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Journeying Towards Connection in a Culture Circle with Six K-12 Educators: An Autoethnographic Study of Critical Praxis

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JOURNEYING TOWARDS CONNECTION IN A CULTURE CIRCLE WITH SIX K-12 EDUCATORS:

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Abstract

Critical praxis is an important means of increasing educators' critical consciousness. Culture circles are one avenue for educators to engage in a critical praxis, to dialogue, listen, reflect, and develop direct action steps. Both critical consciousness (Freire) and an ethic of care (Noddings) are essential and require an ongoing critical praxis. However, there is a lack of educational research on culture circles for ongoing praxis. In this auto/ethnographic, qualitative, action research (AR) study, the researcher created and explored a culture circle of six K-12 teachers. Over the course of five 90-minute sessions, the participants and the researcher raised situational experiences in their educational contexts for critical conversations. The analysis of the culture circle transcripts, informal interviews, and researcher reflexive journals showed that the culture circle educators a) problematized issues facing their social justice and equity efforts, b) connected emotionally and culturally to themselves, one another and their students, c) created direct action steps in their teaching and learning community as they (re)awakened their critical consciousness. The researcher posits that engaging in a critical praxis within a culture circle builds educators' capacity to teach with care and criticality in their racially/ethnically and linguistically diverse learning communities. The study provides research-based evidence in support of utilizing culture circles as a method to foster a critical praxis for preservice in-service professional learning. Limitations, implications, and recommendations for educators and educational researchers are discussed.

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First, I am deeply indebted to the circle of educators who agreed to engage in a process with me. Unquestionably, their words and experiences brought my idea to life. Thank you, N, J, W, C, and A, for your willingness to be vulnerable and make emotional and cultural connections with yourself, with one another, and with our students. I am proud to work alongside you in our journey as educators.

I also want to express my profound gratitude to Dr. Kress, Dr. Coughlin, and Dr. O'Brien. Dr Kress, thank you for your unwavering gift of deep listening, reflective feedback, and critical care. You have moved me forward and onward. I want to extend a special thanks to Dr Roda and Dr. Honigsfeld for the key learning experiences of critical analysis, qualitative research, and professional writing during my internship. Thank you to the brilliant faculty and hardworking students in the Molloy University Ed.D. program, especially the Levittown cohort. I was honored to learn and engage in critical conversations in our circles. I would also like to honor every scholar on my reference list. My words in this paper reflect the power and impact of your work on my own praxis. I am most appreciative of the individuals who cared so personally about me as they listened, read, and gave feedback to the ideas in this paper, including Monica Tetuan and Diane Divone.

I hope this dissertation connects educators to their own critical praxis. Mostly, I hope to always be in educators' circles, connecting with one another, so that we strengthen the ways of teaching and learning that centers on love and care for others.

Dedication

To my family, I wish to express my most loving appreciation. Jim, my sweet love, I am blessed to be forever connected to your wise mind and caring heart. My children, Anna, Noah, and Liam, you are my primary thoughts and daily inspirations for my ongoing learning and growth. Thank you to my circle of family and friends believing in me. I am especially grateful to my mother, Rita Pugh, my primary and most powerful example of love and praxis. would like to dedicate this work to students who have felt unseen or unloved and educators who want to see and love their students more fully.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My journey of engaging in a process of learning and reconstructing my ways of being as an educator started in my first teaching job in a Special Education Preschool in Queens, New York. The racially/ethnically and linguistically diverse student population met me with positive regard. My students and their families were from Pakistan, Haiti, Russia, and many Latin American countries. As a White woman with minimal experience, I felt disconnected from their lived realities. I would go home at the end of the day on the Long Island Railroad to my White segregated neighborhood, and although I thought of my students, I was mostly disconnected from them until I was back on the train on Monday morning. I forged connections between my students and their families during those first years. My White middle-class ableist heart and mind grew.

Despite a novice teacher's level of care and empathy, I felt my limitations in being fully able to teach. I sought out a master's degree program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) with the hope of connecting with a greater understanding of other cultural and linguistic voices. I moved through those early years teaching but learning through a critical constructivist lens. The process of creating art, language, writing, and play was with, not to, students. Years later, I enrolled in another master's program in Conflict Resolution and Peaceable Schools at Lesley University. During those years, I read and discussed critical theories and research from Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Delpit's (1995) *Other People's Children* and hooks'

(1994) *Teaching to Transgress*. My journey continued as I engaged in meaningful dialogue and reflection with other educators with a deep care for education.

I have also spent much time in reflective circles for personal self-care. The first of many groups was named a house church as many of its participants were born and raised as Catholic but felt a disconnect from the patriarchal structures of the actual Catholic Church. We shared a meal and then entered a circle of dialogue around issues pertaining to faith and spirituality, connecting the teaching of Jesus to caring for others. During this time, my love for my husband grew, which is still the strongest connection I have in my life. Out of the house church grew a women's group where I connected with other women to dialogue and reflect on times, we felt disconnected in our complex roles as professional women, wives, and mothers. My feminine identity and feminist ideas grew. After some time, we reorganized our house church group and women's group to form a dream group. We committed to reflection on our dreams within, once again, a shared trusting space where others listened, and we could reflect on meaning making. Today, I work on my emotional and cultural disconnections within a monthly women's group.

Over the past several years of my consciousness-raising journey, the search for communities for critical dialogue and reflection continued. I found and enrolled in Molloy University's Ed.D. Program for Diverse Learning Communities. The years in this doctoral program have given me a vital space for critical dialogue and reflection. Through this most open and critical space of dialogue, I began to envision my dissertation research to include exploring the critical praxis within a circle of educators.

Key experiences I attribute to my learning process have included shared spaces of genuine listening, dialogue, and reflection.

My lived experiences brought me to create this study not only personal learning and growth but for the professional learning community in which I teach. In this dissertation, I describe how a group of educators and I created a space for critical praxis. In this introductory chapter, I present the problem and purpose of the present study. Next, I provide the research questions, design, and methods used to answer my questions. I then briefly describe the theories I utilized to frame my present research study including critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and care theory (Noddings, 1984), which I will elaborate on in my review of the literature in Chapter 2. I define key terms such as autoethnography, ethic of care, critical pedagogy, critical praxis, and culture circles. The last section of this chapter outlines the forthcoming chapters.

Othering and Disconnection as Harmful for Students

At the time of this writing, educators have moved through the difficult time of the COVID-19 health pandemic of 2020, but the residual effects of physical, social, emotional, and cultural disconnection remain (Wahab et al., 2021). Way et al. (2019) provided a background for the current crisis of connection that I have been problematizing in my work within teaching and learning over the past 20 years. Our school system and practices foster individuality and conformity. The student who is unique, or outside the description as mainstream or norm, diverse in their ideas, language, culture, is left on the margins often behind (Howard, 2010). Way et al. (2019), opened a

conversation within me, and I considered new ways educators can engage in a critical praxis within a culture circle. Educators' ideologies and beliefs can foster connection or further the disconnection; however, when given space and time for the reflective work as done in a critical praxis emotional and cultural connections can be made (Darder, 2002; Tyler, 2008).

Emotional and cultural disconnect can occur when students with another language, culture, race, class, and gender are othered by me as their teacher (Tyler, 2008). I witness myself and other educators unconsciously, and even consciously, imposing culturally unresponsive care upon others who come to our learning spaces. *Othering* is a conscious and unconscious negative narrative based one's context. For me, the primarily White spaces I inhabit provide fertile soil for my biases to stay rooted and even flourish. As a White teacher, I must purposefully work to ensure my presence and intention communicate caring and thus building an emotional connection. When I am emotionally connected, I am more likely to communicate care. Some may see this as an altruistic goal, and yet some may regard this as an epistemological unspoken tenet of being a teacher.

The challenge, however, amidst the tense and stressful current climate, is to actualize this altruistic goal in daily living as a person in the world and as a teacher in schools. Educators can feel overburdened and stressed by a system that does not foster our process for developing an emotional connection with diverse groups of people (Mellom et al., 2019). In the business of current educational and even historically White-dominated educational spaces, our connection to one another as well as ourselves may be

lost. Teachers may feel disconnected from one another and their students when accountability demands and curriculum reform without collective discourse is mandated (Safir & Dugan, 2021). The current issues facing teachers and schools occur within the confines of a system that fosters initiative fatigue (Kuh & Hutchings, 2015). We need to make space and time for connection.

In the school districts where this study took place, contractually, all tenured Elementary (K-6) faculty are required to annually complete seven hours of professional learning, and all non-tenured faculty are required to complete 17 hours of professional learning. Examples of current offerings include topics such as restorative circles, culturally responsive classroom libraries, Spanish for educators, and positivity. In all these workshops, teachers sit and receive information and are encouraged to consider the knowledge learned within their practice. Furthermore, educators receive training on new mandates within a variety of content areas. We need new ways to connect with other educators to expand our individual and collective caring critical praxis for more meaningful and impactful action.

As an example, most recently, I attended a workshop on restorative circles. The presenter was dynamic, and I was excited to implement circles for resolving conflicts with my students. Despite the enthusiasm of the approach, I left wanting more dialogue regarding the local school data. The workshop presenter stated that Black and Brown students were more likely to be suspended or punished for behavior. The behavior referrals resulted in the students' limited time in the classroom receiving instruction,

increase the likelihood of lower academic success. The presentation of data by the presenter was also framed as blaming or fixing the student, and we had no time to engage in a critical conversation with others. At the end of the workshop, I left wondering: Where is our individual and collective reflection on our cultural assumptions? We had no opportunity for such critical dialogue and reflective praxis. Similar scenes to the one described above have been noted by educational scholars (Capper & Young, 2014; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2010).

After more than two decades of research and discourse on the importance of critical pedagogy, educator must not overlook the assertion by Howard (2003); educators still need ways to refine their knowledge and reflect on their cultural self as a means toward educational equity. We may base our opinions about people who are different from us on misinformation, often given to us by others who had no interaction with the people they are talking about (Ahmed, 2012). Many White teachers who say they teach a culturally relevant pedagogy are not knowledgeable about cultures or how the students in their classrooms are connected to their culture (Tyler, 2008). DiAngelo (2018) reminds teachers to educate themselves about racism and our own privilege. Educators need support or avenues for uncovering and addressing bias since it has historically omitted from the curriculum in teacher preparation (Gorski, 2009; Sleeter,2017). Tatum (2018) further challenges educators to explore the concepts of White privilege on a personal level, to look closely at the various perspectives of one's identity, and notice the discomfort as an avenue for change. As educators who care about social justice in schools

and communities, starting with oneself, educating and staying informed on a personal level may be a socially responsible step toward acting to change policies and practices. My study allowed me to think more critically about cultural disconnection while exploring the experiences of a diverse group of educators participating within a culture circle.

Statement of the Problem: Disconnection and the Need for Connecting

Freire (1998) addressed the fear people may have when engaging with others who are unknown to them by asking them to notice the feeling of insecurity that may stop them from taking action. The disconnection of the self as a cultural and socially relational being needs further exploration (Souto-Manning, 2010). Several studies (Bradley-Levine, 2012; Galman et al., 2010; King, 1991; Mellom, 2018; Sleeter, 2017; Young, 2010) noted the lack of time educators spend on developing their understanding of social inequities that impact their teaching and learning. Bradley-Levine (2012) noted that the conditions that require ongoing work beyond the initial development of critical consciousness needs further exploration. King's (1991) qualitative study sheds light on the complexity of developing critical consciousness. King's imperative that "uncritical and limited ways of thinking must be identified, understood and brought to consciousness" (p. 140) is still relevant today. Like King, Galman et al. (2010) noted that preservice teachers may not even consider acknowledging the social inequities. Galman et al. (2010) further noted that "ways to interrupt White racial knowledge may be located in the unexamined and unacknowledged White racial knowledge of White teacher educators" (p. 111). Young

(2010) reported the lack of understanding teachers had of the sociopolitical consciousness needed for CRST and ultimately found there is a need to "raise the race consciousness of educators and encourage them to confront their own cultural biases" (p. 257). Students deserve educators who value a critical praxis and engage in the ongoing work required for a critical consciousness.

Within schools, teachers like me, live through today's challenges without spaces to reconnect with our ideologies. These uncertain and challenging times include fear-producing misinformation on health from the media, conspiracy theories, political partisanship, and endemic racial violence (Lamar et al., 2019). An endemic challenge that the current climate has brought forth more urgently is our individual and collective ability to care and love those different from us. As educators, we must seek ways to better our ability to love and care for one another and, most importantly, for our students who may be uniquely different from us.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

In this research, I sought to provide a space for educators to have critical conversations and develop a praxis for building emotional and cultural connections. I believe educators who are emotionally and culturally disconnected from themselves and one another are also disconnected from their students. Therefore, the purpose of this critical transformative autoethnography was two-fold: 1) to create and explore a culture circle for six K-12 educators to bring their own concerns for dialogue, listening, and reflection, and 2) to describe the praxis work that takes place within a culture circle of K-

12 public school educators. I assembled a culture circle of six K-12 public school educators from the northeastern part of the US. In this dissertation, I describe what happened when the educators in this research participated in a culture circle, how they perceived dialogue, critical listening, and reflection, and how their participation in the circle contributed to their development of a caring pedagogy. I made note how educators described how their experiences changed their teaching. By the conclusion of the circle, participants had developed individual and collective action plans to implement within their own diverse learning community.

As a participant and observer in the culture circle, I used a grounded theory research methodology to uncover themes that describe the nuances of inner and outer work that are part of the critical praxis of the teachers in this group. My goal was to understand how culture circles can foster a process of dialogue, listening, and reflection that can lead to action, i.e., a critical praxis of the educators. Additionally, I wanted to understand how the process educators engage in within the culture circle increased emotional connection, critical consciousness, and caring for others, specifically the culturally and linguistically diverse students in our classrooms.

Context of the Study

My wish to add my voice regarding nuanced experiences of critical praxis led me to an autoethnographic grounded theory study. I will discuss the design and methods of the study further in Chapter 3. However, here I will briefly describe the development of

my study in the ways that connect to the ongoing construction of my own identity within cultural spaces of critical reflection and dialogue.

The decision to use autoethnography in this study stems from the fact that I thrive on learning within a group of others, specifically educators who want to engage in the process with me. I chose culture circle as a method because emotional and cultural connection matters to me, and I strongly believe those connections we make with one another can lead to more transformative learning spaces. My goal in any learning space I am in is to embody a presence and intention for emotional connection with others and myself. I value and work at being emotionally connected within my personal life with family and friends and also unknown others, at work, my students, and their families. I positioned myself within the study because I not only want to study critical praxis, but I also want to build my own capacity for this work.

My primary connection to my research study is my job as chairperson within an elementary ENL department and as an ENL teacher in a K-3 school. Part of my job as a chairperson is to support other ENL teachers in my school district. I work with other educators to increase our capacity for a caring critical pedagogy. I see and hear how educators, including me, feel underprepared and stressed by a system devoid of the process needed for developing emotional connections with our students and one another. Teachers have described to me a feeling of overwhelm that leads to a disconnection from one another and their students. When accountability demands and mandated curriculum reforms increase without collective discourse, educators' frustration can be

inappropriately passed on to our students. The teachers whom I coach are responsible for teaching students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Both my professional roles require me to think critically about my ways of being with and caring for others. My altruistic goal, as an educator and human being, is to create an emotional and cultural connection with my students and foster positive relationships between educators and their students. However, amidst the tense and stressful current climate, the challenge is to actualize this altruistic goal in daily living and as a teacher. Palmer (1998) stated:

> Teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal - or keep them from learning much at all. Teaching is the intentional act of creating those conditions, and good teaching requires that we understand the inner sources of both the intent and the act (p. 6)

We need to make space and time to talk, listen and act for caring, critical change.

Site Selection and Participants

In this study, I used a purposeful selection of six educators within my professional circle. Recently, a group of teachers within the school district where I work created the Committee on Civil and Human Rights (CCHR), a subgroup of the New York State United Teachers group by the same name. The group's goal is to support efforts that promote equity and social justice (NYSUT, 2021). I began by inviting several teachers I had met while on this committee. I then opened the invitation to other educators who had previously shown an interest in critical reflection, dialogue, and action. I invited five K-12 educators, like educators from the CCHR, who have a shared concern and desire for

critical praxis but have had limited opportunities for such professional learning. I also used snowball sampling as a few initially invited were not able to participate. One person recommended an educator from her previous connections.

I aimed for a diverse sample based on the participants who were willing and able and would help provide rich descriptive data on their experiences of critical praxis. My intention for bringing together a racially and ethnically diverse circle of educators was driven by my own limited dialogue with educators from cultural backgrounds different from my own. In addition, given the predominantly White teaching staff in our district and the need to include the voices of non-White educators, I felt it was critical to seek out non-White educators. Once the study was underway, I reevaluated my assumption that a particular cultural diversity is required for a culture circle and critical praxis. Yet it is important to reflect on the recognition that there was only one person of color in the circle. This table shows the demographics of the participants.

Table 1

Demographic and Position of Participants

Data Source	Race/Ethnicity	Position
Jessica	White	K-5 teacher
Camila	White, Multilingual Latina	K-5 teacher
Alan	White	9-12 teacher

Nelly	Black	K-12 Speech Language Therapist
Winnie	White, Multilingual Latina	9-12 teacher

I provide more robust descriptions of the participating teachers in chapters 3 and 4.

Overview of Theoretical/Conceptual Underpinnings for the Study

To gain a greater understanding of educators' development of a critical consciousness within a culture circle, I used critical pedagogy and ethic of care to frame this research. Both theories provide meaning and purpose given that Freire's (1970, 1974) and Noddings' (1984, 1995, 2003) words inspired me in my ongoing process of critical learning and caring in teaching. Both theories inform my work as an educator but also supported my process of generating the research questions I sought to answer in this study. I was guided by the words of the participants within the circle and follow-up interviews along with the theoretical underpinnings within a grounded theory approach to build new understandings of educators' experiences of dialogue, listening, and reflection within a culture circle. As themes emerged from the data analyzed, Palmer's conceptual work on the inner and outer landscape of teachers was helpful as well as Collins' (2004) theory of interactional rituals. I discuss the theories in detail in Chapter 2 and show how I used them in Chapter 4. However, I provide a summary here to introduce the theoretical framing for this study.

My curiosity and desire to engage in a process with others has led me to explore what is lacking in the research on critical praxis, the use of culture circles for connection. Praxis is a cyclical, not linear process. Praxis also requires simultaneity of past, present, and future. In other words, critical reflection on past thinking and beliefs within a present experience can allow for envisioning future critical action. For this research, I have separated the aspects of praxis into categories. A process of praxis requires time with other caring educators to reflect on how we were trained to be distracted and disconnected and ultimately build our capacity for greater connection, which is critical action. I sought to describe educators' experiences with culture circles as they cocreated intentional space and time for connection and exposed aspects of their caring praxis. I designed my research questions to capture the group and the individuals' process of developing praxis.

The work of Paulo Freire (1970, 1974) has inspired me to create this study. My review of literature on critical pedagogy, which I discuss in the next chapter, has revealed that for teachers to be more culturally responsive, they need a (re)awakening of consciousness to disrupt bias and assumptions, as well as learn how historic and systemic racism is perpetuated by those in power (Darder, 2002; DiAngelo, 2018; Gay, 2003, hooks, 1994; Kendall, 2006; Landreman, 2007; Mohammed, 2019; Souto-Manning, 2010; Tatum, 2018; Valenzuela, 2016). The literature provides evidence of the value of supporting students' critical consciousness development yet is unrevealing as to the components of critical praxis described by educators (Arellano et al., 2016; Bradley-

Levine, 2017; Godfrey & Wolf, 2016; Gorski, 2009; Neri et al., 2019). In this study, I sought to raise my consciousness with other educators and explored what happened when educators came together as part of a journey in a series of culture circles.

Given that disconnection is an idea problematized in this study, Noddings' (1984) ethic of care is a primary tool I used as I moved toward the exploration of teachers developing their critical praxis. Similarly, other critical educational scholars bring to the conversation the need for relationships as primary to teaching and learning. For example, Love (2019) centers *mattering* and Krownapple and Cobb (2019) centers on *belonging*. Freire (1970) noted the practice of placing cognition above emotional connection as problematic. Noddings (2016) suggested an ethic of care that resonates most as it implies educators relate to their students as if "this child were one of my own" (p. 18). This level of care calls for an intentionally connected relationship.

Palmer's (1998) theory of wholeness became a useful tool to describe what was revealed as I analyzed the triangulation of data, including culture circle transcripts, interviews, and reflexive journals. The educators engaged in dialogue and reflected on their "inner and outer landscape" (p. 3). Over the five months, the educators told personal stories and made connections to their cultural selves and their work. As educators hope to make impactful action steps, they require a caring critical praxis that can support the long journey of awakening and reawakening our critical consciousness.

Research Questions

During this five-month study, I documented the interactions between the educators in the circle as they engaged in dialogue and reflection and made action plans. I also conducted four informal follow-up interviews during the analysis phase of the study. The following questions guided my research:

1. What are the elements of critical praxis within a Freirean-inspired culture circle?
    a. How do participants describe the praxis work of the culture circle (i.e., what elements of the culture circle work or do not work, what was easy, what was hard)?
    b. How does the researcher describe the experience of creating, organizing, planning, and facilitating culture circles?
2. What actions and/or discussions within the culture circle lead participants to caring, critical action?
3. How do the participants pose problems together, dialogue, and act to change their teaching?

Overview of Methodology and Methods

This research was an autoethnographic study that documented and analyzed a culture circle of educators as they engaged in critical praxis to build critical consciousness and reconnect with their caring selves. The method of engaging in culture circles as spaces for restorative, healing, and humanizing learning has been recommended for educators (Lyiscott, 2019; Souto-Manning, 2010). I assembled a culture circle of six

K-12 public school educators who cared about educational problems within their racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse learning communities and sought to pose problems together, dialogue, and act to change their teaching (Freire, 1974; Souto-Manning, 2010). The circle of educators met five times over four months. I recorded the sessions, took field notes, and archived artifacts during this time. Following the sessions, I conducted follow-up interviews with the participants to assist with my grounded theory analysis. Chapter 3 of this paper explains the research design and methodology in more detail.

Overview of the Dissertation

In Chapter 1, I gave a rationale for creating a culture circle to explore the critical praxis of a group of K-12 educators. My current educational concerns that I problematize, which is emotional and cultural disconnections provided the rationale for my study. I explained how the calls for new ways of living out critical pedagogy included a critical consciousness, which led to my study. There is a continued and resounding call for culturally responsive teaching (CRT) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) or culturally responsive and sustaining teaching (CRST) (Paris & Alim, 2014), which leads to the significance of offering a culture circle and exploring educators' critical praxis. I provided the research questions and purpose of the study.

In Chapter 2, I provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks used for my study and a description of the theories that I used to support the research design and methods, including critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970, 1974), ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) and culture circles (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1974; Lyiscott, 2019; Souto-Manning, 2010).

The conceptual work of Palmer (1998, 2005) on the value of reflecting on educators' inner and outer lives was utilized to explain what the triangulation of data revealed. I discuss relevant research to show the gap that supports the decision to conduct an auto/ethnographic action research study.

In Chapter 3, I provide the details of the site and participants of my study as well as the method of the culture circles. I give a summary of the approach used to analyze the data. I also provide ethical considerations along with research quality.

Chapter 4 focuses on the culture circles. I applied critical pedagogy, ethic of care, and Palmer's metaphor for the inner and outer life of educators to analyze the data. I describe how educators problematized current experiences relating to their positions of power, the school culture, and deficit-based thinking. I also provide an explanation of the themes uncovered, which I describe as journeying toward connection, and finally my findings reveal action steps educators created in part due to the experience within the circle.

Finally in Chapter 5, I provide answers to the research questions, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Conclusion

Using the lenses of critical pedagogy and ethic of care, this autoethnography aimed to reveal a greater understanding of educators' experiences as they built capacity for living out, not just theorizing about, critical praxis. The outcome of this study not only addressed a gap in the literature but offers a new theory to consider emotional and

cultural connection as part of the praxis. As I engaged in the circles as a participant and concurrently engaged in the analysis as a researcher, my self-reflection and individual process added to the notion that practices that build habits for emotional and cultural connection to self and others can lead to greater freedom to become and be in the world (Freire, 1974).

Definition of Key Terms

Autoethnography: In the case of this study, autoethnography will be the method of inquiry used to explore the my experiences as the researcher working in partnership with other educators to describe more deeply a social, emotional, and cultural context of a culture circle (Chang, 2016).

Critical Pedagogy: a perspective toward education that is concerned with questions of justice, democracy, and ethical claims (Kincheloe, 2005). Critical pedagogy empowers people to see themselves as agents of social change and architects of their own destinies (Duncan, et al., 2008).

Critical Dialogue: Based on Freire (1970, 1974), a discourse that challenges the status quo and fosters a critical consciousness that leads to transforming social inequities.

Culture Circles: An approach developed by critical pedagogue, Paulo Freire. For the purposes of this study, a culture circle will be a group of K-12 public school educators who care about educational problems within their racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse learning community and seek to pose problems together, dialogue, and act to change their teaching (Souto-Manning, 2010).

Critical Praxis: the relationship between theoretical understanding and critique of society and action that seeks to transform individuals and their environments (Freire & Macedo, 1995).

Critical Consciousness: the ability to analyze, problematize, and affect the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural realities that shape our lives (Freire & Macedo, 1995).

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Connecting for Caring Critical Praxis

During the pandemic when I was remotely teaching in my pajamas, I attended Shane Safir and her colleagues' four-part virtual summit that supported me in finding ways to heal myself from the trauma of the health pandemic and consider the healing my students and families may have also needed. The space was offered and filled with a racially and ethnically diverse group of educators. The space was nothing short of care, a circle of educators providing dialogue reflective listening and action steps. We listened to one another without judgment or fixing and soothed our fears and anxieties of current concerns such as: the persistent murdering of Black and Brown people, political turmoil in the time of the 45th president, and the serious health concerns of our families. We reflected on the emotional aspects of our experiences during a global health pandemic.

My experience was reminiscent of what Palmer (1998) described as care for the inner and outer life of educators. We were able to dialogue and reflect on our inner struggles and joys as well as the outer aspects of teaching, which included planning and curriculum. A follow-up session with many of the same educators revealed that our discussions led us to implement restorative practices with our families and students in our respective educational settings. Several educators I met described action steps implemented for more inclusive practices, such as providing greater access to technology during the pandemic, creating student-centered learning support for students during virtual teaching, and modifying instruction and assessment for more student-led projects.

The most powerful of these were educators describing caring for one another and their students more authentically and responsively in a time of great fear, despair, and anxiety.

Critical praxis, postulated by Freire (1970), is the dialogue, reflection, and action that challenges undemocratic oppressive educational conditions. Critical praxis, though short-lived, was my experience in the virtual circle of educators as described above. Critical praxis requires an intentional and ongoing space like culture circles (Darder, 2002; Hammond & Jackson, 2015; Richardson, 2009; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2010), that is, groups of people sitting in a circle face to face on an issue of concern for the specific group. Some circles have been described as a tool to create classrooms to increase critical care for students and can more easily resolve conflicts (Riestenberg, 2012). Others describe the use of circles as a place for groups of people who want to address a shared cultural, political, or social concern such as equitable practices and policies within a community (Darder, 2002; Lyiscott, 2019). Circles, as in the case of Critical Friend Groups (1994), are places for educators to work within small groups of other educators on their individual practices. There is an urgent need to secure space and time for educators to dialogue and develop critical praxis together.

This chapter explains what the literature reveals about the use of various forms of culture circles given the use of circles as a method in my research design. To make connections to my research question of how participants engaging in a culture circle describe their experience, I provide subsections of studies exploring dialogue, listening and reflective practices in this literature review. My literature exploration has indicated a

great need to understand educators' process of developing critical praxis. My study of six K-12 public school educators' participation in a culture circle will add to the literature on the topic of developing caring critical praxis with and for our students in diverse learning communities. The participating educators, including myself as a participant researcher, were interested in seeking transformative ways of developing more care and inclusivity in our diverse learning community. The literature on critical consciousness centers on theoretical knowledge. My study positions contextual knowledge cocreated through critical dialogue and reflection within the situated learning environment of the participants.

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical pedagogy (Freire,1970) and ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) as well as Palmer's (2004) conceptual framework of the inner and outer lives of educators, are the ethical, critical, dialogical theories that I used for exploring educators' caring critical praxis. Given the problem of cultural and emotional disconnection illustrated in Chapter one, in this chapter, I give a review of literature to set the stage for a study creating an autoethnographic action research study exploring educators' critical praxis in a culture circle. The literature provides key findings and critical learning around the areas of cultural and emotional disconnection/connection yet offers few examples of critical praxis particularly in culture circles of K-12 educators. Noddings' (2016) ethic of care is one of the major theoretical lenses I discus,s given the importance of care in educators praxis. I also used Freire's critical pedagogy but connect his theory to more current

humanizing pedagogies (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019; Darder, 2002; Gay, 2000, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1990; Love, 2019; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011) to show that the evolving scholarship in this area supports the need to study educators ongoing critical praxis.

Palmer's conceptual understanding of wholeness (1998) is a lens that helped me focus on what educators expressed as seen in the transcripts of the culture circle sessions along with follow-up interviews and reflexive journal entries. As described by Palmer (1998):

> Wholeness does not mean perfection; it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. If we're willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole…we cannot embrace that challenge alone, at least not for long: we need trustworthy relationships to sustain us, tenacious communities of support, if we are to sustain the journey toward an undivided life. (p. 30)

Educators are not only people who have subject matter to teach; they have deep beliefs and an inner self. Palmer (2004) noted often the imbalance or disconnection between the inner and the outer self as educators work within stressful environments where accountability demands increase each year. The visual of the mobius strip, as noted by Palmer (2010), provided a visual understanding of what educators in the culture circle revealed as needing more balance and experiencing wavering moments that lack connection to their inner self with their professional roles. The educators in the culture circle revealed the power of building emotional or cultural connections as they navigate their mobius strip. Given the lack of professional learning spaces to process or move

through dialogue and reflection, educators need space and time to reconnect to what Palmer also refers to as their vocation.

Palmer (1998) noted that vocation is more than a job; it is a life-giving calling. Many educators indeed go into teaching with a calling to teach. Palmer noted that the *what* and the *how* of teaching are crucial to explore but places importance on considering the teacher as an impactful part of the solution. Palmer stated:

> Teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal-or keep them from learning much at all. Teaching is the intentional act of creating those conditions, and good teaching requires that we understand the inner sources of both the intent and the act (p. 6).

Despite the value of the teacher identity and the need for educators to connect their role with their inner ideologies, there is limited literature about providing ways teachers work on their inner identities or personal ideologies in connection to their teaching role (Panic & Florian, 2015; Robinson, 2012). For example, we may be struggling to make an impact on our work and feel emotionally or culturally disconnected in our relationships with students, parents, or colleagues. When the educators in our circle connected with their inner selves and their moral compass, they showed a greater individual and collective awareness of their power in creating caring transformational action steps.

Caring

Care is a *binding thread* for working toward more inclusive, democratic, and humanizing teaching and learning spaces (Noddings, 1984, 2003). In considering what happened when educators engaged in a critical praxis, I used Noddings' (1984) theory of care (TC) as a framework to support and guide my study. Noddings (1999) described the importance of care in education in this way:

> I think care theory favors a differentiated curriculum because it seems likely that as we work closely with students, we will be moved by their clearly different needs and interests. In any case, our claim to care must be based not on a one-time, virtuous decisions but rather on continuing evidence that relations are maintained (p. 13).

An ethic of care extends beyond the cared-for students and includes the teacher, the one who cares. The relational nature of teaching and learning requires a two-way, ongoing interaction. Noddings (1984) suggested an ethic of care for educators that is twofold. First, similar to the care a parent gives to their children, students are treated with unconditional love. Teaching with an ethic of care requires a committed relationship and a deep desire to support all children. Noddings (2016) considered the implications if educators held the perspective as if "this child were one of my own" (p. 18). With the similar understanding a parent has of the differences among their children in a family, the teacher regards and values the uniqueness of students in a classroom. As is often the case in primarily monolingual White teaching staff in classrooms with multilingual and multi-

diverse students, a basic disposition to care about students' success is not enough. The cultural disconnection, as a natural aspect of cross-cultural interactions, requires educators to be reflective of the disconnection to be culturally responsive (Hammond, 2020). As Noddings (1995) postulated, “We should want more from our educational efforts than adequate academic achievement and … we will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others” (p. 675).

Noddings (2016) posited an ethical perspective of care as we “see the other’s reality as a possibility for us, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream” (p. 14). In other words, as vital as the one-on-one relationship between the carer and the cared for is the importance of a community or culture of care in the school. In a time when mandated assessments limit teaching is limited by assessments, teachers, administrators, policymakers, and test makers, may not place value in the ethics of caring. Furthe4r, the focus on remediating students' deficits over developing assets positions care as secondary in the learning process. Watson et al. (2014) elaborated on Noddings’s theory and extended the culturally responsive theory to include care so that social justice endeavors make care primary. Their study noted a unique difference between culturally relevant care and the simple virtuous care that one may assume a teacher embodies. Watson et al.’s (2014) qualitative study noted that “participants spoke of genuine recognition of each other’s wholeness and being able to

identify with each other's experiences" (p. 999). A caring educator does not disregard individuality and supports cultural and linguistic uniqueness as assets within learning.

Other educational scholars have warned against the unconsciousness of deficit mindset and bias that goes unchallenged when educators work from the place of virtuous care rather than an ethic of care. Bass (2011) noted in her study that educators who showed a high ethic of care shared personal experiences of bias and discrimination. A critical praxis can be a pathway to caring relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse students. The educators in the circle all described care as getting to know their students in personal ways to support academic growth. Noddings' TC is an ethical imperative that connects to Freire's (1974) critical consciousness theory. When educators were engaged in developing a critical lens during the circle, the theme of care for themselves and their students was expressed. Noddings (2016) distinguished caring about and caring for students. With the similar understanding a parent has of the differences among his or her own children in a family, the teacher regards and values the uniqueness of students in a classroom. Noddings's (2016) ethics of care implies that, like the care a parent gives to their children, students are treated with unconditional love by their teachers. A teacher who embodies caring does not disregard individuality and supports, in fact, loves all differences.

A relationship based on care also calls for responsive action. Noddings (2003) noted that "Caring is largely reactive and responsive" (p. 19). This is especially important within this study of praxis. Also, in relationships of teachers and students where there is a

power dynamic and a cultural disconnect, Sealey-Ruiz (2011) emphasized the importance of care in her work in supporting educators to be more literate about their own racial bias. Again, her study found that teachers of color may be more likely to relate and care about the injustices of racialized experiences of students yet like their white colleagues do little to act for change. All educators should care about and address racialized experiences of our students, not only the teachers of color. Sealey-Ruiz's work on "The Archeology of the Self" relates to my study, given that educators engaged in dialogue with other educators about cultural aspects of the self and reflection on the impact our cultural experiences have on our ethic of care. Teachers who do not share similar cultural experiences with their students benefit from attention and reflection. Jackson (2020) investigated the significance of gender and race in establishing care in classrooms. Her findings suggest that a lack of attention to gender fluidity and diversity within the Black female population can hinder the establishment of culturally responsive care. My study brought attention to salient educators' cultural and emotional connections as a foundational aspect of their critical praxis.

Other educational scholars have added to the scholarship on care to include love and belonging (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019; Love, 2019). Cobb and Krownapple (2019) make use of the word *belonging* in their work on equity and diversity for teachers. Love (2019) bridges the theory of care for students of color by introducing the word *mattering.* Pate (2020) centers *students' good* as a means toward fostering educators' cultural and emotional connections. These conceptual frameworks are connected to care and are also

evident in the tenets of critical pedagogy which framed my study. As educators engaged in critical praxis within a culture circle, our individual and collective care for students was voiced. The educators in the circle expressed care for students to be seen and heard and described relational connections that lead to more meaningful teacher-student relationships which increased our critical consciousness for direct meaningful action steps. The educators in our culture circle share a desire to increase the care for students, especially CLD students who are excluded from a wider variety of curriculum choices or who are unfairly disciplined. Despite having a high level of care and a desire for change, they have said there is no space or time for them to begin to recreate a new paradigm within the larger school system or even develop collective culturally responsive possibilities together. The educators in this study have shared problematic situations for CLD students and engaged in dialogue to develop action steps.

Connection of Care to Freire's Critical Pedagogy

My study explored educators' experience in a culture circle and revealed the complexity of being conscious of bias and developing emotional and cultural connections with diverse others. Freire (1970, 1974, 1998) believed education, specifically literacy, leads to liberation. Critical pedagogy, conceptually developed by Freire, challenges the neutral role of educators and the belief that educators are meant to give knowledge to their students. He held the position that the "banking" model of education needs to be transformed and instead educators are co-creators of learning. Cho (2013) posited that

critical pedagogy is not an individual reform effort, rather a focus on systemic change. However, critical pedagogy, as noted by Kress and Lake (2018),

> approaches knowledge as always in process, always contextual, and always informing and being informed by people's journeys throughout their material worlds. Engaging in critical pedagogy from such a grounded perspective opens avenues for people to read the world while being both in and of the world, tapping into the relationship between world, body, mind, self and other, resulting in knowledge that is immediately relevant and transformative for people and the world (p. 50).

Critical pedagogues, therefore, see participants as positioned to change their current contexts as they generate new understandings within dialectical and reflective action, or praxis. Of particular importance for my study, I explored the literature on critical praxis as the dialogue, reflection and action that challenges undemocratic, oppressive educational conditions (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1974; Jemal, 2017). In addition, Freire's (1974) philosophy and description of the culture circle inspired me to create this study:

> We launched a new institution of popular culture, a "culture circle," since among us a school was traditionally a passive concept. Instead of a teacher, we had a coordinator; instead of lectures, dialogue; instead of pupils, group participants…In the culture circles, we attempted through group debate either to clarify situations or to see action arising from that clarification (p. 30).

Freire's (1974) culture circles for people in his community to problematize issues they faced inspired my action research. Freire's (1970) theory illuminated for me the idea that our capacity for critical consciousness fluctuates or ebbs and flows as problems emerge in our teaching and learning spaces. In other words, there are contextual or situational problems that require the interaction of any member of the community to engage in the praxis. Durden et al. (2015) mentioned the consciousness of educators in their case study of cultural responsiveness. They noted the varied and complex nature of educators' capacity for balancing their teaching responsibilities with their ongoing development of critical consciousness. Their case study illuminated the need for supporting educators to engage in an ongoing praxis for cultural responsiveness. Educators can have awareness or even apathy and acceptance of oppression as the status quo. In the current climate of blaming teachers for low test scores as well as espousing an ethic of care, Freire inspired my use of a culture circle as a space for engaging in individual and collective critical praxis.

Critical praxis, as postulated by Freire (1974), and written about by many educational scholars (Giroux, 2020; Smith-Maddox, 2002; Smith & McLaren, 2010; Jemal 2012) is the dialogue, reflection, and action that challenges undemocratic, oppressive educational conditions. The literature on critical praxis revealed that for teachers to be more culturally responsive, they need a raised level of consciousness to redress their underlying biases and assumptions, as well as historic and systemic racism (Darder, 2002; DiAngelo, 2018; Gay, 2000, 2003; hooks, 1994; Kendall, 2006;

Landreman, 2007; Mohammed, 2019; Tatum, 2018; Valenzuela, 2016). While much is theorized about critical praxis (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1974; Jemal, 2017) conceptualized for educators' use in classroom practice (Gay, 2003; Valenzuela, 2016; Zamudio, 2009), there is a lack of empirical qualitative research on the nature of ongoing critical praxis of educators. Educational scholars respond to pervasive inequities in education by writing on the ever-pressing need for educators to be responsive and develop our caring and loving praxis as educators (Choi, 2021; Ginwright, 2019; Gray & Mehra, 2021; Hammond & Jackson, 2015). Meanwhile, current models of professional learning for pre-service and in-service educators limit, or in most cases, impede critical discourse and reflection (Capper & Young, 2014).

Critical praxis requires individuals to make sense of their own social and cultural circles and reflect on internal and external forces of truth. As Mohammed (2019) noted, criticality is a significant part of a responsive education. The path of critical consciousness is individual and collective. Gaztambide (2017) noted the connection between Freire's critical consciousness and a therapeutic relationship within the realm of and work within psychology. Educators need the opportunity to clear the path for increased connection to their students. My study offered a unique perspective to the social psychology and education literature, given the influence and connection of unconscious bias across and within these fields.

A qualitative study by Godfrey and Wolf (2016) found that critical consciousness needs to be further understood. Levine (2010), in her qualitative ethnography, noted there

are levels of consciousness that people function in, from lack of awareness of historical and social problems to a more critical level of awareness and action, ultimately describing the development of critical praxis as a journey and process if one is even inclined to engage in such a process. Educators need ongoing development in critical pedagogy, especially when they do not share personal and cultural experiences. Emdin (2016) noted that people who do not consider aspects of themselves will allow a reduced version of social justice efforts. That is to say that when given minimal to no space and time to have critical conversations, educators may stay emotionally and culturally disconnected from their collective power and possibilities of meaningful change.

Mimirinis and Ahlberg's (2021) qualitative study noted variations in educators' practical application of theory learned and researched. The authors illuminated the uniqueness of individuals' socially constructed identities. The authors also bring awareness to the diversity within educators as they engage with their subject and an understanding of teaching as an interactive craft that can transform knowledge in the field. They noted that the process educators engage in as they connect their identity to their content knowledge and craft is not fully researched. This research relates to my exploration of ongoing critical praxis for educators who have not had an opportunity to engage in a critical praxis and seek to strengthen their efforts towards inclusive practices, asset-based thinking approaches, transformational learning, and their overall critical consciousness.

Many researchers (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Erickson, 1987; Gay, 2000, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1990; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011) argued that educators must engage in a critical praxis for the cultural responsiveness needed for caring for all students. Anderson (2017) found that students, taught by teachers from the same cultural or linguistic background describe a more significant feeling of care and being *known* or acknowledged. Given that the majority of teachers are White women, makes critical praxis necessary (Vinopal, 2019). Additionally, qualitative research studies (Boucher, 2016; Downer et al., 2015; Rojas & Liou, 2017) have provided evidence of culturally responsive and caring teaching as a means toward addressing the disconnection. These studies reveal the benefits of teachers who are responsive to the diversity students bring to the learning environment. Although a teacher may recognize the importance of knowing their students in a more personal way to foster students' self-preservation and academic success, the readers of such studies are left curious about how the teacher developed her/his culturally reflective praxis.

There is a continued and resounding call for cultural responsiveness in teaching. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) (Gay, 2003) and culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) are considered best practices for all teachers within diverse learning communities. Aronson and Laughter (2016) synthesized the work of Gay (2003) and Ladson-Billings (1995) to show that CRT and CRP are focused on social justice and education to foster social change. Education scholars continue to reframe the work of CRST and implore teachers to provide CRST for diverse students (Paris & Alim,

2014; Salazar & Lerner, 2019). Paris and Alim (2014) further developed the work, stating, “Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching (CRST) seeks to perpetuate and foster-to sustain-linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 88). Salazar (2019) declared that teachers who sustain culture are “a force for equity and excellence in education” (p. 9). Yet, despite ongoing reframing of equity pedagogy, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students continue to be impacted by cultural disconnections (Hanushek, 2019; Noguera, 2009; Tyler, 2008). Teachers work to provide quality academic opportunities for students; however, educators receive little time to learn about and discuss the complexities of current opportunity gaps to work smarter to address the problem.

The research and resources on multicultural education and culturally responsive sustaining teaching (CRST) are extant; however, the degree to which teacher education programs prepare teachers to bring CRST theory to practice is unclear (Capper & Young, 2014; Gorski, 2009). More importantly, professional development may not be providing opportunities for teachers to explore their level of consciousness as a means towards sustaining a role of social justice advocates. Au (2016) described what culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students intuitively feel as a *peculiar sensation* when taught using a curriculum that makes them vulnerable and keeps them marginalized. As stated by Rodgers (2016), “Some groups in society are privileged over others, and this privilege leads to differential access to services, goods, and outcomes’ (p. 368). The dated assertion by Howard (2017) that we do not know how and in what ways we can refine

our knowledge and reflect on our cultural self as a means toward educational equity still stands today.

Social justice educators, multicultural educators, and equity and diversity educators provide paradigms for us to consider ways to reform education for all students. In these paradigms, researchers have written about the lack of critical praxis yet provide minimal ideas for and ways to develop critical praxis within teacher preparation (Gorski, 2007; Sleeter, 2017). One multicultural course in pre-service learning or an introduced framework, such as the CRSF during in-service professional development, limits the pervasiveness of caring critical praxis. The ongoing reframing of equity pedagogy from culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2003; Hammond & Jackson, 2015; Ladson-Billings,1995), culturally responsive and sustaining teaching (Paris & Alim, 2014), and anti-racist pedagogy (Love, 2019) offers hopeful guidance for educators within diverse learning communities. Ultimately, a lack of space and time for deconstructing personal beliefs and unconscious ways of being creates increased stress, burnout, and a negative attitude toward initiatives meant to foster equity and inclusivity (Capper & Young, 2014). The call for an ongoing and sustaining process educators need continues in part due to limited opportunities for space and time for critical dialogue and reflection in educators' practice.

Educators receive training on best practices and curriculum; however, critical praxis is under-examined. Sleeter (2012) asserted that culturally responsive teaching is not commonly understood or implemented. Teachers may value knowing their students

culturally to foster students' self-preservation and academic success; however, there are minimal opportunities in current or ongoing professional development for educators to develop or sustain a critical praxis. Bodur (2016) studied pre-service teachers' perceptions and use of culturally responsive teaching and found it was minimally implemented and even decreased over time.

The review of literature on critical praxis has revealed that for teachers to be more caring and culturally responsive, educators need a raised level of consciousness, as well as develop knowledge about historic and systemic racism. (Darder, 2002; DiAngelo, 2018; Gay, 2000, 2003; hooks, 1994; Kendall, 2006; Landreman, 2007; Mohammed, 2019; Tatum, 2018; Valenzuela, 2016; Zuniga, 2013). Culturally responsive teaching draws from the field of critical pedagogy (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1970, 1974, 1993,1998; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2006) and critical praxis is a much-needed avenue of study. Porfilio et al. (2019) described the complex nature of learning and sustaining critical praxis and noted that critical praxis requires insight from various intersectional humanizing pedagogies. Safir and Dugan (2021) provided a conceptual understanding of critical praxis by arguing that educators have "a capacity to take action, craft and carry out plans, and make informed decisions based on a growing base of knowledge" (p. 102). While much is theorized about critical praxis (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1974; Jemal, 2017), conceptualized for educators use in classroom practice (Gay, 2000; King & Valenzuela, 2016; Zamudio, 2009), there is a lack of empirical qualitative research on how teachers develop their praxis in a culture circle.

Sealey-Ruiz (2011) expounded on the idea that critical praxis is a process, not a linear path taken. In her qualitative study found that participants went through *recursive phases*. Her study highlighted that critical praxis must be an ongoing process to continually work on developing educators within the landscape of cultural and emotional disconnection. The process of bringing forth the initial and ongoing exposure and learning is part of the process supported by critical pedagogy. Wallin-Ruschman (2018) concurred with the theoretical need for educators to look deeply at conflicting messages as an internal process and the need for working within groups of others. The empirical research on critical praxis and the importance of connecting to one's inner and outer self-relates to the experiences of the participants within the culture circle in my study. Participants revealed an inner process connected to how they understand their roles, which is their outer expression as educators.

Ultimately, students need to feel cared for (Noddings, 2016). They need to have a sense of belonging (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019), and to matter (Love, 2019). As an educator seeking to be better at providing culturally responsive care for students, I heed the call from MacLaren (2005), who posited that educators have a responsibility to enact a critical praxis. The literature provides evidence of the value in supporting students' critical consciousness development yet is unrevealing as to how critical praxis is developed by educators. (Arellano et al., 2016; Bradley-Levine, 2017; Godfrey & Wolf, 2016; Gorski, 2009; Neri et al., 2019). My study offered a place for critical praxis as supported by the review of this literature.

Culture Circles

As noted, Freire developed culture circles as a method for praxis. Research building off Freirean-inspired culture circles has shown the benefits of providing opportunities for students who are historically marginalized and disenfranchised, low-income students and students of color (Darder, 2002). Much of the research on culture circles highlights the usefulness for marginalized student populations because of racial/ethnic and other categories of difference. The literature also suggests exploring educators' experiences within a culture circle (Darder, 2002; Lyiscott, 2019; Kohli, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2010). Lyiscott (2019) noted, “if you are an educator who has never faced their story as it intersects with the various social locations that shape how you show up in our schools and in our world, then you are destined to do this work irresponsibly” (p. 13). Research on culture circles suggests it can support the development of a critical praxis has value for the participants and their perceived development as critical educators (Kohli, 2012). However, there is a limited description of what happens within a culture circle as educators engage in praxis work.

Culture Circles for Reflection

Reflective educators, as suggested in this study, require a critical lens not simply a reflection after teaching on what worked and did not work well. A reflective educator, in the context of this study, engages in a growing understanding of others’ lived experiences. The literature on critical consciousness (Bradley-Levine, 2010; Civitillo, 2019) also noted examples of teachers’ attention to mindfulness as a practice and self-

reflection. Gay (2000) noted the complexity and understanding of the practice of self-reflection was noted several decades ago. In one study, Dray and Wisneski (2011) showed the value of providing educators with tools to become mindful, more conscious of their bias and assumptions, and communication with students with disabilities. They suggest that their approach can be utilized for CLD students as well. Civitillo (2019) provided evidence that culturally responsive teachers were more likely to be self-reflective. However, this study was limited in its scope of what constituted self-reflection. Emdin (2016) raised the value of intentional reflective work given the problem he noted of caring, social justice-minded leaders and educators continuing oppressive practices. The current research leaves out the conditions for critically reflecting needed for critical consciousness.

Culture Circles for Dialogue

To build the capacity for meaningful development of emotional and cultural connections and increase our care of our marginalized students, we need to find ways of engaging in dialogue with different people outside our own cultural comfortable identity. “The goal of dialogue is not to convince but to critically analyze prevailing ideas and expand what is known in a space where listening, respect, appreciation and inquiry build relationships and understanding” (Zuniga et al., 2018, p. 647). Unless we listen and talk across cultural boundaries rather than being silent, we are colluding with the marginalization of people, and social action will be invisible. We need to speak more about critical issues in education in “a process that engages the heart and the capacity to

act as well as the intellect" (Zuniga et al., 2018, p. 647). As Tatum (2009) asked, "Does dialogue lead to social action?" (p. 357). She also responded emphatically, "The research evidence suggests the answer is yes!" (Tatum, 2017, p. 357). Gorski (2009) provided a review of multicultural teacher education syllabi to reveal a pattern of liberal discourse but not critical reflection. It is my intention that by providing a space for critical discourse, we can build the capacity for deeper considerations of educational issues.

Culture Circles for Listening

Freire (1974) described listening as experiencing the lived experiences of "other" outside one's reality. Listening in this form is active and not passive. Safir and Dugan (2021) suggested listening as a key element of becoming conscious of others' lived experiences and being affected by what they hear to make changes in praxis. Students also need teachers who will listen to them and act on what they learn to be caring, responsive educators. Listening to others can lead educators towards understanding another's experiences, building empathy and relationship awareness (Sofer, 2018). Evidence-based qualitative research such as mine indicates critical listening can occur within culture circles.

Other Circles

Many professional learning communities (PLC's), as noted in the literature, fall short of the criticality needed for more transformative action. PLC's can be described as a group of educators engaging in collaborative projects that strengthen teaching and learning through lectures and activities that provide learning (Cox, 2003). The current

model of professional development in the school where this study takes place is similar to PLC's and is limited in their ongoing and sustaining support for teachers' critical praxis. Similarly, Communities of Practice (COP) has been conceptualized as a framework to consider. The literature supports the use of COP's (Lave & Wenger), as well as collaboration (Allensworth, 2012). However, criticality, although possible, is not paramount within PLC's or COP's.

The literature on groups similar to the culture circle in my study revealed the complexity of why and how a participant joins a group. In some cases, an educator seeks out the service of a critical friend's group, others are referred by a mentor and many are even required to participate by the instruction of their superior. In other words, members of the group, specifically a COP or a CFG, may be made up of a mixture of educators with a disposition for a caring critical praxis among others who have never given a thought to it as a concept during their educational career and are only in the space out of duty or requirement. In some cases, a COP may be a blend of educators who come on a voluntary basis; However, in others a combination of educators who are required to complete professional development hours. Some include administrators holding a power role, such as direct supervisors or principals. The relational trust needed for teachers to feel a sense of care, autonomy, and voice is limited when power dynamics are present in professional development circles.

Another such collaborative approach, critical friends groups (CFG), are described as collaborative professional circles to help educators reflect on their classroom practices,

such as time management or behavior (Morrison, 2018). The critical in CFG is not synonymous with critical in critical pedagogy. In CFG, critical does not refer to challenging the current status quo regarding power structures within our educational setting but refers to how others are critical or valuable, in one's learning process (Quate, 2004). For example, a CFG would include educators who work closely with a student. Educators may relate this to response to intervention teams or instructional support teams. The goal of these types of groups would be to increase student learning by looking at student work samples and deciding a plan or strategy for increasing student growth on state testing. Carlson (2019) found in his case study of teachers within a critical friends group that, although it helped foster reflection in teaching practice, methods, and assessment plans, the group did not support ongoing sustaining criticality on educators' mindsets or how their cultural identities may be impacting the learning process. The researchers argued it may have had different results with veteran teachers as opposed to new teachers.

The work done within groups such as Communities of Practice (Besar, 2018), similar to those found in CPET, a professional development through Teachers College Columbia and Critical Friends Group (CFG) (2010), may be similar to culture circles for developing a critical praxis. CFG are designed for educators to bring a question or concern regarding their pedagogy for the group to explore and help solve. Burke et al. (2010) found that circles like the one used for CFG can support educators' pedagogical decisions regarding curriculum planning and behavior management. Yet the study, as

well as the CFG's work, primarily focused on pedagogical moves without deeper consideration of the inherent social, political, cultural, and ontological perspectives of the educators that ultimately may impact the implementation or lack of criticality in their teaching.

Another study of professional development using circles within the CFG found it to be "informative not transformative," noting the lack of critical reflection for in-service and ongoing teacher development" (Carlson, 2019). Finally, in a third recent study, Kuh (2016) found educators had a propensity to blame school climate rather than reflect more deeply on their own role in developing a critical pedagogy specifically with and for diverse learning communities. As Muhammad (2009) noted, the problems are complex and blaming one stakeholder over another is not only unjust, it may serve to perpetuate the problems. This study positions the problems within educators' realm of ethical responsibility and care rather than blame.

Most recently, the implementation of the CRSF in NYS, as noted in Chapter 1, makes this study relevant and meaningful. In the past several years, educators in New York have been given opportunities to learn about such topics as school wide behavior supports and culturally responsive literacy. However, the ongoing professional development offered continues to be modeled after the banking method that Freire (1970) warns against (Darder, 2002; Giroux, 1992). Fozdor (2008) also noted that progressive educators may engage in discourse that sounds like they are working toward a critical pedagogy but, in fact, continue to perpetuate the monocultural deficit-based thinking they

purport to challenge (Popkewitz et al., 1982). Educators may use social justice and equity language, but their behaviors, mindsets, or practices may not change. Therefore ongoing praxis is needed.

Given the lack of criticality in circles currently offered in professional development for educators in PLC's and COP's, my study offered what seemed to be missing in the literature: a culture circle for critical praxis with educators aligned with a shared vision. Given that the educators in my study encounter roadblocks in engaging in critical praxis for questioning how we see diverse students in our care, we need a process of challenging false narratives for a deeper critical pedagogy. The literature on teacher professional learning has revealed the need for greater care in designing meaningful learning experiences for supporting pedagogical growth (Liberman et al., 2014). Salazar (2020) noted the importance of furthering one's learning to include critical thinking around ethnic and cultural care for others. Fisher and Frey (2022) suggested that to build the required caring relationships we must engage in a praxis with the other educators.

Models for teachers on how to engage in a critical praxis are limited. As noted by Gorski (2009) in his analysis of coursework on multicultural education and culturally responsive education available in teacher development, the evidence of critical praxis in teachers is unremarkable. As noted by Neri et al. (2019), despite the need for a multilevel approach to develop and sustain teachers' praxis, educators have limited time and space for developing their cultural responsiveness. Arellano et al., (2016) called for teachers to "continuously name and interrogate our own deficit thinking" (p. 63). As argued by

Dixson and Rousseau (2005), “uncovering the myriad ways that race continues to marginalize and oppress people of color, identifying strategies to combat these oppressive forces and acting upon those strategies is an important next step within CRT” (p. 23). My exploration of critical praxis added to the literature that calls for an ongoing process of listening to other voices and challenging the current assumptions that perpetuate White privilege and anti-Blackness.

The culture circle in this study explored one way to improve educators’ practices by creating a space for the deeper interpersonal work required in doing so. I am not suggesting that professional development does not provide powerful work for teachers to grow ideas and knowledge. Similarly, I am not suggesting engaging in culture circles can directly change the systemic inequities in education. I do argue that the ongoing nature of a critical praxis can be part of the solution. My study explored the work in a culture circle that is supported by critical pedagogy and an ethic of care. In other words, my study provided the space and time for a group of educators to explore the underlying relationships of oppressive conditions within our education settings and make an action plan to address them. As noted in the literature and as seen in the findings of this study, a culture circle for engaging in reflective practices and dialogue can lead to individual and collective action so greatly needed.

Conclusion

The hope of creating a more democratic, humanizing, caring, learning community is at the forefront of my thoughts, feelings, and concerns. I learned and explained here

what the research reveals about the problem I address: emotional and cultural disconnection and the need for a space for educators to engage in a critical praxis. I found empirical evidence that strongly suggests educators should develop their critical consciousness. The literature also supports the use of culture circles that are grounded in open dialogue, reflection, and action. The literature I read helped me see the complexities of a critical praxis beyond implementing a culturally responsive curriculum given to educators through a one-day workshop or in the form of a manual (Darder, 2002; Gorski, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2014). Thus, I believe that critical praxis within a culture circle is primary.

The implications of the theoretical and empirical literature on critical pedagogy, care, and praxis point to a need for further qualitative research to explore a culture circle as a method for educators to engage in a critical praxis. My review of the literature on caring critical praxis helped me to develop a plan for an autoethnographic qualitative research study. The seminal and empirical studies illuminated for me the complexity of developing a caring critical praxis. In addition, the studies I reviewed collectively furthered my resolve to develop culture circles with the research design. Therefore, the present study is essential in that it extends the research by describing what happens when educators experience dialogue, listening and reflection within a Freirean-inspired culture circle. The next chapter will describe the research design I implemented to generate theories and raise new questions about working towards a caring, critical pedagogy. In

the next chapter, I describe the research methodology I utilized in this qualitative autoethnography.

Chapter 3: Method and Design

Diving into the Process with Five Other Educators

Just after I completed my coursework for my doctoral studies and passed my comprehensive exam, a new school year began. At that time, I was entering my 20th year as an ENL teacher in a K-3 elementary school. Although we were emerging from the haze of the pandemic, protocols that maintained emotional and social disconnection were in place. For example, emotional disconnection was maintained because we were required to wear masks, and physical disconnect was fostered by not allowing families into the school building, and student desks continued to be separated by 3 feet.

On a brisk early November morning, the entire staff and faculty participated in a full day of professional development. I felt the promise of ongoing learning with my peers burdened by the heavy blanket of weariness as we logged on to the meeting via the Zoom virtual platform rather than in person. I scrolled through the participants to see some of my colleagues whom I had not seen before summer break and, in many cases, since before the pandemic two years earlier. Normally, I would embrace my friends and colleagues and ask about their lives and their families. There was no connection made other than staring at faces on screen. I pushed down my sadness about not connecting with others in person because the topic for the professional development day was restorative justice.

I felt a spark of excitement for learning about collective ways we can care for our students. The presenters of the workshop explained briefly how the racial and cultural

conflict at the district level as well as the societal level are underlying reasons we need restorative justice. The workshop quickly proceeded with describing and modeling a restorative circle. Then, we virtually met in a small group to practice within a circle so that we might be able to implement the technique in our classrooms. After realizing that some of my colleagues were nearby, our small group moved to one classroom to work in person, yet still behind our masks. My circle included another ENL teacher, a school social worker, and a school psychologist. We imitated the presenter's circle, which included listening and dialogue. The workshop ended with the presenters asking us to place our final thoughts in a Google Doc. Everyone in my small group commented that they wished they were a part of a circle to listen, and talk with one another about educational issues. The Google Doc contained comments that revealed educators have a need for space and time for dialogue and listening that may lead to greater caring critical praxis.

This day illuminated how disconnected we were from one another - physically, socially, and emotionally and ideologically. Before and after the pandemic, we had minimal opportunities for ongoing critical conversations built into the school district's professional development. In addition, although many of my colleagues may have a commitment and desire for ongoing critical discourse, on this day, as was the case for me in the past 20 years with this school district, an opportunity for critical dialogue was merely introduced. Our ideological perspectives and the lenses with which we teach were not discussed. This experience brought a continued feeling of frustration at the ongoing

disconnection of educators' ideologies to their professional decisions. There may be educators who want to engage in ongoing dialogue to listen to others and reflect on our ways of knowing and being as a practice and in preparation for teaching and caring for all students. As I reflected on this disconnected, often repeated moment of professional development, it increased my resolve to utilize culture circles and how an autoethnography is the perfect method for my own and my participants' experience of critical praxis.

Reintroduction of the Problem

As shown in the review of literature in Chapter 2, education scholars support the need for educators to engage in a critical praxis. As I found with the participants for my study, there are educators who care about changing the status quo, yet often lack the space and time for racial/cultural discourse to reflect on and act based on new and critical understandings (Safir & Dugan, 2021). In addition, my review of literature on critical pedagogy has revealed that for teachers to be more culturally responsive, teachers need a raised level of consciousness (Landreman, 2007; Mohammed, 2019; Tatum, 2018; Valenzuela, 2016). Educators need to engage in a critical praxis to support the complexity and ongoing nature of critical consciousness (Darder, 2002; Lyiscott 2019). Critical praxis, as suggested in the literature, requires intentional and ongoing spaces like culture circles (Freire,1974; Lyiscott 2019; Souto-Manning, 2010). Valenzuela (2016) noted the importance of educators developing a critical consciousness because they build the capacity to listen to other experiences and understand that an individual’s experience

of social and economic inequities is not the result of their actions, but rather derived from larger socio-political conditions. My study provided educators with an intentional, focused circle analyzed using Palmer's theory of wholeness.

There is a lack of space and time for critical conversations for educators to problematize educational situations that perpetuate racialized othering, deficit thinking and talking about students, and culturally unresponsive practices. Further, the ways educators develop themselves professionally are focused primarily on student success rather than a deeper dive into practices and deficit thinking that create learning gaps (Hammond, 2020; Souto-Manning, 2010). Students need educators who develop a critical consciousness. Safir and Dugan (2021) described the traps we fall into as educators seek to address equity concerns in our schools but perpetuate them. A one-time two-hour workshop does not meet the call of educational scholars who express the need for ongoing and sustaining practices (Paris & Alim, 2014).

Due to the limited experiences within professional learning and the gap found in the literature, my study explored a space for individual and collective dialogue and listening may reveal nuances of educators' critical praxis. My study addresses the gap in the literature and explores the complexities of a critical praxis that goes beyond implementing a culturally responsive curriculum given to educators through a one-day workshop or in the form of a manual (Darder, 2002; Gorski, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2014). The literature also supports the use of autoethnography as a research design and culture circles as a method. The design of this critical autoethnography allows me to bring to the

fore elements of praxis and how teachers develop their praxis and critical consciousness together. In this chapter, I restate the purpose and the research questions. Next, I provide a description of the research design as well as the context and setting of the study. Then, I introduce the circle of educators. I also explain the method and data collected and the steps taken in the analysis phase of the study.

Purpose and Research Questions

Educational scholars and researchers support the need for educators to engage in a critical praxis with a theory of care to at the center of our pedagogy (Choi, 2021; Darder, 2002; Gray & Mehra, 2021; Hammond & Jackson, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2010). I believe critical reflection and dialogue with ourselves and other educators for direct action, in other words a caring critical praxis can only happen when we make intentional circles for connections. I further believe when we are emotionally disconnected from what matters to us, we stay disconnected and pass on uncaring ways of being. Therefore, the purpose of this critical transformative autoethnography aimed to understand the nuances of a culture circle of educators. The specific process elements of the culture circle of 6, K-12 public school educators, as well as the inner and outer work that is part of educators' critical praxis, was revealed. I was able to see how educators' dialogue and reflection within culture circles fostered emotional connection, a deeper caring for ourselves and one another, and, most importantly, our students. Educators began to describe action steps that can positively affect their teaching within their diverse learning communities. Using autoethnography, as a participant and observer, I was part of the

circle of educators and deepened my own critical praxis. The following research questions was guided this study:

1. What are the elements of critical praxis within a Freirean-inspired culture circle?
    a. How do participants describe the praxis work of the culture circle (i.e., what elements of the culture circle work or do not work, what was easy, what was hard)?
    b. How does the researcher describe the experience of creating, organizing, planning, and facilitating culture circles?
2. What actions and/or discussions within the culture circle lead participants to caring, critical action?
3. How do the participants pose problems together, dialogue, and act to change their teaching?

Auto/ethnography

This autoethnography study involved both observing and reflecting on the participants' experience within the circle while simultaneously engaging in self-reflection with my own experiences as a participant. I was observant of the emotions of the participants and reflective of my emotional responses as well. The method of engaging in culture circles as spaces for healing and humanizing learning has been documented (Souto-Manning, 2010). I created a space for six K-12 educators to engage in a process for critical dialogue and reflection on educational issues that matter to them. I facilitated five circles over a four months. Participants also journaled before, during, and after,

which I included as data. I conducted four informal interviews to ask to follow-up questions during the analysis phase of the study. Interviews aimed to see what/if connections can be made between my analysis and the participants' reflections of experience in the culture circles. I also inquired about their action steps. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. My overall data collection and analysis took place over six months.

As an ENL teacher in a K-3 school, my role is to teach students who are learning English as a new language. However, I see my role as much more than that. In my position, I work to think critically about my ways of being with my students and teaching. Many of my students move to the United States and enter school just days after their travels. Our new students may be from another country and therefore another culture. Often, educators and students experience a cultural disconnect. My altruistic goal, not only as an educator but as a human being, is to forge an emotional connection with my students. I consider myself a consciousness-raising, passionate person. At the same time, I recognize my humanness in the process of becoming a better human and a better educator. My desire to become more conscious of indoctrination and ideology as a pathway towards a caring, emotional connection with others has been intertwined in my personal and professional story prior to and during this dissertation process.

My journey to work on staying emotionally connected, loving, and caring for others has made me more curious about the space and time needed to practice, learn from, and with others, specifically other educators. Thus, an autoethnographic design best

allowed me to bring the reader into my own process first of how I constructed, then deconstructed, and reconstruct my consciousness. I included the voices and experiences of myself and the participants within the culture circle. Chang (2016) noted that autoethnographic writing "actively interprets your stories to make sense of how they are connected to other stories" (p. 149). A critical constructivist lens is suited to the theoretical underpinnings of critical pedagogy which seeks to understand "how dominant ideologies and interests distort perceptions of reality" to investigate the process of critical consciousness (Beaudry & Miller, 2016, p. 49). My constructivist worldview aligns with learning from others and our own experiences as we co-construct meaning, which connects to the reflexivity required to understand the process of one's own and others' critical consciousness. Constructivist philosophy supports learning about ourselves and others in our unique yet collective human experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Epistemologically, constructivist researchers value how we co-construct meaning as we talk and listen as well as acknowledge one's own and others' learning process. My study explored participants' intuitive and felt ways of knowing and being, which directly relate to their identities. The ideological underpinning is constructivist, as I explored a process that calls for educators to deconstruct what is unconscious or hidden and bring it to consciousness. This study is also positioned ontologically from a critical lens because education is a means to forge new paths for equity within historical and socially specific contexts. The critical lens drives the purpose, the research questions and, most importantly, the design.

Action Research

This study was designed not only for myself, but also for other educators to "seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell, 2018, p. 8). The constructivist worldview aligns with learning from others, and our experiences as we co-construct meaning, and we follow with action that relates to the lived and shared experiences of our lives. A caring, critical praxis, as discussed by Freire (1974) and others (Darder, 2002; Giroux, 1992; Kincheloe, 2005), can lead to social and economic change, which also aligns to the transformative paradigm. McAteer (2021) stated that action research is an approach that can improve community relationships, which in turn, can promote greater participation in policymaking engagement activities, and improved scrutiny of decisions. (p. 507).

Our dialogue and reflection was not an oversimplified version of critical praxis; it included next steps that challenged inequalities and helped create change in educational settings. Critical consciousness can lead to social and economic change. Research utilizing the critical paradigm helps reveal "how dominant ideologies and interests distort perceptions of reality" (Beaudry & Miller, 2016, p. 49). The current underlying ideology of education that oppresses some while benefiting others, specifically those with money, those who speak English primarily, or those who are White, requires ongoing critical experiences to counter critical pedagogical practices. My position is that the dominant ideology that undergirds educational endeavors requires the co-construction of something better.

As I conducted this autoethnographic study, I conducted a grounded theory analysis of educators' critical praxis. A grounded theory (GT) approach was the lens through which I conceptualized the internal experience of a critical ontological process and attempted to understand how the culture circles "take shape interpersonally" (Levitt, 2021, p. 17). GT was introduced by Davies and Harré (1990), who explained, "any narrative that we collaboratively unfold with other people thus draws on a knowledge of social structures and the roles that are recognizably allocated to people within those structures" (p. 52). In Chapter 5, I animate the themes that emerged from the ground (i.e., from participants' experiences) along with study data. Using culture circle transcripts, semi-structured interviews, and journal writings, I used GT to allow the reader to hypothesize based on the participants' experiences of how and in what ways the culture circle can support educators to be engaged in a caring critical praxis. The use of a grounded theory approach added an critical layer to the theoretical aspects of critical pedagogy and ethic of care.

The constructivist philosophy underlying this qualitative autoethnography supports learning about others and ourselves in our unique yet collective human experience. We have the potential to co-construct meaning when we learn with and about other people's ways of knowing and being. Constructivist researchers value the way we co-construct meaning as we talk and listen to one another as well as appreciate the intuitive nature of knowing. As noted by Farrell (2020), "If consciousness is the site for the solution to philosophical problems, the solution itself, so to speak, is the description

of the essence, or essential structures, of a phenomenon" (p. 2). This study sought, not only for myself but also for other educators, to describe the experience of critical praxis and "seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell, 2018, p.8). A caring critical praxis, as discussed by Freire and others, can lead to social and economic change, which also aligns to the transformative paradigm.

Role of the Researcher

As an autoethnographer, I positioned myself in the research as a member of the group engaged in the process along with the participants. I was interested in describing the process within the culture circle with a deep curiosity and wonder. This critical autoethnography used culture circles to reveal how the participants experience listening, dialogue, and elements of individual and collective action in their positions as educators within diverse learning communities. The culture circles provided a rich description of the complexity of individual and collective critical praxis. In my professional role as an English as a New Language (ENL) teacher, I collaborate with general education teachers to provide instruction for students who are speakers of other languages and whose first language is not English. Despite ongoing professional development on cultural responsiveness, I witnessed the discourse Muhammed (2009) described of the achievement gap that blames students and families, especially students who are not White or native English speakers. The conversations with my colleagues often center around positioning multiliterate students through a deficit lens. Students' multiliterate and multicultural assets are minimized and discounted. Given the marginalization and even

erasure of diverse cultural and linguistic assets students bring, the achievement gap is more likely a result of a belonging gap, as noted by Cobb and Krownapple (2019). Therefore, I purposefully selected autoethnography to include my own personal and professional perspective and process in the research.

Site Selection and Participants

The setting of educators within the school where this study takes place is both theoretically and conceptually supported. The district has a racially diverse student population. The current demographics are 20% Black or African American, 40% Hispanic or Latinx, 2% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 35% White, 3% Multiracial and 0% American Indian or Alaska Native (NYSED, 2021). The number of students identified as Hispanic doubled in the past 10 years as did the number of students listed as receiving free and reduced lunch. The teaching population of the school district does not come close to mirroring the diverse student body. White teachers comprise 84% of teachers in the district. As Sleeter (2001) noted, an ethnocentric pedagogy is still being perpetuated, especially given that most teachers in schools today are White and programs for teacher preparation are lacking in their efforts to address this need. Studies have shown the impact of cultural mismatch between teachers and students and add evidence for an exploration of experiences that foster or impede critical praxis for the educators in this study (Gershenson, et al., 2016; Vinopal, 2019).

Although there is no explicit data from this site on the percentage of students of color or English Language Learners (ELLs) recommended for academic or behavioral

intervention services, referred for special education, or disciplined for minor incidences, the insider perspective I have as a member of the school district allows me to provide observational data from the 20 years of teaching within the district. Of specific concern is the percentage of English Language Learners (ELLs) dropping out of school. The statistics show problematic data, which supports the need for my study to explore critical praxis for educators who work in a diverse learning community. Finally, this district provides teachers with professional development hours to work on their craft. Most recently, the implementation of the CRSF in NYS as noted in Chapter 1 makes this study relevant and meaningful. In the past several years, educators have monthly opportunities to learn about topics such as school wide behavior supports and culturally responsive literacy. The ongoing professional development is modeled after the banking method that Freire warned against (Darder, 2002; Giroux, 1992). Critical praxis must be ongoing and not a one and done experience to foster more critically conscious educators. The current problematic data and the value this district places on professional development support the benefits of this research study.

After deep consideration on how to recruit educators for this study, I decided to invite the participants. A personal, face-to-face, body-connected invitation allowed me to explain my background experiences and research that led me to this study. I was also able to express more fully in person so the participants could see and feel the authenticity and passion in my voice. I wanted to be sure that when I explained I am doing this study for the completion of a dissertation to obtain a doctoral degree, they understood that, I am

most interested in building emotional connection with other educators so that we are more culturally and emotionally connected to our students. I was also transparent that a culture circle was my idea for a useful method for engaging in a critical praxis based on the prior empirical research. I noted that we would work collaboratively with one another to set parameters for the group to ensure trustworthiness and open and honest dialogue.

A few months before the actual study, I participated in professional learning with other educators in my school district. My study used purposeful and, as needed, a snowball sampling selection of six educators given their shared affinity for critical reflection, dialogue, and action as a means for better educational practices within diverse learning communities. For example, most recently, a group of teachers within the school district created the Committee on Civil and Human Rights (CCHR), which is a subgroup of the New York State United Teachers group by the same name. This group's goal is to support efforts that promote equity and social justice (NYSUT, 2021). I began with several of the educators who had participated in this previous group to use purposeful sampling. I invited K-12 educators who have a shared concern and desire for critical praxis based on their decision to participate in the above-noted committee and a conversation regarding my study.

Once the IRB approved my study, I began recruiting participants. As I had laid out in the previous chapters, I was looking for 5-7 educators, who I had access to within my school professional network, primarily in the public school where I work. I wanted educators who shared an affinity for caring for diverse learners but who also struggled

with how they felt successful in their relationships with students or the responsiveness in their learning spaces. I wanted to bring together educators who were like-minded yet diverse to allow for varied perspectives. Most educators in my professional network are White women. I had to be purposeful in seeking out varied perspectives. As noted here in my journal entry, I was engaged in a dialectical process with myself as I considered who I would invited to the circle, and the right process for selecting the educators for the circle.

Personal Journal Excerpt

11.16.2021

9:30 p.m.

Home

> Who should the participants be? Do I seek out intentionally thought out-educators who I know would get what I am saying here. I want to invite teachers who are open to this type of space and process work. I don't want teachers who are complaining about having enough prep/planning time surface level stuff. It can't be a session for airing gripes about admin or parents. This is different. I want to create a professional learning space of our own making to really dig deep into our individual and collective struggles combating bias and encouraging true openness to our diversity. Who will want to do that with me? It has to be a personal invitation… they have to be educators who are already considering the importance of making teaching and learning better with regard to our culturally

> responsiveness, inclusivity and asset-based thinking. I can't just send an email - not a flyer- that's emotionally disconnected. This invitation needs to be a face-to-face body connection so they can feel my passion for this topic. This is an embodied belief that I want to share. Purposeful selection of people… because I know you-you know me and trust me, and I know you and we might be able to co create something together. I know I have to ask Jessica; she keeps saying she is interested in my topic, my idea… and definitely Winnie.

This entry represents for me the process of bringing together other educators to engage in praxis as a group. As I grew my thinking about many of the educational issues we face, I was missing a space for myself to engage in critical conversations with other educators. I wanted to find people in a school where I often feel disconnected emotionally and even physically. I leave work and return often, not relating to another person outside of the school building. This excerpt also shows the need to connect with others who feel deeply about engaging in a process with me. In using the word *embodied*, I wanted teachers who embodied a passion and level of care. I wanted to be more connected to them as educators who, like me, sought to work to make educational settings better for our students.

The Circle of Educators

Jessica has been an instructional coach and reading specialist for over 15 years in our school district. She also supports educators outside the school day by facilitating

Twitter book chats for professional learning. Jessica spoke about learning by stating, "You can't know what you don't know, you just have to be open to it."

Our conversations over the years have shown me that Jessica brings the virtue of humility paralleled with an awareness of how we educators are still learners - learning alongside our students. Jessica and the circle participants care deeply about their pedagogy and care about the process of becoming and using their imaginations to bring forth new individual and collective consciousness. Jessica and I have shared thoughts and hopes about making our respective educational spaces better for all students. For example, throughout my journey in the doctoral program our conversations have allowed my growing ideas to expand. We have talked about new books on a variety of subjects, including anti-racist teaching, asset and growth mindset. Our shared passion about these topics and shared commitment to our growth as educators are often disconnected by the limited space and time for critical conversations. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) described the need for critical reflection, and Jessica is aware that she is learning and will continue to learn. Her openness is a gift to herself, the circle of educators, and her students.

Nelly, a speech therapist in the district, agreed to participate, saying she enjoyed being a part of groups like this and was eager to find more opportunities. Nelly described herself as biracial and deeply connected to her religious background. This is an excerpt as she introduced herself at one of our first sessions together:

> Equity work, it's just been something that, I guess, from my childhood because of my religious background that teaches of the unity of all humankind just living and seeing, the challenges of seeing, when there's not unity and diversity like the impact, the negative impact that that has.

Nelly's excerpt shows she brings her whole self to the circle and her work as an educator. She wears her values on her sleeve. As a former student in the school district, Nelly also brought an extensive awareness and background knowledge to add to our conversations.

Camila, an ENL teacher, had this to say about why she agreed to be a part of the circle:

> I guess from my personal experiences, I've seen students maybe or just people for having students who were bilingual or just not only work but not necessarily English treated differently and unfairly, and so I guess it gave me curiosity of how this circle can help when working in spaces with others who have bias.

Camila also shared a story of a teacher she works with who acted surprised that an ENL student was smart. She showed a level of care for not only the student in this story but also the teacher and her process of frustration at addressing deficit thinking in the workplace. Noddings (1984)) posited the need for an ethic of care that Nelly and Camila both embody. Both shared that they have felt and continue to feel the impact of not being included in the curriculum and the culture of school. They shared a care for the work within our school to increase inclusivity.

Alan has been an AP History teacher in the district for 27 years. He is a doctoral

student who was curious about being in the study as, in his words, “good karma” for completing his dissertation and his interest in learning research methods. When asked to share a bit about why he wanted to be part of the circle he said,

> *I’ve always taught in an environment where students have a very different experience than me, and I love that and any efforts that I can understand students better, I want to be a part of.*

Singleton (2014) suggested the notion of courageous leaders, and Alan reminds me of this type of educator. Alan noted that as a White male, he has a different perspective and privilege, but he brings an authentic level of joy and curiosity to the table. He is known as a leader and a caring educator by his colleagues, and in our circle, he also expressed that he is a learner with and for our students.

Several years ago, I met Winnie, a history teacher at the High School. She facilitated the Civil and Human Rights Committee for the teachers in the district. I joined the committee and saw Winnie as a strong advocate for students. I loved being in group meetings with her as she shared ideas and fostered an environment where other educators could share their ideas. Winnie was enthusiastic and curious when I asked if she would be interested in participating in my study. At our first meeting, she introduced herself to the group, and this excerpt from her introduction spoke to the commitment she has to the community:

> As the daughter of Salvadorian immigrants and going through this school district, I just know that we could do things like small kind of changes to make things a

> little bit easier and more inclusive and just make sure that we get… that all of our members of our community are participating. So that's my drive for equity, and I'm interested in how what circles can bring about, so I'm here.

Paris and Alim (2014) spoke to the need for ongoing and sustaining efforts for CRP. Winnie could be the authors' textbook example of an educator who is always moving in the direction of increasing equity and inclusivity. She has spent time in collaborative circles, engaging in dialogue and creating spaces for others to talk and learn with students and educators. Winnie has also developed a podcast to highlight strong women in leadership roles. The circle of educators has a shared affinity for critical reflection and dialogue regarding historical as well as current social and political contexts as a means for better educational practices within diverse learning communities.

Procedures and Data Sources

This autoethnographic study included dialogue and participant observation within culture circles, interviewing, and reflective journals to gain an understanding of the complexities of educators' critical praxis. The multiple data sources allowed me to explore the elements of critical praxis and enabled me to achieve rich, descriptive, inductive analysis. Data was verified by triangulating several data sources and experiences. Data was analyzed and interpreted to determine the meaning of the experience in relation to the culture circle. Critical pedagogy and constructivist perspectives were the lenses used when reviewing the data because of my interest in understanding the participants' experience and how it relates to critical issues of

educators. As suggested by Chang (2016), I was mindful of being critical of the data because the overall purpose of the experience was to find meaning based on what was recalled, observed, or felt during the experience. I wrote autobiographical texts about my experience in the culture circle as well as journals, letters, and memos during the circles. I reflected on my participation in the circles, what I did, what I said, and how I felt. After I completed the process, I used the autobiographical texts to create an autoethnography.

Culture Circles

I offered a space for reflection and a circle of educators. I sent out a preliminary invite via email (See Appendix B). When I received a positive response to the invitation, I had individual conversations via phone to provide more information. At the time of invitation, I ensured confidentiality and explained that together we would co-construct dialogue and listening parameters for the group. As a participant, I revealed my hopes for creating a safe container for dialogue and reflection. I clarified that I have "stuff" that I want to bring, my own stuff regarding race and equity that I need to continually work on in the hopes of sustaining critical pedagogy. At the same time, I communicated a sincere opening to what other participants could bring to the circle of practice. My invitation explained to the educators that I know from our time together in past experiences that they care deeply about the continued inequality, injustices, and racism within our education system and, as members of that system, feel the strong responsibility to respond and confront our place within it. I extended a personal invitation to participate in a circle of caring educators for critical discourse, listening and reflection for a connection

to ourselves and our roles as educators within diverse learning communities, and because we care about our students.

We co-created a trusting, honest space for reflection and dialogue, a place to work through some of the issues that have come up for us personally and professionally. The circle was grounded in a Freirean critical problem-posing approach with elements of culture circles inspired by other circles. The five-session journey began in March and ended in June. I held the sessions on a weekday after school from 3:45-5:15. The circle of educators met for an introductory session to establish agreements (See Appendix C). With the need for a level of trust in mind, we worked to agree on guidelines for our dialogue. As noted by the National Equity Project (2020), agreements:

> Can improve community relationships, which in turn, can promote greater participation in policymaking engagement activities, and improved scrutiny of decisions. In this way, these approaches challenge inequalities of representation, wellbeing, and access to resources, and thus contribute to positive social change.

Our agreements allowed participants to share openly and honestly while others listened with a sense of curiosity without fixing and advising.

Setting up the Circle Space

As the researcher/participant, I tried to be conscious of how professional learning spaces in school buildings have been used or misused in the past. As Ahmed (2012) challenged, we need to become conscious of the use of space to transform spaces for diversity work. The top-down banking model that we seek to counter in our own teaching

is modeled by the diversity, equity, and inclusivity professional development training we have perpetually received in our public school districts. My study considers the opposite of a top-down delivery model of professional learning. The culture circle was a space for a new process or praxis. The praxis was a new way of restructuring our usual professional learning spaces, which are habitually (mis)used. The culture circle space was more connected to the personal and planned so that multiple voices were included. As noted in the introduction of the study, the typical professional development model falls short of the relational and dialectical experiences we need as teachers, which provided the rationale for implementing my study.

Before our first circle, I thought about how to create a space that was comfortable for participants. Most professional development I have experienced is physically uncomfortable. When I asked the participants to consider their comfort, they responded kindly, dismissing the need or importance of comfort and care for ourselves within the learning space. One participant responded, “anything would be good for me.” The lack of interest or concern for our comfort in the circle space led me to consider how we may accept the way things are and not challenge even the most basic need of our comfort. Another aspect of the space was the proximity to work and home. I felt the proximity would be a key ingredient for me, and the participants noted this factor as well in preliminary conversations about meeting every two weeks. I had to ask myself where the space could be that would create the least amount of stress. Since the pandemic of 2020, we often opted for the convenience of ZOOM or Google Meets. Although online formats

allow easy access for people far away from one another to meet, the physical disconnection was not an option for me as I planned for the circle space. We needed a space close enough to relieve the stress of getting there and getting home for our personal family commitments.

Participants did express the importance of proximity to work and home as an imperative factor that would increase their participation level. When we made it easier to come to the circle, the level of participation increased. As it turned out, several participants noted the convenience of the space being within minutes from work and after school rather than on the weekends. I also considered the physical beauty of the space. I wanted our circle space to be cozy with soft earth-colored couches and pillows or held on a warm evening on a sandy beach low in our chairs.

Again, as a researcher facilitator, I wanted the participants to be relaxed, feel welcomed, and want to return. As a participant, I recalled circles I have been in that allowed me to move freely, breathe deeply, free from distractions and undesirable noise. After hitting some dead ends on securing a yoga-studio type of space near all of us at the end of the school day, I asked the participants how they felt about using my own classroom in the school district. Even though I was worried the participants would not want to use a space on the school grounds due to issues of confidentiality, the participants were easy-going, and agreed to the idea of using the space normally used for my teaching.

My small classroom, which became our circle space, is lined with books. Literally almost every inch of wall space is stocked with professional books or children's books. There is a new rug in the center of my classroom where I decided to place the circle of chairs. The importance of a good chair within the circle, if overlooked, can make a participant uncomfortable and want to leave and not return. In addition, if the chair is too small, as in a tiny children's size given that we were in a K-3 school, the participants' level of comfort could thwart the process of listening and reflection. So, for each session, I borrowed the most comfortable chairs possible from colleagues in my school. At the end of the school day, 3:30 to be exact, I ran around the building, rolling six soft office chairs from classrooms. I placed the chairs in a circle over the rug area.

As I initially planned the topic or reading for the culture circle along with images or questions to spark conversations. This was a difficult yet critical process for me to engage. I told the participants I would facilitate the first two sessions and then welcome their ideas. Rather than commit to a specific curriculum plan as found in the NYSED Culturally Responsive Facilitators Guide created by the NYS Culturally Responsive Education Working Group (2021). I wanted to allow for the varied and personal ideas so that we can learn from one another's experiences fully. The context, what each participant brought to the circles can be found in the Appendices.

Data collection

My overall data collection duration occurred over five months. I collected and analyzed the data, and then interpreted using inductive coding. Data included

observations of self and self in relation to others while participating in a culture circle of six K-12 educators. In addition, I wrote and read journal entries from sessions, and transcribed conversations I had with the participants. Data was verified by triangulating several data sources and experiences. Data was analyzed and interpreted to determine the meaning of the experience in relation to the culture circle. I used critical pedagogy and sociocultural, constructivist perspectives when reviewing the data because I was interested in understanding the experience and how it relates to critical sociocultural issues of educators. As suggested by Chang (2016), I was mindful to be critical of the data because the overall purpose of the experience was to find meaning based on what was recalled, observed, or felt during the experience.

Semi-structured Interviews

As the process was iterative and evolved throughout the study and into the analysis phases, I conducted three informal semi-structured interviews with three participants to probe deeper into the themes revealed from the culture circles. The informal interviews not only provided a layer of triangulation but helped describe in greater detail the relationship between the individual experience and the collective group process. The rapport built during the culture circles allowed the interviews to glean more descriptive data. The interviews also provided richer data as I listened critically for the nuances of critical praxis that may have been overlooked or forgotten from the culture circles. The coding and interpretation of the interviews also allowed for greater reflection on my role as a participant researcher, which increased the validity of the study.

Researcher Memos

Reflective journal writings occurred throughout the entire study. I wrote the journal entries before and after each circle session. A total of 10 reflective memos revealed my process and experiences with initially facilitating the circles and subsequently participating in the culture circle. Memos were also written after interviews and during the analysis phase. Finally, reflective memos were written after meetings, included thoughts about the development of theories during the analysis of the data.

Artifacts

Throughout the research process, I collected artifacts as additional data. Primary artifacts include documents such as texts or visuals used within culture circles. All artifacts were analyzed by noting themes that described how educators are engaging in a caring critical praxis in more detail.

Data Analysis

Once my study received approval from the IRB at Molloy College (See Appendix A), I invited participants shortly after being in the circles. With the educators' approval, culture circles were recorded. I utilized LIVESCRIBE to record all circles and interviews. I transcribed all the transcripts on Google Docs. Analysis followed coding as suggested by Saldana (2016) which includes delineating units of meaning, clustering units of meaning to form themes, summarizing each interview, extracting general and unique themes, and creating a summary of themes.

First, I read transcripts of culture circles and interviews. I wrote notes, comments,

observations, and questions in the margins. I engaged in a conversation with the data, and used open coding, as noted by Merriam (2009). I wrote words or short phrases next to the data. Next, I assigned codes to pieces or chunks of data from the literature (theory-driven) or from the participants' own words (in-vivo). Then I combined the codes into categories. Topics developed in memos assisted me in creating and revising the coding list prior to open coding, identifying themes with the experiences of educators' praxis, and later, theorizing about the reoccurring patterns and key experiences described in the data. Then, I narrowed down the list of categories by reading more interview transcripts and field notes to see if they hold. I renamed a category to align with the data (Merriam, 2009). I utilized a cyclical process that "manages, filters, highlights and focuses the salient features" (Saldana, 2016, p. 9). I drew conclusions based on the similarities and differences as well as the links between the multiple data collected. Finally, I synthesized the codes by categorizing them. I established the trustworthiness of my qualitative interpretations through member checking and peer debriefing.

Ethical Considerations

Given that the goal of the study is to describe the experience and perspectives of the participants, their interests and ideas are paramount regarding ethical considerations. I asked for consent to participate, with the specific details of the study explained for clarity and transparency. To increase the trustworthiness of my study, I also took steps to address ethical considerations before, during, and after I conducted the study Before conducting the study, my personal and professional positionality demonstrated my

educational concerns and interest in seeking growth and understanding of myself and other educators, which strengthened the rationale for the design. A strong literature review supports the foundation of using an autoethnography design and culture circles as a main method for this study all framed around the tenets of critical pedagogy and care. I clearly stated the research objectives, and I explained to the participants that the data will be used within a dissertation with confidentiality guaranteed. I used pseudonyms throughout the study. Regarding participants, the sampling is purposeful, and I used informed consent. The purpose of the study was shared. Participants were asked to volunteer and I assured them that they could remove themselves at any time during the study with no questions asked.

Research Quality

Credibility was established by what Guba and Lincoln (2010) describe as *prolonged engagement.* The credibility increased given that I know the educators from my long personal and professional relationship with them. I know them well and have witnessed their commitment to dialogue and reflect and on caring praxis from our prior conversations and interactions with them in our school district. Penington (2016), in her autoethnographic study, noted the limited engagement with her study participants as a limitation. Given we were only able to conduct five sessions, time was a limitation. However, the in-depth dialogue in the culture circles increased the quality of credibility due to the rapport and relationships with the participants. Finally, I shared the analysis

with participants for feedback and to clarify any misperceptions in the data. This member-checking step strengthened the quality of my study.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the research design and methodology to answer the research questions of my study. As noted, I used a critical autoethnography design to explore how a group of K-12 educators experiences within a culture circle. I described the recruitment of participants and the context in which this study occurred. I provided an explanation of the steps I took to collect and analyze the data. The themes that emerged using the ground theory approach are explained in detail in the upcoming chapter.

Chapter IV: Findings Analysis

As outlined in the previous chapters, the primary goal of this autoethnographic action research study was to provide a space for a culture circle of six K-12 educators to engage in a process called critical praxis. The praxis included dialogue, listening, and reflection that led to planned action steps in a public school on Long Island, New York. The results are presented as an autoethnographic description of the participants' process within the culture circles. I developed a general protocol for the circle sessions with input from the participants. Then, collectively, the participants brought an artifact to the circle to help us work toward our equity effort. The types of content brought to the circle for dialogue varied. It included but was not limited to books, images, poems, and personal writings. Freire's idea of critical consciousness and Noddings' care theory were primary theories that framed this study. Using a grounded theory approach, this chapter provides an analysis highlighting themes that emerged from the triangulation of data, which included: transcripts of interactions between the six educators during five 90-minute culture circles, along with semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and artifacts collected over six months. Palmer's (1998) metaphor of the inner and outer lives of teachers and Collins' (2004) theory of interactional rituals helped me explain how participants made connections to themselves and one another, which opened a pathway to be more caring in their work with their students. Overarching findings from my analysis indicate that educators (re)awakened their critical consciousness. Using ground theory analysis of the culture circle transcripts, informal interviews, and researcher

reflexive journals, this chapter will show that the culture circle of educators problematized issues facing their social justice and equity efforts, connected emotionally and culturally to themselves, one another, and their students, and created direct action steps in their teaching and learning community. In the following subsections, I detail how educators posed problems within the circle, then how they were journeying toward connection, which ultimately led them to the final aspect of praxis: the realized action steps they hoped to take within their teaching and learning community.

Problematizing

My analysis of the data revealed that while participating in a culture circle, educators engaged in dialogue that can be described as problem-posing. Lyiscott (2019) described this step of the praxis we experienced as the "constant collective reflection with the team to live in the tensions and questions of our work as critical educators" (p. 34). This initial element of praxis, as noted by Kumashiro (2015), suggested that educators "work to expose problems in the status quo and help us imagine and create more socially just alternatives" (p. 53). The dialogue in our circle moved quickly toward problems or situations educators were facing in their efforts to promote inclusive policies and practices in their educational settings. Nelly said she "feels a disconnection." Camila expressed, "I am not sure what's going on, but it just doesn't feel right." Winnie also noted that she "just knows it…we could be better." These words from the circle transcripts, along with the narratives and connecting excerpts that follow, implied that the educators in the circle had a critical lens and an awareness of educational problems that

required our attention in the circle. Over the five sessions, the educators named non-inclusive practices, lack of cultural awareness, unwelcoming or uncaring school culture, and deficit mindsets, which are described in the narratives and excerpts below.

An initial problem brought to the circle for dialogue was practices implemented in schools that exclude students. This problem-posing dialogue came about when Nelly brought an excerpt from an academic paper (See Appendix F) with *feasible actions that we can take to promote inclusivity*. She noted that although this paper was written a few years ago in one of her master's courses, she said the ideas are still needed. We used Nelly's writing to problematize current conditions of culturally unresponsive discipline practices and lack of culturally sound cooperative learning practices. The circle educators noticed that we are often unaware, complicit, or apathetic to ongoing unexplored exclusionary practices in our schools. Alan noted, "We don't make connections to the students within the curriculum." Given that most teachers in this school district are White, it is critical to pose the problem to ourselves and one another within our circle, to consider how we are learning and responding to our students' cultural lives (Mohamed, 2020). Nelly provided another specific example about the lack of inclusivity of students with special needs in our schools. Nelly explained,

> The students with special needs; there are no afterschool for those students. There is for everyone else. I think there is more we can do to be more aware of our biases and bring ourselves to account to get better.

Several participants also noted that after the pandemic, we have reverted to less inclusive and more marginalizing practices and policies, such as skills and drill worksheets, and prioritizing assessments over learning. Jessica mentioned her feelings about this problem as follows, “We even seemed to regress to old ways of thinking about teaching, and we are back to blaming kids and families for low-level skills.” Jessica also noted that although we accepted a variety of ways for students to demonstrate their learning during the pandemic, when we returned to school, we let go of caring and inclusive practices and went back to standardized testing, paper and pencil, historically monocultural and monolingual ways of doing schooling.

All the participants expressed a high level of frustration around this topic. This opened a critical dialogue how we are proceeding with inequitable practices and marginalizing students, specifically our CLD students. Winnie added her perspective regarding the reopening plan after the pandemic. She stated “We didn't hear from all voices in the community, just a select few. The most frustrating thing about the reopening committee… so we had an opportunity to reinvent…the goal was to get back to normal. No normal…do something better.”

Everyone nodded. The frustration and fervor were palpable. The educators shared an intense feeling about the problem of jumping back into teaching and learning without processing what had occurred for various stakeholders and maintaining some of the positive experiences. Our dialogue and listening to one another allowed space for us to process out loud and deeply reconsider what we learned that was good teaching and

learning practices that should have continued but abandoned once we returned to "normal." More importantly, there was a space and time given for the educators to release some of the anger. After the pandemic years, we have been regaining our footing and considering ways we can continue to learn in its multitude of possibilities, assessing learning in varied ways and moving students forward with compassion. I felt disconnected from other educators and my critical pedagogy. Now, learning in the doctoral program, reading, and writing about issues in education brought me to the need for a circle.

Another problem the educators in the circle posed was bias and the lack of cultural awareness and appreciation. The educators described uncaring interactions primarily aimed at students outside the Eurocentric White cultural group. Noddings (2016) expressed the need for caring relationships as a fundamental building block for providing all students with their right to dignity and belonging. As Love (2019) emphasized, we need educators to challenge the monocultural ways of teaching and learning so that all students can thrive. Camila shared her frustration at the ways often White monolingual teachers speak about her students learning English as a second language. She reflected, "They don't understand the challenges the students are facing. Teachers are always noticing how some kids are doing well, and others are not showing the growth we want to see". Nelly added to Camila's reflection by stating, "Some kids struggle with assessments. It should always be something we take into consideration regardless of whatever you are doing with that information that should be taken into

account.” Then Nelly elaborated on her frustrations that there are deeper systemic racist conditions at play that needed to be brought to educators' consciousness. She explained, “Race is a social construct, not to bring it there but we have difficulty fitting in boxes, yet we are 99.9 % the same. We really are all one. Humans make it to try to understand things better.”

To break the status quo of current inequities that are complex, historical as well as ongoing, the educators shared a desire to bring a critical lens regarding our practices as well as curriculum choices to the dialogue. Alan related his experience to this dialogue as follows,

> We need more parts of the curriculum not to be so structured so students can interject that’s the best when they take it where they want to go, bring their cultural selves. I like saying “Okay, now you do something with this”.

When the circle educators revealed the importance of knowing and centering their students in personal and cultural ways to support academic learning, they also connected it to the problem that there is not a pervasive shared goal of care.

The cultural unresponsiveness problematized in our dialogue led us to another problem to explore. As the educators in the circle described the need for broader collective cultural care, they brought to the surface the importance of not only theorizing about care, but also conceptualizing care. Although the mission statement for this school district explicitly names creating a sense of belonging as a key component, the educators noted that the students of color and English Language Learners (ELLs) in this school

district are identified as having an academic learning gap as well as an over-classification of ELLs for special education (NYSED). As Mohamed (2020) noted, unless we connect our lack of care to the stories told about student achievement gaps, we will perpetuate these false narratives. Educators care for students as if they were their own, as recommended by Noddings (2016), we can begin to reduce the othering narrative. Collins (2004) noted shared or collective vision is essential within groups hoping to make change.

When Jessica checked in at one of our circles, she revealed the stress she feels trying to foster a culture of care, all the while coaching educators in teaching reading and writing grounded in cultural responsiveness and asset-based thinking. She explained,

> Today was a bear of a day… it was a little rough; everyone seems to be working really hard. But, there are lots of kids that need our extra attention, and we want to give that attention. I am emotionally and physically being dumped on.

Both Camila and Jessica expressed their concern that educators lack time to collaborate to respond to students' individual needs. The pressure is on teachers, which impacts, most importantly, our students. Nelly connected to what others were saying regarding the lack of collective care about the inequities in the following quote, "You must build in the time. If administration does not create the time, you hit the wall; then it's on one person." Although Jessica, Camila, and Nelly named the lack of collegiality and collaboration in current models of coteaching of multilingual learners, they were expressing the need to center students. Muhammad (2009) noted how collegiality and collaboration are related

to changing school culture. Further, Hattie (2012) found that collective teacher efficacy has a significant impact on student success. The larger systemic problem of perpetuating an uncaring school culture was notable to name.

Finally, most participants revealed that the pervasive use of deficit language was a problem in schools. Camila described how educators in her professional circle speak about culturally and linguistically diverse students as struggling, low, or behind. It is problematic that educators may express a concern for students as if they are our own. However, as Delpit (1998) noted, it is easy to talk about other people's children in a way that we would not talk about if they were our own. As mentioned by Mohamed (2020), problematic terminology such as "disadvantaged," "low," or "struggling" often used to describe CLD students requires our attention. The deficit-based thinking narrative problematized in the culture circle's dialogue brought to light how our schools consistently rely on a monolingual view of education.

Further, the deficit perspective leads to a frenetic worry that students who may be struggling are lacking, which may not foster an asset-based approach that leverages the multiple literacies students bring to their learning. As noted by Muhammad (2009), "Students will learn more and be more successful in environments where all educators believe they can learn at high levels" (p. 25) Lyiscott (2019) found the value when educators "enter the discourse… by developing the skills to define, identify, and address the various manifestations of White privilege as it plays out in our world" (p. 27). As

educators who teach racially and linguistically diverse students, it is imperative we problematize cultural discontinuity (Tyler, 2008).

The analysis of educators' dialogue showed that the culture circle was a space utilized to pose problems impacting the teaching and learning of CLD students we care for so deeply. Educators in the circle revealed problems related to our ability to be culturally connected, frame our thinking with an asset-based approach, and be more caring about our students. In addition, the deficit discourse regarding students, most prominently our CLD students, around learning gaps has been increasing. Freire (1998) argued that affirming one's identity is paramount to being. As we problematized the ways educators do not affirm others' identities, we could see how our learning environments are not grounded in the care required for the relationships that are key to learning.

As educators in this circle sought to raise the challenges of implementing racial and culturally democratic practices, we also named the problems of disconnection. As we name the problems facing our students and our collective efforts to care for and love them, we must also engage in ongoing dialogue to balance the often paradoxical and complex aspects of our identity with our roles as educators (Palmer, 1998). All the participants named inequities and non-inclusive practices as well as biased mindsets. The situational problems they named were related to the historical ways of doing school that benefit some and marginalize CLD students most directly. However, Nelly was the only person to name directly the historical and systemic racism that is at play. I theorize that this is the case because educators are not given the space and time for a critical praxis to

deeply explore the depth of racism or systemic inequities impacting students, families, and teachers in our schools. As stated by Noguera (2018), “without commitments to these moral and ethical principles the development of solutions to difficult problems are unattainable” (p. 156). My findings indicate that ongoing praxis is needed to explore critical theories about racial, cultural, and linguistic inequities to increase our individual and collective critical consciousness.

This section described the ways educators problematized conditions in their current context. The circle allowed the educators in this study to be heard as they problematized these culturally unresponsive ways of schooling and processed some of their thinking and struggles with one another. This praxis work allowed for deeper connections to educators’ critical consciousness so that they could create action steps. I discuss more about the individual and collective action steps developed later in this chapter. In the next section, I explain another major theme that emerged within the praxis: connection. As a result of this work, the educators made emotional and cultural connections with each other and with themselves. The following section provides a continuation of narratives along with excerpts from audio-recorded transcripts that describe intentionally designed elements as well as organic examples of emotional connections and cultural connections.

Connection

In the previous section, I described how the educators in the circle collectively problematized forces of disconnection in their workplaces. In part, this action was about

identifying where they saw a need for change, but it was also a way of connecting as a group with a shared purpose. In our culture circle, connection was foundational to developing our praxis and emerged in the data in various ways and throughout the sessions. According to Palmer (1998), connections within a community of praxis are imperative for teachers' ongoing critical consciousness for transformational change. For educators, connection has been shown to be a primary component for developing a critical pedagogy, collective transformation, and collective efficacy (Hattie, 2012; Panic & Florian, 2015; Robinsons, 2012). Freire (2005) explained his own praxis and the praxis work of others as a dialectical relational experience. In our circle, we became linked to one another's inner and outer dialectical lived realities.

When the circle educators connected with their own socio-political contexts and one another, they increased their capacity for changing systems. In this section, I will describe the emotional and cultural connections as revealed by the analysis of the data, which as noted, included five transcribed audio-recorded circle sessions, reflexive journals and follow up interviews. In the first part, I will show from the multi-step analysis that emotional connection was fostered in intentionally created as well as organically relational ways as revealed in the words, observations, and felt experiences of the participants. Then I will explain the cultural connections made using Hammond's (2020) Culture Tree.

Intentional Moves Toward Connection

One intentionally planned element of the circle was the centering of our purpose.

Beyond the scope of this study, the educators in our culture circle shared a desire for increasing care for students, especially CLD students who are excluded from a wider variety of curriculum choices or who are unfairly disciplined. Collins (2004) suggested a shared vision as a key component of positive and successful group dynamics. At the center of the circle space, I placed a small table to focus our intention or our WHY. I placed a small gray stool covered with a rainbow cloth for actual objects, pictures of students, for example, but most importantly, the verbal intention was stated on our first session together, why we were there beyond the scope of the study, as educators with a shared affinity for working toward equity initiatives.

March 15, 2023

Excerpt from transcript

> Welcome, I am so glad you are here for our first Circle of Educators. We met briefly last week as a group to hear about participating in the circle as part of my study. But today is our official first session. I want you to know how grateful I am for your being here. For each session, let's each add something to the center of the circle to keep us grounded on our WHY. For today, I want to keep this picture of students at the center of the circle because they are the why- their happiness-to love and care for them is at the center of my efforts, and I also just want to start off with just giving gratitude to you guys for your time again this is really important to me, and you guys just because of connections of caring about being better for our students, caring for equity and caring about diversity and caring

> about inclusivity. I feel like this circle of educators is awesome, and I am so grateful.

All the participants expressed hope for being more culturally responsive and caring. Camila, in her work as an ENL teacher and as a Latinx woman, she personally and professionally is guided by her why. Winnie named her why at our first meeting, as noted earlier in this paper. She said:

> I just know that we could do things like small kind of changes to make things a little bit easier and more inclusive and just make sure that we get… that all our members of our community are participating. So, that's my drive for equity, and I'm interested in how what circles can bring about, so I'm here.

Centering our intention within our circle meant we explicitly named that our work together was not only for our personal benefit, but we also sought to be better in caring for our students. Collins (2004) noted this symbolic action of centering our why, to ground the group in a shared vision, as a key component of building connection that can lead to action. Noddings (2013) explained that intentionality is primary as we hope to care about others as a moral and ethical pursuit. Naming our intentions set a foundation for future work and linked us to one another. The connections we made in this intentional step proved to build trust that allowed for open and honest conversations throughout the praxis.

Another intentional step was committing to and recommitting each session to circle agreements (See appendix D), which were the intentional and collectively designed

vision for connecting with one another each session. Using some examples as guides, we articulated how we hoped to care for each other's voices and ideas within the circle. The agreements we chose were co-created at a preliminary meeting and primarily adapted from Palmer's (2004) Touchstones as well as connected to Singleton's (2014) Courageous Conversations Compass. The moments when we revisited the circle agreements at the end of a session felt redundant initially. However, these reflections allowed us to connect deeper with one another. The participants noted their appreciation for the agreements, which proved be another way to establish trust for our personal conversations. Alan noted the value of being open and honest. He stated, "I appreciated when I asked questions about superpower, and some said, "No" rather than just agreeing as might happen in other spaces." Winnie named the importance of participants sharing their selves within the circle. She reflected, "I think everyone spoke for themselves, used I statements."

Participants showed an appreciation for one another's ability to use I statements rather than directing a comment at one another. We appreciated that we could be honest without someone trying to fix or set us straight about our experience. At one of our sessions Nelly said:

> *I noticed everyone was fully present, and there was silence in between for thinking and reflecting rather than just jumping in and filling it with talk.*

Nelly's words showed the value placed on presence and how it allowed for participants' to make connections felt throughout the dialogue. The gift of being fully

present honored our individual process of being heard as well as strengthened our collective efforts to listen rather than disengage or stay disconnected:

We also appreciated that we showed up and maintained a high level of presence. All these experiences increased our emotional connection and care for one another. During one of our sessions, I talked about my challenge of living out some of the tenets of our agreements outside the circle.

> *So, I was thinking about these agreements as far as our time together and I'm also thinking about how hard it is outside of the circle. I was thinking about how it's sort of easy here for me because I feel like you all kind of agree, but taking it outside of the circle and, you know, thinking about how you know this one that says, "No setting each other straight," I find myself sometimes you know like having this like inner conflict with myself like okay you're not here to set someone straight or tell others how to do things you know, but I know things have to change in certain ways. So, I am practicing this tenet here…it's not my job to make someone think a certain way or believe a certain way. It's like this other agreement; it's an invitation like consider this give and receive welcome. It is a way of changing or a new way of approaching conversations because I feel like I've been in situations where I want to be assertive, which may come off as aggressive, so I really am working on that one here and outside this circle a lot you know no savings or setting each other straight.*

Alan added his reflection on the agreements and brought it to his practice of engagement

and connecting with others outside the circle.

> *I was quasi in a position to coach and tell someone what to do. We can invite people to try a different approach. Something happens sometimes that has to stop. That part is setting someone straight. Nerve wracking, although I feel justified. Here it's more comfortable.*

The culture circle was a safe and, as Alan said, "…comfortable place to work on our connections so that we could make better attempts at connecting with others."

The intentional use of agreements not only supported our open and honest communication, trust, and care for one another in the circle, it fostered connections with ourselves and ways of being in professional learning as well as with one another. As Ahmed (2019) noted, intentionally created elements of praxis are absent from historical spaces of professional learning. The experience was useful not only in our praxis but in considering ways we could intentionally create agreements for connections with our students.

Organic Moves Toward Connection

The participants developed emotional connections within the process in organic ways. As seen in the excerpts from our circle transcripts, the participants have a shared knowledge or experience base, which is evident in their frequent verbal affirmations of each other; the cultural synchrony of the group was building during this shared affirmation. Collins (2004) talked about the role of positive emotional energy in group dynamics. He noted in his work on interactional rituals that high emotional energy and

shared emotional connection allow for deeper critical conversations that lead to emotional entrainment, which he described as a key toward deeper individual and collective consciousness. Collins (2017) explained:

> here are the ingredients… it brings people together bodily in the same space where they can feel each other's mood and see and hear the expressions they give off; it has to build up a mutual focus of attention everybody paying attention to the same thing and being aware that each other is paying attention it creates collective consciousness or intersubjectivity it needs to start with a shared emotion…the key to ritual success is that the emotion is shared and that it builds up as the group perceives they are all feeling it together mutual focus and shared emotional feedback into each other. The group falls into a collective rhythm. When rhythmic entrainment builds up it is the most engrossing thing in human experience literally the high point in people's lives.

Moments of powerful dynamics found in the culture circle, similar to what Collins (2004) described in his theory of interactional rituals, can be seen when participants shared on a very personal level.

The role cultural synchrony and emotional resonance played, as seen in the shared affirmation statement, is connection. It served as a way of expressing to one another, “I get what you are saying, I have been there too.” Emdin (2016) described this experience within his classrooms as collective effervescence:

> Collective effervescence is reached whey joy of teaching matches the joy of

> learning and a truly cosmopolitan space is created. In these spaces, the level of rigor is elevated, the number of higher-order questioning escalates, and the discussions about the content often reach levels that surpass the knowledge of any single individual in the classroom. (p. 147)

An analysis of the words used by participants using an initial round of in vivo coding showed that participants shared their personal stories. A second round of analysis included the use of word cloud generators of all the transcripts uploaded into Dedoose software. The resulting word cloud (See Appendix F) features the word *know* most frequently. Upon deeper analysis the multiple participants used phrase "you know", which occurred over 50 times in each session. Winnie utilized this phrase as we were discussing the importance of understating our deeper cultural selves:

> *Yeah right, I know what you mean. You have to like show up as yourself; you know right and you have to share where you're coming from, and like what you are who you are what you believe what you think well hopefully invite them to do the same whether in a large group or a small groups or…;however, you want to do it but like you bring your whole self and then you make space in time for them to bring their whole self.*

Alan's participation in the circle often showed a strong relational connection to others. The transcripts revealed Alan popping into the dialogue to connect to an idea or a concept that others were making. For example, Alan would chime in with a supportive or connecting idea like this one, "Because we recognize them as that important to us you

know what I mean?" As seen here, Alan's excerpt starts off with the "because" which not only syntactically connected his words to another participant's sentence, it also emotionally him connected to her ideas. As he ends this comment with *"You know what I mean,"* he offers a link or connection to someone else to be in relationship with his idea. Nelly utilized these discursive moves to make connections:

The expression *you know*, often disregarded in coding qualitative data, is highlighted in this analysis to show how it served as a way of making connections. The content, the text we were reading, or the image we discussed, was important, but the group's emotional connection around the content was vital. The circle work created a connection that was felt in the circle but also extended outside the physical circle.

Outside our circle, the participants were showing an emotional connection to one another. Camila showed an example of the connection to the group in the following excerpt as she was reading over a holiday break.

Excerpt of text chain

Sat. Apr 8 at 2:06 PM

Camila: Good morning! I am reading this book…*Miseducated* by Brandon K Fleming. There's a part in the book that I can't wait to share with you! It's an example of my Why! Have a great Easter!

I was excited that Camila was thinking of bringing something for discussion. I texted her privately to ask if she would like to bring the excerpt of the book to the circle. She was slightly nervous about it but agreed. At the next session, Camila handed out the

pages of Fleming's book for our praxis to continue (see Appendix E). As Camila read aloud from the first page, her voice broke. She cried, revealing a deep care for the protagonist of the book, who she felt represented many of her culturally and linguistically diverse students. She described feeling frustrated for her students whom she witnessed being treated unfairly by other adults whose cultural expectations were based in misinformation or bias. Camila explained,

> *Especially here where I teach, not all of them feel accepted; not all teachers accept them for who they are and open their hearts for them. This is why I love what I do there's a lot that's going on in their lives. Sometimes we don't have time, and we need to make that time to open to each other.*

Camila not only raised the value of being connected to students' lived experiences, but she also demonstrated the need for connection to other educators for collective care. She brought to light the complexity of building capacity without the space and time, like the culture circle for educators, to foster critical consciousness regarding our relationship to students.

Jessica added her reflection after Camila spoke, bringing her critical thinking about the text to the dialogue. She reflected, "I think it's important to give children rich language experience and to validate how we all express ourselves. If you are going to express and care for me, you have to express and care for all of me."

Jessica's excerpt revealed her belief that educators need to connect with students on a deeper level than we currently do. She hopes for an ethic of care, that our students

feel loved. Her idea also reveals a critical pedagogy.

Educators who teach students from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds should be able to care for the difference and love them in ways that foster validation. Freire (2005), in his letter to educators, reminded us that this type of love is not an attribute we are born with but rather a process of becoming and being with our students as not only teacher, but learner. Jessica reflects on how she engages with and ultimately cares and loves her students with all their complexities. Nodding (2013) noted this level of care is needed rather than the often-paradoxical nature of caring teachers who only center certain aspects of students, such as their skill development. Nelly also reflected and connected the text Camila brought to her knowledge about our school's equity and belonging survey completed recently.

> *A piece that stuck out to me (from the text) is the teacher really validated him looking at some of the data (from our school) we did surveys… lowest things among staff and students is that they don't feel validated. Speaking of this, I feel like I didn't fit in both, but in some groups, I had to code-switch; talk Black or African American English.*

Following this, Winnie added, "Everybody gets grace." We sat silently after Winnie spoke the word grace. I felt my own emotional stirrings as I recalled the moments when my students were not given grace. I felt the circle vibrate at this moment. Our words had power to heal or hurt, soothe, or stain someone's heart, perpetuate a bias, or protect one another's birthright to express their gifts and grow them freely.

The recursive nature of the circle allowed for deeper emotional connection. If Camila had not felt an emotional connection from the prior circle sessions, she would not have been vulnerable enough to reveal such deep emotions or even consider bringing her own work to the circle. In turn, her vulnerability opened the floor for others to take an emotional leap. The emotional resonance moved us to a higher feeling of connectedness that empowered our praxis and allowed us to imagine new possibilities outside the circle. I discuss these new imaginings in the final section on action steps, but next I describe the cultural connections forged within the praxis.

Cultural Connections

Through the dialogue and reflection process, the participants in the circle reconnected to their cultural selves while simultaneously developing new knowledge about one another. The new understanding directly connected to our relationships with our students and families and fostered an emotional and cultural connection to ourselves and one another. Educational researchers have shown that the cultural disconnection between teachers and students (Dee, 2015; Downer, 2016; Vinopal, 2019) continues to perpetuate the marginalization of our CLD students. Ahmed (2012) noted the fear of others and of discussing our cultural selves as having an impact on our students within our diverse learning communities. In one of our first sessions, we took a deeper dive into this process by exploring the deep levels of culture shown in the Culture Tree, which Hammond (2015) described as follows:

Rather than use the metaphor of an iceberg, I like to compare culture to a tree. A

> tree is part of a bigger eco-system that shapes and impacts its growth and development. Shallow culture is represented in the trunk and branches of the tree while we can think of surface culture as the observable fruit that the tree bears. Surface and shallow culture are not static; they change and shift over time as social groups move around and ethnic groups inter-marry, resulting in a cultural mosaic just as the branches and fruit on a tree change in response to the seasons and its environment. Deep culture is like the root system of a tree. It is what grounds the individual and nourishes their mental health. (p. 24)

We looked at the Culture Tree image that Hammond (2020) provided (See Appendix H). I asked the participants to consider the three levels of culture as described in the handout. At first there was hesitation, so I spoke first. I named the aspects of my identify, and then others followed. In the ensuing dialogue, we revealed who we are and what we teach. We told stories about our identities, which was an intentional step that created connections to ourselves, one another, and our students. Our connections allowed the participants to learn more about each other and to ultimately reflect in deeper ways.

The deep reflection and listening to one another's' stories opened pathways for connection and empathy, which are demonstrated in the quotes first by Nelly then Alan:

> I really believe that we are created noble, and I try to impart that in my teaching and my life. In seeing how other people live and how other cultures live, my worldview is important because everyone is different, and we all have different cultures even within.

In this excerpt, we see Nelly connecting to her grounded worldview. As she named the aspects of her deep cultural self, she shared the value of connecting herself to her work. The use of the Culture Tree forged intentional connections with other participants, which also allowed others to be vulnerable and share their deep cultural selves as seen in the quote from Alan:

> *We include lots of people who are not blood relatives…they're not just a friend of the family. Because we recognize them as that important to us, but to show that love we made you family, so when you're in you're in love. If you have talents, you have a responsibility to use that talent for other people.*

Alan's use of the word love reveals his deep care for others, including his students. He noted how the love most often expressed solely within families is part of his way of connecting with others. Alan's process of connecting to his cultural self deepened our dialogue to explore our cultural selves and the relationship to our identity as educators and how we teach. Alan shared his perspective on his cultural self in this way:

> *I always felt that the fact that I had relatives in another country was superpower… I can go to another place. Even though it was only once in a while, I didn't know people that were not very different from me. I always felt like I was a keeper of other knowledge that not everyone looked the same. I knew that not everyone was like this.*

Camila connected to Alan yet shared a different experience. She quickly responded by going deeper into her own cultural experience:

> *I loved going, but when I was younger, it was not a feeling of superpower for me. It wasn't anyone but me and my sister who spoke Spanish. I felt embarrassed that no one I knew would celebrate my cultural background -maybe only one teacher. Her name was Mrs. Sunshine, who helped me accept who I was. I didn't acknowledge my identity- it wasn't until I became a Spanish teacher that I started to celebrate aspects of my culture.*

The cultural connections made by one opened a pathway for others to share moving and powerful stories rooted in their cultural ways of being. As we reflected together on the unique and deep cultural ways of being, we also began to consider how we position come cultural ways of being as less valuable in our current educational system. When there are multiple realities of culture empowered, we connect to our collective truth of care for all not just for some. Nelly shared more about her identity and the lack of value she felt growing up in this school district:

> *I didn't feel like it is a superpower being bicultural. I struggled a lot with fitting in. I think with a dual identity, we did not celebrate Christmas. I felt like a freak. Even when Latinos came not from Costa Rica. I didn't admit [it]; I said I was from PR. I didn't fit in with Black people. I didn't fit in with White people. It is very shameful to admit right now. I didn't fit in with my White friends, and I didn't fit in with Black Hispanic friends. I had a strong sense of shame, and not fitting in was like a tornado. It would have been helpful if someone would have identified and talked about it.*

The excerpts reveal how we made connections to our individual lived realities and our collective shared cultural ways of being in the world. Our knowledge of cultural ways of being valued and not valued given power and depowered must be continually explored in relation to our roles as educators given our impact on students learning.

It is worth reiterating that Hammond's visual as a text gave us springboard to help us dive into dialogue. However, in the shared experience, cultural connections built upon one another. Lyiscott (2019) noted this step in her use of culture circles as the real-life phase where participants connect the text to their own contexts. Palmer (1998) noted the importance of providing space and time for dialogue so that teachers can connect their personal with the professional roles they are balancing. In his words,

> Framing inner life issues in ways hospitable to diversity is clearly critical if we want to help people in the public world rejoin "soul and role." Equally critical is the task of devising a pedagogy that works at the level of the soul—a pedagogy that honors the integrity of every soul while still challenging us to address issues we would rather ignore. (p. 382)

Connection to ourselves and one another was foundational in our praxis that led to our critical consciousness. We need space and time to connect to how our identities are revealed and growing in our relationships and pedagogy, especially as they relate to the inequities we may be perpetuating. As Mohamed (2020) noted:

> Before educators begin to teach student to know themselves and others, teachers must first do their own self work. This work involves teachers deeply unpacking

> their own histories, identities, biases, assumptions, and tensions with racism and other oppressions they have learned, experienced, and practiced (p. 78).

Our sessions created space for opening the dialogue to integrate critical reflection with our critical identity learning. All the participants connected to held beliefs and values, even our gifts and talents related to our own cultural and personal identity and how the inner self impacts the outer decisions we make in our professional roles as educators. In noting the cultural connection made within our circle, an understanding of our evolving identity as described by Freire (2005), who posited, "We are neither only what we inherit nor only what we acquire but, instead stem from the dynamic relationship between what we inherit and what we acquire*"* (p. 124).

After several sessions, we generated a greater awareness of the emotional and cultural identities we possess as a collective force for hopeful change. Over the five sessions, what began to emerge was a connection to our identity and one another, which opened a pathway for hope, joy, and future imaginings. These hopeful ideas, which I describe in the next section, provide not an end point, but rather moments within cycles of praxis.

Ongoing Praxis and Action Steps

The participants developed action steps as they first problematized situational and contextual issues and simultaneously made connections to their cultural emotional selves. An action may be the end goal with the focus of praxis being change, yet it is not an end to praxis. Instead, action marks the beginning of the next cycle of praxis. Through action,

there is new reflection and new action. The educators increased their individual and collective critical consciousness through the cyclical process. Nelly spoke after our sessions had ended:

> I would not have shared so openly some of the thoughts I was having had I not been connected to the other educators in the circle, which was a developing process. The space felt safe to speak honestly about my experiences and perspective of racism and bias as a student of color and as a teacher of color. There is more we can do but in the short time we did spend together, I am glad that we could open dialogue at a deeper level than I have in any other professional workshop since being a teacher.

The circle space allowed the individual to be in their process to begin or continue to reawaken their criticality out loud in our face-to-face conversations.

One example of an action step was from Winnie, who noted throughout the circle sessions that she had been to several workshops on being more culturally responsive yet felt still there was something missing from these workshops to inform or change her pedagogy. Winnie noted the idea that if we want to be more inclusive we need to know our students more fully.

March 29, 2023

> *So, if I want to be more culturally responsive in my class I want to know more about my students. Having a cultural survey tells us a little more so we can use the data to see what the makeup of my class is and design reading and questions*

from that information. I want to be more intentional to tap into the students' lived experiences and stories.

Winnie brought her survey as a text to analyze critically. She was willing to be vulnerable and also patient as others shared their perspectives on certain questions in her survey. The dialogue, considering the questions, proved to be a bit messy. There was more cross-talk, interruptions, and side conversations. This was a departure from our circle agreements. However, being a part of and witnessing the emerging disagreements within an intentional space was powerful. Winnie opened herself up to hear others' perspectives.

Jessica reflected on that event in a follow up interview. She explained, "Although this was a bit messy, I appreciated Winnie allowing for process of creating the survey. She was vulnerable, and we were engaged in a feeling of reciprocity. We were learning from one another."

Jessica's use of the word reciprocity is tied directly to a core component of care described by Noddings (2016). Not only were we problematizing care as an ethical and moral imperative for teaching and learning, but we were also practicing care within our praxis. Winnie also felt the notion of reciprocity. She told me that she learned new ideas from the other educators in the group. We created a level of comfort to engage in a process of learning together. Winnie told me that when she did implement the survey at the start of this school year, she decided to include students' ideas in the construction of the survey. She explained, "I asked them what they wanted to talk about their lived realities and what they felt was important for me to understand them better." This shows

Winnie's caring critical pedagogy, centering students not enforcing practices in the typical top-down way. Her action step involved a compromise or reaching a consensus, which promoted greater inclusivity.

At another circle, Camila shared an idea as we were talking about cultural literacies and supporting the cultural awareness of ourselves. She noted actionable steps she wanted to take as she explained in this excerpt from our circle. She stated, "It got me thinking, similar to an equity audit for books, an individual audit and collective audits as an ongoing process, a friend group audit to work on balancing the work and professional responsibilities."

Camila's action step related to the excerpt from *Miseducation* she had brought to the circle sessions prior. How can we audit our thinking to be more mindful of our students and their lived experiences? The questions asked showed a raised level of awareness of her ability to make powerful changes in her teaching. Camila also shared the internal action taking place because of her engagement in the circle. She said, "I really do enjoy coming here. All the stuff that's going on this circle really brings me peace, and I appreciate what everyone said." The positive feeling Camila developed created a space for her and others to begin to develop action steps. Our imaginations were unblocked, and direct action steps began to flow.

Sometimes, the ebb and flow of the praxis of problematizing and connecting naturally brought participants to think aloud about immediate action steps. Alan noted that he was "thinking about next year and thinking about ways we can be more student-

centered." His connection within the dialogue showed how dialogue and reflection in the circle led us to create meaningful action steps. Alan commented at another session that showed small yet powerful steps he could take to incorporate what he was learning into his pedagogy:

> *Makes me think about building turn and talks into my classroom routine. I'm not doing that naturally. A parent I know went to visit the kids in the college, and the doors are all closed. Kids are on computers and nothing is really scheduled into the day for kids to talk to one another creates more loneliness, so we need to build that into the day.*

The direct action steps imagined showed the value of Alan's engagement in the praxis. Interestingly his action step is about increasing connections for students with one another. At an earlier circle, when we were problematizing the deficit lens found in educators' discourse, Alan again naturally spoke about beginning a critical lens to his teaching. He explained, "I never thought about what I do and what I experience through this lens.*"* There were small and large steps beginning to occur. I felt a hopefulness of the future and what we could do together.

Finally, at the time of writing this, the school district where I conducted this study has provided an option for educators to create their own Professional Learning Community (PLC) to meet mandated professional development hours required in New York State. I have started writing a proposal for our culture circle to continue as a PLC for 2023-2024. When I asked Jessica about continuing our circle, she said:

> I think our circle can happen within the PLC idea, like honestly, don't make me stay here after school to do this other kind of stuff…like, trust me to, like, to go meet with people somewhere or to meet virtually and let me know what you want to see at the end. Like, let me decide what that'll be and let me collect my data, and, you know. a little trust like that goes a long way, yeah.

When educators are not trusted to choose what is best and most meaningful for our professional learning, Jessica's hope for our created action step may on fact turn to disconnect. We need other stakeholders to trust educators to grow professionally and engage in their own praxis work. Trust was developed in the circle that enabled creative and enthusiastic action steps. When we emotionally connect to one another, we were able to create better action steps.

For myself, I had started to see that my passion for the culture circle and how it supported me in strengthening my critical lens, it also strengthened my critical voice. I have often felt that to be critical was annoying others or being negative. This praxis work on our circle reminded me that our voices are strong and need to be heard, especially given the students we are in charge of teaching caring for are silenced. Some of the action steps for the educators may be visible. like speaking up in educational conversations to help center other voices, not only the most powerful. Other visible steps were developing culturally responsive curriculum plans, increasing welcome in classrooms and schools, or choosing more culturally diverse literature for our libraries. Some action steps, however,

are internal. Educators who are engaged in the praxis work can in times of conflict allow the peaceful knowing self to stay grounded in love.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I applied critical pedagogy and ethic of care as foundational theories as poured over the words and experiences of the circle of educators. Further, to analyze the data, I used Palmer's metaphor for the inner and outer life of educators and connected to Collins' (2004) ideas on the dynamics found in his work of interactional rituals, which related to the experiences within our culture circle. I also described how educators problematized current experiences relating to their positions of power, the school culture, and deficit-based thinking. I provided an explanation of the theme uncovered which I describe as journeying toward connection. Finally, my findings reveal action steps educators created in part due to the experience within the circle. My study sought to explore a practice that can lead to disrupting or changing the status quo (Radd et al., 2021). In the final chapter of this dissertation, I provide answers to the research questions, contributions to theories, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter V: Conclusions

Lessons Learned for Ongoing Critical praxis.

Over five months six educators gathered in a small classroom in their school district on Long Island. We came together not only to participate in a study to explore critical praxis but because we care deeply about education and our students. We connected with our caring cultural selves, as we engaged in a critical praxis. Rather than imposing and forcing a way of thinking or, worse disengaging and ignoring others' ideas, the educators in the circle were open to connecting because praxis work requires relationships. The dance of listening, critically reflecting on what others said, and pausing for silence moved us to emotional and cultural connections. These vital emotional and cultural connections in the critical praxis led to a reawakening of our critical consciousness. The metaphor of a dance is useful in that there is movement. Praxis is not a discrete point of arrival, and action is not final. Our individual and collective consciousness led to direct action steps, and many, if not all, the educators noted our work will continue.

My personal experiences and value of ongoing critical praxis that have occurred outside and within the doctoral program in which I developed this study is what inspired the purpose and research questions. I deeply connected to this process. I was engaged in purposefully reflecting on my own bias, inner and outer self, and care for developing new understandings of others' perspectives within circles of committed others. My belief that engaging in critical praxis with others has been strengthened by this study. Petrovic and

Rosiek (2007) stated, “It is not enough for teacher educators to turn out teachers with a critical conception of heteronormativity; they must also be able to envision ways, both small and large, to act on that critical consciousness” (p. 226).

The continued predominance of CLD students taught by White teachers, which leads to cultural discontinuity and the perpetuation of Eurocentric teaching, also calls for further exploration of what it means to be critically conscious and engage in a critical praxis. For education to be more just, teachers need to think critically about their role in building relationships with diverse students and developing curriculum through a critical lens. It is an ethical and moral imperative to increase opportunities for a critical praxis to exist as a way towards emotional and cultural connection. This study illuminated how praxis can open the doors to more voices, unheard avenues, and creative thoughts in our diverse teaching and learning settings. As educators, we are called on to care, yet we may have lost sight of caring as a primary foundation for what we do. A way forward is by creating a circle of caring educators who we can listen to and dialogue without fear of retaliation, confrontation, and judgment. During the process the circle of educators renewed our commitment to ourselves which in turn allowed us to renew our commitment to care and teach our students. In the rest of this chapter, I summarize the major findings of my study, describing how the themes respond to my research questions. My research questions focused on the participants' experiences and my own as they were intertwined and dependent on one another. I provide implications for policy and practice, limitations of my study, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

I designed this autoethnographic action research study to engage a group of educators in a culture circle to learn more about the process of critical praxis and to inspire action to transform their practice. The purpose of this study was to describe what happened in the culture circle of six educators engaged in a critical praxis of dialogue, listening, and reflection. Freire critical pedagogy and Nodding TC inspired me to use these two foundational theories to frame my study. I also utilized Palmer's theory of teachers' inner and our lives and Collins' theory of interactional rituals within the analysis stage of the study. My study described individual and collective experiences of praxis.

We began our circle sessions in March 2023 and concluded in June 2023. I collected data in the form of audio-recorded circle dialogue and transcribed the dialogue and follow-up interviews that occurred during the analysis phase of the study. The critical transformative auto/ethnography allowed me to see the recursive nature of the educators posing problems, connecting with the self, others, and ultimately connecting to their critical praxis for increasing our critical consciousness as seen in direct transformative action. My study disrupts the current top-down model of professional development and confronts how, if left unchanged, it will continue to have implications for perpetuating educational inequities. Given the conceptualizations of praxis that resulted from the culture circles, I believe they offer significant promise for exploring the development of

culturally responsive, asset-based educators. In the next section, I describe the findings in relation to the research questions.

Major Findings

In this section, I provide answers to the questions that guided this study. In Chapter 4, I reported the three major themes that emerged from the triangulation of participant data. Our time together in the culture circle allowed the educators to pose problems, make connections emotionally and culturally, and develop action steps within our diverse learning communities.

Finding #1 Culture Circles as a Method for Critical Problematizing.

Over the five sessions, the educators shared a critical perspective of current issues specifically for the CLD students in their care. The educators in the circle had and developed a critical awareness of educational problems that require our individual and collective attention. Over the five sessions, the educators named non-inclusive practices, lack of cultural awareness, unwelcoming or uncaring school culture, and deficit mindsets. They did not just complain about these issues; they brought them to the circle as part of the praxis work. They brought issues they cared about so that change could be made.

Finding #2 Connection Fostered the Praxis Work Within our Culture Circle.

A significant finding was that connection was foundational to the praxis work within our culture circle. Critical praxis is an individual endeavor, but the relational connections strengthened our praxis. The inner self-reflection shared in the circle connected us quickly to one another and our roles as educators. The participants were

able to create a safe space for the hard work of uncovering our identities and how that impacts our teaching. We talked about our understanding of our own cultural identities and how it impacts our capacity for critical pedagogy. The emotional and cultural work we did in our circle opened deeper conversations and reflections that fostered our thinking about being culturally responsive educators and educators with reawakened critical consciousness. When the participants made emotional and cultural connections between the inner and outer self and one another, we opened a pathway for hope, joy, and future imaginings. Connections experienced in the circle allowed for individual realization of strength, hope and fortitude as we addressed the disconnection we individually and collectively experience in the educational system as it currently exists.

Finding #3 Our Culture Circle Led us to Action.

Through dialogue, listening, and reflection as we posed problems in our current contexts and developed emotional and cultural connection, we increased our capacity to return to the more comprehensive system and make transformational changes in our individual and collective learning spaces. Our creative sparks were ignited, and we realized we have the individual and collective power to transform the problems we face in our schools. When the educators engaged in dialogue with one another about their inner self, moral compass, and ideologies, a collective awareness grew. The educators in the circle co created a safe and trusted place, opened the dialogue, and considered ways to bring this consciousness outside the circle and into the larger circle of our classrooms

with our students and colleagues. We gained individual and collective consciousness so that we can co-create action steps inside our culture circle and outside it as well.

Responding to the Research Questions

Research Question #1:

What are the elements of critical praxis within a Freirean-inspired culture circle?

The elements of the critical praxis, as revealed in the data, are problematizing, connecting, and action. During the first element of the praxis, educators posed problems related to their situational contexts. The problems posed within the circle showed a shared moral or ideological belief in cooperation and care. This dialogue demonstrated a critical lens, not only thinking about issues but bringing to the fore issues for us to individually and collectively challenge. A critical discourse can challenge the status quo and foster a critical consciousness that leads to transforming social inequities (Freire, 1974). Our circle allowed us the space to problematize what we see and hear regarding inequities and non-inclusive practices for CLD students. Our dialogue showed we critically analyzed our current ideas and practices across cultural boundaries. We were able to talk about critical issues in education and not only complain about or discuss them over and over, but rather consider ways to address them in our practice. The time spent problematizing in our current contexts increased our capacity for meaningful development of emotional and cultural connections as well as increased our care of our marginalized students.

The second element of praxis, as noted in the triangulation of data, was connections. The educators listened in a way that strengthened one another's emotional and cultural connections. They listened with, as Delpit (1988) described, “a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds” (p. 297). More significantly, an educator listens without a hidden agenda, but rather listens with a deep respect to learn from the exchange of ideas. Listening and learning about and from others increased educators’ cultural knowledge, which was outside their initial realm of understanding. The goal of promoting those who are marginalized can be met when educators engage active listening as a tool used for increasing knowledge. Our praxis was cyclical, and we returned to the circle for deeper conversations after time to reflect on our thoughts about the situation or issues previously discussed.

1.a/b How do participants and the researcher describe the praxis work of the culture circle?

Participants spoke about our time together with words like “collaborate,” “together,” and “I'm not alone in this work”. The participants described their experiences within the circle as a process, not a completion of tasks or activities, lessons to be learned or taught. Praxis includes the people in the circle, listening and reflecting to bring about change. We are educators, but we are also learners, and impacted by the social and political issues of our time. The participants also described a care for changing and acting. Jessica specifically noted a movement forward in our collective efficacy and

power to make changes in our practices. The participants described collaborative efforts that grew within the circle and were continuing outside the circle. The educators also described the often non-ethical or culturally unresponsive ways of doing school. We follow the status-quo, oppressive, or marginalizing practices because the force is strong. The dialogue and reflection opened a pathway to see our own transformational power through direct action steps.

Research Question #2:

What actions and/or discussions within the culture circle lead participants to caring, critical action?

A major recursive experience that allowed for the journey to become a cyclical process of care was in the making, revisiting, and upholding agreements for our circle sessions. As the facilitator of the first circle, I brought visuals of ground rules or agreements from a few sources. We discussed them all and made connections to the work many of us had been utilizing in restorative circles within our classrooms. We read them aloud or silently and reflected on the agreements honored or experienced during each session. The agreements fostered care for one another. The agreements, read each session, reminded us to care more deeply for one another within the circle. The agreements created an intentional protocol so that we all could be heard. The agreements strengthened our dialogue.

Another aspect of the circle that led participants to caring, critical action was the checking-in time. At each of our circle sessions, we spent time doing a check-in. This

time created a space for moving from casual friendly chat to centering ourselves in a space where we can be heard one voice at a time. This type of listening during the check-in was different from casual chatting with one another, one-on-one, or in a small group. We held an intentional space for each voice to be heard. The check-in was a space to build connections, as shown in Chapter 4, that were foundational for action. When only one voice was speaking, the others were not moving and talking with them; they were hearing. Truly hearing others was a powerful aspect of moving our circle toward connection. Within our professional experiences, we noted that there are hardly times where we can feel heard. Participants reflected on the difference between the types of talk that occur in typical professional learning circles in which many noted they hardly speak. The check-in time allowed for anyone who normally would not share about content to make the connections to their thinking.

Finally, the participants' individual situational needs guided the content of the circle. The "work" we brought to the circle was our own images, texts, and surveys, that became the focus for the circle of educators to dialogue and reflect on together. As I reflect on the overall experience, there were powerful moments but there was not one key or critical moment. The cyclical nature of the circle created a movement and fostered ongoing connection to continue our work together. If I were to redesign the questions, I would ask how the work of the group led us to critical moments. It is not the moments that are important to name but the process that got us to each and every moment.

Limitations of the Study

A substantial limitation of this study is time. I conducted this study over five circle sessions within four months. Praxis is defined as an ongoing, recursive process which is needed. Therefore, we needed more time to go deeper to cyclically revisit situations that were raised up in our circles. The small amount of time in the circles limited the process, limiting the results of the findings.

Second, despite the value of having real educators who present real problems, the people, including myself as the researcher participant, cannot be replicated for future studies. The limitation in presenting a small number of participants can be offset by the relational aspect of ordinary educators currently teaching in the field, seeking new ways of supporting the diversity of our students and hoping to change the educational system that oppresses and marginalizes them. Although small, this study is real, rich, and deep and has value due to the application of this context to other educators with simpler yet complex perspectives. My study focused on educators and the small but powerful changes they can make within the larger system.

One more limitation of my study is my positionality, which although brought a high level of authenticity, also brought with it a level of subjectivity. With historical and systemic race, class, and gender bias in mind, the current marginalization of culturally and linguistically diverse students in education requires a focus and a raised level of critical consciousness. I interrogated my level of consciousness, knowing that I come from a White, middle-class, non-marginalized perspective, with humility and fortitude. I

described my praxis and the praxis of the participants so that it adds critically to the diverse perspectives, conversation, and ongoing process educators are taking. I brought an awareness that my positionality, which is an aspect of privilege, afforded to me due to my identity as a White, middle-class heterosexual woman. I juxtaposed this limitation with my vulnerability to reveal my thinking within the group process within the autoethnographic writing throughout the study. Given that this is an autoethnographic study, I attempted to provide a balance of the researcher and participants' voices in the analysis. The need for diverse voices to be heard was considered in the design and implementation of the study. The fact that there was only one person of color may be seen as a limitation. But throughout the circle sessions, the participants revealed an openness to hearing others' perspectives while at the same time not making Nelly the representative for all people of color.

During the study, I triangulated the findings with multiple data sources. I also took steps to increase the validity and trustworthiness of my study. I invited participants to review the transcripts and observational notes to ensure validity. I consulted with peers, as well as my dissertation committee, to help inform my process of analyzing data and generating themes to increase the reliability of findings. Finally, I was sure to consult and consider the suggestions from my dissertation committee to challenge the bias of my preconceived theories throughout the development and implementation of the study. As an educator, I know the impact teachers have on students, which moved me to position them as the subject of this study.

Finally, my personal and professional experiences as well as a review of the literature strengthened the idea of engaging in ongoing critical reflection and dialogue with others. I attempted to widen my lens by utilizing multiple theories. However, all my theories are also White, which is a limitation of my study. I realize the implications of having a primarily White, Christian perspective and theories connected to my perspective. However, as Freire encouraged, I engaged in a dialogical perspective, which addressed some of the theoretical limitations of study. Given that Palmer (1998) does not address race and class issues, when paired with Freire and Noddings, they painted a fuller picture to explain the experiences of educators' critical praxis. The theoretical limitation of this study leads to recommendations for further studies.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Study

This action research study, though focused on the experiences of the educators in this culture circle, has several implications for educators and those who make decisions for educator professional learning. I recognize my study as providing a necessary, yet not sufficient analysis for understanding praxis. As I focused solely on educators, my hope is that other members of the school community see the value of engaging in a critical praxis in a culture circle.

My study has implications for educators seeking new ways to enhance their pedagogy to be more critical and culturally responsive. Culture circles are a countercultural way of growing professionally, and my findings reveal strong indications that they are a useful method, specifically in the area of cultural responsiveness and

critical pedagogy. In addition, schools where educators are given professional development as a recipient of information that may or may not have usefulness in their field, a culture circle of educators can engage teachers to be a part of their own action research within the praxis. For one example, in-service teacher educators who are required to complete New York State-mandated professional learning may benefit from a culture circle of educators who offer them safety, care, and challenge their thinking. Therefore, I recommend restructuring of current offerings of professional learning to include culture circles as PLCs for educators to problematize and connect with one another and their own critical consciousness for more widespread individual and collective action. The findings of this study provide ideas for school districts with increasingly diverse populations to imagine new ways for educators to develop a caring, critical pedagogy.

Given that educational research like mine provides evidence that educators should engage in a critical praxis and culture circles are one way to meet that need, policymakers must support teachers and school districts in fostering educators' ongoing and sustaining critical praxis. The New York State Board of Regents should continue to promote its policy statement (2021) commitment to ensuring.

> All school districts and institutions of higher education will develop and implement policies and practices that advance diversity, equity and inclusion – and that they will implement such policies and practices with fidelity and urgency.

However, rather than solely providing frameworks that educators must unpack and understand on their own time, policies should include funding for educators to develop and sustain a critical praxis. The school district where this study took place has primarily implemented professional development in a top-down model based on NYS policies, all with substantial time constraints. The findings from this research study provide a new method for improved professional learning and also, given the design as action research, offers a new way for schools align to policy recommendations. The positive experiences of educators as researchers and specifically engaging in action research instead of flat, top-down current professional development models are implications for administrators, policymakers, and teacher educators to consider. When educators participate in a culture circle and engage in praxis, the action steps educators take may be more meaningful to themselves and the students within their diverse learning communities.

Finally, the literature that supported this study provided evidence of the value in supporting students' critical consciousness development yet was unrevealing as to the components of critical praxis described by educators. (Arellano, et al., 2016; Bradley-Levine, 2017; Godfrey & Wolf, 2016; Gorski, 2009; Neri et al., 2019). My study added to the research in revealing an example of what happened in a culture circle as we engaged in a critical praxis. Future research is needed to study the critical praxis of educators over longer periods. Research should be conducted that offers longitudinal examples of praxis to reveal a wider variety of themes. Other types of research designs

can allow for new understandings of culture circles and critical praxis. A correlational study that can show a relational connection between praxis work and the impact on students' social emotional skills and academics would add to the research on this topic. Ultimately, critical praxis should be given more consideration in various types of educational research.

Conclusion

> Authentic help means that all who are involved help each other mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality which they seek to transform. Only through such praxis— in which those who help and those who are being helped help each other simultaneously —can the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped.
>
> (Freire, in hooks 1998, p.47)

This study allowed participants to engage in a process that supported critical conversations and identify action steps that participants could implement in their teaching and learning spaces. The educators who participated in the circle shared an affinity for deeper work to address our individual and collective educational disconnections. The relationship that currently exists is that everything fits in a specific box to keep the system going. Participants returned to the circle each session, apologized when they could not make it, and even came rushing in from doctor’s appointments not to miss the session. This circle illuminated that educators want and need something deeper and when they work together their actions are meaningful.

It was our last circle, and I thanked everyone for being a part of the circle.

Transcript Excerpt

May 24.

Thank you so much for being a part of this process, for coming and for continuing to come back each session, and for being a part of the study. I am so grateful. I am not only doing this to complete my dissertation but I'm doing this because I need it. I need you all - this circle. I am so grateful to all of you. I feel more connected to you all…to our work and I am excited about the ideas we have for next year. I really want to keep our circle going next year.

Nelly interjected: "Yea, I was going to say aren't we going to keep it going!"

Camila: "Yes, I want to. Can we?"

Winnie: "Definitely"

The connections that we made felt affirming and necessary for us to keep exploring our critical pedagogy. Out of our circle connections, partnerships grew to include collaboration in professional leadership roles. For example, Camila and Nelly are currently working together to open teachers' hearts and minds to bring an asset-based approach when dealing with the complexity of students learning English as their second language and who also may be struggling with speech articulation and language processing. According to them, the work in the circle connected them to this direct action step in their learning community. Jessica and I have planned a mini culture circle for educators to problematize their pedagogy in writing instruction, specifically for CLD

students. Alan is completing his own dissertation. Winnie used her cultural survey and described knowing her students better this year because of it. She also noted that she will continue to revise based on student input, showing again that our praxis is not over.

As noted in the analysis, participants needed the space for dialogue to bring racial inequities and historic racism to the fore. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Nelly had used the expression, "I don't mean to go there but…" multiple times over several sessions as if she was bringing up something taboo. In a follow-up interview with Nelly, she noted that in her past experiences in spaces of professional development, she was not able to bring "it" up that she might be misunderstood or placed in a box. She was glad to have the circle to open the dialogue for her and for all of us. I was also glad but recognized that her repeated use of that statement meant we can go deeper. Our praxis is not over.

As noted above, all the educators said they would like to continue our work together. Not only do I want to maintain the emotional and cultural connections, but I also want the work to be an ongoing and sustaining process. I noticed my experience in the circle reconnected me to my care for myself and other educators to be engaged in ongoing reflection for greater responsiveness. As I reflected on the strong possibility of our culture circle continuing in the future, I became aware of my internal joy. This praxis work of problematizing our situational practices and policies, connecting emotionally, and planning meaningful action steps ultimately brought me joy. We are all working hard with a heavy dose of care and passion. As I seek to find joy in the world and bring joy into my classrooms, my time in the circle has empowered me. Our praxis will continue.

I am grateful and humbled by the fact that this journey is and will be forever unfinished. Once I think I know something, I realize there is more to learn, unlearn, and relearn. I say this without diminishing the level of deep and impactful learning I have co-constructed within the collaborative spaces of the culture circle. I have always been a part of circles at moments where it changed my life, my thinking, and really touched me and moved my thinking. Those times were always in circles of people. Whether it was a church/religious type group or a women's group, growth and change happened in those circles. Most importantly, my hope is not to simply consider myself a social justice leader but to be a part of ongoing and sustaining critical spaces of dialogue and reflection with diverse groups of people that can lead to more action for dignified equity in education and our communities. Our praxis will continue.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

MOLLOY UNIVERSITY
1000 Hempstead Ave., PO Box 5002, Rockville Center, NY 11571-5002
www.molloy.edu

Patricia A. Eckardt, PhD, RN, FAAN
Chair, Molloy University Institutional Review Board
Professor, Barbara H. Hagan School of Nursing and Health Sciences
E: peckardt@molloy.edu
T: 516.323.3711

DATE: December 15, 2022

TO: Christine Daniels
FROM: Molloy University IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1996187-1] Engaging in a caring critical praxis: An autoethnographic action research study of a culture circle with K-12 educators.

REFERENCE #:

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF NOT HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH
DECISION DATE: December 15, 2022

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Molloy University IRB has determined this project does not meet the definition of human subject research under the purview of the IRB according to Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations for the research as defined in 45CFR§46.101.

You may proceed with your project.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If there is a proposed change to the project, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to inform the Molloy University IRB of any requested changes before implementation. A change in the activities may change the project from not human subject research status and requires prior communication with the IRB.

The finding of the project may be published if NO individual level or identifiable data are used. An example of text for publication in a journal could read: "This activity was acknowledged by the Molloy University IRB and deemed to not be human subject research as defined the Common Rule 45 CFR part 46, subpart A."

Projects that do not meet the definition of research (as defined the Common Rule 45 CFR part 46, subpart A) still require an annual ongoing report of the project if the project extends beyond a year (see Annual Non-Research Ongoing Project Report Form).

If you have any questions, please contact Patricia Eckardt at 516-323-3711 or peckardt@molloy.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,

Patricia Eckardt, Ph.D., RN, FAAN
Chair, Molloy University Institutional Review Board

This letter has been issued in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Molloy University IRB's records.

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Molloy University IRB
Approval Date: December 15, 2022
Expiration Date: December 14, 2023

Dear educator,

My name is Christine Daniels. I am a doctoral student starting an autoethnographic action research study to complete my dissertation within Molloy University's Ed.D Program for Diverse Learning Communities. I am currently the Chairperson for Elementary ENL and have been an ENL teacher for over 20 years in the South Country Central School District. I am interested in creating a circle of educators who, like me, care about issues of diversity, equity and inclusion and would like to work together to address educational challenges we face in our teaching and learning spaces.

I am calling it: Circle for Educators.

I am seeking 5-7 K-12 educators to voluntarily participate in a 7-part series of circles. The 90-minute circles will be designed to allow educators to dialogue and reflect on individual and collective problems in our teaching and learning spaces. Given professional development experiences that are delivered in a top-down design, this series will offer a caring, safe and brave space for educators to engage in a process that can lead to meaningful, creative action steps.

The series of circles will be held every other week from February-May 2022. I have not yet set dates as I would like to see who is interested. We can then find a day and time that works for all.

Please let me know if there are any questions or concerns about this study that I may address for you. Participation is entirely voluntary. This study has been pre-approved by Molloy University IRB. If you are interested in participating in this study, please email me at cdaniels1@lions.mollly.edu so I can forward you the informed consent form.

Thank you so much for considering to be a part of my study.

Sincerely,
Christine Daniels
cdaniels@southcountry.org
631-525-2486

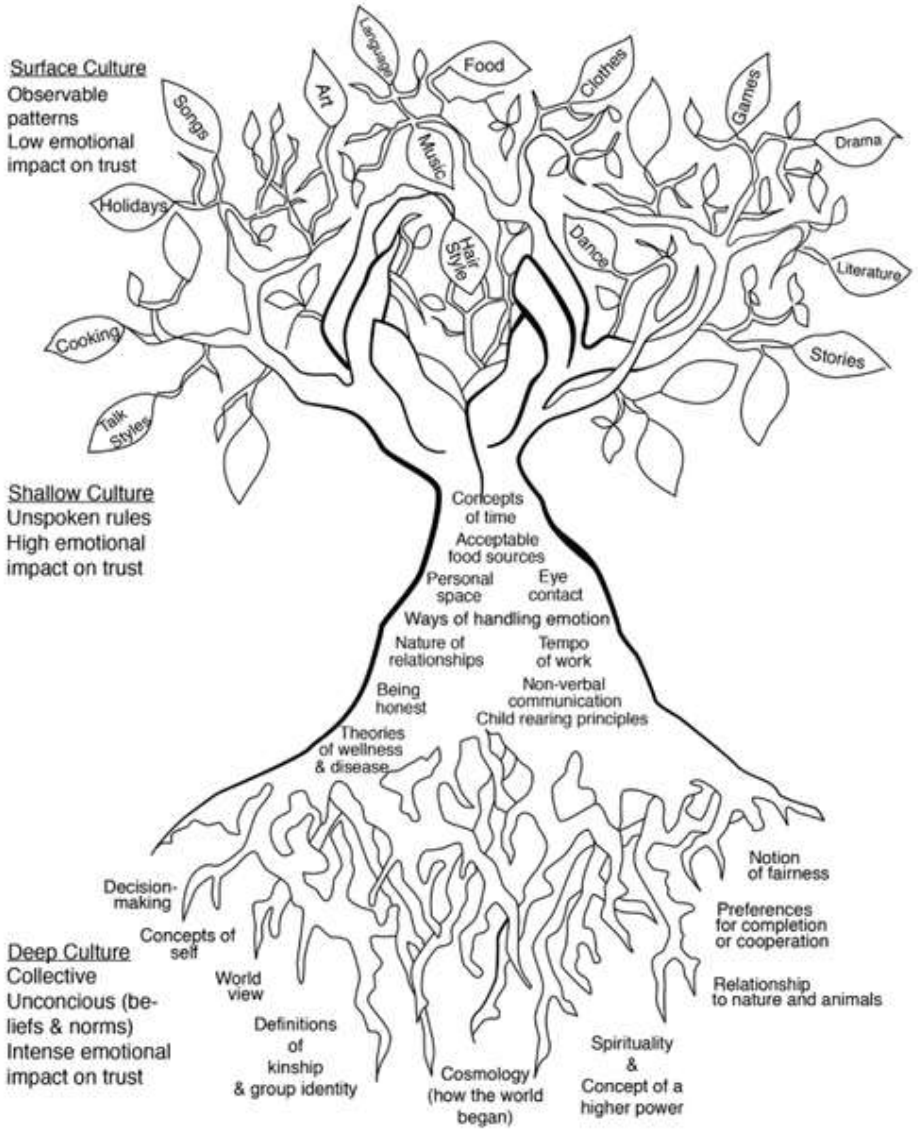
Appendix C: Circle Agreements

Educator's Circle Agreements

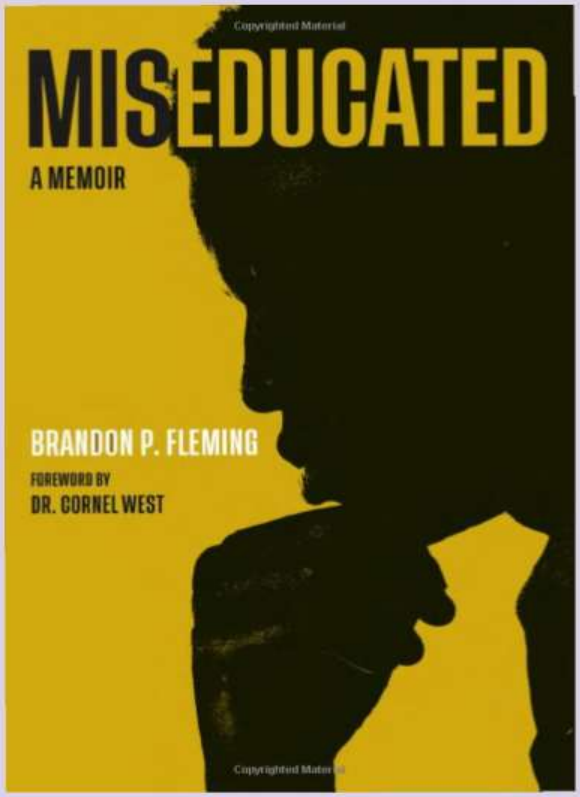
- Be as fully present as possible.
- Extend welcome and receive welcome
- Listen with soft eyes and body language awareness.
- Welcome silence.
- When the going gets rough, turn to inquiry, interest, or wonder.
- There is always invitation, never demand.
- No fixing, saving, advising, or setting each other straight.
- Speak for yourself into the center of the circle: use "I" statements.
- Learn to respond to others with open honest questions.
- Attend to your own inner teacher.
- Observe deep confidentiality.
- Know that it's possible to leave the circle with whatever it was you needed.

Adapted from Touchstones Palmer, P. (1997). *Courage to Teach*

Appendix D: Zaretta Hammond's (2020) Culture Tree



Appendix E: Camila's praxis wor



Bring to mind a student.

Connect to their basic inherent good.

How do schools/educators/students access their good to help students to be educated?

Appendix F: Word Cloud from Transcripts