People forget how to help people.*

Ariana: *Podemos hacer nuestros dibujos y compartir.*

Exploring segment one, students have been exposed to this book, although visually by seeing the front cover in the school library and the classroom library. Students can recall that they have seen this book before, but never had the opportunity to read it, nevertheless read it as a whole class. Often books are displayed in the school library and or glass cases without ever having students read them. These books are often displayed just to be displayed on a certain history month, rather than encouraging readers to ask questions or read books outside their reading Lexile and/or reading level. This is vital because students have seen these books in the Multicultural section in the school library without ever having the possibility to pick them up and read them. After all, it was not the child's reading level. This is unsettling to witness children being denied books because of their physical appearance the child being too small or not old enough to read these kinds of books. On the other hand, the teacher knowing this matter, I took the initiative to allow this book to be explored in the second-grade classroom within a culture circle.

The second segment is about the role of the facilitator. The transcript elaborates on the role of the facilitator by the teacher explaining concepts or terms that may be difficult to understand the complexity of the *Underground Railroad*. Once concepts are explained, the

teacher then shares personal examples of stories that have been heard of or further researched.

The purpose of the facilitator is not to just read aloud a book just because of it, rather the facilitator needs to deeply investigate the author, illustrator, historical documents, and setting of the 1800s and have students understand that this issue is continuous.

The final segment involves both students and the teacher coming together to find a way through the critical cycle of praxis. Before praxis can take place, dialogue, and problem-solving is partaking in the culture circle. Lucas wants to know more about both sides of Henry and Dr. Smith of why kindness was incorporated because Dr. Smith helped Henry escape. As the facilitator asked questions, Maahir mentioned, *“People forget how to help people.”* Maahir’s response was not only answering the questions that I had posed, but it was a statement. He didn’t elaborate on his statement rather just left you thinking deeply about what he said. In the end, Ariana mentions to the class, *“We could make our sketches to then share,”* as the transcription comes to a close. Ariana’s statement is shifting the culture circle to praxis by continuing our dialogue through sketches. This is important because, not only is praxis taking place, but the power that students have when it comes to being part of a culture circle is remarkable. Furthermore, it comes to show that students want to continue our dialogue through other forms of expression, not just orally but visually too. It is important to allow students to converse in a modality that is fluid and not constraining set questions or just having students produce something. Students are the center of what a culture circle is and when students have the lead, their voice becomes stronger for many to listen and join in.

Henry’s Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad (Levine, 2007) was intentionally chosen. It was not selected as a way for students to understand the central message of slavery, rather it was selected for students to bring forth the movement of the critical cycle of

a culture circle. In other words, I wanted to see if students would take this book through the praxis stage of taking our conversations to the next step. As stated previously, I wanted students to explore topics that are often silenced in elementary school. I carefully selected this text that not only had a Lexile level for the grade level but also kept in mind how I could navigate the text and embed it within the curricula. Again, it's not about changing the curriculum, rather it is about incorporating stories that reinforce the state standards. Using Levine's (2007) text, students were able to converse and think critically about the world around them through a lens that was not instilled in them by the teacher. Rather they were able to ask questions and reflect on what is significant to them in the present moment.

The use of this text and sharing this example is to describe not just what students were thinking or doing, but the various tasks that the facilitator had to endure. Planning and preparation are vital when doing a culture circle, but enjoying the present moment and process with students is even more fulfilling. I hope that this example brings forth the notion, that although there were times of dialogue and student agency regarding sharing their ideas and sketches with the facilitator, the facilitator's role is to also enjoy the moment. Throughout the culture circle, the facilitator must not only observe what the students are thinking and doing but also take part in the experience. This means actively participating in the dialogue and sharing personal experiences to connect and reflect on the outcome of the culture circle. While students have agency in sharing their ideas and sketches with the facilitator, the facilitator's role is to facilitate the discussion, enjoy the moment, and reflect on the outcome of the culture circle.

The facilitator's role and agency within or after culture circles can vary depending on the context. Teacher field notes and transcripts offer insights into the facilitator's role and agency. Examining these records provides examples of how the facilitator navigates the culture circle

process. For instance, there may be instances where the facilitator grapples with the idea of closing a circle for the first time, or other situations where the facilitator determines the next steps based on student dialogue and the flow of the critical cycle. Students' sketches and perspectives also shed light on the issues that emerged during the culture circle, displaying their connection and courage in exploring the texts and sharing their own stories.

To illustrate, the facilitator's agency within or after culture circles, specific texts were selected as examples. These texts include: These texts offer fruitful examples of the facilitator's agency in action within or after culture circles. They showcase how the facilitator engages with the text and guides students in exploring complex themes, promoting dialogue, and encouraging students to connect the text with their own experiences and perspectives.

By analyzing teacher field notes, transcripts, and student examples, we gain a deeper understanding of the facilitator's role and agency within or after culture circles. These records highlight the facilitator's decision-making process, the support for student agency, and their ability to create a meaningful and inclusive learning environment. The selected texts demonstrate the facilitator's intentional selection of literature that sparks discussions, fosters critical thinking, and allows students to share their stories and connections. Overall, these examples exemplify the facilitator's agency and its impact on the culture circle experience.

Conclusion

The facilitator's role is crucial in a culture circle. Culture circles are designed to bring people together to learn and reflect on various topics. The facilitator's role certifies that the culture circle is a meaningful and transformative experience for all participants. The facilitator is responsible for not only preparing and planning the experience but also actively participating in

it. They are not just observers but participants who share their experiences connect with others and reflect on the outcome of the culture circle. The facilitators play a crucial role in guiding the group through the critical cycle process. This includes setting the tone of the group, creating a safe and welcoming space, and establishing rules for communication and participation. The facilitator must ensure that all participants have an opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives. They must also be able to facilitate meaningful discussions and activities that help deepen the group's understanding of the various topics being explored.

The facilitator should be well-versed in the context being explored and have a deep understanding of its history, traditions, and values. This knowledge will enable the facilitator to guide the group more effectively, provide accurate information, and ensure that the experience is authentic. The facilitator has agency within and after culture circles. During the culture circle, they can use their agency to steer the conversation toward important topics or to encourage participation from quieter members of the group. They can also help create a safe and welcoming space for participants to share their experiences and perspectives.

After the culture circle, the facilitator can use their agency to continue the conversation and encourage ongoing learning, and reflection. They can provide resources for further learning, such as books, articles, or videos that delve deeper into the culture explored during the culture circle. They can also encourage participants to continue the conversation outside of the culture circle by connecting them with others or providing a platform for ongoing discussion.

Again, the role of the facilitator in the culture circle is essential and often overlooked. The facilitator acts as a stakeholder in change, fostering a safe and inclusive environment where students can freely share their perspectives and stories. By sharing personal experiences and creating a bond with students, the facilitator becomes an integral part of the culture circle,

moving away from an authoritative role and towards an educator who understands and empathizes with the learners. This shift allows for a deeper connection and engagement within the circle.

The facilitator's agency within or after culture circles plays a significant role in guiding and mentoring students. Through active facilitation, the educator encourages discussions, models critical thinking, and nurtures empathy among the participants. Creating a safe environment where all voices are valued is crucial. By documenting and reflecting on the learning process, the facilitator ensures that the culture circle remains a transformative and collaborative space.

Furthermore, the facilitator helps students connect their personal experiences and prior knowledge, promoting deeper engagement and reflection, encouraging empathy, and providing opportunities for students to share their stories and examples further strengthening the learning experience. The facilitator also supports students in translating their newfound knowledge into meaningful action, empowering them to address social issues both within and outside the classroom. By actively engaging in these roles, the facilitator acts as an educator who guides students toward critical consciousness and transformative change.

In conclusion, the facilitator plays a vital role in a culture circle. By guiding the group through the process, sharing their experiences, and using their agency to encourage ongoing learning and reflection, the facilitator can help to create a meaningful and transformative experience for all participants. With the facilitator's guidance, participants can deepen their understanding of the topics being discussed and explored, connect with others, and reflect on the experience in a safe and welcoming space that becomes ours, and a transformative action of collectively thinking and saying that we stand together takes root.

CHAPTER 6:

Summary and Implications

Within the classroom, many students find themselves voiceless, their identities overshadowed by the authoritative presence of textbooks and mandated curricula. In this educational landscape, opportunities for students to express their true selves are scarce. Recognizing this gap, the introduction of culture circles emerged as a crucial tool, where students could wholeheartedly share their cultural identities and personal stories. This initiative was essential in the classroom, addressing the profound desire within students to reveal their authentic selves to both their teachers and peers. Culture circles became a vital space where students could articulate their thoughts, providing a crucial platform to discuss their experiences and perspectives on social justice issues.

As an educator and researcher, it became my mission to delve into this educational space and paradigm, weaving a study that would serve as a testament to the significance of creating spaces where students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds like Latinx communities, could share their viewpoints on social justice issues. In the second-grade classroom, I embarked on this journey, where students shared their stories and perspectives. It became evident that only by creating these spaces could educators and researchers genuinely learn from the rich experiences these students bring, leading to a transformative journey within the classroom. Culture circles supported this change, offering an opportunity for learning, understanding, and fostering sincere connections among students, educators, and researchers alike.

Summary of the Dissertation

This dissertation delved deeply into the integration of culture circles alongside social justice picturebooks, fostering a vibrant learning environment within a second-grade classroom. The essence of this study lay in providing students, many of whom were Latinx, with a platform to candidly share their life experiences through an array of carefully chosen books within the culture circle setting. As the students engaged with these texts, rich and meaningful discussions emerged, giving rise to four distinct themes that encapsulated their reflections. The depth of these conversations was captured through a multifaceted approach, involving student sketches, transcripts, and the dialogues emanating from the culture circle sessions. These diverse data sources provided a comprehensive foundation for analysis, revealing the intricate layers of issues that deeply resonated with students.

Within this analytical framework, these emergent themes served as a mirror reflecting the profound concerns and narratives students found compelling to discuss. The fundamental basis of this exploration lay in addressing one of the pivotal questions guiding this study: identifying the core issues within the social justice picturebooks that were explored during the culture circle sessions. Through this analysis, the study aimed to unravel the intricate threads of these narratives, shedding light on students' perspectives, and highlighting the societal issues that resonated most strongly with them. This in-depth examination not only illuminated the thematic richness of the chosen picturebooks but also underlined the power of culture circles in empowering young learners to engage critically with social justice topics, fostering a classroom environment where their voices were not only heard but celebrated.

This dissertation also delved into the theoretical framework that played a pivotal role in shaping my identity as both a teacher and a researcher. The profound impact of these theories

echoed throughout the entire spectrum of my work, from the careful curation of the picturebooks to the thorough orchestration of culture circles. By illuminating the theories that guided my pedagogical journey, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive view of the driving forces behind my teaching practices. It was essential to articulate not only my teaching philosophy but also my stance in the contemporary educational landscape. The exploration of Critical Pedagogy, Transactional Theory, and Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy served as an anchor, nurturing the critical consciousness that permeated this research. These theories served as more than guidelines; they were the foundation upon which the safe spaces for students to share their experiences were constructed.

Critical pedagogy, with its focus on empowering students to question and critically engage with their education, acted as the driving force behind the establishment of culture circles as spaces for open dialogue and transformative learning. Transactional theory, in turn, provided the lens through which I viewed the interactive dynamics between teachers, students, and texts, enabling a deeper understanding of the complex relationships forged within the classroom. Indigenous social justice pedagogy, with its emphasis on honoring diverse cultural perspectives, reinforced the need for inclusive narratives within the selected picturebooks, fostering a sense of belonging for all students. These theories collectively underpinned my teaching philosophy, emphasizing the creation of a supportive environment where student voices were not just encouraged but given priority. In essence, they provided the scaffolding for my teaching decisions and further validated the critical consciousness that was nurtured and sustained throughout this study.

A crucial part of this analysis involves my deeply personal reflection on my identity as a teacher-researcher, intertwined with my heritage as a Chicana. This introspection journeyed

through my experiences within the education system, highlighting the stark absence of opportunities I encountered. This introspective exploration became a catalyst, prompting me to reassess my role and purpose within the realm of education. It was within this profound introspection that I unearthed my passion for culture circles, recognizing them as a potent platform where the threads of social justice and the vibrant tapestry of picturebooks could intricately weave together. This realization marked a pivotal moment in my educational journey, reshaping my purpose and fueling the mission of this dissertation.

The essence of this dissertation resides in the earnest endeavor to honor and amplify the voices that students carry into the classroom. It stems from a deeply rooted commitment to create a space where these voices, often muted by systemic silence, could resound, and be acknowledged. By combining the transformative power of culture circles with the narratives of social justice-focused picturebooks, this study emerges as a testament to the essential need for inclusive, student-driven education. This dissertation, therefore, stands not just as an academic pursuit but as a profound ode to the myriad voices that echo through the corridors of classrooms, waiting to be heard, understood, and valued.

Furthermore, within this dissertation, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to contextualize the current research. Existing scholarly work was examined, specifically focusing on literature discussions and participatory action research in educational settings, predominantly in upper elementary through adult education contexts. The literature review segments a broader discourse—a rich tapestry of research that highlights the significance of infusing social justice issues into dialogues with students.

This review not only synthesized prior findings but also positioned the current research within this ongoing conversation. It emphasized the paramount importance of fostering an

environment where discussions concerning social justice could take place. Such discussions, as revealed in the reviewed literature, are essential for cultivating critical thinking, social awareness, and transformation within educational settings. Hence, this dissertation contributes to this vital dialogue, shedding light on the value of integrating social justice issues into educational discourse and, more significantly, extending this practice to early education, specifically the K-2 classroom.

The process and methodology employed for structuring a timeline and curating a collection of books relevant to students played a pivotal role in facilitating this research and addressing the fundamental questions explored within this dissertation. Two key research questions emerged as the foundation of this study: (1) what issues do students raise in their discussions of social justice picturebooks in culture circles? and (2) what are the ways the teacher acts with agency within or after culture circles?

To address these questions comprehensively, a systematic and organized approach was adopted. The process encompassed the development of a timeline, designed to incorporate relevant literature. This critical phase involved sourcing and selecting picturebooks that had the potential to resonate with students and encompass themes aligned with the social justice framework. These thoughtfully curated materials were the catalyst for the subsequent research, serving as the focal point of culture circle discussions. This selection process was crucial, as the chosen books became instrumental in elucidating the issues raised by students during these dialogues. Furthermore, it enabled the exploration of my role as a teacher, investigating how the teacher exercises agency both within the culture circles and in their post-discussion interactions with students. This methodological approach allowed for a nuanced and comprehensive analysis,

ultimately shedding light on the intricate dynamics of culture circles in early education and addressing the questions posed by this dissertation.

The research conducted within the second-grade classroom significantly contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding the narratives shared by students in today's classroom. Through this dissertation, I aspire to inspire fellow educators and researchers to continually uphold the significance of student voices in the process of shaping educational theories. Additionally, I intend for this work to serve as a poignant reminder for educators to engage in reflective practices, evaluating their positions and pedagogical approaches within the educational milieu. This self-study is paramount in fostering meaningful and inclusive learning opportunities for every student.

Furthermore, I envision this dissertation as a steppingstone toward fostering critical learning experiences within K-2 educational settings. Acknowledging the inherent value of the stories held by even the youngest students, this research emphasizes the crucial need to create spaces where these narratives can be shared and valued. By recognizing the unique perspectives and voices of these young learners, educators can cultivate an environment that nurtures creativity, empathy, and a profound sense of belonging. Ultimately, I hope that this dissertation ignites a collective commitment to amplify student voices, not only in research but also in the everyday fabric of educational practices, ensuring that every child's story is not only heard but cherished.

Purpose of Study

Throughout this dissertation, my perspectives as a Chicana have led me to deeply reflect on the moments in my education when my identity, culture, and language felt marginalized or overlooked. These reflections have prompted a profound re-evaluation of education's role

concerning all students, but especially Latinx students. I found myself grappling with the question: How can I support Latinx student voices and the experiences they bring into the classroom? Engaging with picturebooks through the framework of culture circles, coupled with this heightened awareness, has sparked a profound review. It has spurred me to consider innovative ways through which I can re-shape the educational journey of Latinx students in elementary school, ensuring their experiences are not just acknowledged but celebrated and integrated meaningfully into the classroom.

In my role as both an educator and researcher at Soaring Wings Elementary, I strived to carve out spaces and opportunities to delve deeper into the experiences of Latinx students, including my own, leading to the formulation of the two central research questions in this dissertation. The first question aimed to unravel how students engaged with social justice issues presented in diverse picturebooks, shedding light on student responses. The second question delved into my dual position as an educator and researcher, specifically examining my role as a facilitator within a culture circle. Throughout this process, I aimed to amplify the voices of Latinx students, enriching both my understanding and their experiences within the classroom.

The focal point of this dissertation centers on Latinx students and their voices within the classroom through using picturebooks within a culture circle. I firmly advocate that education should never marginalize or mute any group or individual; rather, it should stand as a resistance against oppression. Education, in my perspective, ought to embrace and honor the diverse voices and narratives that each individual brings into the classroom. To facilitate this inclusivity, educators should actively create vibrant and welcoming spaces for dialogue, employing strategies such as culture circles to foster meaningful engagement and understanding among students.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework sustaining this research comprised a diverse array of theories and perspectives spanning critical pedagogy to literacy. These theories were interwoven and engaged with each other within the context of this dissertation, giving rise to a framework that illuminates the intricate and beautiful facets of education. Through this amalgamation, a comprehensive lens was crafted, allowing for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted dimensions within the field of education.

Paulo Freire's (1970) philosophy of critical pedagogy, which emphasizes dialogue to critically address social issues and examine power dynamics, served as a foundational concept in this study. Freire critiqued the notion of banking education, wherein students are seen as empty vessels to be filled by teachers, asserting that education should encompass not only reading words but also reading the world. Building upon this, Souto-Manning (2010) emphasized that education should enable individuals to question and challenge inequalities, re-envision their world, and engage in dialogue and critical thinking. Freire highlighted the political nature of teaching, advocating that educators explore the theories they use to support their teaching intentions.

Souto-Manning (2010) underscores that culture circles are rooted in two fundamental principles: the recognition of education as a political endeavor and the central role of dialogue in the educational process. These principles are instrumental in addressing the learner's environment, critically and politically analyzing issues, and engaging in dialogue to overcome oppression and seek solutions. Thus, culture circles form a cyclical and recursive process, leading to transformative action. Within this framework, culture circles provide students with a space where their experiences are valued and central to the construction of meaning. This process

is complex, it involves crafting the curriculum from the social fabric of students' lives, which is constantly changing.

Louise Rosenblatt's (1994, 1995) theory of transaction emerged as a cornerstone in this study, elucidating the intricate relationship between the reader and the text. Within this framework, the reader and the text engage in a unique transaction, shaping the reading experience profoundly (p.1). Gordon Pradl (1996) further enriched this discourse by asserting literature's potential as a democratic tool within classrooms. Pradl emphasizes how literature can facilitate meaningful opportunities for questioning and critical thinking about the world. Furthermore, Pradl (1996) underscored the necessity for teachers to re-evaluate their roles and positions in the classroom, acknowledging the power structures at play. By recognizing these dynamics, teachers can create inclusive spaces where students actively engage in their learning and decision-making processes. These theories contributed significantly to the understanding of literacy and highlighting literature's pivotal role in the classroom.

Shirley (2017) emphasizes the importance of Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy (ISJP) as a means of rethinking education for Indigenous students, advocating for Indigenous epistemology and nation-building. ISJP involves three key steps: deconstructing and disrupting the cycle of colonization, promoting and protecting Indigenous languages and knowledge systems, and inspiring youth to engage in transformative actions contributing to nation-building. Additionally, the terms "teaching into the risks" and "cultivating the heart" proposed by Shirley (2017) highlight the need for dialogue, healing, and understanding colonialism, acknowledging that praxis, especially in today's diverse educational modes, takes time. Ultimately, these efforts must engage both the heart and mind to address social issues and promote social change, necessitating the willingness to listen and teach about the risks.

The incorporation of Indigenous pedagogies in the classroom brings forth the challenge of decolonization, confronting systems of oppression and silence. In the process, teachers, or rather educators, are urged to challenge Western hegemonic structures, moving towards more inclusive practices in education. Additionally, recognizing the importance of Indigenous epistemology as a system of knowledge rooted in relationships and acknowledging other choices beyond Western methodologies fosters a deeper understanding of Indigenous cultures and identities. These concepts, together with critical Indigenous pedagogies and praxis, enable educators to engage in dialogue about Indigenous struggles, hopes, and aspirations, offering spaces for Indigenous communities to share their experiences and perspectives.

The theoretical framework employed in this dissertation played a crucial role in shaping, conducting, and analyzing the research carried out with second-grade students. It's not just a one-way application of theories but a dynamic process where theory informs practice and practice, in turn, enriches and refines theories. This theoretical framework underscores the essential relationships among educators, students, and texts within the classroom environment. It serves as a poignant reminder of the responsibility to create spaces that nurture and encourage the growth of theories and their practical application, ultimately enhancing the learning experience for Latinx communities and other communities, to generate meaningful opportunities for future educational endeavors.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection in this dissertation encompassed a diverse set of sources, including student sketches, teacher field notes, audio transcriptions, and weekly reflection memos. Given the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, an online platform in the form of a secure Google

Drive folder was employed to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, in line with Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols. This digital approach facilitated the scanning and categorization of student sketches, which were then organized based on themes. As themes emerged, smaller subcategories were formed, allowing for a more granular exploration of the specific issues that students were addressing in response to the social justice picturebooks explored during the culture circles. This method of data collection and analysis ensured a comprehensive and systematic examination of the research materials.

Revisiting Research Findings

In this section, the focus is on revisiting the two primary research questions, summarizing both the questions themselves and the key findings in a concise manner. Each question is examined, highlighting the most intriguing aspects of the research inquiry and the subsequent discoveries.

The first research question delved into understanding how students respond to social justice issues presented in picturebooks during culture circles. Through extensive analysis of student sketches, teacher field notes, and transcribed discussions, a vivid picture emerged. Students engaged deeply with the material, offering nuanced and thoughtful responses. Their sketches and discussions revealed not only their comprehension of social justice issues but also their emotional connections and personal reflections. This question unearthed the profound impact literature had on these students, showcasing the power of storytelling in eliciting empathetic and critical responses from students.

The second research question explored the role of the teacher as a facilitator within and after the culture circles. The findings highlighted the significance of the teacher's guidance and

support in nurturing a safe and inclusive environment for student dialogue. Teacher field notes and reflection memos portrayed the delicate balance between facilitating meaningful discussions and allowing students the autonomy to express their thoughts. The most compelling aspect was the emergence of the teacher as a co-learner, engaging in a reciprocal process where insights from students shaped the overall learning experience. This question illuminated the dynamic interplay between the teacher's facilitation skills and the student's active participation, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the educational process.

In summary, these findings emphasize the paramount significance of cultivating dialogue among students. The research not only yielded valuable insights into students' perspectives but also underscored the indispensable role of educators in nurturing enriching, reflective, and empathetic learning spaces. These discoveries serve as a reminder of the transformative potential within education, where the interplay of literature, dialogue, and facilitation can empower students to engage deeply with social justice issues and inspire a lifelong love of learning.

Implications of this Research

The work carried out in this dissertation merely marks the beginning, as students yearn for more opportunities to have their voices recognized and celebrated within the American educational system. The endeavors in the second-grade classroom at Soaring Wings Elementary represent just a fraction of the transformation that is required in U.S. schools today. There is a pressing need to expand and deepen these efforts to create inclusive and empowering educational settings across the nation.

Latinx students, like all students, are in dire need of spaces where they can bring their unique stories and experiences into the classroom and the broader educational field. The call for

change is resounding. What's required are school systems that are not only responsive but celebratory of the richness of diversity. Students should no longer be marginalized or rendered invisible within the curriculum; they should stand at the heart of it. Educators, too, need to evolve into staunch advocates for all students, recognizing the profound responsibility they bear in bridging theory and practice to create genuinely empowering learning spaces. It is only when educators delve into critical reflection about their theories and philosophies that they can labor toward an educational system that genuinely nurtures success for every learner.

In the following section, I put forth implications regarding the potent role of literature within classrooms. The implications are divided into three subsections: one around the significance of literature, the second on the role of the teacher as facilitator and on educators and change, and the third on administrators and school leaders and change. Lastly, I outline implications for future research.

The Pages of Change

The power of literature, as illuminated by this research, is undeniably transformative. It serves as a bridge connecting students from diverse backgrounds to a world of ideas, emotions, and perspectives. Through carefully chosen and thoughtfully facilitated literature, educators can create spaces where students not only encounter social justice issues but also engage deeply, developing empathy, critical thinking, and a heightened sense of social consciousness.

This study illuminated the transformative power of literature for both students and educators. Literature served as a tool for self-discovery, enabling students to empathize with diverse perspectives, challenge societal norms, and transform their self-perceptions. As an educator, this journey revealed the potential of literature to go beyond traditional literacy

instruction focused on phonics and reading skills, offering a pathway for students and educators to engage with the world and one another.

Throughout this exploration, it became evident that literature facilitated critical questioning, prompting students to challenge the educational system, question authority, and reflect on the representation and inclusivity within the curriculum. This shift in dialogue empowered students to recognize their agency and the roles of educators in shaping their educational experiences. The study's findings encourage further research into the perspectives of educators and specialists on literacy, exploring how they can become advocates and allies for their students and shift from being mere knowledge transmitters. This shift holds the potential to profoundly impact Latinx and all students, inspiring a more inclusive, empowering, and transformative educational experience.

Literature possesses the remarkable ability to validate the experiences and identities of all communities. It allows them to see themselves reflected in the stories, fostering a sense of belonging and pride. This validation is an essential component of creating an inclusive and equitable educational environment where every page is the change. The power of literature and pedagogy based on the selection of children's literature is vital. How can teachers select literature for their classrooms? How can they implement culture circles with literature in the classroom? Although these questions can never be fully addressed to their potential, I would suggest starting with being exposed to outside resources where multicultural literature is enriched and valued. Public libraries, including institutions like World of Words, have invaluable resources that brought forth the very titles of these books that were addressed in this analysis.

I believe having a social connection with teachers who have literature recommendations is also another approach that can be taken. It was not just looking at the age appropriate or

reading level of the text that should matter, but student demographics and community also be centered in text selection. I would also recommend talking to the families of students to see what their interests are and what topics could be addressed in a culture circle.

In the application of culture circles, employing the critical cycle involves progressing through the five stages inherent to the critical cycle. This dissertation aligns with a similar approach, mirroring the critical cycle by articulating the theme (culture circles), engaging in problem posing (the two research questions), facilitating dialogue (discussion), presenting problem-solving elements (findings), and proposing actionable implications. Unconsciously, there is a representation of the utilization of culture circles throughout this dissertation. It suggests that teachers might have been incorporating culture circles into their practices without conscious awareness, lacking familiarity with its tenets or how to facilitate them in the classroom. Encouraging educators to integrate culture circles within literature emerges as the starting point for recognizing the profound synergy between literature and pedagogy within the framework of culture circles.

This approach implicitly underscores the potential ubiquity of culture circles in educational settings, operating as an unacknowledged yet impactful force in classrooms. It unveils the latent power and relevance of this methodology in facilitating meaningful dialogue, critical thinking, and student engagement within the academic sphere. By fostering an understanding of culture circles and its seamless integration into literature discussions, educators can unlock a potent tool for enriching pedagogical practices and creating dynamic learning environments that resonate with students.

This exploration sheds light on the potential alignment between existing teaching practices and the principles of culture circles. Encouraging educators to recognize and

consciously implement culture circles is pivotal, as it not only unveils the latent power of this pedagogical approach but also offers a pathway to enhance the impact of literature within educational framework.

Two additional themes guide the future work of educators and administrators. In the ever-evolving landscape of education, these themes play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences and opportunities of both students and the professionals entrusted with their learning journey. The next sections delve into these themes and their implications, shedding light on the crucial considerations that educators and administrators must navigate to create inclusive, effective, and empowering settings for all students.

Innovative Educators: Navigating Change in the Classroom

Exploring student agency and the role of the facilitator within culture circles holds significant importance due to its comprehensive approach. One notable aspect is its application within the primary elementary grade, which is relatively underexplored. On the other hand, there needs to be more information on how to best navigate change in the classroom. How can educators seek to implement change? I believe this starts with fully understanding the concept between teacher and educator. Garcia (2020) explains that a teacher is someone who is certified by the state level and has obtained all their credentials to teach students. On the contrary, an educator is not merely a job; it's a commitment to inclusivity, cultivating empathy, and creating an environment where every student feels seen and heard. Educator roles extend beyond the curriculum and find ways to incorporate action outside the very walls of the buildings.

Understanding the difference between a teacher and an educator brings forth the essence of seeking change. This is where transformative change goes beyond instruction. A teacher is often associated with the instructional aspects of distributing knowledge; an educator embodies a broader and more holistic role in sharing the overall learning experience with students. The shift from being a teacher to becoming an educator signifies a move beyond the traditional paradigm of instruction, encompassing a more profound engagement with students, their diverse needs, and the broader societal context in which learning unfolds.

Transformative change, in this context, exceeds the conventional understanding of education as a mere transmission of information. It suggests a fundamental (re)evaluation and (re)structuring of the educational approach, emphasizing not only the content but also the process of learning. Educators, in this transformative model, become allies of dynamic and inclusive learning environments. Their role extends beyond the classroom, reaching into the realms of mentorship, guidance, and fostering a lifelong love for learning. This paradigm shift challenges educators to embrace a multifaceted role, incorporating elements of mentorship, facilitation, and advocacy to create an environment that not only impacts knowledge but also nurtures the holistic development of each student.

In my role as the facilitator, I approached the state standards not as rigid constraints but as adaptable frameworks that could be transformed to align with the unique context of culture circles and picturebooks. The objective was never to impose my singular interpretation of curriculum or to question the necessity of standards. Instead, it involved a dynamic process of understanding how the existing curriculum and standards could seamlessly integrate with the innovative practices of culture circles and the rich narratives offered by picturebooks. This approach aims at fostering a more organic and meaningful learning experience for students.

This transformative shift extended to (re)defining my role in the classroom from a conformist teacher to a facilitator. The emphasis was no longer on delivering content but on guiding and facilitating the learning process. This shift was instrumental in the establishment of a vibrant and cohesive classroom community. As a facilitator, there was more time for interaction and a participatory role took place, which involved encouraging students to actively engage with the material, share their perspectives, and contribute to the co-creation of knowledge within the culture circles. This evolution in the teaching role was foundational in nurturing a sense of agency and autonomy among students.

Furthermore, this transformation wasn't about discarding established educational structures but about learning about them. The integration of culture circles and picturebooks served as complementary elements that enhanced the effectiveness of traditional standards and curriculum. It was a harmonious blend that recognized the value of conventional educational frameworks while infusing them with the vitality and relevance brought about by innovative pedagogical approaches.

Educators navigating change in the classroom takes time. Using culture circles in the primary and elementary grades is only the beginning. It serves as a testament to the potential of dialogue, student voices, and story practices in a nurturing way. Empathy, critical thinking, and social-emotional development ultimately promote a more inclusive and socially aware classroom with the use of culture circles. This is how educators become innovators for change.

Empowering Educational Leaders: Administrators and Teacher Leaders as Agents for Change

Implementing professional learning opportunity initiatives centered on culture circles is a strategic move to empower administrators and teacher leaders in fostering inclusive and

dialogical educational environments. These sessions should delve into the theoretical foundations of culture circles, clarifying the principles of student-centered learning, dialogue facilitation, and the transformative potential of literature in classrooms. By exploring case studies and successful implementations of these instructional strategies, participants can gain practical insights into adapting these concepts into their unique school contexts. Special attention should be given to strategies for creating inclusive spaces, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity and representations in literature. Workshops might involve interactive activities and literature discussions to allow administrators and teacher leaders to experience firsthand the dynamics of a culture circle and understand its impact on student engagement and critical thinking.

Integrating strategies for creating inclusive and dialogical spaces within these professional learning opportunity sessions is paramount for ensuring a comprehensive understanding of culture circles. This involves exploring methodologies for selecting diverse literature that resonates with the varied backgrounds of students. Emphasis should be placed on the role of language and communication in fostering meaningful dialogues, with practical tips on facilitating discussions that amplify student voices. Moreover, the training should equip leaders with tools for managing potential challenges, promoting respectful conversations, and addressing sensitive topics within the culture circle setting. By instilling a sense of confidence and competence in administrators and teacher leaders, these professional learning opportunity initiatives can catalyze a transformative shift in educational paradigms towards more student-centric and culturally responsive practices.

Incorporating culture circles into school policies is a visionary step towards institutionalizing student-centered, dialogue-drive approaches in education. Advocating for the formal recognition of culture circles within school policies underscores their value as a

pedagogical strategy that can promote critical thinking. This involves emphasizing the alignment of culture circles with broader educational goals and standards, showcasing their potential to not only meet academic benchmarks but also foster inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments. Suggestions for integration could include referencing culture circles in curriculum frameworks, acknowledging their role in achieving specific educational outcomes, and encouraging teachers to incorporate these practices into their instructional plans. By implementing culture circles, schools signal a commitment to innovative and holistic education.

Building leadership capacity involves showcasing the pivotal role that administrators and teacher leaders can play as facilitations within culture circles. By actively participating in these dialogical spaces, leaders not only model the desired pedagogical approach but also contribute to fostering a sense of shared leadership within the school community. This engagement can extend beyond mere endorsement, emphasizing the importance of leaders creating environments that actively support teachers in incorporating innovative pedagogical practices, including culture circles. Encouraging administrators and teacher leaders to embrace this participatory role reinforces the collaborative nature of educational leadership, where those in leadership positions are not just decision-makers but co-learners and co-facilitators in the ongoing process of creating vibrant, and student-focused learning environments.

Promoting and incorporating literature and picturebooks that authentically represent the varied experiences of students is important. Administrators and teacher leaders can play a pivotal role in advocating for curricular changes that reflect the cultural backgrounds of the students within a specific school context. This may involve reviewing and selecting texts that resonate with the diversity within the school community, fostering a more inclusive educational experience. Additionally, leaders can promote professional learning opportunities that encourage

the cultural competency of educators, enabling them to facilitate meaningful discussions around diverse literature within the culture circle framework.

Incorporating assessment strategies aligned with the principles of culture circles is essential for educational leaders seeking to evaluate the impact of this pedagogical approach. Administrators can explore and implement qualitative assessment measures that go beyond traditional quantitative metrics. Focusing on indicators such as student engagement, critical thinking, and the depth of dialogue within culture circles provides a more comprehensive understanding of the learning outcomes. This approach not only encourages a shift from conventional testing methods but also ensures that the assessment aligns with the collaborative and dialogical nature of culture circles.

To facilitate a successful integration of culture circles into educational practices, administrators and teacher leaders should prioritize creating robust support structures for educators. This could involve implementing mentorship programs where experienced educators guide their peers in adopting culture circles effectively. Additionally, establishing collaborative learning communities allows educators to share experiences, strategies, and resources related to culture circles. Ongoing assistance and resources are essential components of these support structures, ensuring that educators feel equipped and confident as they navigate the complexities of this transformative pedagogical approach. The focus should be on fostering a sense of community and shared learning among educators, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness and sustainability of culture circles in the educational landscape.

Through targeted discussions and presentations, leaders can articulate how culture circles align with student and educational philosophies. This alignment should be embedded into the school's vision and mission, reflecting a commitment to fostering meaningful dialogue, and

student agency. By weaving culture circles into the fabric of their educational philosophy, administrators can garner support and commitment from stakeholders, creating a cohesive and unified approach to transformative pedagogy within the school community.

Administrators and teacher leaders play a pivotal role in advocating for the necessary resources to support the successful implementation of culture circles. This involves developing persuasive strategies to secure financial and material resources, highlighting the long-term benefits of investing in pedagogical approaches that prioritize student voice and critical dialogue. Leaders can articulate the positive impact on student engagement, social-emotional development, and overall academic success that arises from culture circles. By making a compelling case for the value of these resources, administrators can ensure that educators have the tools and materials needed to create a transformative and student-centered learning environment.

The impact of this research is not confined to the classroom alone. By highlighting the positive influence of culture circles on student agency, empathy, and critical thinking, this study brings the potential for more extensive applications within education. Educators involved in curriculum development and policymakers can all draw valuable insights from the advantage of integrating dialogue and student voices to be heard in classrooms, especially in the realm of primary education. This approach leads educators as facilitators in establishing an environment that fosters not only the socio-emotional development of students but also their active involvement in matters of social justice.

Curriculum development should emphasize diverse and inclusive literature that reflects the lived experiences of Latinx students and other marginalized groups. Using literature serves as a powerful tool for fostering empathy, understanding, and critical thinking in the classroom. Ongoing professional development should focus on helping educators identify culturally

responsive literature and effectively facilitate discussions around social justice issues. Moreover, continuous professional development should be designed to equip educators with the skills and knowledge needed to identify culturally responsive literature and adeptly guide meaningful discussions on social justice topics.

Obtaining various research on the efficacy of various pedagogical approaches for teaching social justice literature to young students is crucial. Focusing on critical pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching are only mere avenues to take. By using this approach, educators and researchers alike can develop an understanding of what methods work best in different contexts and with various groups of students. Applying this mode will empower them to make informed decisions and craft effective strategies for nurturing young minds to be empathetic, critical, and socially conscious individuals.

This study resounds with a call for transformation. It emphasizes the essential need for literature that mirrors the diverse stories of all students. This call-to-action urges educators and researchers to redefine the realm of children's literature, thus reshaping the educational journey for students throughout the nation. The power to advocate for this change lies within us and the potential impact is profound, setting the stage for a more inclusive and empathetic outlook in the field of education.

Implications for Future Research

In future research endeavors, it's imperative to recognize the powerful and distinctive perspectives held by students. An intriguing avenue to explore involves actively involving students in the data analysis process, enabling them to contribute their interpretations and insights about their work. By engaging children in data analysis, we can gain a more authentic

understanding of their thoughts and responses to the various issues and topics discussed, either through their sketches or in small group settings. I continue to question whether students would identify different themes compared to my interpretations. How might such an approach impact the way children learn and reflect upon their understandings? This collaborative analysis could yield rich insights into the minds of young learners and their unique perspectives.

In addition to collaborative data analysis with students, an invaluable approach would be to conduct brief, informal interviews with them throughout the study. These interviews would provide insight into what students are thinking as they make comments or create specific drawings through their reflections. It would be interesting to see how they engage in multiple interviews allowing for individual exploration of their motivations and reasons for responding in certain ways concerning social justice picturebooks. Such interviews would offer a window into their thought processes and considerations underlying their engagement with picturebooks. This would unveil a more comprehensive view of their experiences and stories.

The use of audio recordings in this study had limitations, as the recorder had to be passed around during our culture circle discussions. This setup disrupted the flow of conversations, requiring pauses to facilitate the recording. In future studies, a significant improvement would be investing in a better recording system. Placing a high-quality microphone at the center of the culture circle would allow for more natural conversations to take place. Allowing these methods, students can organically speak and express their thoughts rather than glancing at the microphone every time. Allowing this approach will also capture a richer array of student voices but also enable seamless interactions, encouraging students to build upon each other's responses more freely and effectively. Such an improved recording approach would undoubtedly elevate the authenticity and depth of the data collected.

This study also opens doors to numerous promising avenues for future research. One compelling direction is the investigation of the long-term impact of culture circles on students. This could examine how participation in culture circles during primary grades influences students' social and emotional development, academic performance, and ability to translate the knowledge and skills gained outside the classroom. Such longitudinal studies would provide invaluable insights into the enduring benefits of this research.

Comparative studies represent another compelling research avenue. Exploring the effectiveness of culture circles across different grade levels and cultural contexts can reveal the versatility of this pedagogical approach. It can help identify any variations in outcomes and effectiveness and determine whether adjustments are necessary when implanting culture circles in diverse settings. Moreover, if students can distinguish the difference between various classroom practices as the data reflected between both second-grade classrooms of what could be shared amongst peers, then I continue to wonder if this also applies to multiple grade levels.

Furthermore, in an increasingly digital age, the potential for integrating technology and diverse media formats into culture circles is an area ripe for investigation. Research into the use of multimedia and digital tools within culture circles can offer innovative ways to enhance student engagement, learning outcomes, and the exploration of social justice issues. This evolving landscape aligns with contemporary educational practices and the interests of students who seek digital modalities.

Conclusion

Every student in our classrooms holds immense value, possessing a unique voice story, and purpose. As educators, it's our profound responsibility to nurture and guide students in

discovering their worth and potential. This is what culture circles offered, that space to accomplish this approach. For Latinx students, it's especially crucial to move beyond harmful practices of othering and silencing. Instead, classrooms should serve as spaces that foster recognition, growth, and empowerment. Each student's dreams are significant, and it's only through thoughtful and meaningful teaching experiences that educators can help share that light.

This dissertation's most significant contribution lies in the emphasis on building meaningful relationships. It serves as a powerful reminder that teaching transcends mere instruction; it delves into the very essence of students' and teachers' hearts. Education is not confined to the classroom; it's a transformative journey that impacts everyone, it fosters learning, growth, and change. Recognizing this truth paves the way for a more inclusive, empowering, and impactful education journey for every student.

Moreover, this analysis delves into the power of literature and the insightful conversations that unfolded among students. It's deeply rooted in the theoretical framework that guided my role as a facilitator within the culture circles. The findings resoundingly affirm that students, when engaged in topics that resonate with their lives, can engage in profound and critical discussions. This work serves as a vital reminder that classrooms when designed to meet Latinx students where they are, can yield incredibly fruitful outcomes. The relationships fostered in this process extend far beyond the classroom, lasting a lifetime.

Latinx students deserve justice and inclusivity within the classroom. They merit pedagogies that are culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining. These pedagogies transcend the obsolete notion of "banking education" and the oppressive practices that have been perpetuated. Instead, they advocate for action, transformation, and a democratic classroom.

Furthermore, these pedagogies embrace the intricate transactions between readers, offering an educational journey that truly honors and empowers all students.

Learning from collecting research and writing this dissertation brought forth the richness of stories from all students. Their voices expressed and highlighted in these pages confirm that no matter the age of the child, students are waiting to be heard and valued. This can be expressed in one word: resilience. Students showed and expressed resilience within and outside the classroom. These rich stories are carried within to validate that all students matter within culture circles.

APPENDIX A

Consent Form



Consent Version: 01/03/2022

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University of Arizona
Consent and/or Parental Permission to Participate in Research

Study Title: Using children's literature in culture circles: *student dialogue, reflection, and action in a second-grade classroom*

Principal Investigator: Cecilia Serrano

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study. Your child's participation in this research study is voluntary and your child does not have to participate. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide for your child to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether to have your child participate.

This project will look at what conversations students are having based on children's literature. This study will take the same Arizona standards and study children's dialogue based on the curriculum. The expected duration of this research will be from January 2022 to May 2022 a total of five months.

There are no expected risks to your child because of participating in this study. Your child will not benefit directly from participating in this study. Your child's identity will be kept confidential, and no education records will be shared. Data collected from this study will be encrypted and password-protected. All data will be erased after this study and your child's name will not be used in any report.

The information that your child gives in the study will be anonymous. Your child's name will not be collected or linked to their answers. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your child's identity.

Your child's responses (classroom work) will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your child's name to this code will be kept in an encrypted and password-protected file. Only the Principal Investigator (Cecilia Serrano) will have access to the file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed.

With your permission, I would like to audiotape, and video record the classroom activities so that I can make an accurate transcript. Once I have made the transcript, I will erase the recordings. Your child's name will not be in the transcript or my notes.



HSPP Use Only: Consent Script

Non-Funded or Internally Funded

Consent Version: 01/03/2022

Your child will not be identified in any report or publication of this study. Even though we will tell all participants in the study that the comments made during the focus group should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside the group.

The information that your child provides in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. The University of Arizona Institutional Review Board may review the research records for monitoring purposes.

I would gladly talk to you in person, over the phone, or via Zoom if you would like more information about this study. Please reach me at Cecilia.serrano@tusd1.org or (520) 225-1300 to address any further questions or concerns about the study.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Human Subjects Protection Program Director at 520-626-8630 or online at <https://research.arizona.edu/compliance/human-subjects-protection-program>.

Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form, and I am aware that my child is being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree that my child participates in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

Printed name

Signature

Date

Name of child

HSPP Use Only: Consent Script
Non-Funded or Internally Funded

APPENDIX B

Recruitment Form



Dear Parents, Guardians, and Families,

This letter is to invite your child to participate in a research study about how children dialogue about children's literature to consider social issues.

I will be engaging in research this January 2022 to May 2022 during school hours in our classroom. The purpose of this research is to learn from your child about how they respond to books. The research process is a class read aloud on a weekly basis during our reading time while we still attend to literacy standards from the mandated school curriculum. In other words, I will use the same standards required by the school and examine how children respond to children's literature about social issues that are relevant to their lives. The read-aloud is part of my regular curriculum, the only difference is that I want to closely examine children's responses to better understand their thinking.

I will be taking some pictures, recording some videos, audiotaping, and collecting some of their work. All this information will help me more about how to strengthen my practice as a teacher. All information will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms (fake names) will be used.

I will be sharing all findings with you after the study has been completed. Participating in this research is voluntary and it will not affect your child in any way. Your child may discontinue participating in the study at any time. Your child will still participate in the read-aloud since that is part of our curriculum, but I will not gather data on your child's responses to the books.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subject research at The University of Arizona reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of research participants. If you are willing to have your child participate, I will ask you to sign a permission form.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at (520) 225-1300 or by email at Cecilia.Serrano@tusd1.org. I would gladly talk to you more in detail via phone, zoom, or in person about what this study entails. I look forward to meeting you to further discuss this study and answer any further questions.

Sincerely,

Cecilia Serrano, M.A.
Second Grade Teacher
Principal Investigator

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