Developing a Critical Consciousness with Elementary Students
as A Catalyst for Academic Success

Marisol Diaz

Stephen F. Austin State University

Abstract

Students of Mexican backgrounds have experienced oppressive schooling practices and classroom pedagogies that create academic achievement gaps. This article presents the work of the author, who taught for six years in a Title I elementary school near the United States and Mexico border. Based on an autoethnographic study that investigated the impact of critical pedagogy in the classroom, the author explores the extent to which the pedagogical approach mediated students' critical consciousness development, resulting in a trajectory of academic success. The study analyzes six years of student work, self-reflection, and the daily routines of the classroom. The findings suggest that the students' development of critical consciousness catalyzed their critical thinking skills, which they in turn applied to a wide array of academic content, including mathematics, science, and English language arts.

Keywords: critical consciousness, critical pedagogy, elementary, academic success, Hispanic students, students of Mexican background

Introduction

In the United States, academic achievement continues to play a significant role in a students' life. For the most part, academic achievement can be a vehicle for success in other areas of life, such as career and economic stability. However, not all students receive the same education (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Historical differences in schooling practices have created academic achievement gaps between students of color and their White peers; this includes students of Mexican backgrounds (Reardon & Portilla, 2016; Valencia et al., 2002a; Yosso, 2013). The United States' National Center of Education Statistics reported that, while the overall academic growth in reading and writing has increased, the achievement gap between Hispanic and White students persists.[1] Compared to White students (under the age of 18), Hispanic students are more likely to be retained, to experience school violence, to experience higher push-out rates, and to be living in poverty (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017).

Inequities in education show students of Mexican backgrounds are more likely to be viewed through a deficit lens (Valencia et al., 2002b; Valenzuela, 1999), be labeled as having behavioral problems, and be perceived as threatening or as perpetrators, feeding the school-to-prison pipeline (Orozco, 2013). Additionally, school's tracking systems of Black and Hispanic students affect the kind of jobs they will attain when entering the labor market (Moller & Stearns, 2012).

While high school dropout rates among Hispanic students have significantly decreased, Hispanic students still have the highest dropout rates among all other racial groups (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). Without high school degrees or a GED (Tests of General Educational Development), college education is not possible. College attainment remains a critical factor for socioeconomic mobility and life chances; research supports that those who have college degrees earn more money (Torpey, 2018), tend to have better decision-making skills about life and social interactions (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011), and even live longer lives (Case & Deaton, 2015). In fact, only 16% of all Hispanics have a bachelor's degree or higher, and the overwhelming majority of the population (59%) only have a high school degree or lower (Noe-Bustamante & Flores, 2017).

---

[1] Adopting language from the United States Census data, school districts use the term *Hispanic* when referring to multiple populations of Latin backgrounds. This includes Mexican students and students of Mexican backgrounds. Therefore, in order to discuss this group statistically, the term *Hispanic* is used in the article. When not referring to data sets, the term *Mexican* is used to best describe the students' cultural identity.

Awareness of these problems and their power to persist through time are not new. Some explanations for these differences use deficit ideologies and debunked myths about biologically-determined or inherently-natural abilities to explain variance in academic achievement (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). However, scholars in education, psychology, and law have long disproven such ideas (Aldefer, 2003; Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and found that such disparities are better understood through social and schooling factors related to racism and social class (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Knapp & Woolverton, 2004). While there is extensive research that supports the vast benefits of classroom pedagogy and curriculum that centers a student's culture and ways of knowing (Delpit, 2012; Nieto, 2010; Sleeter, 2011), there are less studies from teachers as researchers (Kincheloe, 2012). This is especially true for studies at the elementary level that work with students of Mexican backgrounds.

In this article, I describe the experiences I engaged in as an elementary teacher and the elementary students from whom I learned, teaching grades second through fourth, at a Title 1 school (NCES, 2019) for six years. The majority of the students in my classroom were of Mexican background, as was the larger demographic of the school district and city. I noticed students' academic achievement improved and more importantly, they became critical thinkers and demonstrated their critical consciousness about their lives and sociopolitical context through their work, relationships with their peers, and with their home caretakers. The byproduct of the critical pedagogy used in the classroom was increased academic achievement. This article examines the role of classroom pedagogy in students' development of critical consciousness and its effect on academic achievement. Specifically, this study considers one key research question: to what extent did critical pedagogy mediate students' academic success?

Literature Review

Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy (1970)—grounded in the importance of dialogue, praxis, and critical reflection—guided my teaching in the classroom. Critical pedagogy draws from critical theory: a framework which studies the dynamics of power as it relates to knowledge construction and oppression (Giroux, 2001). Critical theory positions knowledge as socially produced and demands an understanding of various forms of oppression. Critical pedagogy draws from critical theory and applies it to educational practices. According to Paulo Freire (1970), when an individual becomes critically conscious, they can perceive the social

conditions of their political and economic context that oppress them. Critical pedagogy focuses on the process in which both teacher and student become increasingly conscious of their sociopolitical context. This process, conceptualized by Paulo Freire's (1970) as *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, emphasizes developing this awareness as a cornerstone of critical pedagogy. Moreover, critical pedagogy retains an inseparable relationship between teaching and learning. In this context, teaching and learning should not be separate if they are to be truly effective and revolutionary (Freire, 1978; 1998).

Critical literacy is associated with critical pedagogy as it moves beyond the technical aspects of literacy and instead focuses on the connections of power and literacy (Macedo, 2006). Used as a tool for critical consciousness, critical literacy engages students in critical reflection through problem-posing and empowers individuals to engage in questioning the social reality in which they live. Using a critical lens, I taught about oppression and forms of resistance through stories, books, and real-life examples from Mexican and other diverse marginalized communities.

Historical Context

From its earliest origins in the British colonies, schools primarily functioned to maintain the economic and political power of the White elite class (Knapp & Woolverton, 2004). Historically, school segregation primarily focused on the forcible assimilation of indigenous communities, including but not limited to native Mexican communities in the southwest United States (Churchill, 2004). In the nineteenth century, Mexico lost nearly half of its land to the United States, leaving many Mexicans living in poverty and without a homeland. White settlers amassed their economic and political power throughout the region, and, by restricting the use of Spanish, they were able to extend their cultural dominance (Vélez, 2008). School sites were the primary socializing institutions for this type of cultural colonization. With a large Mexican population, Texas was one of the states at the forefront of Americanization movements. By 1870, Texas laws mandated English-only instruction in all schools. This, along with widespread poverty, left most Mexican children unable to attend school (Vélez, 2008).

Mexican students continued to be segregated in schools throughout the early 1900s with policies and curriculum focusing on English-only pedagogy and widespread assimilation through cultural eradication and violence (Mirandé, 1994). "Mexican American education was all Americanization all the time" (Blanton, 2007, p.70). During this time, some scholars suggested

the clinical labeling of Mexican students as "social, cultural, and educational retardation" in order to justify, demand, and support an Americanization of the curriculum (Blanton, 2007, p. 67). By the 1920s, teaching English was the main objective of schools, while all other academic areas did not receive the same importance. The attainment of English seemed like the only path to learning. Segregated schools for Mexican students were overcrowded, lacked adequately trained staff, and had under-resourced facilities. In these schools, it was prevalent for students to be retained up to three times in first grade because they had not acquired English proficiency (Powers, 2008). Up until the late 1970s, punishments for violating English-only policies included corporal punishment, fining students, and Spanish detention classes (Valencia, 2002). One of the consequences of such policies was an overrepresentation of Mexican and Mexican American students in special education classes (Valencia et al., 2002a). These practices, rooted in deficit ideologies, had lasting legacies that influence current schooling practices that enforce a connection between English and patriotism that are still seen across the country today (Zamuido et al., 2011). The historical accumulation of these oppressive experiences have long lasting traumatic effects.

Deficit models that attribute disparities in academic achievement to students and their communities are still present. As mentioned previously, students of Mexican backgrounds are more likely to be labeled negatively and their cultural identity blamed for their lack of success in school. While there is no empirical evidence to support these deficit views, documented research demonstrates that teachers maintain deficit thinking of Mexican students, such as perceiving them as lazy and careless (Valencia, 2002). Valenzuela's (1999) study of Mexican-American youth in a U.S. high school noted Mexican students were vastly underrepresented in the college-bound tracks with their teachers often disrespecting them. Valenzuela also noted that Mexican American youth 'learn' perhaps no other more influential lesson in school than to devalue the Spanish language, Mexico, Mexican culture, and "things Mexican" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 19). Valencia (2002) notes that these schooling practices have a substantial impact on academic achievement. These factors include school funding inequalities and overrepresentation of students labeled as Hispanic in special education programs and vocational tracks.

These historical patterns also affect economic attainment and impact income inequality (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Reardon & Portilla, 2016). In the United States, students of Mexican backgrounds are primarily labeled Hispanic and categorized as Latino. Only 15% of Latino

students, ages 25-29, have completed a bachelor's degree. Latinos hold the lowest household income with a nearly $20,000 average difference from whites and more than $10,000 difference from all other races (Heinrich, 2016).

Schools and the schooling process have historically contributed to the Mexican community's income inequality and college attainment by stripping the cultural identity of Mexican students, replacing their native languages, and emphasizing assimilation and compliance (Herrera-Rocha & de la Piedra, 2019). Nevertheless, schools can also be places of empowerment through which cultural identity and language can be preserved and used to promote academic achievement. Robust research connects successful academic achievement to using a curriculum that supports and maintains students' cultural identity and heritage (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings; 1992; Sleeter, 2011; Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004).

Research Methods

This ethnographic study covers seven years of my teaching. Like many teachers, I electronically archived many classroom-related artifacts, such as high quality and engaging lesson plans, student work samples, photos of student activities, articles for reading, parent communication letters, written feedback from students and various assessments. I also archived electronic notes on my positive and negative teaching experiences, e.g., failed lessons or my biases about students' abilities. I considered this to simply be good teaching practice and other teachers did the same thing. In a sense, this was where my research began. The data is a seven-year collection (grades 2nd-4th) of these artifacts; meaning data from about 165 students.

Categorization was used to analyze the data and locate emerging themes (Maxwell, 2005), following Marshall and Rossman's (2016) seven phases for analyzing data. I also borrowed methods from grounded theory, which use the constant comparative method to help build conceptual categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Further, while conducting the categorization process, I peer-debriefed with scholars in the field and examined the literature to construct the findings and derive the themes. It is important to note that ethnographic work seeks to provide a complete picture of a specific context using a collection of data over substantial periods of time. Further, "because [ethnographic] work is too focused on complex local situations, it does not permit easy isolation of one variable for testing. In fact, some ethnographers question whether we can think of human behavior in terms of variables at all"

(Anderson-Levitt, 2006, p. 282). The themes drawn from the collection of data are presented in the findings section.

Setting and Participants

The school community is largely of Mexican descendancy, situated near a national border from which it draws its traditions and diversity. The families and students are welcoming and community oriented. They value family life, socializing, and education. Parents and caregivers supported me and mentored me in community activism. The school is adjacent to a large metropolitan area with characteristics of an urban area (Milner, 2012), such as a high level of English learners. The school enrolls nearly 1,300 students in pre-kindergarten through the fifth grade, of whom more than 90% are Hispanic, about 80% are economically disadvantaged, more than 70% labeled as high-needs students (U.S. Department of Education, 2019) and nearly 60% are English Language Learners. As a Title I school, the majority of students are from low-socioeconomic status and categorized as Hispanic. The majority of the students are coded with various labels such as "at-risk," "low SES (socioeconomic)," "SPED" (Special education), or "LEP" (limited English proficiency). From second to fourth grade, my classroom was an inclusion classroom at times, i.e., students labeled as special needs are in mainstream classrooms.

As a theoretical framework, I used critical theory, which is an approach to education that acknowledges the unequal realities of education and calls for an interrogation of external forces that have historically oppressed individuals and groups—so that such critiques might allow them to change this reality (Hart, 1990). Critical theory is an important ideological influence in qualitative methods and provided the lens to examine the relationship with systemic and pervasive inequalities in my students' schooling experiences (Bredo, 2006; Bredo & Feinberg, 1982). Further, critical theory and a critical pedagogical teaching philosophy maintain a transformative agenda (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010; Greene, 2010), which were a central part of the ideology informing the day-to-day classroom interactions.

A key feature of critical theory is dialectical thought. This means being able to think about the process of one's thinking while at the same time thinking about the material it is working on (Giroux, 2001). As a teacher and researcher, I engaged in this kind of thought process. I critically examined my own teaching while at the same time using critical theory to frame my analysis of the data. Critical theory was used as part of the theoretical framework to critique the students' schooling experience and the pedagogical approaches in the classroom. I

used critical theory to focus on the broader social structure in which the school was located and how the students' social class and racial and ethnic identities affected their education.

Positionality

From the beginning of my teaching career, I decided not to split my work from my life in an effort to think critically about my work. When I began teaching at this school, I decided to live in the same community as my students and rented an apartment close to where most of them lived. In this study, one of the most important things I was aware of during the analysis of this study was my researcher positionality (Peshkin, 1988) and how my positionality, world view, and theoretical framework influenced my interpretation of data. As such, I understand that my work and interpretations are subjective. I am a Mexican cis woman who came from a very low-social class and was raised in the same kind of environment and cultural background as my students. I view schools and the educational system as inherently oppressive and even dangerous for students of color, especially for students of Mexican background. I acknowledge that no matter how objective I may have tried to be, my observations were influenced by my beliefs. However, Peshkin (1988) noted that this is not necessarily a negative issue; on the contrary, it can make research more insightful and perhaps more honest because such positionality is brought forward instead of being denied.

Findings

The extent to which critical pedagogy mediated the students' academic success is evident through the themes drawn from the data. Developing a critical consciousness with students was a catalyst for their academic success. The strongest themes among the data were *co-creation of knowledge*, *conceptual and inquiry-based teaching*, and *critical literacy*. In the following sections, I describe each of the themes in detail and share ways students engaged with academic content using a critical pedagogical framework to develop student's critical consciousness.

Finding 1: Co-creation of Knowledge

Co-creation of knowledge emerged in the data from students' social interactions as they played and engaged in daily classwork. Students had authentic opportunities to choose how they wanted to demonstrate their knowledge. As the teacher, I engaged in self-reflexive practices to encourage my students to assess their own learning (Méndez-Negrete, 2013). For example, I structured science lessons through long inquiry-based investigation units in which

students made independent observations in groups and individually and kept science journals on each unit that varied from investigating mealworms to the life cycle of plants. Students shared their observations and created a class informational chart that demonstrated what they found. I placed their information on the classroom science wall for students to modify or refer to.

The Brassica Plant investigation unit is an example of co-creation of knowledge in science. My second-grade students worked closely together while observing their brassica plants and comparing their plant growth. Students were encouraged to observe other students' plants and discuss possible reasons for the differences in growth. This knowledge-sharing was a common pedagogical approach across all academic subjects. Later in the unit, the brassica plants produced yellow flowers, and the class explored ways to pollinate them. Some students suggested bringing in bees, while other students responded that it would be difficult to do so. One student suggested rubbing plants together individually, and the class did so. This caused the Brassica plants to produce seedpods, which stimulated further discussion and discovery. Another example of co-creation of knowledge was the classroom's math wall (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

The co-constructed classroom math wall that students used to explain math concepts

Another form of co-creation of knowledge was the creation of informational displays, such as a math wall. After covering a mathematical unit, I took the central concept or vocabulary terms and asked the students to create examples and definitions of the terms. Students worked in groups and placed their definitions and drawings on the math wall. I used various grouping

methods; most were randomized to ensure all students had a chance to work with each other. Students used this math wall as a reference point and a resource tool. Remarkably, if students found information related to the term or concept, they modified it and added information.

I spent a lot of time with my students. This came in the form of Saturday field trips (not sponsored by the school district) and my time playing with them at recess. I observed student's co-construction of knowledge outside of the classroom. For example, I observed students play outside during lunchtime and saw them display similar cooperation approaches as used in the classroom. Figure 2 is a photograph I took while I witnessed students designing and planning a sandcastle. Students delegated tasks and worked cooperatively, much like they did on classroom projects.

Figure 2.

The decimal wallets students created, the items students sold as well as the hundreds, tens, and ones used as currency in this lesson

Co-creating knowledge helped build strong relationships among the students, forging what scholars have described as student-centered learning communities grounded in socially and culturally relevant teaching (McIntyre et al., 2001). For one journal entry assignment, students wrote a letter to the class demonstrating the development of a strong positive identity with their classmates' shared abilities and consistently used the plural "we" to describe their relationship to the class:

> Dear class I love how funny, smart, strong, cool, and how quiet you can be. But the 1st thing I know from this year is that with all of us combined makes a person who's smart, has brains, knows what's right and does what's right. But that person can be either a girl or a boy because we are all equal. And what we need to do is be that shinning student. I

wish you luck. Sincerely, [student's name]. P.S. whoever is reading this I hope you are part of the brain in the class. I also hope that you are the most important part. Sincerely [student's name].

Similar sentiments are overwhelming among the data. Students describe their classmates as unique, special, and intelligent. There is an acknowledgement of all the knowledge they co-created and the treasured memories they shared. In one student's letter, they expressed that their classmates are a "great team" and that the friendship the class has "will never be broken".

Empathy developed in the students as they became more aware of themselves, their classmates, and the collective learning process. Additionally, social-emotional skills emerged when students worked in groups. They were motivated to learn, took turns, and explained their perspectives clearly and respectfully to each other. As one student wrote in their journal, "you guys teached [sic] me more than farther than the moon.". As students learned to collaborate, they had to learn to listen to one another and value their peer's input. In particular, this created a sense of community and facilitated learning. As one student wrote to the class, "You took me in like family […] you took me in and changed me."

Co-creating knowledge became the mode of meaning-making, created spaces of collaboration, and simultaneously built relationships. The pedagogical benefits of collaborative learning extended beyond the social benefits of learning how to work with others. Research on peer collaboration has shown that peer interaction increases the motivation to learn (Järvelä et al., 2010) and enhances cognitive development, logical reasoning, and higher-order thinking skills, such as creative problem solving and critical thinking (Akkerman et al., 2007; Perret-Clermont, 1980; Vygotsky, 1978). As part of the class pedagogy, collaboration was a factor that increased critical thinking skills. When students worked together, they built communication and learned new skills from one another.

Finding 2: Conceptual and Inquiry-based Teaching

Similar to critical thinking skills used in critical theory, inquiry-based teaching is a pedagogical approach that uses questioning to guide students into understanding and critical reasoning (Kuhn, 2005). Although the classroom's general learning environment was one of inquiry, I used this teaching approach when carefully planning science and math lessons. Inquiry-based science lessons usually began with a general question or problem that the students could

investigate in more profound ways. Working and playing in groups was a common practice in the classroom and was extended to all subjects. However, working in groups to solve problems and analyze concepts came easier in the subject areas of math and science. I noted that at every grade level (second through fourth), students' mathematical skills grew after being exposed to conceptual teaching and working in groups.

One example of this type of investigation was a four-week mealworm unit. Students were each given a mealworm to observe each day. Students handled their mealworms and used a magnifying glass to study them carefully. Students made and wrote their observations in their science journals and added a drawing of their observations. Once the students made their observations, the class gathered together and shared their notes. For example, after the students made their initial observations, I encouraged them to think about how they could keep track of their mealworms' growth. I asked students what tools we had available in the classroom that might facilitate this process. A student suggested using rulers, and the rest of the students listened and began measuring their mealworms with rulers.

Math lessons were also taught conceptually. For example, in fourth grade, I taught decimals as it relates to fractions using a project I created called *Tiendita and decimal wallet*. Living in the same community as my students, and also sharing a similar cultural background as them, gave me insight in ways to make connections with academic content. This culturally relevant teaching approach (Ladson-Billings, 1992) mediated students understanding of the math concept. The students cut out paper diagrams of ones, tens, and hundreds diagrams out of paper and placed them in their paper wallets. Students folded a paper in half and stapled the sides to create a pocket for the wallet into which they placed their diagrams of ones, tens, and hundreds. We established that the hundreds would be equivalent to a whole, the tens represented as 1/10, and finally, the ones units represented as 1/100.

Each student had to create a *tiendita* (a store) and sell items, which were objects from the classroom. Each student made tags to show how much each of their items cost and placed them on the top of their desk. The class was divided into two groups, based on where they were sitting to facilitate moving around the room. The first group were the buyers, and the second group were the sellers. Students bought items from one another using the ones, tens, and hundreds as currency. Students had to make change and the sellers had to write a receipt showing the transaction amounts. This gave the students opportunities to add and subtract

decimals, which is another content skill. For example, if an item sold was $3.40, the students could pay with three hundreds and four tens. This activity was used for about two weeks. Each time we began the activity, the students would set up their *tiendita* (it was different each time) along with the prices for the item they selected (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3.

The decimal wallets students created, the items students sold as well as the hundreds, tens, and ones used as currency in this lesson

Figure 4.

Students moving around the classroom buying and selling various items

Math lessons were structured so that students could connect the concept and their lives. I always framed these lessons from a social justice and critical perspective. One example of this was when I taught the equal sign and the concept of equivalence. I learned that many perceived the concept of the equal sign much like a period at the end of a sentence, rather than a symbol expressing a relationship between two expressions. When I approached teaching this concept, I connected this mathematical concept with the idea of equality.

I introduced the lesson by drawing five pennies on the board, the equal sign, and then one nickel. I asked the students to make observations. Students noted the obvious; one side has

five pennies, the other one single nickel. Then I asked the students to tell me about the five pennies' value and how it related to the nickel. The students then said that the *values* were equal. I stated that, even though one side has five coins and the other only one, both sides' value was the same. I continued to write more examples: one half in fraction form and one half in decimal form. Again, the students said that the *values* were the same though their representations looked different.

I then drew a stick figure of a short figure, the equal sign, and a tall stick figure on the other. I asked the students what they thought I meant by using the equal sign in the metaphor I had just drawn. Many hands went up in the air. "The stick figure on the right side is equivalent to the stick figure on the left side," one student said. I asked the students to explain further what they meant. Another hand would shoot up: "They both have the same value." I followed by affirming and saying that they had the same value even though the two pictures looked different. Discussions evolved as I asked the students to provide more examples. The students shared more: kids in wheelchairs and kids who are not in wheelchairs, African Americans and Mexicans, the president and lunch ladies, and girls and boys. I wrapped up the lesson by affirming the students' observations: although we all may look different from one another, speak differently, or have different jobs, we all as humans have *equal value*.

Students do not forget the connection between this ideology and the mathematical concept. I have heard students say things like, "Mrs., some students were laughing at Linda just because she uses a walker. They do not believe in equivalence." This demonstrated the degree to which students' internalized the concept of equality in math to the concept of equality in the context of human worth. Further, when students solved math problems or recreated equations to show equivalence, they did so very successfully.

Informed by critical pedagogy that rejects a banking-system of education (Freire, 1970), my teaching approach necessitated teaching conceptually. The use of students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and conceptual teaching, enhanced the students' critical thinking and analytic skills. This environment allowed students to thrive and develop their cognitive abilities to think complexly and relationally about what they were learning. Furthermore, students were encouraged to think of culture as a set of lived practices and meanings (González, 1995). Our class won the school's math bowl competitions and even the district-

level math bowl competition. The students also continually surpassed their peers in state standardized tests.

Finding 3: Critical Literacy

The final theme emerging from the data was critical literacy (Freire, 1973) and language skills within the classroom. Students engaged in reading and writing as part of the daily routine in all content areas. Teachers read to students daily from various books and texts drawn from different reading levels. We focused on emancipatory literacy that carried social justice themes to promote discussions and ask questions.

In our reading discussions, students effectively distinguished the various dynamics of the community and school; their experiential knowledge tuned them into what we read and developed their literacy of the world around them. Notably, emancipatory literacy—a social justice tool in political, religious, or cultural resistance to domination (Freire, 1970, 1978, 2005; Gee, 2012)—constituted a central component in students' development of a critical consciousness. Paulo Freire believed literacy was a powerful tool that could empower people when the literature caused the reader to question the social reality in which they lived (Freire, 1970, 1978; Freire & Macedo, 1987). To develop this kind of literacy among students, I selected books with social injustice issues by various authors that talked about rich histories and folktales of Mexican and African American heritage. One of the stories I read was Dr. Seuss' *Yertle the Turtle* (2008). This is the story of a greedy turtle that piles other turtles on top of each other to sit at the top of a turtle stack; a brave turtle at the bottom of the stack speaks to power and demonstrates resistance. After reading this story, I asked students questions to encourage them to draw connections to their social worlds: "Who in our community or school are like the turtles at the bottom of the stack? At the top? What are ways the turtles resisted and question those in power?"

In social studies, I selected texts from various sources that told different perspectives of history, such as the Chicano movement, women's suffrage, the Civil Rights movement, and maps showing Native American land and how Native Americans were colonized through violence and unfair treaties. One of these books was Rebecca Stefoff's (2009) adaptation of Howard Zinn's (1990) *A Young People's History of the United States*. It was part of the classroom library and I read sections of it during read-aloud time. These books and this pedagogical approach were central to the curriculum.

These stories, coupled with critical pedagogy, profoundly changed the class dynamics and encouraged students to find ways to act on what they learned. As a consequence of reading an article about Frederick Douglass, students created a club called Spanish Club. I accidentally found out about the students' Spanish Club when I heard them talking about it after recess. A few weeks earlier, we had discussed the Frederick Douglass article in class extensively. Specifically, we had discussed how Douglass taught other slaves under a tree to read and write—and how slave owners kept more control over slaves if they did not know how to read or write. The power of literacy resonated with students.

To highlight why Spanish Club and its creation is so meaningful, it is necessary to talk about language programs used in the school district. Like most schools in the region where I taught, transitional bilingual education models are used in schools to ultimately replace students' native languages with English (Herrera-Rocha & de la Piedra, 2019). Most of my students came from transitional language models and spoke very little Spanish. The students often asked why I did not teach more Spanish and frequently asked other students and I to translate letters into Spanish. These letters were often for grandparents.

Once I learned more about Spanish Club, I learned that they met under a tree. The students stated they were inspired by Frederick Douglass and wanted to emulate him teaching under a tree to provide each other knowledge. The next day, I took pictures (see Figure 5) of the students during Spanish Club and watched as they organized and delegated tasks that they would learn or teach. In this way, the students created spaces of resistance by teaching themselves a language they were not taught in school, and they provided knowledge for each other that could liberate them from oppressive school policies of language (McIntyre et al., 2001). They created these spaces together, in a collective, as a "club."
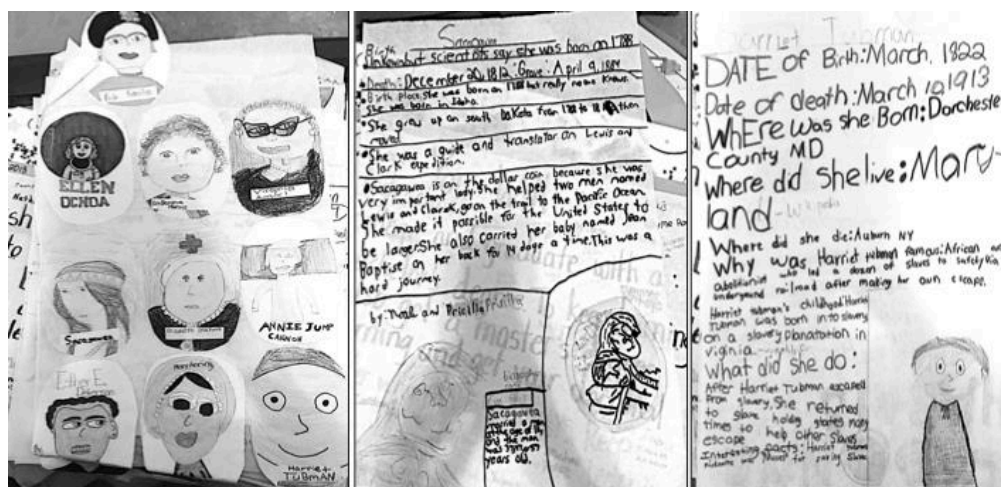
Figure 5.

Third-grade students during recess engaging in Spanish Club. Students self-organized, brought a blanket from home to sit on, and created curriculum

At other times, students created their own books. During various discussions in class, students asked questions about the role of women in a particular field. This occurred at various times throughout the school year, especially during science, when students would ask who the first woman scientist was or who was the first woman to go to the moon. During reading time, a student suggested that the class write a book about the contributions of women. Students used the internet to obtain a list of women they wanted to learn more about. I placed students randomly in groups of two and assigned one woman to each group. I also gave the students guidelines as to what specific information they should look for. Then they researched that person's contributions and background information. At the end, everyone collected their work, and we made a class book. The students asked me to save it for next year's class or anyone else who wanted to borrow it (see Figure 6).

Figure 6.

The women's book that students created on large paper and measured about two feet by two feet. The book consisted of ten women. From left to right, the first image is the cover of the book, the second is Sacagawea, the last one is Harriet Tubman.

Discussion

A critical pedagogy framework informed all teaching decisions through which I examined my pedagogical approaches and its impact on my students' broader socio-political context. Focusing on developing a student's critical consciousness was a catalyst to their academic success. Promoting the development of the student's critical consciousness occurred in tandem with the teaching of academic lessons, and every opportunity was used to affirm students in their role of constructors of knowledge. The influence of developing a critical consciousness had an impact on students' sense of self, the classroom environment, and overall academic achievement. Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, emphasizes developing this awareness as a cornerstone of critical pedagogy. When individuals become critically conscious, they can perceive the social conditions of their political and economic context that oppress them (Freire, 1970).

One of the challenges of critical pedagogy has been the difficulty for classroom teachers to translate critical pedagogy *theories* into concrete classroom *practices* (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004). This leaves this powerful pedagogical tool in a realm of philosophy that may be intangible to some classroom teachers. While a critical pedagogy cannot and should not be prescriptive (Freire, 2005; Kincheloe, 2012; McLaren, 1994), in this study, there were specific characteristics of critical pedagogy that emerged when such teaching philosophies were enacted, and a critical consciousness was developed. These included teaching through a constructivist approach in which students co-created knowledge. Rejecting a banking-system of education (Freire, 1970) and teaching conceptually and inquiry-based. Further, using critical literacy practices in reading and writing throughout all content areas. Developing a critical consciousness with students through these processes developed students' socio-political awareness and self-agency. This facilitated students' habit of mind to question existing knowledge and see themselves as knowledge-creators and not just passive consumers.

Conclusion

Like other marginalized communities of color, students of Mexican backgrounds face oppressive schooling practices influenced by generational suppression of culture and language (Herrera-Rocha & de la Piedra, 2019). This study investigated the extent to which critical pedagogy mediated students' academic success. The data revealed that developing a critical consciousness through a critical pedagogy *demanded* a constructivist teaching approach. This

encouraged the teacher and the students to co-create knowledge. A critical pedagogy *demanded* emancipatory literacies. In other words, students needed to learn to ask relevant questions grounded in the material conditions of the world around them in order to begin to improve those conditions. Through these literacies, students imagined different possibilities about their future while further questioning their present schooling experiences and social-political context. A critical pedagogy *demanded* I teach students conceptually, especially in the areas of math and science. A critical pedagogy *demanded* a teaching approach centered on developing a student's critical consciousness in every opportunity and throughout all classroom lessons. Through this process, students learned the foundations of critical thinking (Kincheloe, 2008, 2010) and was a catalyst for developing similar critical thinking skills they applied to academic areas of math, science, and language arts; these elements set students on a trajectory for academic success.

In this case, the classroom curriculum demonstrated that the classroom environment could greatly influence academic achievement for students all students but especially for students of Mexican background. While educational research has consistently confirmed similar findings (Banks, 1993; Erickson, 1987; Gay, 2018; Sleeter, 2011), this study is a contribution affirming that students' academic success is not biologically-determined or blamable of a student's cultural background. On the contrary, using critical and culturally relevant pedagogy, students can lead a trajectory for academic success by developing a critical consciousness.

References

Akkerman, S., Van den Bossche, P., Admiraal, W., Gijselaers, W., Segers, M., & Simons, R.-J. (2007). Reconsidering group cognition: From conceptual confusion to a boundary area between cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives? *Educational Research Review, 2,* 39–63. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2007.02.001

Aldefer, C. P. (2003). The Science and Nonscience of Psychologists' Responses to The Bell Curve. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 34*(3), 287–293. https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.34.3.287

Anderson-Levitt, K. M. (2006). Ethnography. In J.L Green, G. Camilli, & P.B. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 279–295). American Educational Research Association.

Banks, J. A. (1993). The canon debate, knowledge construction, and multicultural education. *Educational Researcher, 22*(5), 4–14. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X022005004

Bell, D. A. (1995) Who's afraid of critical race theory. *University of Illinois Law Review, 1995* (4), 893-910.

Blanton, C. (2007). *The strange career of bilingual education in Texas, 1835-1981.* Texas A & M University Press.

Boykin, W., & Noguera, P. (2011). *Creating the opportunity to learn: Moving from research to practice to close the achievement gap.* ASCD.

Bredo, E. (2006). Philosophies of educational research. In J.L Green, G. Camilli, & P.B. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 3–31). American Educational Research Association.

Bredo, E., & Feinberg, W. (1982). *Knowldege and values in social and educational research.* Temple University Press.

Case, A., & Deaton, A. (2015). Rising morbitity and mortality in midlife among white non-Hispnaic Americans in the 21st century. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 112*(49), 15078–15083.

Churchill, W. (2004). *Kill the Indian, save the man: The genocidal impact of American Indian residential schools.* City Lights.

Delpit, L. D. (2012). *Multiplication is for white people: Raising expectations for other people's children.* New Press.

Duncan, J. D., & Murnane, R. J. (2014). Growing income inequality threatens American education. *Phi Delta Kappan, 95,* 8–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171409500603

Erickson, F. (1987). Transformation and school success: The politics and culture of educational achievement. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 18*(4), 335–356. https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.1987.18.4.04x0023w

Freeman, M., & Vasconcelos, E. F. S. (2010). Critical social theory: Core tenets, inherent issues. *New Directions for Evaluation, 2010*(127), 7–19. https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.335

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* Herder & Herder.

Freire, P. (1978). *Education for critical consciousness.* Seabury.

Freire, P. (2005). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare teach.* Westview Press.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. P. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word & the world.* Bergin & Garvey Publishers.

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed). Teachers College Press.

Gee, J. P. (2012). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Giroux, H. A. (2001). *Theory and resistance in education: Towards a pedagogy for the opposition.* Bergin & Garvey.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Aldine Pub. Co. https://doi.org/10.1097/00006199-196807000-00014

González, N. (1995). Processual approaches to multicultural education. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 31*(2), 234–244. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886395312008

González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practice in households, communities, and classrooms.* L. Erlbaum Associates.

Greene, J. C. (2010). Foundations of qualitative research in education. In W. Luttrell (Ed.), *Knowledge accumulation three views on the nature and role of knowledge in social science* (pp. 63–77). Taylor & Francis.

Hart, M. (1990). Critical theory and beyond: Further perspectives on emancipatory education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 40*(3), 125-138. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001848190040003001

Heinrich, M. (2016). *The economic state of the Latino community in America.* United States Congress Joint Economic Committee Democrats.

Herrnstein, R. J., & Murray, C. A. (1994). *The bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life.* Free Press

Herrera-Rocha, L., & de la Piedra, M. T. (2019). Ideologies of language among ELLs on the US-Mexico border: The case of a transitional bilingual programme. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 40*(8), 665–678. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2018.1544638

Järvelä, S., Volet, S., & Järvenoja, H. (2010). Research on motivation in collaborative learning: Moving beyond the cognitive–situative divide and combining individual and social processes. *Educational Psychologist, 45*(1), 15–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520903433539

Kao, G., & Thompson, J. S. (2003). Racial and ethnic stratification in educational achievement and attainment. *Annual Review of Sociology, 29*(1), 417–442. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100019

Kincheloe, J. L. (2008). *Critical pedagogy* (2nd ed). Peter Lang Primer.

Kincheloe, J. L. (2010). *Knowledge and critical pedagogy: An introduction.* Springer.

Kincheloe, J. L. (2012). *Teachers as researchers: Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203801550

Kleibard, H. M. (2004). *The struggle for the American curriculum, 1893–1958* (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203339985

Knapp, M., & Woolverton, S. (2004). Social class and schooling. In J. Banks (Ed.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 656–681). Jossey-Bass.

Kuhn, D. (2005). What Needs to Be Mastered in Mastery of Scientific Method? *Psychological Science, 16*(11), 873–874. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2005.01630.x

Ladson-Billings, G. (1992). Culturally relevant teaching: The key to making multicultural education work. In C. A. Grant (Ed.), *Research and multicultural education: From the margins to the mainstream* (pp. 102–116). Falmer Press.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record.* 97. 47-68.

Macedo, D. (2006). *Literacies of power: What Americans are not allowed to know.* Westview Press.

Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach.* Thousand Oaks, Calif:

Sage Publications.

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G. (Eds.) (2016) *Designing Qualitative Research* (6th Edition). SAGE.

McIntyre, E., Rosebery, A. S., & González, N. (Eds.). (2001). *Classroom diversity: Connecting curriculum to students' lives* (Vol. 88). Heinemann.

McLaren, P. (1994). Critical pedagogy: An overview. In *Literate schools* (pp. 168–173). Longman.

Méndez-Negrete, J. (2013). *Pedagogical conocimientos: Self and other in interaction.* National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Annual Conference. Paper 14. http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/naccs/Tejas_Foco/Tejas/14

Milner, H. R. (2012). But what is urban education? *Urban Education, 47*(3), 556–561. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912447516

Mirandé, A. (1994). *The Chicano experience: An alternative perspective*. University of Notre Dame Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpj78xq

Moller, S., & Stearns, E. (2012). Tracking success: High school curricula and labor market outcomes by race and gender. *Urban Education, 47*(6), 1025–1054. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912454440

Musu-Gillette, L., de Brey, C., McFarland, J., Hussar, W., Sonnenberg, W., & Wilkinson-Flicker, S. (2017). *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2017* (NCES 2017-051). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). Fast facts: What is Title I? https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=158.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). The condition of education: Status dropout rates. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coj.asp#:~:text=The%20overall%20status%20dropout%20rate,from%206.4%20to%204.2%20percent.

Oreopoulos, P., & Salvanes, K. G. (2011). Priceless: The nonpecuniary benefits of schooling. *Journal of Economic Perspectives, 25*(1), 159–184. https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.25.1.159

Orozco, R. (2013). White innocence and Mexican Americans as perpetrators in the school-to-prison pipeline. *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal, 7*(3), 75-84.

Perret-Clermont, A. (1980). Social interaction and cognitive development in children. Academic Press.

Peshkin, A. (1988). In Search of subjectivity—One's own. *Educational Researcher, 17*(7), 17–21. https://doi.org/10.2307/1174381

Powers, J. M. (2008). Forgotten history: Mexican American school segregation in Arizona from 1900–1951. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 41*(4), 467–481. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680802400253

Nieto, S. (2010). *The light in their eyes: Creating multicultural learning communities* (10th Anniversary Ed.). Teachers College Press.

Noe-Bustamante, L., & Flores, A. (2017). Facts on Latinos in the U.S. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/fact-sheet/latinos-in-the-u-s-fact-sheet/#english-proficiency-of-hispanic-population-in-the-u-s-2017

Reardon, S. F., & Portilla, X. A. (2016). Recent trends in socioeconomic and racial school readiness gaps at kindergarten entry. *AERA Open, 2*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858416657343

Sleeter, C. E. (2011). *The academic and social value of ethnic studies: A research review.* National Education Association.

Sleeter, C., & Delgado Bernal, D. (2004). Critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and antiracist education: Implications for multicultural education. In J. A. Banks & C. M. Banks (Eds.), *The handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 240–258). McMillan.

Seuss, D., & Cohen, C. D. (2008). *Yertle the turtle and other stories.* Random House.

Stefoff, R. & Zinn, H. (2009). *A young people's history of the United States: Columbus to the War on Terror.* Seven Stories Press.

Torpey, E. (2018). *Measuring the value of education, Career Outlook.* U.S. Bureau of Labor & Statistics. https://www.bls.gov

U.S. Department of Education. (2019). *Definitions.* Retrieved from https://www.ed.gov/race-top/district-competition/definitions

Valencia, R. R. (2002). The plight of Chicano students: An overview of schooling contions and outcomes. In R. Valencia (Ed.), *Chicano school failure and success: Past, present, and future*, 2nd ed. (pp. 52–69). Routledge.

Valencia, R. R., Menchaca, M., & Donato, R. (2002a). Segregation, desegregation, and integration of Chicano students: Old and new realities. In R. Valencia (Ed.), *Chicano school failure and success: Past, present, and future* (2nd ed.) (pp. 70–113). Routledge.

Valencia, R. R., Villareal, B., & Salinas, M. (2002b). Educational testing and Chicano students: Issues, consequences, and prospects for reform. In R. Valencia (Ed.), *Chicano school failure and success: Past, present, and future.* Routledge.

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring.* State University of New York Press.

Vélez, W. (2008) The educational experiences of Latinos in the United States. In H. Rodríguez, R. Sáenz, & C. Menjívar (Eds.), *Latinas/os in the United States: Changing the face of América* (pp. 129–148). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-71943-6_9

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Harvard University Press.

Yosso, T. J. (2013). *Critical race counterstories along the Chicana/Chicano educational Pipeline.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203624821

Zamuido, M. M., Russell, C., Rios, F. A., & Bridgeman, J. L. (2011). *Critical race theory matters education and ideology.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203842713

Zinn, H. (1990). *A people's history of the United States.* Harper & Row.