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Critical Pedagogy in Practice: Reflections of a K-5 Educator

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Abstract

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The author illuminates major theoretical concepts integral to critical pedagogy as they apply to grades k-5 through a selective review of the literature and reflection on how these principles intersect with her personal and teaching experiences. A candid analysis of the author's ongoing journey to put these ideas into practice**,** including ways in which she has felt successful and areas she continues to find challenging, is offered. Suggestions for ways in which elementary school educators can approach their teaching practices and classroom structures through the lens of critical pedagogy are included. Reactions to the thesis from several of the author's colleagues, friends, and mentors are presented.

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Introduction to Critical Pedagogy

> In speaking about hunger, I must not be satisfied with defining it as "urgent need for food, big appetite, lack of nourishment, deprivation from, or scarcity of food." The critical intelligence of something implies the apprehension of its reason for being. Stopping at the description of the object or twisting its reasons for being are mind-narrowing processes. My comprehension of hunger is not dictionary: once recognizing the meaning of the word, I must recognize the reasons for the phenomenon. If I cannot be indifferent to the pain of those who go hungry, I cannot suggest to them either that their situation is the result of God's will. That is a lie. (Freire, 1997, p. 13)

In the past few years, I have been in a consistent state of bewilderment and distress as the current administration of the federal government of the United States outwardly targets groups of people, rolls back protective environmental policies, and imperils the legitimacy of some of our most democratic institutions, such as the free press. In times of such emotion, I wonder what my role is as an educator. Why should my students learn to be kind, if those who lead our country do not value kindness at all? While it has been easy, at times, to lose hope, I have been inspired by the students and colleagues around me who resist the regressive changes that seem, in many ways, inevitable.

In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Paolo Freire (1997) insists that "without a vision for tomorrow, hope is impossible" (p. 13). My vision of tomorrow is a world changed, for the better, by my students. As a teacher, I feel that my role is to provide students not simply

with the tools that will help them succeed in college and in their careers, as is the intent of the Common Core State Standards (http://www.corestandards.org), but also with those tools that will guide them to be reflective and critical people.

In this thesis, I refer to this type of teaching as critical pedagogy, though major thinkers in the field of education have referred to it as anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010), engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994), multicultural education (Au, 2014), praxis-oriented pedagogy (McLaren, 2016), and transformative pedagogy (hooks, 1994), among others. This approach "cultivate[s] a process of teaching and learning that deeply nurtures the development of critical consciousness among teachers and their students… through on-going, interactive classroom spaces, where teachers and students can reflect, critique, and act upon their world" (Darder, Torres & Baltodano, 2017, pp. 27-28). Critical pedagogy "makes no claim to political neutrality" (McLaren, 2016, p. 10) and is therefore situated in the "larger, more serious struggle for social justice, a struggle that recognizes the need to fight against systemic racism, colonization, and cultural oppression that takes place in our [country and our] schools" (Au, 2014, p. 2).

As a preface to this thesis, I will note that my intent is not to write a traditional review of literature, but rather a selective review that is specifically tailored to my personal and professional experiences. I include these experiences liberally as a means to explore and apply key concepts of critical pedagogy. The process of writing this thesis was a cathartic one and yet many of the personal anecdotes that I chose to include leave me vulnerable to the perspective of the reader. However, my decision to do so evolved

out of necessity. Self-examination is a major element to this thesis. Without a critical review of self, educators cannot critically review their teaching practices. So, to model this axiom, I will allow myself to be exposed to my personal critiques and to those of others.

There are four major parts to this thesis. In the first, I outline a few major, recurring concepts that I believe are fundamental to those interested in engaging in the process of critical pedagogy. These include that educators must (a) first find a reason or awaken to the need for critical thought in our world; (b) explore their identities and unpack their histories before asking their students to do the same; (c) acknowledge that education is not a neutral process and is heavily influenced by the systemic inequities in our society; and (d) use their teaching to actively challenge the system that unfairly targets individuals or groups. In the second, I discuss the practices and structures ideal to critical classrooms and consider those within my own, examining those that are and are not in place in my space and those that I can change. I then briefly conclude in the third section and follow up with a section where I reflect upon my journey through this writing process and discuss some ways that critical educators can find support. I close my paper with responses from colleagues and friends in the field.

To provide some context for my process, it seems essential that I identify who I am. I am a young, cisgender, heterosexual, non-religious, English-speaking, neurotypical, physically abled, White woman from an upper-middle-class background and am still unpacking my own history—a process that will not likely end. The massive amount of research on critical theory and education was at first overwhelming. For every piece I

read, I was introduced to another. At some point, with regards to time, I realized I would need to limit my sources. I sorted resources and focused squarely on those most relevant to the demographics of my past and current students (racially and linguistically mixed students in K-5 settings in left-leaning cities, ranging from low- to high-socioeconomic backgrounds), and to my topic, which is teacher- and student-driven, though I briefly touch upon school and government-wide policies as well.

Review of Major Concepts

While authors such as Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) as well as Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) propose ways that educators can transform their traditional practices into critical ones, they also acknowledge that educators must first be willing to transform themselves. As bell hooks (2017) asserts, educators "cannot empower students to embrace diversities of experience, standpoint, behavior, or style if our training has disempowered us" (p. 186). Therefore, if we aim to do so, we must undergo a process of self-examination and reflect upon how our histories and beliefs can unintentionally work to undermine the way in which we teach.

It is worth noting that there is no simplistic "how to" for engaging in critical pedagogy. The process is individualistic and inherently unsystematic. The following section outlines a few major, recurring concepts that have arisen from my research that may guide educators on their journey towards becoming critical.

Finding a Reason

Theorists of critical pedagogy argue that educators who desire to can learn how to engage in this type of pedagogy, but they must first commit themselves fully to the

process (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 20). Some educators engage in critical pedagogy as a way to resist the system that oppressed them. For example, bell hooks' teachers at Booker T. Washington, who were predominately Black women, were "on a mission... to nurtur[e] intellect so that [their students] could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers—black folks who used [their] minds" (1994, p. 3) to combat the unfair and racist system. Their pedagogy was a revolutionary and counter-hegemonic act that worked to actively challenge the ubiquity of "white racist colonialism" (1994, p. 3). These teachers were realistic about their world but optimistic in their action to change it. They committed to critical pedagogy out of necessity and their choice and dedication inspired hope.

However, not all critical educators have been systemically oppressed. In fact, many educators who decide to commit, myself included, are favored by the structures of our society. Because the process is "active, dynamic, [and] often threatening... [demanding a] total involvement of self," (Bolton, 2018, p. 71) these educators must have reasons that are compelling enough for them to question and challenge the status quo. Or, in my case, awaken to them.

Unpacking history and discovering identity. An awakening need not be a single moment, though there may be a defining circumstance that acts as a turning point and leads us to self-examination. To illustrate this point, I will discuss my own identity and the event that led me to commit to critical pedagogy. I was raised upper-middle class in an extremely safe and White neighborhood of Long Island, New York. As a child, my family felt comfortable with me walking from home to school, to the park in our

downtown area, and to my friends' houses, too. In school, I felt free to use my voice when I disagreed with an assignment or a school rule. I felt agency to use my privilege, though I did not realize the extent to which I was privileged at all.

Within the first week of arriving at college to begin my sophomore year, I received a call from my mother telling me of the sudden and unexpected passing of my father. I never gave much thought to how I would react to this type of event—how I might feel or how I might change because I did not believe I would need to until I was much older. All four of my grandparents were still alive and well, and while I had lost a new friend in college a few months before to a possible overdose, I still regarded the death of a family member as a non-reality. I mark this event as the first instance where I recognized that adversity, and not safety, was the norm. I now think back to September 11th, 2001, when I arrived home from school to see my father, covered in dust, from the long walk home from downtown Manhattan after the attack on the Twin Towers. I remember the way his face looked that day, but I was a child who still had a father, and did not discern his fear or anguish. I could have lost him that day, but I did not.

While I think that I have always been reflective in some ways, the process of grief transformed me and my worldview. I began to look at people and see more, recognizing that all individuals have experienced their own traumas and joys. I began to see that life experiences shaped not only momentary actions and reactions but also people at their core. The ongoing process of unpacking has been a crucial component to my awakening because it has allowed me to reflect upon my journey and place in this world in relation to others.

Reflection is a necessary and routine process for teachers. We look to formal and informal assessments as a way to evaluate our teaching and inform our instruction. But critical educators must also commit to this more personal form of reflection. Unpacking invites us to "closely examin[e] and explor[e] what makes up [our] worldview, the experiences, conversations, memories, and traditions that create [our] paradigm" (Kuby, 2013, p. 9). Some may find it helpful to journal their journey of unpacking; others may talk it through or be mindful about putting aside time for self-examination each day. In committing to the process of unpacking, teachers can "intentionally examine who they are and how their beliefs shape teaching situations" (Kuby, 2013, p. 9).

In order to engage in the unpacking process, it is crucial that educators examine the many components of their identity. All individuals have a personal identity, which includes "our name, age, place in the family, personality, interests, and talents" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 22), and social identities, of which we have many. Social identities encompass our "racial identity, gender, culture, language, economic class, family structure, sexual orientation, abilities and disabilities, religion, and the like" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 22). Often, our social identities dictate how we are treated and treat others, and affect our access to society's institutions, including education (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 22).

The process of discovering and examining identity can be challenging as confronting our place in society through the lens of our social identity can open old wounds or expose us to new ones. As a White educator, I understand that many of my social identities link me to the unfair treatment of others (Derman-Sparks & Edwards,

2010, p. 22). However, I believe that distancing myself from this reality, as many do, would significantly impede my ability to be an empathic and impactful teacher. In seeking to support the development of students with ties to a diverse range of social identity groups, educators must first understand who they are and how their own social identities relate to those students (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 23). When we understand ourselves in the context of our society and its institutions, we can better situate ourselves to impact positive change.

Acknowledging That Education is Not Neutral

Becoming a critical educator requires a reason, an awakening for some. But a teacher does not become critical simply because she has decided to be. A first step to the ongoing process of learning, reflecting, and critiquing is accepting that “there is no such thing as a neutral educational process” (Shaull, 2016, p. 34). In schools, non-neutrality impacts all students, young and old, and can manifest explicitly through school, state, or nation-wide policies and mandates that dictate which and whose history is valuable to learn or implicitly, by accepted practices that are seemingly innocuous, such as show-and-tell, which "privilege[s] those who have lots of cool stuff or experiences" (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015, p. 9). Educators can be complicit in furthering non-neutrality or combat it through critical teaching.

A prime example of an explicit and non-neutral educational mandate was the College Board's revision of content to be tested in AP World History for the 2019-20 school year. Whereas the class curriculum once taught 10,000 years of history, it would now only cover topics after 1450 CE, starting with the "Global Interaction" period.

According to an article in The Atlantic magazine, the College Board decided to reduce the content covered in the course by 60% after a series of surveys and performance data suggested that "too many students and teachers drown in the information overload and ultimately fail to gain value from the course" (Wong, 2018). Yet in reducing the course's content to the post-European colonial period, the College Board limits student understanding by discarding the narratives of cultures "before they were exploited and depleted by colonial powers" (Wong, 2018). While teachers of this course could speak to and question this mandate, they would have to do so within time constraints of short class periods, which could negatively affect student testing outcomes.

While teachers of young students may still have curricular mandates, they usually have more leeway than secondary teachers when deciding how to approach them, often because they have more class time with their students. Critical pedagogy can work to counterbalance the explicit impact of dominant culture on curriculum. For instance, when I worked as a third-grade associate teacher, my class was learning about the history of immigration to New York City. My mentor teacher and I had invited families to share their immigration stories with the class. A parent who was African American wanted to meet with us before deciding to participate. Her family's story was one of forced migration, of slavery. While she did not have all of the details of how her family members were taken from their homeland and brought to America, she did have some. When she did finally share with the class, our students listened closely, engaged with her story, and respectfully inquired. While the discussion outraged and disturbed some students, it empowered others to talk about their own. The conversation provoked further

inquiry, and we continued to learn about the enslaved individuals who built the foundation of the city.

When I reflect on this memory, I am thankful for this parent, who allowed herself to be vulnerable, and for my mentor teacher, who recognized the importance of providing young students opportunities to learn counter-narratives. Either individual could have decided that this history was too hurtful or uncomfortable to share with young students. But by presenting students with perspectives that challenge dominant notions (e.g., people immigrate to better their lives, etc.), we offer them opportunities to consciously combat them.

Isms. As dominant culture influences what students learn within the institution of education, it also shapes the world in which they live. Isms are the institutional forms of prejudice established by dominant culture and reflect the belief that those who differ from the norm are inherently inferior. They are explicitly "expressed in laws, in organizational policies, and in regulations, as well as in the thinking and actions of people who carry out the policies" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 24). Isms include, but are not limited to, ableism, ageism, classism, colorism, educationism, ethnocentrism, gender binarism, nativism, racism, sexism, and sizeism. Isms and their intersectionality permeate many aspects of our society, though to varying degrees of visibility. They manifest explicitly through federal policies and laws and implicitly, through, for example, the language used by teachers in schools. While some anti-discrimination policies work to combat explicit isms, such as the Civil Rights Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, it is essential that critical educators be aware that these laws do not solve societal issues of

discrimination. Many explicit isms endure in our laws, and more are being created, which continue to affect individuals in our society, including our young students, negatively.

Gender binarism, for example, was explicitly institutionalized in early 2018 under the Trump administration with a memorandum that disqualified from military service transgendered individuals who "may" require "substantial medical treatment, including medications and surgery... except under certain limited circumstances" (Office of the Press Secretary, 2018, p. 1). Such a discriminatory policy impacts all people in our society. Gender nonconforming individuals may not see themselves as candidates to protect our nation, except under "certain limited circumstances" (Trump, 2018, p. 1). Or, while they and their allies may critique, question, and resist this policy, others may use it to legitimize discrimination in everyday life.

While as individuals we may not directly generate or influence policies that discriminate, it is important to recognize that, every day, we experience and "carry out the dynamics" of systemic, institutional advantages and disadvantages due to our membership (or perceived membership) in social identity groups (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 24). For example, teachers often say "boys and girls" as an informal way to call students to attend. While this phrase is seemingly harmless, it is an implicit form of discrimination that forces students to conform to one gender or the other in their classroom—an act which is likely to occur outside of it regardless for children in schools without "All Gender Bathrooms." In this case, if we are not cognizant and critical of commonplace language, we reinforce the dominant norm perpetuated by our society and advanced by the above memorandum.

Internalized privilege. The dynamics of isms are the consequence of the internalization of privilege and oppression (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 25). Internalized privilege, sometimes termed internalized superiority, describes the "psychological consequences" for people with social identities that "bring them economic, social, and cultural advantages… [that] encompass a whole series of rights, expectations, and experiences that function as the grease that can make daily life easier, smooth access to institutions, bring economic success, and provide social supports" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 25). "The American Dream" is an example of internalized privilege, with its widespread assumption that hard work is the key to success. Some individuals attribute negative qualities to those who are unable to access class mobility and defend their discrimination by referencing the "American Dream." However, without the historical context of who had or did not have access to based upon perceived social identity groups, it is hard to equate success solely to hard work (Miner & Peterson, 2014, p. 41).

Richard Rothstein, author of *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, illustrated this point in an interview on NPR's Fresh Air when he described how the GI Bill, which initially gave benefits to veterans of World War II, helped these veterans and generations of their families "rise economically and socially in America" (Gross, 2017). However, because of segregationist legislation implemented in the New Deal, the GI Bill excluded African American veterans from programs that provided housing mortgages and loans. While many of these exclusions were deemed unconstitutional in 1948, they have continued to influence the financial

stability of those targeted. Rothstein's interview with Terry Gross on NPR's Fresh Air explains the extent to which African Americans were deprived of the GI Bill's "American Dream":

> [Today], African American incomes, on average, are about 60 percent of average White incomes. But African American wealth is about 5 percent of White wealth. Most middle-class families in this country gain their wealth from the equity they have in their homes. So this enormous difference between a 60 percent income ratio and a 5 percent wealth ratio is almost entirely attributable to federal housing policy implemented through the 20th century. Families that were prohibited–-African American families that were prohibited from buying homes in the suburbs in the 1940s and '50s and even into the '60s by the Federal Housing Administration gained none of the equity appreciation that Whites gained.

The impacts of the GI Bill are lasting. White veterans could save money for their families through home equity, while their Black counterparts could not. As a result of this discriminatory policy, a disparity in class grew that correlated with skin color and not with "hard work," as proponents of the "American Dream" might argue.

For critical educators, especially those privileged by the system, it is crucial to acknowledge the psychological impact of unearned privilege, which may perpetuate a "feeling or belief that what are actually advantages over other people are merely "natural" or "ordinary" circumstances" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 25). As a new teacher from a background of unearned privilege, I have been a culprit of this phenomena. When I worked as a third-grade associate teacher, my mentor teacher moved from his

kindergarten classroom to our new one and inherited his predecessor's class library. Most of our fictitious protagonists were White children, though this did not occur to me as abnormal. A 2016 report by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin determined that only 22% of the characters represented in children's books were children of color (Donnella, 2017). One could therefore assume that the percentage reflects reality, and yet, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), ~41% of school age children are children of color.

Though I did not have this data at the time, it is clear to me that I made a similar assumption and failed to consider how this type of invisibility would make my students feel. In doing so, I missed an opportunity to challenge the status quo and basis of power that enables classroom libraries like mine to largely "reflect the dominant culture and race and language" (Miner, 2014, pp. 11-15). My mentor teacher, who I consider to be a critical educator, questioned the books in our library and expressed his concern to school administrators. Because of his action and our school's funding resources, we were able to order new books with protagonists that better reflected the students in our classrooms. There are alternative actions for teachers who work in schools that cannot afford to replace or supplement libraries. Critical educators could invite students to investigate their classroom libraries, examining "who are publishers denying and why?" Teachers can sort through their library, removing books that "blame the victims of..."isms"(Miner, 2014, p. 15) or teach their students critical literacy skills that support them in identifying and reflecting on the stereotypes found in the stories they read (Teaching Tolerance, 2018).

Internalized oppression. Internalized privilege shapes systemic assumptions about groups of people, which propagates what bell hooks (2003) calls the "politics of shame and shaming" (p. 93). To illustrate this, hooks points to the opponents of "affirmative action and other strategies aimed at creating greater diversity," (p. 93) who often see access, or equality of opportunity, as the only condition necessary for equality. Many of these thinkers, according to hooks, compare standardized test scores between White students and students of color from similar class backgrounds and determine that the gap in scores relates to the "lazy, indifferent" character of students of color who "want to work the system so that they get something for nothing" (p. 93). These opponents, however, fail to acknowledge the historic role that shame and shaming play "in maintaining racial subordination... in the arena of education" (hooks, 2003, p. 94).

The politics of shame and shaming intensifies internalized oppression, in which "people who belong to one or more social identity groups who experience any of the many faces of institutionalized prejudice and discrimination, such as... constant negative messages about their groups," (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 26) begin to feel these messages are valid. In an interview with Jody Sokolower, Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, illustrates this point of how internalized oppression impacts African American children and youth:

> When young Black men reach a certain age—whether or not there is incarceration in their families—they themselves are the target of police stops, interrogations, frisks, often for no reason other than their race. And, of course, this level of

> harassment sends a message to them, often at an early age: No matter who you are or what you do, you're going to find yourself behind bars one way or the other. This reinforces the sense that prison is part of their destiny, rather than a choice one makes. (Sokolower, 2014, p. 59)

Critical educators should be cognizant of how internalized oppression can create barriers to learning and that they can be responsible for creating them. As an educator from a background of unearned privilege, I now realize that this privilege has informed my worldview in a way that has disadvantaged my teaching by limiting my understanding of other experiences. For example, after I graduated from college, I worked as an intern at a high-performing charter school in Washington DC. The students were mostly African American children from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, a fact which I learned when working with admissions during a testing day. The teachers, however, reflected a different demographic. They were mostly young White women. The school practiced character-based discipline, in which teachers used incentives and consequences to manage the classroom. This meant that the students who spoke when spoken to were valued and those who spoke "out of turn," whether it was to comment on what another student said or make a connection, were penalized. The students who were on in-class suspension were forced to wear pinnies to designate their status and were not allowed to talk to other students in the class. From my perspective, the cyclic nature of character-based discipline led to the repeated in-class suspensions of a few students. At the time, I felt uncomfortable with this practice though I could not speak to why. I now realize that my discomfort was founded on the fact that this structure, which I in no way

challenged, led to systemic oppression. These repeated offenders were rarely free to discuss and learn within the community and were targeted and isolated because they either tried to integrate before they were free to or questioned the system that disempowered them.

To note, not all individuals who identify with groups that are discriminated against suffer from internalized oppression. Moreover, internalized oppression can manifest in students who do not typically identify with groups that are systemically oppressed. As a freshman high school student, for example, I was asked to meet with my mother, my male science teacher, and the principal, who was a woman to discuss the way that I dressed. My teacher and principal shamed me for dressing in form-fitting t-shirts that were no tighter or more revealing than other students and chastised me in front of my mother, who was unsure how to respond. I was sexualized by my male teacher and so put to shame. It took me years to reflect on this and acknowledge that it was my teacher, and the principal who supported him, who should be shamed for sexualizing a child.

Resistance and alliance. It is important to realize that many of us have been conditioned to internalize both privilege and oppression and that, unless we resist the system and ally with others, we continue to take part in the cycle. As critical educators, our aim should be to inspire our students to identify issues of unfairness and think about how to respond to them. Peter McLaren (2016) terms this action dimension of critical pedagogy, "praxis-oriented pedagogy," which "bridges the gap between critical knowledge and social practice" (p. 26). Freire (2016), who also refers to the work of praxis as action-reflection, asserts that it the privilege of praxis is “the right of everyone”

(p. 88). Students can engage in praxis in larger contexts, such as societal movements, or in individual contexts, by speaking up and standing up against unfairness.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is a large and societal example of this type of critical action. The movement originated in 2013, in the wake of Trayvon Martin's murder and acquittal of the man who fatally shot him, George Zimmerman. According to the Black Lives Matter Global Network website (n.d.b), the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 further catalyzed the cause. The movement, which was founded by three Black women and is now "a member-led global network of more than 40 chapters," is a form of active resistance, a "call to action in response to [consistent] state-sanctioned violence and anti-Black racism" (Black Lives Matter Global Network, n.d.a).

To clarify, resistance is a form of action-reflection by an individual standing up against unfairness that targets themselves or a group in which they are a member (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 28). Alliance is a form of action-reflection taken by an individual standing up against unfairness that targets other individuals or the groups in which others are members (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 28). In the case of Black Lives Matter, all Black proponents are resistors, while all others are allies. While both forms of action-reflection are critical to creating lasting change to systemic inequities, it is crucial that allies not presume they know how to better navigate the movements they support (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 28). Instead, allies should take the lead from the resistors and ask "what they want [them] to do and how [they] can help" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 28).

Allies can best partner with movements by acting up or speaking up against those in their own identity groups who are acting oppressively (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 28). To connect with the example of BLM, I recently spoke to a defender of the BLM counter-movement, "All Lives Matter," who openly explained her confusion about BLM. She did not understand how people could support a movement that prioritized the lives of some people over the lives of others. In providing her with demonstrable evidence from qualitative studies that "a citizen's race may well affect their experience with police—whether an encounter ends with a traffic stop, the use of police force, or a fatal shooting," (Makarechi, 2016) she began to open up to the idea of the movement. Contrary to the belief of the counter-movement, by challenging systemic inequities and racists practices in our system, the resistors and allies of BLM "work vigorously for freedom and justice for Black people and, by extension, all people" (Black Lives Matter Global Network, n.d.b).

Critical educators should also convey to their students that individual moments of resistance and alliance are just as crucial in the fight against unfairness as large movements are. Students, like all of us, are capable of making or being subjected to offensive and harmful jokes, biased jokes, and unfair rules and policies, which often reflect broader inequities and biases in our society. Through regular modeling and guided practice, students can learn from critical educators how to critically identify and consistently respond to moments of prejudice, bias, and stereotypes. Student allies can learn to stand up, and not stand by, to unfairness and check-in with those who have been treated unfairly. But all of this requires that teachers exemplify this type of

action-reflection in their daily practice. Therefore, critical educators must make a daily commitment to never "let[ting] hate have the last word" (Willoughby, 2016, p. 5).

Conclusion

The critical pedagogy I refer to is demanding to implement. It is the progressive, holistic, and "engaged pedagogy," that hooks (1994) refers to and regards as anything but superficial. To effectively empower students, "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own wellbeing" (hooks, 1994, p. 16). The process I describe is not intended to be prescriptive or sequential, but rather a summary and reflection of my own findings.

Application in K-5 Classrooms

Committing to a life of critical pedagogy is an arduous and perpetual process. It takes learning and relearning, constant reflection and adaptability. But it also requires rethinking and adapting actual structures and practices within the classroom. In the following section, I frame the structures and practices ideal to critical classrooms in relation to the literature. I then reflect on my own classroom experience and examine which structures and practices fit the critical model and intersect with the concepts discussed above, and which do not. In regards to the latter, I examine alternative structures and practices that "disrupt the commonplace" (Lewison et al., 2015) and assess the potential outcomes for my students, their families, and my teaching.

Home-School Connection

One of the most central points among critical pedagogy theorists is the crucial role that home-school connections make in creating equitable classrooms. Building

connections that demonstrate that all families are welcome, regardless of their backgrounds or familial structures, sets a tone of respect and inclusivity that combats the non-neutrality of the dominant culture. This type of connection "communicate[s] to students that their family identities are valued" and "offers teachers an opportunity to invite family involvement and share curricular goals, materials and resources" (Scharf, 2018, p. 14).

As a first-grade associate teacher, I observed my mentor teachers build relationships with families in this way. Early in September, families and students designed "welcome" cards in their home language, which decorated our classroom door for the duration of the year. Throughout the year, family members were invited in to teach our class about their culture in any way they saw fit. One family led us through a cultural cooking lesson, while another showed us pictures of a birthday celebration on their phone. Knowing that each family had different schedule needs, we allowed families to sign-up to come in anytime during the day. We were flexible if changes needed to be made. That year, all families were able to participate.

In my first year as a lead teacher, I bonded with my families, though not in ways that similarly combatted non-neutrality, disrupted the commonplace, or supported the building of a critical classroom. I went on home visits to meet students and families before the first day of school, which helped kindergarteners with the transition to a full day of school with a new teacher. I also sent out parent questionnaires in the summer, which gave me a slight sense of my incoming students' personal identities (e.g., interests) and social identities (e.g., home languages). Moving forward, I would like to transform

the way in which we invite families into the classroom. Currently, our volunteers run choice-time centers. These centers are always between 1:00 and 3:00 PM, and attract the same, available, volunteers—meaning that working families are unable to attend. Often, these family-led centers result in a show-and-tell type scenario where students get to boast about their toys and art supplies. However, some families volunteer and end up teaching our class about their cultural upbringing and experiences. I would like to emphasize to families that we appreciate this type of experience and perhaps offer family visits outside of choice-time periods for those who are unable to attend.

Building strong home-school connections can lead to student success. All students are capable of achieving in school, and yet, teachers and schools often value the specific "knowledge, resources, ways of thinking, and dispositions... [that] can be used to accomplish school tasks successfully" (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 33). We group children by assessable capabilities (e.g., reading level, writing stage, etc.) and create mixed groups to moderate dispositions—but students are more than just these isolated, assessable capabilities. Families are "valuable and indispensable partners," (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 36) and incorporating their knowledge into the classroom can enhance student learning outcomes (Scharf, 2018, p. 15). Our students carry with them what Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) refer to as the funds of knowledge, which include the "...historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well being" (p. 133). As critical educators, we are tasked with tapping into these funds of knowledge to support children in discovering their own identities as learners.

In reflecting upon the home-school connections in my teaching practice, I know that I would like to be more consistent about focusing heavily on individual students and what I know about and how I build upon their funds of knowledge. When thinking about how the funds of knowledge can influence student success, my mind always recalls the writing journey of one of my first students. This student was social and engaging. Students and teachers alike loved to hear her tell stories about her home life or time with friends. But she was not considered a traditionally "successful" student. As compared to her other classmates, she relied heavily on manipulatives during math exercises. While she loved reading and listening to stories, she was not qualified as "on -level" by traditional reading assessments. When she sat down to write, she often broke down in tears. She would express that she was without ideas, that her penmanship was not as neat as she wanted or that her spelling did not look right.

During one long break away from school, we asked the students to bring home their writing journals. She returned with her journal in hand and a smile on her face. While reading through her entries, it took me and my co-teacher a few moments before realizing that what we were reading were sagas half written in Jamaican Patois, the language of her grandmother. The stories were captivating and enriched by her comedic narration. We asked her to share with the class, which she proudly did. As the year progressed, she felt increasingly comfortable during writing periods and excitedly worked to develop her voice, which now more comfortably reflected her voice as an oral storyteller. We saw an increase in her work production and observed that an aim for

perfection and a comparison between her work and others no longer acted as a barrier. As a result, her penmanship, spelling, and grammar, the skills most assessable, progressed.

Building a Multicultural Library

Ideally, a classroom's library includes a range of books that affirm and reflect students' identities and experiences and invites them to explore and appreciate those of others that differ from their own. Emily Style (1996) refers to these types of books, or curriculum in her case, as "mirrors" and "windows," respectively (p. 1). A library that offers a balance of the two provides students with a more complete picture of our world—one that is not limited by the universality of truths that is often dictated and normalized by the dominant culture.

Lee & Low Books (2017), a multicultural children's book publisher, produced a "Classroom Library Questionnaire" that allows teachers to determine the extent to which their libraries are culturally responsive and diverse. The questionnaire essentially acts as an audit, which according to Scharf (2018) is a non-judgemental “reading” of the messages conveyed by the books on the shelves “with an eye toward diversity, equity and student empowerment” (p. 9). While leafing through the books in my library, I used this free resource to identify the strengths and weaknesses of my library and assess the gaps in mirrors and windows.

There are notable strengths to my classroom's book collection. My student body is relatively diverse in regards to race, language, and culture, and many of the books reflect this diversity and that of the surrounding community, which is also socioeconomically diverse. The library contains books that open students to alternative yet valid

perspectives, including publications such as Maribeth Boelts' *Those Shoes*, and offers them windows into lives of individuals living outside of Southern California and even the United States, like Taro Yashima's *Crow Boy*. We have books that teach history that typically not highlighted by the dominant culture, where people of color are made visible beyond the Civil Rights' Movement, and talented women are featured in sports.

Nevertheless, I do feel that there are significant weaknesses to my library collection as well. For one, there is little balance between mirrors and windows. The library is overwhelmingly full of books written by White authors with characters who are cisgendered and who come from monotypic, heteronormative, family structures and configurations. Those books with protagonists from alternative backgrounds to the dominant culture are mostly part of my private collection. The library lacks substantial representation of characters with disabilities or protagonists who are native and indigenous to California. At times, I feel that there are too many books in general on the bookshelves, making it overwhelming for kids as they bookshop. Using this tool will help me balance mirrors and windows as I sort through and remove the books that I already have and fill in the gaps when I next order new ones.

Establishing Classroom Norms and Culture

Unpacking one's own culture is crucial for educators if they are to build critical classroom communities. As Zaretta Hammond (2015) asserts, the "hardest culture to examine is our own, because it shapes our actions in ways that seem invisible and normal" (p. 55). Our culture permeates the classroom, "from how [we] expect children to behave socially, take turns during discussions, or even pass out classroom materials"

(Hammond, 2015, pp. 55-56). If we do not recognize and reflect upon it, we, unfortunately, dictate to our students what is "normal" and what is not and as a consequence, unintentionally perpetuate a culture of shame and shaming.

For example, if one of our first goals as critical teachers is to convey to our students that they are all capable (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 32), the practice of enforcing that students sit still, straight, and quiet during long meetings or work times devalues and shames those who do not. As a student, my school experience conditioned me to think of the classroom community as a quiet space where children sat up straight, listened, or worked independently. Those who conversed were at best off topic, and at worst, cheating. As a result, at times I find I am triggered by student chatter during their work time, which is surprising considering I am a social worker. This sentiment is not conducive to critical classrooms, where students should be inspired to talk through work, share their process and product, and collaborate with others. As I enter my next year as a teacher, I plan to actively check my responses to student behaviors, such as talking while working and reflect on my triggers so that I can avoid making my students feel like they need to conform to a certain type of work (Hammond, 2015, p. 167).

As educators, we set the tone in our classroom, and if we want our students to stretch themselves both academically and emotionally, we have to offer them a safe place to be brave in (Hammond, 2015, p. 143). The culture that we should aim for in our classroom, which is influenced by the structures and processes we put in place, should "tend to the emotional well-being of everyone rather just on [smoothly] covering the day's lesson plan" (Hammond, 2015, p. 143). Doing so requires that we allow for the

divergences of plans and expectations and release much of our power to our students—even to those who are young, because "...children's passion for thinking often ends when they encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only" (hooks, 2010, p. 8).

In my own space, this means rethinking my level of responsiveness. While it is easy to meet with students during lunch, recess, and quiet time, I may have to push into curricular time as well to respond to or discuss big questions that come up. By demonstrating that issues important to my students deserve dialectic, I believe I can convey to them that their thinking is valuable and can acted upon in ways that positively (or negatively) impact themselves and those around them.

Giving students the power to take ownership of the norms and rules within the classroom can also positively sway the culture within it. Every year, my students cocreate a classroom promise. Together, they generate, categorize, and name ideas for rules that will support them in doing their best (Anderson, 2015, pp. 175-176). According to the Teaching Tolerance (2018a) article, "A New Set of Rules," "when students build and agree on their rights and responsibilities as members of a classroom community, they are much more likely to abide by those rules and to keep one another in check." My students have come up with ideas such as, "be kind with words and actions," "keep our class and school organized," and "stretch your brain." When students follow these norms, they work to build and strengthen the democratic culture within the class. Unfortunately, in my experience, I have noticed that these rules often become stale towards the middle of

the year. While students understand the classroom promise as a set of rules, they often lack the same conviction they had of following them when they first wrote them.

In “A New Set of Rules,” Teaching Tolerance (2018a) outlines a few measures that teachers can take to sustain a class promise's impact. For starters, teachers should begin with a discussion that emphasizes the "reciprocal bond" between "right" and "responsibility" (Teaching Tolerance, 2018a). What rights should students have in the classroom? For the youngest of students, Teaching Tolerance advises that teachers suggest they have the right to "play," "work," and "be safe." Next, how can the whole class honor these rights? Teaching Tolerance recommends developing one responsibility for each right, such as using walking feet to ensure the class' right to safety. I have seen and implemented these initial steps when working to create classroom promises, but have not yet attempted the following steps, which I believe may work to solidify them throughout the year.

To further ownership and critical thought, students can engage in a discussion about what to do when rights are not honored. Teaching Tolerance goes as far as to suggest that teachers can create a physical space in the classroom for problem-solving and peer mediation, which can be decorated with the classroom promise and student-made artwork to act as a visual representation of their rights. Once the promise is put into print and ratified with student signatures, teachers can send copies home to bridge home-school communication and welcome families into the classroom to celebrate (Teaching Tolerance, 2018a). These steps are time-consuming and require a commitment of actual space in the classroom, but I plan to see how they work and if to what extent the

process endows students with a sense of excitement and seriousness about civic-engagement and community-minded behavior within their classroom community.

Classroom Setup

While seemingly superficial, the setup of a classroom pervades its culture. Setup can send "nonverbal message[s] about what and who is valued in the classroom" (Hammond, 2015, p. 144) and includes anything from decorations to desk and table arrangements to displays of work and art on walls. Ideally, critical classroom should be set up in a way that is student-centered and works to "[support] collaboration, [foster] dialogue, [encourage] ownership and [ensure] comfort" (Scharf, 2018, p. 9). Designating a space for problem-solving and peer mediation that is decorated by the classroom promise, for example, can emphasize the importance of community-mindedness in the class.

Seating. Critical classrooms can demonstrate their inclusive culture through seating arrangements. Vazquez (2014) proposes organizing the classroom into different workspaces and areas where "students [can] comfortably work on their own, in small groups and also as a large group" (p. 22). Creating an environment in which students feel comfortable about accessing the materials around them and deciding which areas best suit their work and work style builds independence and self-knowledge in students and allows teachers more time to discuss, research, and play with their students (Vazquez, 2014, p. 22).

In my experience teaching young K-3 students, I have not seen many, if any, classroom setups like those I grew up with—single, isolated desks organized in straight

rows and columns, which faced the teacher and whiteboard. Most of the classes I have observed or worked in have communal work tables, which promotes collaborative work. However, many of these classrooms, mine included, are still largely uniform in their set up. My class, for example, has six large tables that fit 4-6 children. All are the same height, though I have attempted to lower and raise them myself, and occupy a similar space toward the center of the room.

Last year, I used outdoor spaces for small groups and provided clipboards for students who felt most comfortable working on the floor. I made sure that my classroom had nooks to read in and seating options away from the group tables. However, In designating spots "away" from the group area, these same spots became points of contention. Students either wanted to sit in these areas because they were "special" or thought of them as the spots needed for children who could not focus on group tasks. Looking forward, I plan to reimagine my classroom space to fit the diversity of workstyles in my classroom more effectively. Rather than to provide spots “away” from the group, I would like to find a way to ingrain flexible seating into the culture of the classroom so that students learn to be critical about what they need in order to feel self-efficacious in the class.

Ethos. The classroom environment illuminates an ethos, a spirit of its culture. It is a "powerful container in its own right that reflects, communicates, and shapes values" (Hammond, 2015, pp. 144). When students feel physically, socially, and emotionally affirmed by their surroundings, they feel more relaxed and capable of learning (Hammond, 2015, pp. 144). However, the inverse of this is also true. Students who feel

threatened by the "cultural mismatch or subtle microaggressions" in their classroom environment are more prone to "stress producing defensive strategies" (Hammond, 2015, pp. 144). Consequently, those students are also less likely to see their classroom as a safe space for critical thinking.

I find that "subtle microaggressions" can easily penetrate practices and go unnoticed unless checked. For example, when working as a first-grade associate teacher, I became the point person for creating charts because I was celebrated for my ability to give life to stick figures. Early in the year, I worked with my mentor teachers and the class to create a chart about reading partners to hang up. During a prep, one of my mentors, a woman of color, took the chart down and put it in front of me for revision. "No one has see-through skin," I remember her saying to me, "not even you. So let's add some color." It was the first time in my two years as an associate teacher that I reflected on my chart-people. If anything, one could assume that these people had white skin—I have noted in the last year that my White students often illustrate their whiteness by the absence of color. I now remind students of our crayon, marker, and colored pencil "skin color" collection and prompt them, respectfully, to think carefully about the actual shade of their skin. After this moment of enlightenment inspired by my mentor teacher, I never left my people drawings colorless again. While still simplistic, they now consistently include skin color, diverse hairstyles, and even clothing.

Without constant reexamination, the classroom ethos can communicate other unintended values about teaching and learning as well. For this reason, teachers should regularly reexamine the elements in their environment to ensure that they fit with the

spirit of community. In the past, I have reserved a space for my classroom promise and allotted student work and class charts in the remaining wall space. After reading Hammond's (2015) chapter about creating culturally responsive communities, however, I began to rethink this. I often decorate my walls with the products of student work (i.e., self-portraits, completed math projects, paper chains of kindness, community murals, etc.). While some of these products, such as the paper chain of kindness and community mural, demonstrate common values in my class, they also reveal an emphasis on the product as opposed to the process, which is not more valuable in a critical classroom.

Critical educators can communicate the core values of their classroom by emphasizing the importance of both the product and the process of learning. One way teachers can accomplish this is by using wall space to house audit trails, or the visual articulation of the learning and thinking that occurs in classrooms with lived and dynamic curriculums (Vasquez, 2014, p. 36). Audit trails are visible to all within the school community and act as a way to affirm and communicate the evolution and diversity in student thought over curriculum. Audit trails also trigger new and relevant inquiry that, if allowed, can lead to the emergence of a more fully student-driven curriculum.

The idea of an audit trail inspired me to rethink the static nature of my classroom walls. I see real merit in displaying critical curriculum as it is being lived and negotiated. In efforts to create a condensed, though not superficial, audit trail, I may designate a wall dedicated to our curriculum in-progress. To ensure that this wall is not just a "me project," or one that takes too much time away from planning with my teaching partner, I can consider creating a few student jobs that will enable volunteers to take a leading role

in outlining and presenting the path of our curriculum, though I am, as of now, still unsure of how I will model and guide them through the process. Vasquez (2014) also suggests that teachers adapt audit trails in their space. Audit trails may be virtual or art-based, made from sticky notes or photographs, and do not necessarily need to take up an entire area to be impactful for students, families, and community members (Vasquez, 2014, pp. 175-180).

There are other minor changes and routines that balance processes and product that I can commit to for the upcoming year that will also work to "add real value to the classroom" (Hammond, 2015, pp. 144). The first that I plan to try out is to "establish an "artwork on loan" program where families "loan" the classroom their artwork for a period of time" (Hammond, 2015, pp. 145). Each time a new piece of work is displayed, I will invite families in to discuss why they value this work and how it "creates a sense of well-being" (Hammond, 2015, pp. 144) in their home spaces. I will also begin to collect "authentic textiles and handcrafts" from families throughout the year and use them as accents, not "artifacts," of the room. Giving families a part in "decorating" the room, allows them to partake in building a classroom environment that emphasizes "[culture], beauty, and harmony" (Hammond, 2015, pp. 144).

Daily Routines

As educators, it is important that we recognize how culture can be ingrained in our everyday routines. While "some classroom activities are designed specifically with the intention of addressing diversity [and critical] issues," (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 47) daily routines can be transformed to do so as well. By rethinking traditional

approaches to read-alouds, language use, meetings, reflections, and classroom jobs, teachers can work to create and sustain critical practice and thought in their classroom.

Read alouds. By reading books that challenge the status quo, critical educators give students access to perspectives that enable them to resist or ally themselves with those whose identities are disadvantaged by systemic inequities. I believe that critical educators should expose their students to books that are not necessarily "safe" choices because many of these books explore topics that support children's ability to grapple with significant problems they may encounter in their world. Sherman Alexie is a YA author who asserts that he "write[s] to give [children] weapons—in the form of words and ideas—that will help them fight their monsters" (Alexie, 2014, p. 94). Those who oppose the books that explore real and critical topics, he believes, "...aren't trying to protect… the poor from poverty. Or victims from rapists… They are simply trying to protect their privileged notions of what literature is and should be. They are trying to protect privileged children. Or the seemingly privileged" (2014, p. 93).

Vasquez (2014) suggests that "there is no such thing as a critical literacy text," (p. 4) there is only the way in which we decide to read it. My students are young. I teach a K/1 classroom. But I believe that in grounding discussions in fairness, even my youngest students can become capable of thinking deeply and engaging in real conversations about critical books and the world around them. My only reservations are in the way in which I respond to the courageous conversations that emerge. I wonder to what extent I am projecting my own biases on my students and whether or not I am influencing their

views. As I look to partner with my students' families and my school, I also worry that some perspectives may feel silenced, ignored, or uncomfortable.

Educators can expand upon the read-aloud routine by building text sets of mirrors and windows. Text sets, which are "a combination of books and everyday texts... offer different perspectives on the same topic" (Vazquez, 2014, p. 30) and provide students with repeated exposure to "new voices" (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 109). Multiple perspectives complicate what we think we know, but "complicating things offers an opportunity to work toward a just and equitable solution to what we might have originally perceived as irreparable differences" (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 109). While simplistic responses to incidents of bullying, such as "ignore it" can help students at the moment, it will not support the critical thinking skills that may enable them to contextualize the "underlying causes of this kind of behavior" (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 109) and lead them to work through it.

While the books I read tend to relate to the topics or social issues that emerge from class discussions, I do not believe that they adequately address the "multiple roles that all of us take on at various times" (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 108). A student who is declared a "bully" by some, for example, can also be a brother to an ill sister, a daughter to a working mother, a new student to an isolating school. This same "bully" could also be reacting to the hurtful actions or behaviors of others. In the next year or so, I plan to create text sets and introduce them to my students by topic. A text set revolved around bullying, for example, may include one or two cases with stereotypical "bullies," but may otherwise work to challenge this label. The reality is that "we are all complex beings with

the capacity to do harm and to do good" (Brown, 2016. p. 45). Labeling children as "bullies, victims, and bystanders... downplays the important role of parents, teachers, the school system, an increasingly provocative and powerful media culture, and societal injustices children experience every day" (Brown, 2016. pp. 45-46). By providing children with glimpses to other experiences, a diverse text set can speak more accurately about behavior and be proactive, not reactive in situations of "bullying" (Brown, 2016. pp. 45-49).

Language use. If we, as critical educators, are thoughtful and consistent in our use of language, then we can use it as a tool for action-reflection. If we are not, we can perpetuate the systemic inequities prevalent in our society. "Language is not neutral... power, position, and privilege are all lived out in both oral and written discourses" (Kuby, 2013, pp. 87-88). As educators, we need to be cognizant of this. The language we use in front of our students can work to affirm societal isms or confront them, hurt our students or empower them, downplay injustices or challenge them.

When I worked as a first-grade associate teacher, I recall a moment where I referred to an incident between several first-grade girls as a "mean girl moment." At the time, I did not reflect on my choice of words. I explained the incident to colleagues objectively and added a modifier to explain my take on the interaction. One of my mentors at the time interrupted me before I spoke further, a strategy recommended by Willoughby (2016) to "curtail" and "marginalize" biased behavior at the moment (p. 18). While I felt embarrassed by my use of language in front of two colleagues that I respected, I appreciated the straightforwardness and honesty of my mentor, who

explained that the phrase made her feel uncomfortable—that mean behavior is not gendered and that we should not perpetuate the stereotype.

> As educators, the language we use or do not use holds power.
>
> Adults at any school… teach by example, by tone and words they choose, by how they treat others during moments of disagreement or tension. They teach by what they don't say. If, for example, they allow a bigoted comment to go unchecked, they are offering tacit approval of similar comments. (Willoughby, 2017, p. 7)

There are times each day where I hear or overhear, students, friends, family, or strangers using biased and prejudiced language. While I was once hesitant to respond, I am now more deliberate about how to engage with those to whom I react. I now recognize that I must be consistent in speaking up to students, regardless of age, and model language that combats non-neutrality and isms. Moreover, I must also be consistent in "gently challenging the negative assumptions or comments"(Scharf, 2018, p. 20) made by adults. If I fail to model "proactive responses to bias, discrimination, exclusion, and bullying," (Scharf, 2018, p. 20) I send a message to students that sometimes, "it's OK to say bigoted things" (Willoughby, 2016, p. 18).

Class meetings. Classroom meetings follow predictable patterns, and their impact on the culture of the classroom becomes invisible over time (Hammond, 2015, p. 146). Some critical pedagogy theorists suggest that, if designed thoughtfully, class meetings can work to affirm student identities and experiences, unite the community, and perpetuate a positive classroom ethos (Hammond, 2015, p. 146). This idea implies, however, that some commonplace routines of class meetings may prevent or create

obstacles to these outcomes. According to Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015), "the traditional version of morning meeting prepares children for a transmission model of education, not a critical one" (p. 9). Some well-known meeting practices, such as show-and-tell and personal announcements, require a culture that emphasizes "being courteous, quietly listening, not interrupting, and asking polite questions" (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 9). While these behaviors are not necessarily negative on face value, they work to ritualize an acceptance and perpetuation of "dominant discourses, subjectivities, and ideologies" for teachers and students alike (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 9).

As a way to disrupt this commonplace, Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) point to Lee Heffernan, an elementary educator, who worked to evolve morning meeting in her classroom from a highly consumerist forum to a gathering where students discussed and debated the best way to approach issues that were a value to all those present (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 2). For example, after being told that lunch seating would now be assigned, Heffernan and her students decided to use their morning meeting time as a forum to co-research better seating options, which they could present to their principal (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 3). Heffernan described morning meeting as "a place of possibilities, where the contradictions and tensions between the personal and the social can be addressed and reimagined" (as cited in Lewison et al., 2015, p. 3).

Because of time constraints, I do not think it possible to fit this type of forum into my current structure of morning meeting. For most of my K/1 students, morning meeting is a time where they come in, center themselves, greet each other, review the schedule for the day, and prepare themselves to transition into the day—which, according to

Hammond (2015) is a culturally responsive way to “emphasize interdependency and social connection” (p. 146). However, after discussing with my curriculum advisor and cooperating teacher, I have committed to scheduling an official 10-15 "community meeting" time a few days a week, before lunch and recess times, where students can co-inquire about issues that impact them. Vazquez (2014) suggests allowing a student or students to act as "chairperson" or "co-chairs" for these meetings, where they collect agenda items and lead the discussion, which will support them in hearing out and giving weight to other's perspectives and in giving them "more space to make decisions about how meetings might play out" (p. 25). While I may act as co-leader with my younger students, I do believe that my first-grade students will be able to take on this responsibility through guided practices and a release of responsibility and will eventually be able to mentor the younger students as well. I hope that this additional meeting time in our daily routine will give my students an outlet to discuss problems that impact them, decide how to best act on them, and reflect on them the following day. I believe that this practice will strengthen our collectivist values and give students a sense of how they, as individuals, matter within the community.

Classroom jobs. The routine of classroom jobs can also illustrate to students how their efforts can positively contribute to the community. In a critical classroom, students should have the opportunity to approach daily, real-world tasks in "new and interesting ways," that "accommodate [their] multiple learning styles, such as artistic, kinesthetic, and verbal" (Scharf, 2018, p. 9). Ideally, students will take ownership of their jobs and

the classroom space if the types of jobs affirm student identities and reflect the actual needs of the community.

In my classroom, student jobs range from teachers' helper to schedule reader to table monitor. Early in the year, these jobs inspire students to take ownership and responsibility of their classroom. However, as the year progresses, I find that while my students look forward to the weekly routine of changing their jobs, they are often less excited by the prospect of completing them. From my research, I have found and conceived of a few strategies to revitalize student excitement for their jobs, which I may try in the coming year.

The first idea, which was inspired by Vasquez' (2014) thoughts on class meetings, is to transform traditional classroom jobs. Rather than to have a schedule reader or morning message reader each week, for example, I can ask students sign up to be "chairs" or "co-chairs" of meetings. Theses "chairs," as described in the previous section, will create each meeting's agenda, giving students agency and voice in how the meetings are run.

The next idea, inspired by Scharf (2018), is to create more jobs that cater to alternative learning styles, such as artistic, kinesthetic, and verbal. Doing so will empower the diverse range of students in the classroom who are not otherwise engaged by the mostly tactile responsibilities of the classroom, such as "chair monitor." While I already have some alternative jobs, such as "classroom friend," I may add others that ask students to lead movement activities or manage organizational or creative projects.

My final two ideas were driven by common notions of critical pedagogy theorists: that student identities and experience should direct our planning and that students voice should influence the process. Therefore, I think that co-creating jobs with students and later reflecting on their impact would instill a sense of agency and responsibility in students. While I will have some go-to jobs, I would love for students to brainstorm new jobs that they think relevant for the class' needs, giving them a further sense of ownership. When these jobs no longer seem to work for the class, I believe that my students can talk through what worked about them and what did not. Students can then come to a consensus about how they can adapt that job or if it should be omitted.

Constructing Critical Curricula

When critical educators are thoughtful about the development of curriculum, critical thought and dialogue become "a routine part of the ongoing, daily learning environment and experiences" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 8) in the classroom. Critical curriculum ideally permeates every aspect of the day, from lunchtimes to meetings to mathematics. At its best, critical curriculum is "grounded in the lives, identities, and histories of students... [and] inherently connects learning to the world outside of our classrooms" (Au, 2014, p. 86). Unfortunately, when implemented superficially, this type of curriculum can easily become a "tourist curriculum," that can unintentionally provoke "tokenism, trivializing, misrepresenting, and stereotyping" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 9).

Courageous conversations. If we want our students to learn to be critical and challenge the non-neutrality in our world, then we must encourage classroom

communities where students feel brave enough to engage in productive, though possibly contentious dialogue about issues that concern or confuse them. "Silence is not a neutral response" (Jennings, 2016, p. 52). Courageous conversations are termed "courageous" for a reason. Critical educators must dedicate real curricular time to courageous conversations if we want our students to learn the power of dialectic.

When I started teaching, I knew I wanted my classroom community to be a place where students felt safe enough to voice their opinions and brave enough to change them. As a young student, I was conditioned to view topics such as politics, race, and religion—anything contentious, as taboo. Perhaps my teachers felt "vulnerable or overwhelmed" by these topics, but by not engaging with my classmates and me over these issues, by silencing them and avoiding them, my teachers sent a message to us that these topics were either unimportant or inappropriate for school (Jennings, 2016, pp. 51-52).

In my practice, I actively remind myself to engage in courageous conversations with my students. Mostly, I do so informally—either during recess and lunch periods or during independent work times. However, this year I am modifying my schedule "so conversation is honored as part of the curriculum... [to provide students with] repeated opportunities to develop their critical-thinking skills, empathy, and worldview" (Jennings, 2016, p. 53). Each day, as I detailed in a previous section, my class schedule will include one meeting time, separate from morning meeting and closing meeting, which may incorporate events that happened during that day's recess or invite students to discuss significant changes and happenings in their lives. During the first few meetings, I

will model active listening and respectful engagement and teach students how to refer to the norms established in their classroom promise when responding to others (Jennings, 2016, p. 53). When students (and all people) see holding courageous conversations, or productive dialogue, as part of their daily routine, they will "build understanding and transform perspectives," (Jennings, 2016, p. 52) for themselves and others.

It is worth noting a few challenges I have experienced when engaging in courageous conversations. For one, when students are making sense of the world around them, their curiosities can at times come off as discriminatory. As teachers, we have to determine when these "questions, comments, or behaviors indicate an underlying stereotyped idea, discomfort, or rejection about human differences" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 33). These instances are teachable moments and likely require discussion with the whole class. Secondly, these courageous conversations cannot always conclude within a given time restraint, especially when those students are young. At times, I have felt uncomfortable with the conclusions made by my students and have attempted to redirect the closing of their conversation. However, doing so negates the importance of my their processes, and can "silence [them] unwittingly" (McLaren, 2016, p 179). In such cases, I believe I need to be responsive to the importance of the dialectic by committing more time to it on the following day.

Co-constructing curriculum. When critical educators invite their students to take part in curricular planning, they demonstrate to them that their identities and experiences matter and empower them to make tangible change. The extent to which

educators co-construct curriculum with their students can vary and age-level can impact the degree to which students take part.

Dale Weiss (2016) describes how the passion of his second-grade student over issues of gender identity inspired him to propose co-constructing a teaching unit with that student. Weiss reached out to his former student and her family, a 4th grader who had similar experiences of dealing with bullying related to the way that she dressed. Building a team of three allowed Weiss to support the development and implementation of a student-driven curriculum. While asking his second-grade student to lead classes may have been too much of a responsibility, pairing her with an older mentor gave her the agency and confidence to take critical action (Weiss, 2016, pp. 72-81).

This type of planning, where there is a gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student grants students the opportunity and agency to act on their critical thinking skills. Moreover, as illustrated in the case above, educators can use co-constructed curriculum planning to emphasize the importance of allying yourself to a cause and giving voice to those who are resisting injustices. However, allowing students this type of curricular influence requires that educators take a secondary role in planning, a traditionally teacher-driven practice, and can lead to initial discomfort.

Alternatively, theorists of critical pedagogy offer other methods for educators looking to effectively and consistently draw upon student knowledge and experiences. I was excited by one very manageable organizational strategy called a "critical literacy chart," suggested by Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015). This chart includes three columns: personal/ cultural resources drawn on; critical practices enacted; and how the

teachers took up a critical stance. Using this chart, teachers can plan curriculum by drawing on students' funds of knowledge, such as the languages they speak at home, their immigrant experiences (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 36), or day-to-day experiences, such as a student's concern about name calling (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 113). The two correlating columns, respectively, allow teachers to track how their students engage critically with these resources and how they as teachers decided to respond, whether by "consciously engaging, entertaining alternative ways of being, taking responsibility to inquire, [or] being reflexive" (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 13).

I can see myself using this chart at first as a way to hold myself accountable to culturally responsive and reflexive teaching, and eventually, as a way to approach students who may be interested in co-constructing units. Taking note of how lived and negotiated curriculum takes shape in the classroom will also make communication with families over curricular choices more straightforward.

Mandated and negotiated curriculum. While some schools are more lenient than others regarding teacher independence in planning, most require some grade-level mandates. My current school, for example, expects that teachers plan in accordance with the Common Core State Standards (https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/cc/). Vasquez (2014) recommends that teachers create a t-chart to "readily map the work [the class is] doing, [the] lived curriculum, against what [is] expected" (p. 13). Doing so makes it easier "to articulate to parents, colleagues, and administrators the ways in which [the] negotiated curriculum surpasse[s] the required curriculum" (Vasquez, 2014, p. 13).

In my experience, I have found that families are often concerned that their children are not learning reading skills if we are also prioritizing the critical content that their children are reading. Mapping out curricula in this way with real examples illustrates to families that both traditional and critical skills can be taught concurrently without either being diminished and that they both contribute to the holistic growth of their students.

Reflecting. Building critical curriculum is an ever-changing process that is created and recreated by the interactions of classroom communities. Each year, there is always more for teachers and students to learn about "themselves and others, about identity and diversity, about discrimination and empowerment, and how they all relate" (Scharf, 2018, p. 22). While each year, the exchange between students, teachers, families, and curriculum may differ slightly or extensively, teachers and student should frequently reflect on what worked and what can be improved for the following week, unit, or year.

While I ask my class to informally reflect on units of study or pre and post-assess their knowledge of these units in some way, I plan to make the dialectic of reflection more routine. While I still think it's critical that I assess my students regarding what they learned, I also believe that I need to reassess myself as well. By working to create a community in which students feel comfortable asking and critiquing me on my pedagogical choices, I believe that my classroom community will be a place in which students learn to question the structures and practices around them and reflect upon which support their style of learning and which do not.

Scharf (2018) also recommends that educators journal as a way to "capture evolving thoughts" on the critical work we do (p. 22). This year, I am committing to keeping a weekly journal as a way to track my thoughts on "anti-bias content and curriculum, classroom or school dynamics related to identity and diversity, personal experiences related to these issues and relevant insights from discussion groups and training sessions" (Scharf, 2018, p. 22). While I do not normally journal, I hope that by putting my thoughts my thoughts in words, I will be able to develop myself further in my practice.

Taking Critical Action

Praxis, the action-oriented component of critical pedagogy, allows critical students to challenge the system, to take their place as resistors and allies, and to make change for the better. Praxis, comprised of the dimensions of action and reflection, "involves increased commitment to the position one has chosen, and thus ever greater engagement in the effort to transform concrete, objective reality" (Freire, 2016, p. 37). I believe that this component of critical pedagogy is the most radical, and arguably the most important because, without it, "children are left with guilt and fear… as they deconstruct power relationships… [but are not provided with] opportunities for reconstruction and social change" (Kuby, 2013, p. 44).

Unfortunately, it seems that praxis is often trivialized in the classroom, even my own. We ask students to "write for change" and yet dismiss or punish them if they "learn to talk back" (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 147) and challenge the systems that actually impact them day-to-day. Lewison, Leland & Harste (2015) propose that teachers who commit to

critical classrooms should support the development of "challenging students," (p. 150) and tackle the issues that "might have been seen as inappropriate for school in the past" (p. 148). "It is not enough to treat [these issues] as a topic of conversation; we have to go out and do something as well" (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 149). Allowing students the agency to take social action about things that matter to them can have a transformative power (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 149). From my reading, I have gathered a list of ways in which teachers can approach praxis-oriented pedagogy in a meaningful way.

Activities. Free resources are widely available to teachers who are looking for activities, routines, or inspiration to supplement and enhance critical curriculum in ways that do not feel superficial. Below are a few that I plan to try out over the next few years if applicable, though I will need to modify a few for my K/1 students.

- Art, movement, expression: teachers can support students as they create art, movement, or expression pieces that communicate messages of anti-bias and transformative themes.
- Oral Interviews: students conduct and record interviews around themes, such as immigration stories, which allows "insight into the diverse perspectives, identities, experiences and viewpoints of people across a community. This task allows students the opportunity to learn more about, better understand and appreciate the experiences, identities, and perspectives of others," and teaches students how to avoid making generalizations about groups of people (Teaching Tolerance, 2018b).

- Questioning and reconstructing “good causes”: Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) described a project where fifth-grade students researched a popular "good" charity and discovered that it was under investigation for corruption (p. 151). In this instance, the idea that not every "good" thing is "good" inspired students to investigate and critique other charities that were perhaps not doing the good that they had been advertising. I would take this further and discuss how my students could either take a stand by reaching out to these charities or how they could work to inform those who had been hurt by these charities.
- Redesigning activities: acts of transformation, of texts or practices, that "contribute to creating a world where power is not used to disempower others, where difference is seen as a resource and where everyone has access to social goods and opportunity" (Janks, Dixon, Ferreira, Granville, & Newfield, 2014, p. 8). Redesign activities ask students to "re-present" dominant representations. For example, older students may challenge eurocentric views of the world by deconstructing conventional maps of the world and redrawing them. Redesign activities can also work to reimagine structures not accessible to all. Vasquez’s (2014) young students, for example, decided to redesign a toy container when they realized its packaging was hazardous to babies. They sent a letter to the company that included two redesign options for it to consider (Vasquez, 2014, pp. 157-159).

- Resistant Reading: Students learn through guided practice how to engage in "dominant reading... the most common and widely accepted interpretations of a text," and resistant reading, where "readers reposition themselves in relation to the text by taking on an unrepresented position or voice." Through this practice, students learn to read with an "awareness of power... [that] empowers them to question dominant beliefs and perspectives" (Teaching Tolerance, 2018c). As an example of this, educators may ask their young students to resist the traditional story of the "Three Little Pigs." After students have discussed their retelling, the teacher may introduce them to Jon Scieszka's *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, which offers readers with the untold, non-dominant perspective of the wolf.

Culminating experiences. Ending the year (or a unit) with a culminating experience provides children with the opportunity to reflect upon and share with others the way that their inquiries and concurrent actions "resulted in a more socially just and equitable community" (Vazquez, 2014, p. 167). Students can take part in, organize, or lead the way in which a class decides to share their critical learning with the world.

During my second year of teaching as a first-grade associate teacher, my two cooperating teachers led a brainstorm with our class in which students decided to create a "Family Museum." The class had spent the entire first semester learning about families and dedicated the month of December to develop a museum to put our knowledge about the many types of families into action. Students created three guiding statements, which

directed their creations for the museum. For the statement, "All Families Are Unique," for example, a group of students created a station where individuals could mix paint to form their skin color. Another group videotaped students saying "hello" in their home language and drew corresponding country flags. Allowing students to take leadership in this experience empowered them to share their critical knowledge with others and to respond confidently to any questions and concerns that were directed at them.

The "Family Museum" is one example of a meaningful, culminating experience that is impactful for students and the school community. It allowed students to speak to their learning process and invited families to take part in their own. In the coming year, I would like to rethink the curricular shares that have traditionally occurred in my classroom. One way I may attempt to do this is by reflecting with my students at the end of each unit, and ask them how they believe they could best teach others about what they learned. In reflecting with students and inviting them to direct the way in which they act on their knowledge, I believe we can disrupt the traditional practice of curriculum shares and redesign new, more meaningful ones to end our unit or year.

Summary

There are plentiful resources for educators who are interested in engaging in critical pedagogy with young students. Theorists such as Paolo Freire and Peter McLaren present the major concepts of the theory. Educators like Vívian María Vasquez, Zaretta Hammond, and bell hooks illustrate the theory in practice, with regards to students of all ages, from Kindergarten to grad school. And organizations such as Teaching Tolerance and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (naeyc), through

publications written by Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010), propose strategies, exercises, and activities for teachers looking to build critical curriculum.

All this said, the process of becoming a critical educator is not a straightforward one—the journey of one educator will almost certainly differ from that of another. Therefore, before we commit to reflecting on our teaching practices, we must first commit to reflecting on ourselves. Without self-examination, we will not find a reason for change, and without a reason, we cannot change the world or inspire our students to do the same. As eloquently put by Paolo Freire (2016):

> [T]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. (p. 39)

Once teachers have committed to the process of self-examination, they can then approach their practice and the structures they have put in place through a critical eye. Though the extent to which we can transform our practice varies, our commitment to that transformation in praxis can slowly change the world.

Reflections

My original intent in writing this paper was to find myself as a critical educator and give myself and my practice some direction. After spending many months thinking

about the major concepts of critical pedagogy and its application in contexts similar to my own, I feel that I have grown in many ways but still have far to go. I realize that in my position, I am still very capable of being ignorant and, while I want my students to resist and ally themselves against systemic injustices, I am aware of my own complicity in maintaining the status quo (Lewison et al., 2015, p. 168). In taking stock of what has changed since the time I began, however, I recognize that I am now more empowered and less hopeless about continuing the on-going process of transforming my practice. When I no longer have thoughts, questions, or concerns I will no longer be actively pursuing a life as a critical educator.

As educators, it is easy to become isolated within the confines of our classroom. We spend much of our off time planning learning experiences for our students and prepping physical materials in the time that remains. Becoming a critical educator is a process and finding support is crucial. Teachers can and should seek out support within the school community, from outside support groups, or through the internet (Vasquez, 2014, p. 19).

Regarding in-school support, critical educators may wish to make their curriculum visible. Allowing colleagues, administration and parents to watch curriculum "take shape," by inviting them in to observe learning or by sending them class newsletters allows them to "see the connections... to both the official paper curriculum (e.g., skills associated with reading and writing) and... unofficial curricular topics (e.g., gender, the corporate agenda, marginalization)" (Vasquez, 2014, pp. 19-20). By inviting others to

take part in and observe how critical curriculum plays out developmentally, teachers can present the topics of discussion in a way that is accessible.

Critical educators can also connect with those "of like mind with whom to think through and share experiences" (Vasquez, 2014, p. 20) outside of school, by enrolling in professional development, university classes or by joining critical literacy organizations. However, when searching for opportunities, educators must also think deeply about which opportunities apply to their particular needs. For example, Teaching Tolerance (https://www.tolerance.org/), a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, holds in-person workshops for K-12 teachers on "Facilitating Critical Conversations" and "Social Justice Teaching 101" or offers electronic guides for topics such as, "Critical Practices for Anti-bias Education" and "Do's and Don'ts of Celebrating MLK Day." While applying to the in-person workshops might be more impactful for some, the workshop sites are not always so accessible. While admission to the conference may not be expensive, flights and hotel expenses may be barring, in which case, joining social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest) or joining listservs, such as the one hosted by Rethinking Schools, may suffice (Vasquez, 2014, p. 20).

Voices from the Field

While an educator's commitment to critical pedagogy is an individual one, I believe that they can strengthen it by connecting with others in related fields. I know that those around me have inspired me. I reached out to a number of friends, colleagues, and mentors and invited them to read and reflect upon a draft of my thesis. The feedback I received was powerful. Some individuals empathized with my narratives and in turn,

shared their own. Others recommended further reading or encouraged me to rethink certain phrases or word choices. For example, after speaking with an old mentor, I decided to use the phrase “courageous conversations” over “difficult conversations.” A former colleague from New York created a group text comprised of educators looking to discuss flexible seating and others shared new ideas. I was truly appreciative of all those who took the time to read my thoughts because many of them inspired my thinking. The following are some of their reflections. I have decided to keep these quotes anonymous to emphasize the power of their words.

"I can empathize with your "awakening" as I think experiencing death and grief was transformative in a way that I could never have imagined, and, as it relates to the profession. I think it made me question the value of the type of education I was providing before vs. after, and how I was responding to different students' needs." - *colleague*

*“*Emerson’s *The Magic Tunnel* is a great example of negotiating language in a book. There are few narrative stories that focus on the people of New Amsterdam and the surrounding area, but the book was written in the 1940s and contains major gender stereotypes and some mild assumptions about American Indians. As a read aloud the text can be modified, or you can talk about what people thought was acceptable in the 1940s and what we think is acceptable today.” - *mentor*

"After the 2016 election almost all of the kids came in upset about the result, but one student came in cheerful because his parents had voted for Trump. It was tricky as people were sharing in the morning to stay neutral and make sure all kids and families felt safe and respected. Children aired their feelings, and I kept my comments pretty factual about how American government works when they had questions or misinformation." -*former colleague*

"I love the ideas from Hammond that the hardest culture to examine is our own. Increasingly, I've been thinking a lot about how I emphasize and push efficiency, productivity, work ethic, and put a premium on academics. In many ways, I uphold a very particular American and Western way of interacting with the world, and the goal is a particular vision of success." -*mentor*

"Division directors keep using the language of "parent engagement" as we develop programs from that Harvard summer institute they went to a few summers ago. Many of us are trying to switch to "family engagement" to welcome all family structures." -*former colleague*

"I tried to imagine so many of the elements you incorporate into your classroom as part of my own growing up, and my memory is flawed, of course, but I think there was none of this. There was no multicultural library, at most, it was "diverse" for having one book on Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa. There was no questionnaire about home

language sent out over the summer, there was no offer for parents to engage in the classroom-parents could fight over the PTA and who could donate to the school.” *-friend*

“Last year, third grade implemented Genius Hour from Harvey "Smokey" Daniels' *The Curious Classroom*, and fourth and fifth did something similar. It's a time where kids can pursue their interests and explore a topic of their choice independently or in groups. It was a huge hit! We all did it a little differently, so if this is something you're interested in exploring we can talk about the various structure it took on this year.”

-former colleague

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