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Raúl S. Lomelí
rsl.lomeli@gmail.com

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Critical Praxis *Círculos*: The Impact of Culturally Responsive Teacher Development

Raúl S. Lomeli

Abstract

The significant changes in school demographics across the nation indicate the rapid growth of the Latino population and an urgency to support Latinx students in K-12 and beyond (Glass, 2008). The demographic shifts, traditional notions of cultural capital, and the persistence of deficit-thinking contribute to educational challenges for Latinx students. Academic outcomes are higher and social benefits are stronger, whenever teachers employ culturally responsive teaching in the classroom (Cammarota, 2014; Covarrubias, 2017; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Even though such practices and approaches have demonstrated success, they are not being practiced and replicated in many parts of the country. Furthermore, it is not clear as to how administrators and teachers can work together to ensure that culturally responsive practices are discussed, learned, and employed in school settings. This study sheds light on the process of participating in administrator-teacher praxis *círculos* (circles) to develop collective critical consciousness and strengthen culturally relevant teacher competencies. The study followed a participatory action methodological approach, where I as the principal and researcher worked alongside teachers to nurture educator dispositions for implementing a Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) informed praxis.

Keywords: Culturally relevant education, teacher development, participatory research

Raúl S. Lomeli is a teacher in the World Languages Department at Del Mar High School in San Jose, California, and an adjunct professor at Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California. Email address: rsl.lomeli@gmail.com

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Introduction

The significant changes in school demographics across the nation indicating the rapid growth of the Latino population should alert school leaders to make sure that our education system is ready to engage and support Latinx students (Glass, 2008). The Latinx community will soon be larger than the white community in many states in the United States, and already a fact in California (Glass, 2008). Representation of students of color in higher education is substantially lower when compared to their white counterparts, and even lower for students of color that move on to a graduate level and or professional degrees (Ladson-Billings, 2006; KewalRamani, 2007; Kohler, 2007; Santigo, Galdeano & Taylor, 2015). The demographic shifts, a critical analysis of cultural capital, and deficit-thinking frame the problem for my study of a culturally responsive pedagogy.

The primary focus of this qualitative study lies in understanding how teachers and a school leader can develop what I call a *collective critical consciousness* through dialogue on critical theories and pedagogy, through engaging in *Critical Praxis Círculo*¹ (CPC). Developing collective critical consciousness, accessing and valuing community cultural wealth (CCW), and being intentional in creating a caring teacher community are all essential components to Culturally Responsive Teacher Development (CRTD). I propose that Culturally Responsive Teacher Development can be accomplished and lead a to *collective critical consciousness* when a group of educators: (1) Come together and critique the status quo or institutional forces of oppression and apply the critiques to their own context, (2) Access community cultural wealth to find ways to counter the status quo or institutional forces of oppression, and (3) Develop a caring teacher community through authentic dialogue. The two guiding research questions for the study are:

1. What is the impact of engaging teachers in Culturally Responsive Teacher Development?
2. How does Culturally Responsive Teacher Development impact teacher pedagogy?

The problem that this study intended to examine is the deficit ideologies exhibited by teachers and demonstrated in many school practices. This is a problematic issue since deficit ideologies and lack of critical consciousness lead educators to adhere to institutionalized ideologies and structures that are inherently deficit and racially violent toward students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2013). This study focused on how a principal can work in a dialogic and collaborative manner with teachers to co-create a collective critical consciousness and culturally responsive pedagogy. These dispositions have emancipatory potential for teaching and learning, particularly with students of color. This study sheds light on alternative and non-dominant methods that can be employed by school leaders to promote shifts in ideology and methodology for teachers as they engage students of color. Fur-

thermore, this study aimed at understanding the process of and effects of a professional learning community (PLC) focused on teacher ideology and instructional practice. I was guided by Freire's (1973) notion of praxis that calls for action as a means to impact both ideology and practice. The teachers and I came together once a month for 1-1.5 hours in a PLC to engage in dialogue related to issues that affect students and families. This PLC met monthly for six months and provided us with six cycles of praxis to engage in and reflect on during subsequent meetings and during interviews with participants. The PLC approach was intentional in centering teachers as the drivers for change in their own school community, as it specifically called for teachers to facilitate and lead the process *and dialogue*.

Definition of Acronyms and Terms

1. Community Cultural Wealth (CCW): the theory advanced by Tara Yosso (2005)—“an array of knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression.”
2. Critical Praxis Círculos (CPC): Critical Praxis Circles were the name we gave to our professional learning community meetings, since they included Freirean principles of dialogue and praxis.
3. Professional learning communities (PLC): Professional learning communities are groups of educators who meet regularly to reflect upon and discuss their instruction and student work.
4. Culturally responsive teacher development (CRTD): the term I'm advancing to define our praxis and includes three key elements: (a) Critical Consciousness, (b) Cultural Wealth, and (c) Caring Teacher Community.

Literature Review

I examined the research on deficit thinking, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Community Cultural Wealth to lay the foundation for my study. This body of research demonstrates that many of the policies that inhibit true relevance and engagement for students of color are racialized in nature and in practice.

Deficit thinking is prevalent in our educational system, as evidenced by the access and achievement gaps that demonstrate substantially lower college access rates for students of color, along with higher dropout rates, lower college completion rates, and barriers to culturally responsive approaches. Many of these realities are due to an inequitable funding system, and to a political system that rejects Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). Such as was the case with the banning of Mexican American Studies (MAS) Program in Arizona, even though it demonstrated obvious social benefits and academic outcomes for students of

color (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014; Valenzuela, 2010; Yosso, 2005). In 2017, a federal judge ruled the ban unconstitutional and motivated by racial animus. Followingly, academic gaps persist and alienate youth when curricular approaches fail to include the lived experiences of students of color (Loewen, 2008; Valencia, 2011). Another negative effect on academic achievement is the hyper focus on methods in education, which often lead to standardized education for all without considering ways to make the content relevant and engaging to students of color (Bartolome, 1994; Solorzano, 1997). Racialized assumptions about communities of color most often lead schools to default to the banking method of education critiqued by Paulo Freire (1973).

Our system of education continues to marginalize students of color through deficit assumptions and educational structures in ways that blame students of color for their lack of achievement (Valenzuela, 1999). Their background, culture, language, and social class are disparaged and are deemed as not having the social capital necessary for success (Bourdieu, 2011; Gonzalez, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2005). Anyon (1980, 1981) demonstrates how schools operate differently based on the makeup of the social class of the student body in order to replicate the maintenance of power and wealth. In addition, Loewen (2008) demonstrates how school curriculum is often filled with lies or half-truths regarding historical events and or figures. Loewen (2008) describes how US history books often omit how many historical figures were racist, yet they are still revered by our society. Schooling has systematically marginalized students of color, failing to value their linguistic and cultural assets.

Although this is the case in most school districts, Community Cultural Wealth and asset-based pedagogy provide alternatives that have already proven effective with communities of color in different parts of the country. Even though success with students of color has been reported for those employing CRP and/or culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Jimenez, 2020; Tintiangco-Cubales, 2014) and/or culturally sustaining pedagogy (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017), there is limited research that explores how such a disposition toward CRP can be developed in teachers, especially once teachers are already working directly with students (Kohli, 2018).

In order to develop the dispositions necessary for engaging students in Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) informed pedagogy, teachers need to engage in collective dialogue and deep reflection as a way to develop CCW aligned ideologies and to develop their pedagogical outlook. Freire (1973) posits that educators should become co-creators of knowledge through dialogue on theory and one's epistemology (ways of knowing, or experiential knowledge); this dialogue should cause educators to problem-pose and then to find tangible solutions for the problems and or issues that are recognized through the dialogic process. This leads us to the way that dialogue can be used in critical leadership to bring teams together, promote trust, and also to develop collective praxis (Freire, 2005).

Bartolome (2004) further supports the importance of engaging teachers in developing their critical consciousness or “political and ideological clarity,” and sees this as foundational toward engaging Mexican and or immigrant origin students and “denouncing discriminatory school and social conditions and practices” (p.119). One cannot expect teachers to engage students in culturally responsive pedagogy if they are not striving for racial justice or if they are not exposed to these ways of learning (Kohli, 2014). As such, culturally responsive pedagogy (and other critical approaches) calls for engaging students in critiquing forces of oppression, centering community cultural wealth in curriculum and instruction, and developing a critically caring community to support transformative learning (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Cammarota, 2014; Covarrubias, 2017; Gay, 2010; Jimenez, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012; Tintiango-Cubales, 2014; Valenzuela, 2010). These approaches speak to the importance of not only attending to academics, but also attending to socio-emotional, personal, and the overall well-being of students. Moreover, the development of critical consciousness through a *dialogic círculo* process is foundational to the ways in which teachers can enact asset-based culturally affirming pedagogy with students and the community.

Methods

This study examines the process of engaging six educators in seven professional learning community meetings, which we redefined as Critical Praxis Círculos (CPC). The group was comprised of five teachers and myself—one principal (researcher-participant and author). The CPCs aimed to develop a caring teacher community and gain a collective understanding of concepts, issues, and pedagogical praxis (action steps). The data includes our CPC meetings and teacher interviews.

Setting of Study

Salinas Community Charter School² serves approximately 550 students, from Preschool to sixth grade, and is a Spanish-English dual language immersion program. All students learn subjects in English and Spanish. One-third of each class is made up of the students with English as their primary language, one-third of the students with Spanish as their primary language, and one-third of the students are bilingual. The students’ language abilities are determined using a pre-assessment tool. The school community is overwhelmingly Latino (N=473), and comprised of 33 White, 11 Black, 11 Asian, 6 American Indian, and the rest declined to state. Close to 65% of the population qualifies for free and reduced lunch, noting that this is also a predominantly working-class community.

Teachers were recruited to participate via an email invitation that explained the research topic and process. This email informed participants of

my role as a participant observer. Participation in the *Critical Praxis Círculo*³ (CPC) and study was voluntary and participants were given plenty of time to pose questions or gain clarification as to the process before the interviews (group or individual) took place. It was essential that I was the primary investigator as a participant observer, since this study had the potential to shed light on participant-led methods that can be employed by school leaders. Documenting a principal's efforts to center teachers as drivers of change in this study provides the field with evidence for how teacher-led inquiry and praxis can be implemented.

Participant-Observer Role During Critical Praxis Círculo

As the principal of the elementary school where the research was conducted, I engaged with teachers as a participant-observer of a teacher-led professional learning community (PLC), which was referred to as a *Critical Praxis Círculo*⁴ (CPC). During the initial CPC, I made clear that our focus would be on exploring and critiquing the status quo in education and schooling, and provided a list of topics that we could engage in in order to problem pose, engage in dialogue, and then find ways to put ideas into action. Teachers facilitated all subsequent CPCs and used the list to guide the group's next steps regarding the content to cover.

Nonetheless, at times I did support teachers in the process of engagement during the sessions since dialogue and the *círculo* methodology was new to most participants. However, I only did this whenever the process needed guidance, when I was asked to clarify specific aspects of the meetings, or explain the purpose behind our CPC initiative. Although I helped to focus our purpose and time in the CPCs during our first meeting, teachers were given the liberty to choose content, activities, and dialogue topics to cover in the subsequent sessions.

Critical Praxis Círculos (CPCs)

Using dialogue as a means and method to engage in critical praxis ensured that all voices were heard and that power dynamics were minimized since all participants had equal time to share during our *círculo* format meetings. The task of developing critical consciousness through exploration of critical literature and through the exploration of lived experiences was accomplished through critical dialogue and praxis, as outlined by Freire (2000). Dialogue calls for building trust, understanding each other's stories or situations, thereby appeasing fears. It is also a viable path to building empathy and trust and is even more powerful when groups engage in this manner as a means to address issues (Darder, 2016; Freire, 1973). Furthermore, dialogue for this study took place using the *círculo* approach and method since this is also a native Mesoamerican and Native American approach that originates with the ancestors of the community that we are serving and thus, a relevant ontology that can directly impact one's epistemology (Carrillo, 2008; Kinship Circles, n.d.; Reagan, 2004).

Native American communities believed that one's epistemology or way of knowing was interconnected and rooted in one's way of being or ontology (Reagan, 2004). One cannot separate our minds from our heart, spirit, and soul, and therefore education should encompass and build upon all aspects of a person. Similarly, the concept of *educación* (education) as defined by Valenzuela (1999) involves elements of pedagogy and academics, and is founded in moral, social and personal values (Valenzuela, 1999).

Círculo (circle) is a ceremonial act that requires a high level of *respeto* (respect) and *palabra* (living out your word), as well as an intense focus on authentically listening to one another or listening with the heart (Carrillo, 2008). During the seven CPC meetings, teachers and staff followed this general plan:

Critical Praxis Círculo (CPC) – Agenda

1. Breathing and check-in: educators here took time to simply express whatever was on their mind or whatever they chose to contribute to the space.
2. The facilitator from the previous meeting provided an overview of what was shared and decided on by the team.
 - a. How did the actions go?
 - b. What worked and or what challenges were faced?
3. The facilitator for the meeting provided a synopsis of a critical topic, article, or video that all had a chance to preview before the meeting.
4. The facilitator posed questions about the reading and engaged in a created activity intended to bring about clarity and focus related to the topic that was chosen by the facilitating teacher.
5. Time for dialogue and meaning-making was allotted. During this time, the facilitator ensured that all had an opportunity to share their thoughts and or lived experiences [testimonio] related to the topic.
6. Educators then decided on how they would implement what was learned during the meeting. This ranged from attempting a new approach for dealing with student behaviors, finding better ways to connect with parents, and engaging students in relevant content and curriculum.

The agenda was flexible, thus allowing for participants to change it if they chose to move in different directions regarding meaning-making, taking action, or reflecting on previous meetings, literature, or other topics important to the group. Since this study was participatory in nature, our activities sometimes shifted depending on relevant events that may have taken place, promoting authentic dialogue or *testimonios* (Burciaga, 2007; Huber, 2009). It was the responsibility of the facilitators to 'read' the participants as the meetings unfolded (Freire, 1973). Since the study calls for critical praxis, it also had an emergent and grounded design at its core because participants in the study had a say regarding shifts that may have taken place or to fully understand issues that were originally posed.

Interviews

I conducted interviews of the six teachers to understand their perceptions and/or learning at two key points in the study; after the first meeting, and toward the end of the study. Part of the meaning-making nature of the study entailed bringing forward the participants' experiences, and reflections or *testimonios* (Burciaga, 2007; Huber, 2009) as they participated in dialogue and as they shared during interviews with me (Merriam, 2005).

In asking teachers for interviews, I explained that the intent of the interview was to hear their authentic perspective regarding the critical praxis meetings (CPCs) that took place. I also let them know that I was not interested in right or wrong answers. Rather, I simply wanted to hear about their perspective and or experience in the CPCs (see Appendix 1: Interview Questions).

Data Analysis

Guided by grounded theory (Anderson, 2007), I constantly checked the data gathered through interviews and revised as needed to ensure I would have the data needed to answer the research questions. In order to triangulate the data collection for this study, I also kept a reflexive journal throughout all steps of the study (Anderson, 2007). This helped me track my thoughts, actions, possible shifts in methods or approaches, and or decision-making processes. The CPCs were recorded through a digital audio recorder as agreed upon by all participants. This granted me time to go back and listen to meetings, code data, and to revisit what was said, to ensure authentic understanding.

To answer my research questions, I focused on three areas in my data analysis process: (1) the process of co-developing critical consciousness and community; (2) the process and engagement with Culturally Responsive Teacher Development; and (3) How teachers perceived the impact on their pedagogy. In examining Critical Consciousness, I focused on both the content covered and dialogic interactions, since they both are essential in the praxis process as described by Freire (reading the world through critical topics and dialogue). I developed the following categories in order to analyze data:

1. *Critical listening*: When and how teachers are listening to one another as evidenced by building on each other's ideas.
2. *Decision making*: Instances when the group makes decisions and how these came to be.
3. *New teacher talk*: Times when new teachers or less outspoken teachers participate in meaningful dialogue.
4. *Teacher dialogue*: Teachers' comments, perceptions, or reactions to specific readings or topics that reflected more engaged dialogue (e.g., racial justice, poverty, time or levels of engagement, teacher-student relationships).

5. *CCW conversations*: I separated teacher dialogue that focused on Community Cultural Wealth where teachers demonstrated a collective critique of systems of oppression, valuing/accessing community cultural wealth, building a caring teacher community, and shifted toward CCW informed pedagogy.

These approaches provided substantial data allowing for clear analysis and understanding of the process we engaged in as we covered the critical content. As I analyzed data, I reflected on the following questions in alignment with a grounded theory methodology: *Were participants able to consistently critique systems of oppression and make connections to their life or current issues/context? Were participants able to acknowledge and bring value to Community Cultural Wealth, as well as develop a caring teacher community? What did teachers say was the impact of the CPC's on their thinking and pedagogy? Was there consistency between what they reported and their actual pedagogy?*

These specific areas were studied and analyzed using a coding system that helped to identify if and when these topics or comments were made, how often they were made, and to capture *testimonios* that included deep personal/familial vulnerability, passion, and emotion (Burciaga, 2007, Delgado Bernal, 2012). I transcribed all interviews and CPC meetings, and coded the data. I then charted the data and indicated *testimonios* that were shared since it means that participants were making deep contextualized connections to the content. I saw these as deep learning towards developing a collective critical consciousness. After coding and analyzing the data through the three elements, I was able to ascertain the full praxis and research cycle including: if teachers were able to engage and develop collective critical consciousness; study the CPC process and how it helped teachers engage in issues, and study the impact of the CPC process on teacher practice. Figure 1 is a conceptual model that depicts the interwoven and cyclical impacts the CPC had on Culturally Responsive Teacher Development and by effect, on Teacher Pedagogy. We engaged in the CPC approach/method, studied how participation in this impacted culturally responsive teacher development, and thus impacted teacher pedagogy.

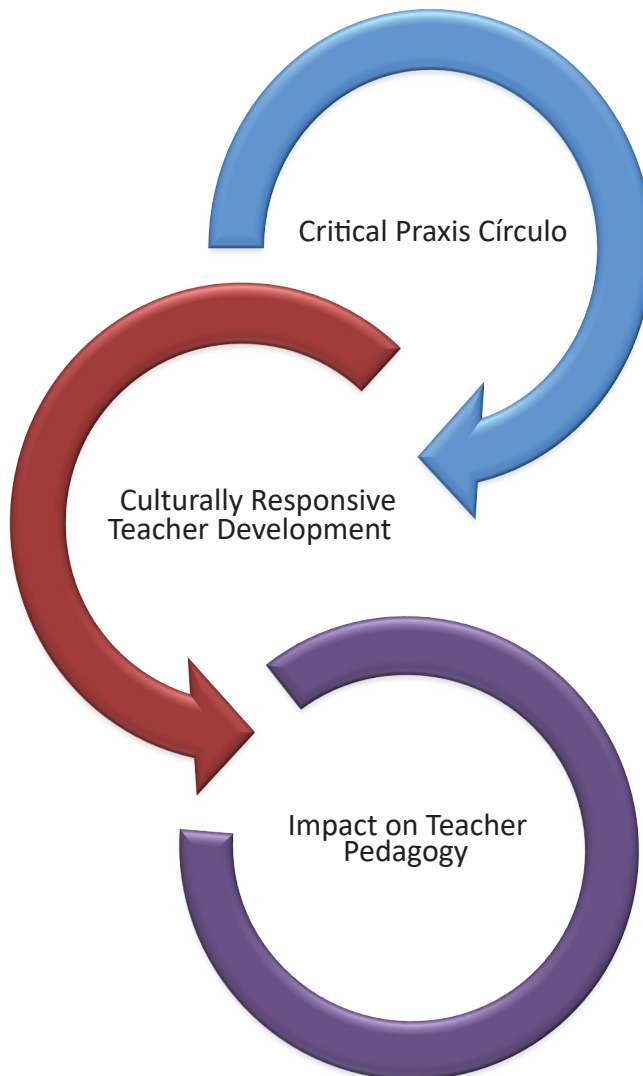
Findings

Six participants (including me), engaged in seven Critical Praxis Círculos (CPC) sessions whereby we listened intently to one another, reflected on what was being shared, and built on one another's comments and ideas. The CPC's helped to build a caring teacher community and a collective understanding of concepts, issues, and to develop steps in our praxis cycle. Dialogue was evident; deep sharing and listening is evidenced by the length of time that participants shared and the quality of consistent engagement from all participants. Most participants held the attention of others and shared in instances for 5-10 minutes at a time. This type of authentic sharing is usually not the norm in school settings. Often times,

teachers are required to simply sit and passively listen to presentations by school leaders or outside experts during professional development sessions.

Whenever teachers are called to share, they are given minimal time to express their point of view or to pose questions. At times, teachers are asked to interact with one another, yet these interactions are few and far between and often mere-

Figure 1
Critical Praxis Circulo Model



ly consist of short (1-2 minutes) think-pair-share activities. In contrast, teacher voice, alternating facilitation, and dialogue as a part of our CPC *círculo* process was central as a way to build a caring teacher community. It provided a space for authentic discovery, deep reflection, application to our life experiences, and fostered pedagogical action steps. *Culturally Responsive Teacher Development* (CRTD) as I define here includes:

1. *Critical Consciousness*: Collective Critique of systems of oppression.
2. *Cultural Wealth*: Valuing and accessing community cultural wealth.
3. *Caring Teacher Community*: Sustaining a caring teacher community.

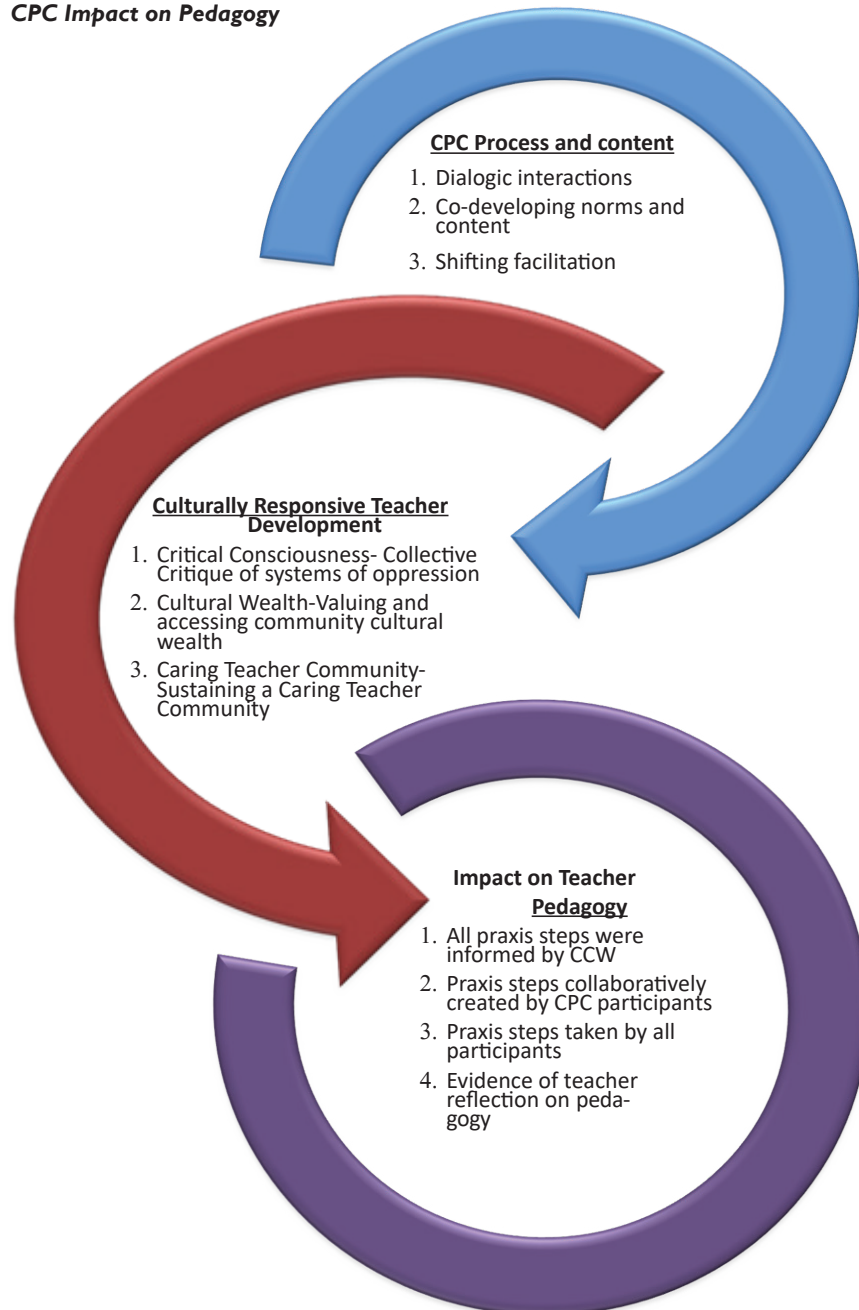
All three CRTD elements were in place during all of our CPC *círculo* sessions. Participants naturally engaged in critiques based on the content, then applied these to their own contexts, and consistently also shared ideas to engage our students/community in accessing their own cultural wealth. In so doing, participants were clearly able to engage in CRTD that undoubtedly impacted teacher ideology. In addition to engaging in CRTD, participants were able to come up with relevant praxis. These praxis steps demonstrated shifts in pedagogy that were aligned to the conversations we engaged in through the CPCs. That is, if we had not engaged in this project, teachers would not have attempted all the innovative ideas presented. Even some of the comments made as to how they were now thinking about students and our school environment demonstrate how the CPC impacted pedagogy. Furthermore, the praxis steps taken were all informed by community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), thus demonstrating how this PD intervention helped to shift teacher ideology and supported Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) informed pedagogical shifts.

Figure 2 depicts the impact that *Culturally Responsive Teacher Development* (CRTD) had on teacher pedagogy, which was the overall intended outcome of the project. The model highlights the main components of the Critical Praxis Círculos (CPC), the guiding principles of our Culturally Responsive Teacher Development, and the impacts that both had on teacher pedagogy. In the following findings sections, I highlight three key findings from this study and the Critical Praxis Círculos (CPC) professional development: (1) Developing critical consciousness; (2) Critical pedagogy revelations; and (3) Impact on teacher pedagogy.

Developing Critical Consciousness

Teacher participants engaged in dialogues through our CPCs that supported a ‘developing critical consciousness.’ That is, they demonstrated critiquing the status quo, critiquing systems of oppression, made personal or context connections as to the reading that we engaged in and with the ideas that were posed, accessed CCW in student and families, all while building community. These ideas, conversations, and connections, led to effective Culturally Responsive Teacher Development (CRTD), and shifts in teaching praxis (as will be discussed in the next finding).

Figure 2
CPC Impact on Pedagogy



In my interviews with teachers, many reflected on elements of critical consciousness when asked what they had learned throughout the CPC sessions.

Zoe: I appreciated the piece on collectively getting to a place of consciousness. Our school is really lucky since a lot of us already get it, due to our background. It was good to see that there are other people that see things critically.

Xiara: It's important that we are critical as to what we teach our students. Also, that they [students] understand that they have a lot to offer so that they feel valued for who they are.

Valeria: I've been very sheltered in the past, but it helped me question things more and focus on the *why* behind the way things are.

Lorena: This CPC has been very beneficial for personal growth. I learned a lot about Cultural Wealth and its importance and value for all schools.

Luca: I learned throughout the sessions the importance of utilizing the local community within the school. I also found it interesting when we talked about making content more relevant to the children, [and] to better utilize their prior knowledge.

In their own way, they each demonstrated the development of a critical consciousness. Zoe mentioned “collectively getting to a place of consciousness.” Xiara noted the link between teachers being critical with helping students understand their value. Valeria acknowledges a sheltered upbringing and learning to question things more, while Lorena comments on “personal growth” and the power of CCW. Luca closes with ties between culturally responsive teaching and the importance of including the community.

As we continued our project, teachers began to reflect on how their critical consciousness connected with our school/community context.

Xiara: It made me think differently about our school and how we engage the whole community. Also [it] helped me see how the curriculum doesn't really include our kids' stories. We had good conversations that were tied to our context and the shared facilitation was good.

Valeria: It made me think of starting [these topics] sooner with kids. It's ok to question and to give students the ability to do so, as well.

Luca: It has had an impact on my critical consciousness because now I view my history and social science material in a different light, and it allows to me approach lesson planning from a whole new angle.

Zoe: It made me more mindful of my practice, oppression is real, and we sometimes do not realize it. My brother said, '*les vas a lavar el coco...*' I said, *no, les voy a abrir el coco*' (My brother said, 'you're going to brainwash them'...I said 'no, I'm going to open their minds').

Xiara: It has caused me to think more about making lessons more relevant even though it's hard. I've also applied my learning to the way that I communi-

cate with parents by acknowledging their needs, their attributes and [cultural] wealth.

Valeria: The praxis worked really well! It helped me reflect on things and try new things with students. Students were impacted greatly. Going into details as to what really happened helps students really react and engage.

Lorena: This is the first district and first school in my 16 years of teaching where I felt encouraged, and comfortable to create culturally relevant curriculum.

Luca: I am now more conscious in what is taught and how. Being careful with my choice in words [is] a shift I have seen in my practice.

In these excerpts, teachers critique the status quo and systems of oppression, made personal or curricular connections, and built upon CCW in students/families, all while building community through the CPC process. These ideas, conversations, and connections led to effective CRTD. Throughout the CPC, participants made many suggestions to praxis steps that would impact classroom practices and relationships with students and parents.

Critical Pedagogical Revelations

Some examples of the ways in which participants were now thinking about shifts in pedagogy, relate to their abilities to critique the status quo and to find ways to contend with it in classroom practice—I'm calling these shifts *critical pedagogical revelations*. One teacher's quote synthesizes this concept well: "We need to teach them how to think critically. Just teaching them not just how to do something, but how to think about things. To think about their environment. To think about how to solve problems."

The following is an example of a teacher participant acknowledging oppressive cycles that have negative impacts on students of color, even to the point of obstructing students and communities from having the freedom to think.

That's why you have these oppressive cycles. Because we can't even stop to think. I think it is really important, at least as a teacher for me, with our children that we have. To give them that power to just think, you know? (Teacher participant from CPC group dialogue)

This example brings forward Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) as a way to promote positive cultural identity in students as a precursor to enacting change. Another teacher added, "At the end of the day, it has to start with at least them knowing 'my story matters.' I have a voice. How can I use it to create a change?"

The following example highlights CCW as a way to promote positive cultural identity in students. Thinking of ways to build empathy and true community in diverse classrooms and contexts. "How do we teach our kids to understand and appreciate their story? How do we teach the other kids to recognize that, and to help? Not just to empathize. I think we could do more." The following quote

demonstrates a participant reflecting on the importance of exposing students to critiquing institutions and forces of oppression:

It makes me think about how the purpose of what we're teaching our kids a law is something that's supposed to keep order. Yeah, that's what it is. Where are we teaching them that laws can be unfair? Who makes these laws? Why do they get this power? That's what I want to teach, you know?

The teacher above is pushing for a critical examination of power and the law, and how it affects communities. Another example of a *critical pedagogical revelation* is highlighted in this teacher participant quote: "How do we become responsive? How do we bring in relevant pedagogy? How do we become critical of what we're putting in front of them so that it is engaging for all learners?"

Finally, this quote from our CPC dialogues demonstrates a CCW aligned curricular approach to engage students of color and a teacher's reflection on funds of knowledge:

In the Latino culture, storytelling is a huge piece. I feel like that is something that's not highlighted as much as it should be. I feel like our kids themselves, if they learned that they are great storytellers, that they have a voice, and they learn how to use that, then that in turn will be a starting point. Now use your voice and turn it into writing. Letting them know that they are strong in this, because it comes from their culture, you know?

Here we see the teacher making bold connections with the CCW and funds of knowledge students already have and linking it to a powerful practice of teaching.

Impact on Pedagogy

Culturally Responsive Teacher Development (CRTD) impacted CPC participants' pedagogy as demonstrated by the praxis steps created during CPC sessions. Some of these examples were evidenced by how teacher participants engaged students (simulations), the way in which teacher participants perceived their own school context (noticing campaign), and the way in which they engaged parents and students (CCW parent session). All three praxis steps were developed during CPC sessions and included a call for teachers to bring in simulations as classroom strategies to engage learners. In this case the simulations had to do with games led by teachers in order to expose students to issues of power, gender, race. The hope was getting students to experience injustice and to then apply this to their own contexts. Another praxis step included participants going on a 'noticing campaign' to notice and critique parent interactions, student interactions, and other ways in which our community may espouse racist ideologies (whether knowingly or unknowingly). Apart from the three praxis steps, there were many other reflective components that demonstrated the ways in which participants began to think about pedagogy in ways that are aligned to CCW. While some participants more

fully demonstrated pedagogical shifts based on their follow-through in the praxis steps, all participants engaged in insightful dialogue sessions. We discussed topics that could impact their own pedagogy and engaged in listening to and reflecting on how praxis steps were incorporated into the classroom or school contexts. This opportunity to work together and learn from one another is not always present in schools. Evidence here demonstrates that there are many positive outcomes in pedagogy that can come about whenever teachers are allowed to lead, are deemed holders of valuable knowledge, and are provided with a space to co-create action steps that impact pedagogy, and where they also have a space to reflect on their own attempts. Even though some teacher participants may not have been able to take all of the praxis steps, all were able to learn through their creation and through listening to the outcomes implemented by other participants.

Recommendations for School and District Leaders

In our collective attempts to find solutions for the persisting achievement gaps that affect students of color, and in particular Latinx students, we must make sure that we are not making ideological errors as described by Borrero (1994). That is, we must demand that proposed solutions in education are specifically focused on students of color and rooted in culturally responsive teaching and CCW. In this way, we can rethink how we *do* school in order to authentically engage all students. Focusing on assessments, and making year to year performance comparisons on gender, race, economic status, and other demographic markers, merely point out the persistent gaps; our responses to these data continue to evolve from the same ideological errors that created the gaps in the first place (Bartolome, 1994). Rather, the field of education needs to address teacher ideology and teacher disposition as they relate to students of color. In this study, I outlined many of the steps that can be taken by school leaders and educators, including:

1. *Engaging teachers in a critical exploration of systems (through a CRT lens).* As seen in this study, teachers consistently engaged in such topics that were essential to developing a *collective critical consciousness*, which then led to shifts in ideology and pedagogy. The following are examples as to content that can be explored:
 - a. Exploring CRT as a framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses (Yosso, 2005).
 - b. Acknowledging and exploring the contradictory nature of education, since it has the potential to emancipate and empower yet more often than not contributes to oppressing and marginalizing people of color (Freire, 1973).
 - c. CRT in education shifts the focus and goal back to the liberatory potential of schooling (hooks, 2014; Freire, 1973).
 - d. Using contemporary or historical examples in literature or forms of media to explore and expose forces of oppression.

e. Explore institutional practices and societal paradigms that have a significant marginalizing effect on the overall achievement for students of color in the U.S.

2. *Engaging teachers in exploration of and in accessing Community Cultural Wealth* to inform ideology and pedagogy (i.e., centering Latinx students). This study demonstrates how it was essential to not only critique systems of oppression, but also to value and access CCW. Further points on CCW include:

a. Community cultural wealth brings forth, identifies, and emphasizes the many aspects of wealth found in communities of color; an essential factor in an educator's pedagogical outlook especially in the context of communities of color (Yosso, 2005; Burciaga 2012).

b. Community cultural wealth also directly negates and contends *deficit thinking* by focusing on the capital accumulated by people of color as a starting point for education, rather than on assuming that the education system is fair and 'works,' and then blaming those that are not succeeding (Yosso, 2005).

3. *Establishing Praxis Steps*

A key component of the study was to ensure that teachers were able to take steps toward enacting Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. We did this through creating time in the CPCs to develop and decide on praxis steps that were informed by our collective consciousness. Essential elements to praxis include:

a. Using Freire's notion of praxis that call for action as a means to impact both ideology and practice (Freire, 1973)

b. Collective processes where we are able to know and act upon our context in order to change it (Darder, 2016)

c. Developed by teachers and administrators in a collaborative process

Conclusion and Implications for Further Research and Educational Practice

Although some scholars have demonstrated how to develop CCW informed dispositions in teachers, much of the contexts have been in university-based teacher preparation programs (Bartolome, 1994; Darder, 2016). Little to no research focuses on how site leaders can continue the work of developing or sustaining critical consciousness in teachers in order to ensure culturally responsive pedagogical approaches. This study is an example of the way a school leader, along with teachers, can develop a caring teacher community, all while collaboratively engaging in Culturally Responsive Teacher Development (CRTD). We enacted this via our dialogue circles, which I called 'Critical Praxis *Círculos*' and through the exploration of critical topics, applying critiques to one's own life and local contexts, and through identifying and accessing community cultural wealth

in students for curricular development. This study demonstrates how a principal and teacher team can use their Culturally Responsive dispositions built through the CPC process, to develop and attempt praxis steps intended to more fully engage students of color (Freire, 1997). In these praxis steps, it is important to note that participants were able to move away from the “methods fetish” (Bartolome, 1994) that hinders teacher learning. Some may have questions as to student achievement as a result of the CPC, and as a result of the praxis steps that we took. However, this study was not intended to measure student success; rather, it was intended to examine teacher dispositions toward more inclusive and affirming (humanizing) pedagogy.

This study can also be seen as fruitful for teachers and principals as well as district staff, as they think of ways to implement Ethnic Studies, Culturally Relevant/Sustaining Pedagogy, Critical Race Theory, Community Cultural Wealth, and other critical pedagogies. Scholars in the field may also be interested in finding meaningful ways (possible partnerships with districts and school organizations) to continue the raising awareness about critical approaches that are already happening in some teacher education programs. School and district leaders often have the right intentions toward equity, yet they may not know how to put critical teaching into practice. In other cases, school and district leaders may themselves be lacking in socio-political awareness, thus impeding culturally responsive approaches. Scholars in the field of education that are interested in authentically engaging students of color and in re-imagining how the schooling system can work, may seek out school and district partnerships. These collective partnerships are needed to bring about equity, inclusion, and better outcomes for students of color.

Notes

¹ A monthly professional learning community, which we called a critical praxis circle.

² Pseudonym.

³ Circle.

⁴ Critical praxis circle (also professional learning communities).

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Appendix

Interview Protocol Questions

Open-ended questions that were asked during the initial interview included:

1. Why did you choose to participate in the Critical Praxis Círculo?
2. What do you hope to gain from your time invested in this effort?
3. What are areas of need for you as a teacher and related to the focus of CPC?
4. What related experiences or skills will you be bringing to the group?

Questions for the final interview included the following:

1. What have you learned throughout the CPC sessions?
2. Did this process impact your level of critical consciousness and or your focus on how critical issues affect our context?
3. Has this learning caused you to shift your practice in any way?
4. Has the learning impacted your focus on building relationships with students and families?
5. The last part of the final interview included revisiting some of the comments made, questions posed, suggestions made, and or reactions participants had during the CPC meetings, in order to verify that what I captured and interpreted after analyzing the CPCs was indeed what was intended by participants.