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Edifying the Spirit of Love and Liberation in the Education of Young Children: Lessons from Critical Pedagogy and Reggio Emilia Inspired Educators

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Edifying the Spirit of Love and Liberation in the Education of Young Children:

Lessons from Critical Pedagogy and Reggio Emilia Inspired Educators

by

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Lessons from Critical Pedagogy and Reggio Emilia Inspired Educators

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This dissertation written by Seyedeh Zahra Seyed Yousef, under the direction of the
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Dissertation Committee
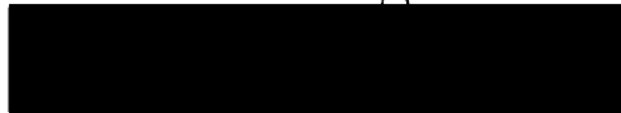
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My heart is so full of gratitude and love for every person who has touched my life up until this point, culminating in the creation of this dissertation and this degree. First and foremost, I thank God and my ancestors who show up for me in unexpected ways each and every day. My daily dose of miracles helps me to feel connected and to continue living my purpose to the best of my ability.

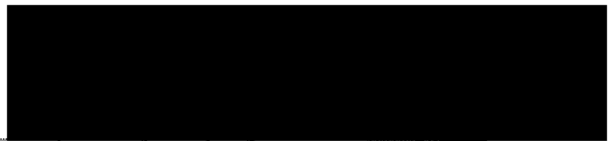To my mother, Maryam Nikniai, who none of this would be possible without. My mother, who brought me here by herself with only $11 and a dream of giving me a life full of promise. My mother, who is a pillar of strength, service, dedication, and unwavering love. I love you, Maman. Everything I do is to honor you.

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when the values of education as liberation and the format of schooling align in ways that allow our students to be truly free. I am forever thankful for your time and authenticity.

And lastly, to my students, all the world's children. We can do so much better by you. I will fight every day to make a better tomorrow for you. You are precious, you are special, you are important, and you are the reason for this work.

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ABSTRACT

Edifying the Spirit of Love and Liberation in the Education of Young Children:

Lessons from Critical Pedagogy and Reggio Emilia Inspired Educators

by

Seyedeh Zahra A. Seyed Yousef

In an age of *adultism* in which children have been perceived as mere drains on society, schooling often has been viewed as a means to an end. Due to the fact that a capitalistic society requires future workers, children have been socialized in the necessary skills and knowledge required to fulfill their future job requirements. Consequently, schooling often has taken place in the form of the banking model in which students are treated as empty vessels to be filled up by the knowledgeable teachers, and then to regurgitate said knowledge on assessments to prove their understanding. I challenge this antiquated vision of education, especially in relation to what it has meant for young children in preschool through first grade.

Using critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach as theoretical frameworks, I conducted a critical narrative study of eight early educators who have had experience working with students in early grades in emancipatory ways. I found that educators' own experiences and consciousness greatly affected their beliefs about young children as well as the *liberatory* practices they engaged. I present a proposal for a shift in thinking about the education of young

children, a relational model of education that highlights the intersections of critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach in grounding the work of teaching in armed love, belief in the capabilities of children, and opportunities for students to work with educators as revolutionary partners and transformative change agents who have an active role in their education and their world.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I am calling on all educators—those in our classrooms, in our homes, and on our

streets—to embrace and respond to the urgency of our collective need to teach

love and to learn freedom. (Shalaby, 2017, p. xviii)

The first time I was dehumanized by the American educational system, I was five years

old. Having been in the United States for less than a year and having a severe disability meant

that I did not speak English, nor could I walk. The adults in the school setting made decisions for

me in my *best interest*. After a few months, I was deemed too sick and illiterate to attend local

public schools, and instead, I was funneled into a fully exclusive special needs school. As I

entered this school setting surrounded by students with a wide range of intellectual disabilities, I

implicitly knew from the start that my stagnated physical state and lack of knowledge of the

English language did not make me the same as these classmates. My potential as a student had

been reduced and labeled. Although the school was beautiful and the people were loving and

caring, my voice as a child who knew something was off—that there was more that I was

capable of—was ignored for over a year before someone stepped up and advocated for my need

to have access to a more mainstream and inclusive learning environment. This experience was a

catalyst for my eventual decision to become an educator. I personally experienced and knew,

first hand, how children could be silenced and limited from their potential, given the narratives

created by the adults around them (Swadener & O'Brien, 2009), and I wanted to be a better

listener and a better defender and advocate of children's rights.

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My first teaching position was at a middle school in Los Angeles. The first time I entered this school, I knew that my style and the school's style were completely at odds. I wanted to facilitate learning in a student-centered, buzzing, democratic classroom with collaborative groupings and thematic units. The classrooms I saw were all traditionally organized in rows with minimal wall décor, and a distinct and eerie air of complete and highly regulated silence. It felt like I had been transported to a schoolhouse in the pre-industrialized America that I had only seen in black and white photographs. One distinction existed, however; all of the students in the classroom were Black and Brown children. As I began my work at this school, I soon realized that the authoritarian doctrine was much deeper than I had understood initially. All work was to be done from packets, and multiple-choice testing-style questions were to be included at the beginning and ending of each of the six bell periods. Students were only allowed to use certain kinds of pencils or to wear certain kinds of socks and shoes and were given merits and demerits as a system of governance to the strict behavior code. The silence I had experienced my first time at the school also continued to surprise me, as I realized that this was the protocol for most times of the day, including breakfast, snack time, and lunch.

From the outside looking in, this was a place of order where Black and Brown children were calm and undisruptive, doing work for an extended eight-hour school day. From an insider's perspective, however, this school was stifling children's rights to their individuality, creativity, and voice. They were trapped in the school-as-prison model that deficit-minded leaders cited as being the most necessary and only way of assisting students from historically marginalized communities to a life of promise. The way this school approached learning from a traditional, teacher-centered model was essentially dehumanizing, ignoring the needs of students

(Boyd & Markarian, 2011; Renner, 2009). This process of dehumanization, of stripping students of their essence and repackaging them as data points in a place that claimed to be creating the next generation of leaders was absurd and infuriating. This was a process that brought to mind Freire's (2007) assertion, "Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects" (p. 85).

After spending some time teaching at this school, I had found ways of running my classroom in a covert-style operation, becoming a "master of deception" (Darder, 2015, p. 77). I knew that I could no longer follow the rigidity required or the duplicitous structure and that I needed to find a new place to work, a place more in line with my own vision of education. However, I did want to do what I could to disrupt the destructive educational beliefs and practices that permeated the school culture. I thought that since they were still in a state of founding, there would be things that could be done to allow students the space to use their voices and express their desires for what they needed and wanted out of the school they were attending. In one particular professional development session, I brought up the notion of dialogue as expressed by Freire (2007) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* I was challenging the seating arrangements and wanted to move tables into groups instead of rows so students could have more opportunity to work together and share and build on each other's ideas. Before the words had fully left my mouth, they were immediately rejected by the school leader who stated, "Well, that book is really only about Freire's work with illiterate adults in Brazil. It has nothing to do with kids."

I left the school shortly after, but I have always come back to that moment. Yes, Freire's work was in fact with adults. This did not mean, however, that there were no applications for how to turn socially just ideology into practice in any grade level, in any setting, and in any country around the world. This did not mean that students in our current school system were any less oppressed and that there was not more that we should have been doing as conscientious educators to provide them with a space where they were free to learn, free to be, and free to grow into their full potential as democratic citizens, capable of fighting for a more just world.

Statement of the Problem

Children in our society and, in particular, children of color have been underrepresented and oppressed in numerous ways. As Swadener and O'Brien (2009) reminded us, although children were generally the fastest growing age group, "[they] are physically smaller and weaker than adults as well as too young to vote and to contribute much economically, and hence are typically voiceless" (p. 122). In fact, before children reach the age of at least 16 when they have access to driving privileges in the United States, there were very few ways in which they would have been acknowledged in our culture apart from birthdays and holidays. Now, children being voiceless in the broader contexts of power within the *adultism* or *"disrespect of the young"* (Bell, 1995) inherent in our society might have been expected, but the fact that children also have been voiceless and powerless in the context of their own development and education has been not only unfortunate, but also disabling. The antiquated banking model has reigned supreme as the foremost approach to educational practice in all subject areas and all grade levels of schooling (Archer, 2007; Darder, 2018; Freire, 2007). This has made it difficult for children to be seen and understood as relevant co-constructors of their own education. In particular, students of color

further have been oppressed by not only the perception of lack of worth based on their age, but also by the de-legitimization of their communities, cultures, and languages. The function of schooling then has become one in which students have been forced to assimilate in a colonizing educational system that merely has gotten them ready to become cogs in the capitalist society that has been disguised as democratic participation (Darder, 2012, 2017).

In an age of neoliberalism, the schooling of children merely has been seen as an investment in the future work force. Since the focus of neoliberalism has been to concentrate the majority of wealth and power into the upper echelon of the 1%, it has made logical sense that the majority of the nations' students have undergone an academic process of socialization that has prepared them for a life of labor (Sims, 2017). For many students, school has meant going to a building filled with rooms in which they sat quietly, listened to the teacher deposit information from their notes into their brains, and then regurgitated what they remembered on a periodic exam. In fact, only through privatization have students usually had access to emancipatory practices that have allowed them to think freely and act on their curiosities. Freire (2007) asserted that within the banking model of education "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry" (p. 72). Despite Common Core state standards that were meant to allow more critical thinking and problem solving, new curriculum constantly has been formulated in an attempt to teacher-proof the teaching and learning that should take place in classrooms in favor of a new version of the banking model.

Since neither students nor teachers have needed to learn to think for themselves in this paradigm, curriculum routinely has been standardized, and accountability to state-mandated exams has been exalted over the well-being of the people (Kinos, Robertson, Barbour, & Pukk, 2016). Sims (2017) found that even in teacher preparation programs, the curriculum for accreditation was standardized and competition driven, leaving little space for reflection and the development of true teacher consciousness. In much of modern schooling, schools have been oppressive to children, especially in working class communities of color and in schools that have proclaimed authoritarian rigidity and structure as the pathway to success. This reproduction of the hegemonic system of governance has shuttled students from these communities into roles as laborers rather than as leaders and has reinforced the interests of capitalist society that has fed off of an endless cycle of low-quality education and lack of access to opportunity and mobility (Darder, 2015).

There have been many factors that have silenced students' voices and ability to engage with their schools and classrooms including deficit views and labels, stereotypes projected onto students from historically marginalized communities, low expectations for student outcomes, sparse critical analysis of content, concerns around conduct and behavior, and lack of culturally competent and inclusive teaching practices and curriculum (West-Burns & Murray, 2016). Elementary school students have had even less agency or voice than children in upper grades, due to their young age and perceived naivety (Barksdale & Triplett, 2010). In order to move away from this debilitating dynamic, educators should effectively and purposefully practice education as a space for liberation and freedom. Allen (1995) noted:

In the age of empowerment, educators can no longer ask children to abide by NO

TALKING rules; rather, children must be encouraged to voice their concerns, opinions,

and plans as learners; to discuss decisions; to talk and act like citizens in a democracy.

(p. 286).

It has been because of our nation's unyielding fondness for the banking model and authoritarian

educational practices that a need has emerged to rethink the education of children to prepare

them for democratic life and help them build the democratic essentials of voice, participation,

solidarity, and community from a young age.

It would seem that the work of Freire, which brought light to such concepts as dialogue,

reading the word and reading the world, and the notion of emancipatory praxis would be the

perfect response to an otherwise humdrum and disenfranchising approach to educating young

people. Freire's work on critical pedagogy emerged in the 1970s and gained traction in the 1980s

in the United States (Gottesman, 2010). However, most literature dealing with Freire and

possible applications for the American educational system led back to secondary education or

education of adults in college settings or within popular education settings. Furthermore, in an

era of accountability that instituted the use of test scores assessing even students in kindergarten

classrooms through high-stakes means, opportunities to interrupt the neoliberal confines of a

predisposed caste system have been dispelled by testing strategies and targeted intervention

groupings (Rozich, 2016). This has left little space or time for dialogue and meaning-making,

especially in lower grades that have been supposed to provide the foundation for all skills in

reading, writing, and arithmetic, which students would later need in order to become productive

individuals who could contribute to the system of capitalist accumulation in U.S. society (Bowles & Gintis, 2011).

It has been as if the ability to think, speak, and act critically was reserved only for those who had reached a certain age bracket, as if only then were their lived experiences worthy of analysis. Nevertheless, as Freire (1998a) argued, "The more critically one exercises one's capacity for learning, the greater is one's capacity for constructing and developing 'epistemological curiosity,' without which it is not possible to obtain a complete grasp of the object of our knowledge" (p. 32). How could this concept of garnering curiosity and critically examining the ways in which we learn and how we understand the world around us only have been reserved for those of a certain age or class? How could this not be something that has been pointed out and practiced when all young toddlers first entered the classroom? In order for people to truly read the word and read the world as grown-ups, it would make sense that they should have been introduced to and fostered through democratic practices, the utilization of one's voice, and critical participatory citizenship as soon as possible in their early socialization as historical beings (Darder, 2018; Freire, 1998a).

This qualitative research sought to better understand the ways in which early educators have promoted life-sustaining practices with young children, and how this has supported their engagement with children's voices from an early age. In order to combat the banking model of education and authoritarian pedagogy, educators should have an alternative that has been proven to be effective in the development of consciousness among young students. Darder (2012) noted that educators should be vigilant in their understanding of power and how the decisions they might make in their praxis could have a direct influence on the culture of learning that children

would experience (Darder, 2012). In addition to the ideas of Freire, this study engaged the Reggio Emilia approach for its resonance with Freirean pedagogy and its focus on the education of young children. A central assumption of the Reggio Emilia approach and this study has been that children of all ages deserved to have their voices heard, and it was the work of the teacher to facilitate and ensure children's rights were respected and valued (Malaguzzi, 1996; Scheinfeld, Haigh, & Scheinfeld, 2008; Wien, 2008). This research hoped to enlighten naysayers of critical approaches with children and to demonstrate that there were greater possibilities for creating just and emancipatory spaces for our youngest students in the quest for a more *liberatory*, curious, and humanizing education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to bring to light what some educators have done in the early grades to facilitate emancipatory education for the youngest of students in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. Early Childhood Education, also known as preschool, has been so much centered on giving children freedom to express and explore. In the age of accountability, it would be gratifying to see that more of these emancipatory practices had made their way into elementary classrooms, especially in the early grades. Through narrative sessions where educators recounted and took a critical look at their experiences working with young children, this study aimed to gain a better understanding of teachers' lived experiences as they had evolved and developed their consciousness as educators, the successes and struggles they had faced in building the foundation for critical citizenship and liberatory teaching and learning with younger children, and the different ways they had engaged children's voices and integrated emancipatory practices into their classroom praxis. From their stories, we might better

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understand how the integration of these humanizing approaches could empower young children's agency and voice.

Research Questions

This study included an examination and deeper understanding of how educators have facilitated liberatory educational practices in the early grades. Through a qualitative critical narrative approach with practitioners in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade, I attempted to answer two overarching questions:

- How have educators of young children utilized critical pedagogy and/or Reggio Emilia approaches to create emancipatory spaces for young children?

- In what ways could critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach intersect in the education of young children?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informed this qualitative research study utilized two lenses: critical pedagogy inspired by the work of Freire and the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. The combination of these two approaches provided a framework (see Figure 1) that allowed me to focus in on how teachers perceived themselves as liberatory
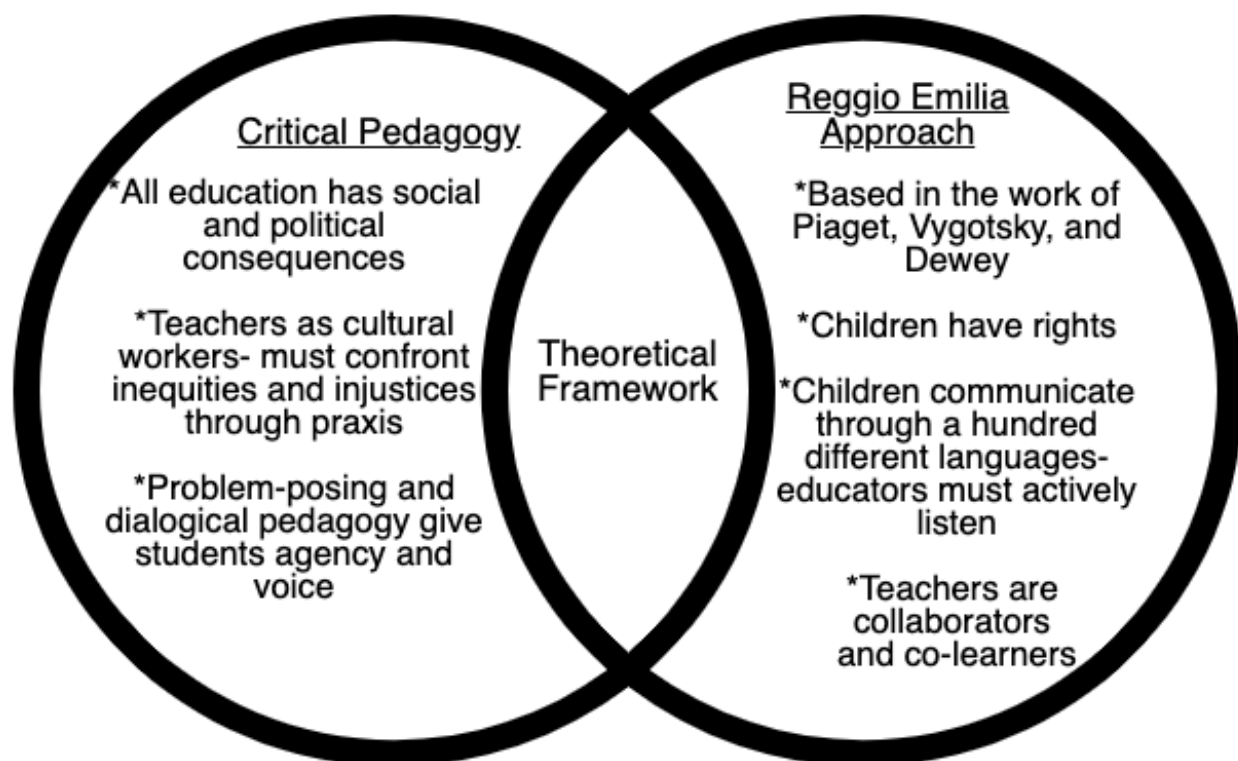
Figure 1. Intersection of critical pedagogy and Reggio Emilia approach as theoretical framework. Adapted from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* by P. Freire. (Original work published 1970), and "Examining the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education," by V. M. Hewett, 2001, *Early Childhood Education Journal, 29*(2), pp. 95-10. Copyright 2001 by Springer Netherlands.

educators, how their beliefs shined through in their daily practices with our youngest students, and how their praxis countered traditional banking notions (Freire, 1998b, 2007) of what teaching and learning has meant and what it should look like.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy, with roots in critical theory developed by the Frankfurt School, has connected to the work of progressive educators such as Dewey, Freire, Giroux, McLaren, and Darder, among others. This lens has rejected the hegemonic epistemology of mainstream White, American ideology and has challenged educators to develop critical consciousness by

interrupting systems of oppressive power within their classrooms and their schools (Han, Madhuri, & Scull, 2015). Since teaching has been described as a political act, critical pedagogy has challenged the status quo and reading between the lines. By no means has critical pedagogy been a method or best practice but rather a way to look at the world more critically and to resist forms of oppression by creating a dialogical cycle of praxis-action-reflection through which we might work to support children's voices, participation, and social agency in ways that could help young students participate in the reading and transforming of their world (Darder, Torres, & Baltodano, 2017; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

In order for students to truly develop their voices and active critical citizenship, they should be taught how to question and provided with opportunities in which they might engage in the practice of what Freire (2007) termed *question posing* during each day's learning (Kersten, 2006). Teachers should also be able to recognize when a child has been enacting active citizenship and voice through his or her actions in order to not dismiss children's efforts and, more importantly, to respond to them in ways that could nurture their curiosity, creativity, and imagination (Freire 1998a; Phillips, 2010). Critical pedagogy has provided an excellent lens by which to analyze the use of dialogue in the classroom and amongst teachers in relation to each other as continuous learners. Gur-Ze'ev (1998) stated, "The aim of Freire's critical pedagogy is to restore to marginalized groups their stolen 'voice,' to enable them to recognize, identify, and name the things in the world" (p. 466).

Hence, a key point of analysis included observing for student voice in action as they worked to make meaning of the world around them and as they contended with the learning opportunities that teachers constructed with them over the course of their learning. Particularly

with young students, this process could happen in the context of literacy where discussions could be posed around reading and writing stories (Darder, 2017) as students worked to read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This also has meant that educators should be reflective about their own practice, should take action to sharpen their critical skills, and should work in community to improve education for the students they were serving (Duncan-Andrade, 2005). Since teaching has been defined as a cultural and political act (Darder, 2012), it has been important for educators to understand their position of power and to be mindful of the discourses they might promote in order to allow students sufficient pedagogical space to explore their own individual thoughts and curiosities without being hindered by the desire to please teachers by adopting their ideology (Segura-Mora, 2017).

Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Emilia approach was rooted in the pedagogy of schools of the same name in Northern Italy and based on the work of Vygotsky and Dewey as well as Piaget's approach to child development and early childhood education. These schools were established based on the community's deep belief in the value and rights of children to learn in ways that supported their social agency, voice, and autonomy as they experientially and organically engaged their world (Cadwell, 2003). Viewing the child as capable beings, Reggio educators have promoted learning in ways that have supported children's interests in better understanding their world experientially. Through their work, educators using this approach truly have been facilitators and co-learners with young students as teachers actively have listened to the children's *hundred different languages* (Cadwell, 2003; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012; Hewett, 2001),

referring here to the multitude of ways in which children might express themselves even from a young age.

This Reggio Emilia approach to education has promoted the value of children as true people and has been directly in line with emancipatory learning that has emphasized life-affirming childhoods and the development of critical consciousness in all children (Darder, 2017). As educators have practiced documenting students' inquiries, they have formulated lessons and opportunities that should help students find answers to their own questions. As with critical pedagogy, the Reggio Emilia approach has not been a method, but rather a way of being and creating an education that has allowed students the space and freedom to explore the world around them in order to make new meaning. In this sense, the approach has been complementary to Freire's notion of reading the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Although the Reggio Emilia approach most often has been applied within early childhood centers and preschools, this study argues that there is definite potential to utilize this pedagogy, in combination with critical pedagogy, with school-aged children. Moreover, emergent curriculum attested to how Reggio-inspired practices could be used in classrooms with older students (Wien, 2008). Hence, by bringing together the lenses of critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach, a conceptual framework was created that permitted me to analyze the narratives of emancipatory educators reflecting on their own successes and struggles as facilitators of emancipatory pedagogical spaces among young children in their classrooms.

In Combination

These two approaches might have been different in origin and in typical usage, although overlapping in quite a few ways. They have both been described as self-generating processes of

teaching and learning wherein participants reflected, engaged in dialogue, acted, and reflected

again continuing on the cycle (see Figure 2). In critical pedagogy, this has been the work of

praxis—reflection, reading of the word and the world through dialogue, and action (Freire,

2007). In the Reggio Emilia approach, the inquiry cycle might begin with a provocation, leading

into exploration, documentation, and reflection before starting again (*Our Learning*

Environment, 2016). Both approaches have required engagement from all participants, teachers

and students alike, and an organic approach to learning from one another and from the world,

which has not been reliant on pre-constructed curriculums based in what should be taught and

tested.
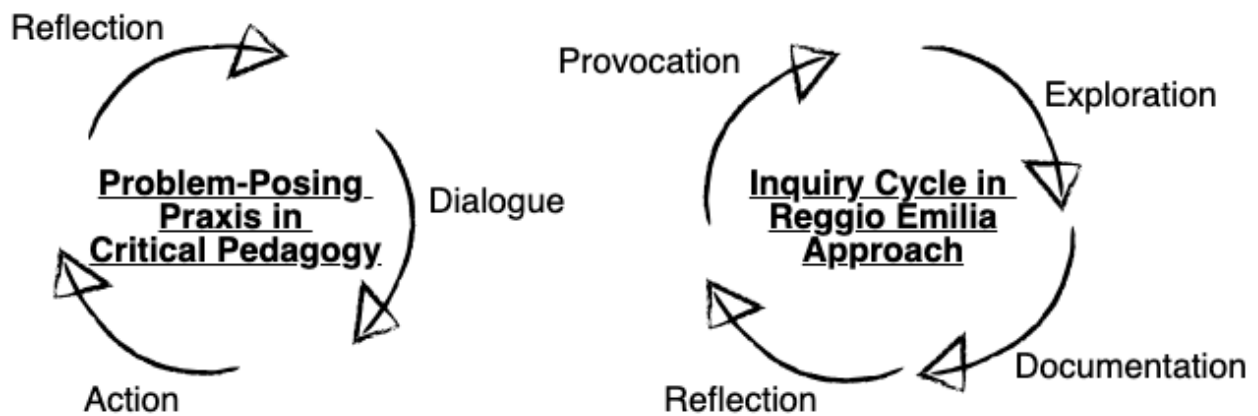
Figure 2. Self-generating processes present in critical pedagogy and Reggio Emilia approach.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design including data collection via critical

narratives and focus groups with eight educators who had experience teaching preschool,

kindergarten, or first grade. Using the data collected, the teachers and I co-constructed critical

narratives describing and analyzing their educational practice. I used my professional network to

find educators working with young children from different schools who self-identified as

progressive or critical educators or who had experience working in Reggio-inspired early childhood settings. The educators, as indicated above, self-identified as utilizing empowering practices and had a minimum of three years of experience. I began with one-on-one narrative sessions that aimed at getting at the heart of how these educators viewed children and their rights, what they thought they were doing that was inspired by emancipatory practices, how they described their teaching philosophy, where those critical ideas came from, what was unique about them as individuals or the context of their school, what motivated them to push back on traditional pedagogical modes, and what they were doing to continue honing their critical praxis with young children (Carter, 2009).

Through bringing participants together in a focus group, I was able to triangulate data by creating a space to share with participants the key themes that I found in talking to each of them individually. Although only three of the eight participants were able to attend, this also gave them an opportunity to add more context and depth to all that we talked about and all that I saw in the individual narrative sessions. The focus group also provided a sense of how teachers could work together to share their knowledge and lived experience in order to benefit other teachers and students. In this way, their efforts made it possible for education to be a space of collaboration rather than competition where teachers understood themselves as learners who also taught one another. Such a lived praxis among teachers could help create and support a culture of collective community action within and outside of the classroom space.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study could be notable for practicing educators, as well as school administrators. Teacher preparation programs also could have a major need for this research

since it has been within the context of the classroom curriculum that teacher ideologies often have been veiled and reinforced. This has occurred largely because emancipatory teaching and learning efforts generally have been erased or ignored within mainstream teacher education programs (Bartolomé, 2004; Han, Madhuri, & Scull, 2015). This has pointed to the need for transforming the ways in which teachers work with and engage their young students in the critical co-construction of education which has been shown to have a significant impact in classroom pedagogical practices (Arce, 2000; Bartolomé, 2004; Darder, 2012; Segura-Mora, 2017).

Moreover, the possibility of creating greater space for student voice and democratic citizenship in early elementary classrooms could have a substantial impact on how students develop into critical citizens as adolescents and young adults. Bray's (2018) work on the trajectory of the *Spectrum of Voice* (see Appendix A) for young children was an example of how student agency could be expanded from expression to leadership by moving from teacher-centered to learner-centered learning and ultimately to learner-driven education where students would have true voice and democratic freedom to fully participate in building their own school experiences.

Although there have been some researchers who have delved into studies pertaining to the use of critical pedagogy and Freirean ideas with younger students (Cowhey, 2006; Duncan-Andrade, 2005, 2007; Huerta, 2011; Kersten, 2006; Reed, Saunders, & Pfadenhauer-Simonds, 2015; Rozich, 2016; Shor, 1987; Souto-Manning, 2010), much of their work has been with upper elementary, middle school, and high school students. In one study, the use of critical pedagogy in a first-grade bilingual classroom did address the role of developing voice and the practice of

questioning for students in this young age group (Arce, 2000). However, this study focused on only one teacher in a very specific setting, and the research was done almost 20 years ago.

Darder's *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A Pedagogy of Love* (2017) spotlighted several teachers who employed critical pedagogy approaches in the teaching of young children. Segura-Mora (2017) spoke of the necessity of taking advantage of teachable moments even with kindergarten students to allow them the space to confront hegemonic socialization in order to unpack understanding around race, culture, and identity. In his example, he utilized story books to open up discussions about beauty and skin tones in order to challenge students to think critically about what they believed about themselves and others. Segura-Mora utilized these "golden opportunities" (p. 133) to bring to light issues of social justice, so that students could better learn to read the world as well as the word. Goldstein (2017) used children's literature in her first and second grade special education class to allow her students with special needs to grow their agency by writing, critiquing, and sharing their own stories. Souto-Manning (2010) also shared in her book about culture circles how the use of these circles in her first-grade classroom allowed her students the space to take social action against what they saw as a form of segregation through pull-out educational services provided by the school. These examples revealed how critical pedagogy could be absolutely relevant in early elementary classrooms and how it could be used further to support emancipatory teaching and learning with our students.

In terms of the Reggio Emilia approach, there has been a growing body of literature about how the approach has been implemented more widely across the world, particularly in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Edwards et al., 2012; Kerchevsky, Mardell, Rivard, & Wilson, 2013; Wurm, 2005). However, most of this work has focused on early

childhood education occurring in the years before entering primary school. Wien's (2008) text, *Emergent Curriculum in the Primary Classroom: Interpreting the Reggio Emilia Approach in Schools,* examined the Reggio Emilia approach in primary classrooms but with an eye primarily on curriculum rather than on how these practices supported children's rights and the pursuit of dignity and humanity within the classroom setting. Kerchevsky, Mardell, Rivard, and Wilson's (2013) compilation, *Visible Learners: Promoting Reggio-Inspired Approaches in All Schools*, also offered several vignettes on how Reggio-Emilia principles were being utilized in classrooms across the United States. Two examples focusing on early elementary—specifically in kindergarten—demonstrated how students' curiosity was used to explore new content and space for problem solving and to express themselves in creative ways while learning key skills that would continue to help them further in their development as students.

Hence, it has been important to continue deepening the knowledge base around emancipatory teaching and learning in early education, especially with those working with children as they first entered school in preschool, kindergarten, and first grades, since these years should be the foundations of cultivating curiosity and building voice, participation, and community. This should be an important educational moment for children, since the early primary school structure and experience could be more rigid than early education programs which those children would have attended from ages two to four. In these spaces, play and participation have been encouraged because children were learning how to become social beings with new faces all around them. However, when entering the primary grades, young children suddenly have been expected to be accountable to a higher bar of learning in which learning outcomes must be met each day. This has made it difficult for teachers to focus on the

fundamentally important human skills that children should hone and have deserved the right to express as part of their continued educational experience. This pointed to why it has been important to bring to light spaces in which these emancipatory techniques of questioning, facilitating, and listening indeed have continued despite the perils of teacher-proof curriculum (Freire, 1998b; Giroux, 1988; Mac Naughton & Williams, 2009).

Limitations

One key limitation to this study was that I chose educators who self-reported as somehow practicing in emancipatory educational practices. By narrowing the scope to early education teachers, I had an even smaller pool of teachers from which to select. This may have left me with a less diverse group of participants, as many of the participants previously knew and worked with each other in different contexts. If people knew and worked with each other on a more consistent basis, they might already have shared ideas and tools that informed their praxis. Another limitation was that the research was primarily done through narratives of the educators. As it became too difficult in the scope of this project to include classroom observations and student perspectives, I was unable to better clarify many of the self-reported practices that surfaced in the narratives and focus group by also doing classroom observations to paint a clearer picture of how the teachers' theories, reflections, and practices expressed themselves with their students.

Delimitations

Doing qualitative research with such a small number of representatives made it impossible to state that the findings could be replicated by anyone else. Also, in doing critical narratives, since the focus was on the depth of individual stories of participants, the study might

not be easily generalizable to a larger population due to its specificity. This was so particularly in this study, where I focused on finding educators who self-identified as employing critically minded or Reggio-inspired approaches. So the data that I collected cannot be directly generalized for other educators who might not have had the same learning experiences, political values, or societal ideals. At times, there might be dissonance between what someone has said they believed and how they actually have behaved in the real world. For that reason, I regret not having been able to include classroom observations and the voice of the students who have had personal experience working with these educators.

Definition of Terms

Banking model of education: model of teaching where students are deposited with information from the teacher and expected to memorize and regurgitate in an endless cycle.

Early elementary/Early primary education: schooling that encompasses the beginning of elementary school for children aged four through six. This includes preschool, kindergarten, and first grade.

Critical pedagogy: educational practices that arose from the understanding that there were injustices and inequalities in the world and that education must actively explore and challenge these inequities in order to interrupt and overcome them. Teaching in this model has been described as a social and political act. Educators should confront issues of power within their classroom spaces in order to make space for more liberatory and emancipatory practices.

Praxis: the practices of action and reflection that lead to transformation.

Reggio Emilia approach: a system of early childhood education founded in the Emilia-Romagna region of Northern Italy by Loris Malaguzzi. This system emphasized the *hundred different languages* of the child, incorporated the multiple intelligences, and described how teachers could facilitate the child's meaning-making process by valuing the rights of children

Organization of Dissertation

The dissertation research will be presented in a five-chapter format. The first chapter has included an introduction which offered a discussion of the problem and purpose of this study and how, through the utilization of the lenses of critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach, we might better understand ways to create more emancipatory learning experiences for young students in the early years of education. The second chapter provides a review of the literature about children, education, and empowerment tied to (a) suppression of children's rights and the value of children, both around the world as well as particularly in education, and (b) empowering practices in the classroom, more specifically focusing on meaning-making, listening, and expressions of voice. The third chapter describes the qualitative methodology based on critical narratives that was utilized in this study. The description includes information about the participant selection process as well as the data collection and analysis process. It also includes a timeline of the research study and pertinent information relating to each participant. In the fourth chapter, the narrative data collected from the one-on-one sessions with the participants is presented. In order to uphold the voices of the participants, these data are presented in a format that focuses on presenting participant's stories as they relate to the a priori and emerging themes, utilizing their voices as the guiding force in the narrative. The last chapter includes an analysis,

through the lenses of critical pedagogy as well as the Reggio Emilia approach, of the major

themes found through critical narratives and a focus group discussion. It also includes

conclusions and recommendations for practice and for further research pertaining to empowering

practices in early education classrooms.

CHAPTER 2

CHILDREN, EDUCATION, AND EMPOWERMENT

The child is made of one hundred.
The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking.

A hundred.

Always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling, of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.

The child has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine.
The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.

They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and at Christmas.

They tell the child:
to discover the world already
there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.

They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.

And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.
(Malaguzzi, 1996, p. x)

Malaguzzi's poem has reminded us that children had a natural curiosity and expression that was a marvel to watch in action. Their interactions with their environment and with others could spark joy and hope in a world that often has seemed dark and jaded. When watching a child explore a new space or follow through with confirming a hypothesis, one might explicitly see their hundred languages at work. At some point, however, children have become entrapped in the process of socialization, wherein much of their curiosity, innovation, and bravery has been squandered and replaced with common sense, practicality, and the rules for upholding the status quo. About this, Wright (2015) affirmed, "Children's thinking is still imaginative, flexible and linked to fantasy and fiction. Yet, imagination and fictional qualities are what young children begin to lose as they grow older" (p. 2). Often, it has been because adults have thought they knew that children needed schools that functioned as the mechanism for socialization that striped those children of their imagination and transformative potential as young citizens of the world. As such, schools have become vehicles through which the rights of children systematically have been suppressed in order to help them become better suited for life as grown-ups who could serve the interests of the wealthy and powerful.

This chapter will further develop background on how children's rights have been viewed and upheld around the world. As part of this framing, this discussion of the literature examined how the suppression of children's rights has affected children's lives around the world, within their daily lives and more specifically within the process of their education in the United States. Placing particular attention on the banking concept and the silencing of children helped to demonstrate how, as standardization and accountability have increased, the rights of children to freely express themselves has decreased, particularly for students from racialized communities.

In order to counteract methods of dehumanization in schools and society, it has been important for children to be seen and treated as valued beings (Christensen & Aldridge, 2012). This began with the concept that Vygotsky (1986) termed as "meaning-making," through which children had the time and space necessary to better understand their world and their place within it (Mahn, 2012). Examining Reggio Emilia-inspired notions of *The Hundred Languages of Children,* as well as Freire's concept of reading the word and the world, we should more fully understand how children have learned to explore their world and their place within it. Through the practice of listening, teachers and students could better communicate with one another, and young students could come to more fully develop their voices (Darder, 2018; Freire 2007). Finally, in breaking down Bray's *Spectrum of Voice* (2018), we might see how this development of young students' voices could move from expression to leadership, the most empowering space through which students might participate as critical thinkers and democratic citizens in shaping their learning experiences.

Suppression of Children's Rights

In 2018, there were 7.6 billion people living in the world. Of those 7.6 billion, more than one quarter of the population was comprised of children whose ages ranged from birth to 18 years old. It was ironic then, that one quarter of the population had no true opportunity to advocate for themselves. Since children were too young to vote, to show up to government meetings, or even to typically and easily create their own campaigns to advocate for what they believed in, their voices were fully silenced. That meant that all decisions made for them and for their well-being were made by others who were far removed from their own childhoods and the experience of being children. The prevailing mindset, or what these adults fundamentally

believed about children, was what decided how children were to be viewed, what people believed children deserved, and how far people were willing to go to protect and advocate for children's needs.

In the 1985 book, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, Zelizer explained how child labor was a highly prominent practice until the 1930s. What was once thought of as a useful child who could do work and help share in the responsibilities of the family was later seen as a useless child who was merely a burden on society. In fact, a study titled *Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think about the Next Generation,* researchers "found a stunning level of antagonism not just toward teenagers but toward young children as well" (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Bers, 1997). Although this study was done two decades ago, adult views toward children seem to have remained unchanged. Such attitudes, often associated with *adultism* (Bell, 1995; Fletcher, 2013) could have far-reaching effects on the inequities that have persisted both in the world at large and more specifically in the realm of education.

Around the World

According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) 2014 report on the State of the World's Children, there were over 2.2 billion children living in the world (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2014b). It was because of this ever-growing population that UNICEF created the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989 to recognize world-wide that children indeed did have rights and that it was the responsibility of adults in their countries to advocate and speak up for their access to quality lives. The CRC embraced four core principles:

- Non-discrimination or universality (Article 2): All children have rights, regardless of race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

- Best interests (Article 3): The child's best interests must be a primary consideration in all decisions affecting her or him.

- Life, survival and development (Article 6): All children have a right to life, and to survive and develop—physically, mentally, spiritually, morally, psychologically and socially—to their full potential.

- Respect for the views of the child (Article 12): Children have the right to express themselves freely on matters that affect them, and to have their views taken seriously. (UNICEF, 2014b, p. 4).

Much has changed since the CRC was first established almost 30 years ago. UNICEF consistently has researched these changes using a multitude of data-collection techniques. UNICEF has collected quantitative data on children in countries around the world in a variety of categories in order to tell the stories of children's experiences and the inequities they have faced worldwide. Through sharing knowledge in these annual reports, UNICEF has attempted to make the needs of the world's children more visible and to advocate for greater equity and more thoroughly developed and protected inalienable rights.

The 2014 report showed that great disparities still existed worldwide despite advances that had been promoted since the 1970s. Even in the year 2012, 6.6 million children under the age of five died, averaging about 18,000 deaths each day (UNICEF, 2014b). According to the 2016 report, in comparison to the world's richest children, the poorest children were 1.9 times

more likely to die before the age of five (UNICEF, 2016). Many of these deaths were caused by completely preventable and treatable ailments such as malaria, diarrhea, and pneumonia (UNICEF, 2014c). This report showed that social and material conditions and lack of opportunity were the culprits behind these morbid levels of inequality experienced by the world's children. These alarming rates suggested powerfully that even the most basic right—that of human life itself—was denied to millions of the world's youngest children due to inequities in health care, nutrition, sanitation, and basic protection against violence.

With such dehumanizing life conditions, it has been no wonder that children's rights to primary and secondary education also has been an area of great injustice around the world. In 2011, over 57 million primary school-aged children were not enrolled in any quality educational programs. Respectively, only one-third of secondary school-aged children were enrolled worldwide (UNICEF, 2014b). By 2016, there were approximately 124 million children and young people who were considered to be out-of-school worldwide (UNICEF, 2016). These startling numbers were significantly greater within poor communities and in the poorest countries. There were also an estimated 75 million children whose educations had been disrupted by national crisis situations such as violence, natural disasters, and epidemics. For many of these children, access to education was destroyed and usually would fail to be restored in adolescence.

Even more discouraging was that 38% of children who did have the opportunity to attend school would leave without learning how to read, write, or calculate simple mathematics. This would reduce significantly their life chances and opportunities for quality work as adults, therefore perpetuating the social and material oppression to which their families had been subject for generations. These inequities were even more frequent if the children came from poor

families, lived in rural regions, were girls, had disabilities, or were from racial and ethnic groups that were facing discrimination (UNICEF, 2014c). The first step in creating equitable schooling experiences for children of all ages should be to give them access to enrollment. It has been only when children have had access to education that we could address classroom practices in order to create more liberating spaces for teaching and learning.

Within Education

In education, the suppression of children's rights always has been a prominent factor in the process of socialization. As student attendance in schools in the U. S. was made compulsory in the mid-1800s, the idea of childrearing at school became a topic of great concern (Hall & Manins, 2001). Now that students were to spend so much of their time at schools, teachers would be responsible for care and discipline. It was at this time that the doctrine of *in loco parentis,* or in place of parents, became a part of school discipline policies. According to Stuart (2010),

> The doctrine would ordinarily be understood to require the guardianship qualities of a parent, as being supportive, protective, and perhaps disciplinary. When the doctrine [was] applied in public schools, most courts have focused almost solely on disciplinary aspect of the principle without considering its concomitant protective responsibilities. (p. 970)

Furthermore, a dominant belief that existed in juxtaposition with this principle was that well-behaved children were considered intelligent and that punishment developed moral character to produce the right kind of citizens. For this reason, corporal punishment became common practice in schools across the nation as a legitimate way to reprimand students for what schools considered to be inappropriate actions or infractions against school rules (FindLaw, 2016; Winter & Kafka, 2016).

Banking concept and high-stakes testing. Within the context of neoliberalism, efforts

toward the standardization of knowledge in the U.S. have prevailed. As such, education has

become deeply commercialized, running much like a business (Molner, 2001), with curriculum

sold as a packaged commodity. Learning kits and teacher-proof curriculum materials have been

bought and distributed by school districts because administrators believed that teachers could not

be trusted to create the types of lessons that would lead students to what they considered to be

high levels of mastery and achievement (Giroux, 1988) based on standardized test scores. In the

era of accountability, the banking model of education has been alive and thriving. The banking

concept, as described by Freire (2007), was one in which the teacher was the all-powerful keeper

of knowledge and the students were empty receptacles, simply waiting to be filled. Once the

knowledge droplets reached their maximum capacity, students were expected to regurgitate what

they had learned through unit exams, end of quarter exams, and end of year high stakes

assessments. These assessments then were used to rank schools based on student performance, in

order to determine which states should receive more funding for the excellent work that they

were doing, and which states should lose money and resources because their work was not up to

par.

Although accountability has not been a bad thing, the way schools have been held

accountable in the neoliberal system has been completely backwards. Schools doing well have

been given more money and more freedom to create their own curriculum, while schools not

meeting requirements have been even more highly micromanaged and have received less funding

to expand programming and support students in ways that actually have been needed. As Nichols

and Berliner (2007) argued in *Collateral Damage: How High Stakes Testing Corrupts America's*

Schools, this has resulted in a dehumanizing process as students have been turned into numeric commodities pressured from a young age to care deeply about their test scores and view their performance as a measure of their self-value and self-worth. This further has enabled deficit framing around schools and communities that have been *at-risk*, needing assistance from those who knew what was best for them, since they were not proving that they could do well on their own (Darder, 2012; Freire, 1978; Tienken, 2013; Urrieta, 2004).

All of these factors have functioned to suppress children's rights in schools not only because what children have wanted out of education never has been considered, but also because of the lifelong destructive impact of neoliberal accountability practices. Yet, what could not be ignored here was that the very process of testing, particularly as a high-stakes measure, has been in direct opposition to principles of children's rights as outlined in the CRC (Elwood & Lundy, 2010). This has been of even greater concern for schools in the most marginalized communities that have served predominantly working-class students of color, and where the banking approach to education and high-stakes testing have been used as instruments of social control. Accordingly, children's rights to be heard, cared for, and to learn have been further compromised in a manner that has thwarted their voices, social agency, and potential for democratic participation.

Discipline and silencing students. Classroom management has always been a part of teacher work. Teachers have been responsible for their students while at school, naturally creating an environment conducive to learning. This basic requirement has been hyperbolized, however, in schools operating in low-income areas and serving students of color. At these schools, discipline often has meant a zero-tolerance policy harshly punishing students for

anything from defiance to physical altercations, including situations of self-defense (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; Black, 2016). U.S. School discipline practices and policies have evolved over the course of the last 150 years in response to research and opinion about the nature and value of various forms of discipline (see Table 1). The trends in school discipline practices and policies have showed that historically the role of schools in disciplining students has been a highly contested topic. From the dehumanizing practices of corporal punishment to the exclusionary practices of expulsion and suspension, schools across the nation have been trying to figure out the appropriate steps to take when confronted with conflict amongst students (Black, 2016). Though disciplinary action in schools could have multiple facets including retributive, preventative, and rehabilitative purposes, the majority of associations with school discipline have focused on the aspect of punishment (Kajs, 2006; Shalaby, 2017). As schools began to recognize the damaging effects of physical punishment, they turned to removing students from the school setting as the next best strategy to deter students from misbehaving and to ensure that school was presented as a safe space. Hence, zero-tolerance policies have emerged as a way for schools to regain social control of their pupils and to create at least the illusion of safe school environments while in reality opening a wormhole that severely punished students for their first infraction of even the most minor offenses without any consideration for the conditions in which the infraction occurred (Allman & Slate, 2011). Although these policies initially were set up to protect children and help them feel safe at school, the outcomes often have been in direct contradiction to children's rights to maintain their dignity and to have inclusive access to their education in a way that promoted the development of their potential (Covell, 2009).

Table 1

History of School Discipline Policies and Practices, 19th Century to Present

Time	Policies and Practices	Impact
19th Century	Policy states that teachers and school administrators assume parental rights of minors while they are at school.	Children spent much of their time at school with teacher's role as disciplinarian *in loco parentis* (in place of parents).
1920s & 30s	Freudian psychiatry explored effects of spanking on child development.	Parents began to think more deeply about parenting techniques and effects on children.
1940s	Child development literature challenged traditions of corporal punishment.	Literature said misbehaviors leading to corporal punishment were a normal part of developmental stages.
1950s	Juvenile delinquency crisis occurs with teachers complaining about students talking, not sitting still, and belief that next generation of youth would not be ready to be good citizens.	Belief grows that students were maladjusted, promotion of separate schools for "troubled" youth. Discipline put into teacher contracts to more clearly define role of teacher vs. administration in student behavior management.
1960s	Literature on "child maltreatment syndrome" emerges. School administrators began to use out-of-school suspension as a way to reduce student misbehaviors.	Increase in pediatric and public knowledge regarding the difference between physical discipline and child abuse or corporal punishment referred to as "socially abnormal." *Dixon v. Alabama*[a] (1960) argued the need for due process rights in school expulsion.
1970s	Reports published by American Psychological Association and National Education Association denounced corporal punishment in schools. War on Crime brings police officers and security officers to schools. First formal account of in-school suspension as a consequence for student misbehavior released.	States began to ban corporal punishment as a method of discipline. National attention was brought to the issue in *Ingraham v. Wright*[b] (1977) as a challenge to Eighth Amendment rights. Schools felt the need to be more secure and safe. *Goss v. Lopez*[c] (1975) argued the need for due process rights in suspensions and expulsions.
1980s	NASW Delegate Assembly approved policy that opposed school use of physical punishment.	National Coalition to Abolish Corporal Punishment in Schools developed to ban physical discipline in schools.
1990s	*Gun Free Schools Act* of 1994[d] was part of *Improving America's Schools Act* 1994[e].	Legislation required schools that received federal funding to state policies including expulsion of students who bring weapons to schools. This was the beginning of the zero-tolerance as common practice in schools.

*Note. A*dapted from "School Discipline in Public Education: A Brief Review of Current Practices," by K. L. Slate and J. R. Slate, 2011, *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 6*(2). Copyright 2011 by National Council of Professors of Education; "Corporal Punishment in U.S. Public Schools: A Continuing Challenge for School Social Workers," by D. R. Dupper and A. E. Montgomery Dingus, 2008, *Children & Schools, 30(*4), pp. 243-250. Copyright 2008 by National Association of Social Workers; and "A Brief History of School Discipline," by C. Winter, & J. Kafka, 2016, March 3, *American RadioWorks*. Podcast retrieved from http://www.americanradioworks.org/a-brief-history-of-school-discipline. Copyright 2016 by American Radio Works. [a]Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education, 186 F Supp. 945 (MD Alabama, 1960). [b]Ingraham v. Wright, 430 U.S. 651 (1977). [c]Goss v. Lopez, 419 U.S. 565 (1975). [d]Gun Free Schools Act, 20 U.S.C. §7961 (1994). [e]Improving America's Schools Act, 1 U S.C. §6301 et seq. (1994).

These zero tolerance policies also have corresponded to no-excuses models persisting in many schools nationally, most particularly in charter schools serving students of color. Cohen (2017) argued a greater need for "oversight over no-excuses charter schools, thereby ensuring that no child . . . is subject to policies that could have been culled from . . . prisons" (p. 31). Based on the thinking that teachers should be responsible for making sure students had no excuses for low achievement, this model utilized a high level of surveillance to ensure discipline and order. Promoters of the no-excuses model believed that learning could not commence in the midst of chaos, and therefore, students needed to be held to high bars of expectation for not only academics but also behavior (Dishon & Goodman, 2017). The hope was to break bad habits and build better ones—habits that would lead to success in college and in life. However, the problem has been that this was yet another situation of adults deciding what was good for children without their consent or consultation. Students, according to those who have ascribe to these models, were not trusted to make their own decisions and were therefore denied their rights to self-expression and choice.

Due to the myriad of school rules and expectations, students have been inherently set up for failure because there has been no excuse for poor choices, and mistakes should be used as learning opportunities and a time for reflection through detention. As the result of a study of a no-excuses model school, Golan (2015) noted,

> On any given afternoon, the cafeteria is filled with students in detention who have violated one of the school's meticulous rules: refusing to lift a head off a desk, talking in the hallway, leaving a homework problem blank, chewing gum, getting out of their seat

without permission, and the catchall, disrespecting a teacher. Detention adds an hour of silence to students' already full schedules. (p. 109)

In theory, these practices have been meant to help students have their best opportunities for learning. They should be efficient with their time, focused on their work, and feel comfortable and confident that their school was a safe place for everyone. In reality, however, these hyper-structured environments have caused students to feel anxious and policed, especially knowing that a large part of their day would be spent in silence and that their frustrations rarely would have an outlet. Golan (2015) described this school phenomenon:

To maximize instructional time and keep students focused on their learning, the school stipulates silence during multiple points of the day, including homeroom, transitions between classes, the introductory "Do Now" exercise, and independent practice. Teaching is largely didactic, with student input solicited primarily in the form of short answers to questions. More advanced teachers integrated interactive activities into their lessons, but new teachers—particularly, those struggling with student behavior—were encouraged to establish order before experimenting with more innovative teaching strategies. School leaders instructed teachers to have students work silently and independently when their behavioral expectations were not being met, because group work is more difficult to monitor. Order was seen as a prerequisite to effective teaching rather than a consequence of effective teaching. . . . Especially in the beginning of the year, when teachers were working to establish their authority, students could spend class after class mostly in silence. This led one eighth-grade girl to complain, ''We're silent all the time. Silent even in clubs, silent in class, silent. Come out of the building, silent.''

Even when able to talk, Amir, a diligent fifth grader, learned he should talk only at

specific times: Self-control is when you're able to talk, when you know to talk at the

appropriate time. And it's important because you can get a really bad consequence and I

do, I really show self-control because I don't talk at all in class and I talk when the

teacher tells me when I have to talk or answer a question. And otherwise I don't talk in

class. (pp. 110-111)

With such a highly regulated expectation of silence, it would be difficult for young

students to feel that they have been heard or valued. Although these particular testimonies were

from eighth graders at middle school sites, there have been elementary schools that also have

employed these same strict codes of conduct and highly regulated schedules with young children.

Vygotsky (1986) noted that this was of much concern, in that children's developmental needs

required opportunities to participate in free forms of discussion in order to build social and

communication skills. As the students in Golan's (2015) study attested, despite these schools'

efforts to maximize children's full potential by giving them opportunities to attain equitable

access to quality education, they were actually doing students a disservice in alienating them

from their rights as children—the rights to express themselves and to develop as critically

conscious individuals who could advocate for themselves and their needs from a young age.

Empowering Practices for the Classroom

There was a time in American schooling when teachers experienced greater autonomy

and were free to explore with their students, to create integrated units that were all based around

a theme and that encapsulated reading, writing, and arithmetic in ways that teachers felt were

worthy of teaching and relevant to students' interests—in other words more freedom from

bureaucracy (Walker, 2016). Since the emergence of standardized testing and standards-based teaching, teachers have lost much autonomy in their classroom spaces. Scripted curriculums have been created to ensure that all students had the same access to content knowledge. In many ways, this systematizing was meant to create more equitable practices, ensuring that all children would have the access they deserved to the knowledge because the curriculum was teacher proof (Giroux, 1988; McDermott, 2013). This teacher-proof curriculum might have been beneficial in some situations. However, where students were coming to school daily and yet leaving without learning anything, the teacher was usually insufficiently prepared and functioned simply as a placeholder for a babysitter on school days.

However, people who entered the profession of education because they actually cared about education and were excited by the prospect of being innovative and creative were completely stifled by this style of teaching, which could have been easily monitored by a robot rather than a real-life person. In some schools, administrators would even do walk-throughs to ensure that every classroom in the grade level was literally on the same page at the same time of day (DeWitt, 2016). This dehumanizing mandate made it extremely difficult for teachers to be responsive to their students and suggested that neither the teacher nor the students had any ability to bring forth any of their own knowledge or schema into the learning process (Giroux, 1988).

In many cases, scripted curriculum has become less popular than it was in the early 2000s, and teachers have at least regained some freedom to interpret standards and allow students to explore them in creative ways (Pointer, 2014). Despite critiques of Common Core Standards (Rethinking Schools Editors, 2013), some have believed that the push for this approach encouraged students to understand the conceptual knowledge behind the skill. There

has been more engagement with manipulatives and learner-centered activities in classrooms, as well as the possibility for more authentic assessment across the nation's schools (Darling-Hammond, 1995). Constructivist styles of teaching and the notion of emergent curriculum have been considered empowering practices, and teachers and students have been encouraged to learn through exploration of a concept or idea (Jones & Nimmo, 1994; Wien, 2008). Interest has driven more learning, and teachers have used their freedom and creativity to tie in the standards.

It is interesting to note that much of the constructivist ideas with young children has been inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy and an understanding that children have had contributions to share that would actually enrich everyone's collective learning. Whereas traditionally, the context of schooling in capitalist America has viewed education as a sort of industrial machine or economic engine (Bowles & Gintis, 2011), Reggio has viewed the school as a "living organism" (Malaguzzi, 1998). Engaging education from a Reggio perspective has created a drastic shift in the way that we have approached schooling and could provide the conditions for teachers to create more meaningful and life-affirming practices with students. Through the affirmation of the child as a valued being, we might be able to explore their meaning-making processes and truly listen in order to promote learner-driven teaching and learning in an environment that truly saw the child as a valued being.

The Child as a Valued Being

In order to adhere to children's rights, people should first fundamentally believe that children were valued beings worthy of said rights. For the purposes of this research, a child has been defined as any person under the age of eighteen. The assumption here has been that from the time children were born, they inherently had rights to safety, preservation, and dignity.

Moreover, international law has established every child's right to protection against violence. In 1989, CRC named these very rights, although carrying out the mandate of these rights around the world has proven difficult to accomplish. The authors of the report proclaimed "Despite the existence of rights, children suffer from poverty, homelessness, abuse, neglect, preventable diseases, unequal access to education and justice systems that do not recognize their special needs. These are problems that occur in both industrialized and developing countries" (UNICEF, 2014a). The consequence has been that violations of children's rights have been far more common than we would want to believe, given the manner in which adults often have betrayed the rights of children and negated the value of their humanity.

For a child to be considered a valued being, adults should acknowledge their voice and participation in the many sectors of society. Grounded in the Reggio philosophy, children should be treated as citizens with the right to participate in their world, and most especially in the creation of their knowledge and culture (Scheinfeld et al., 2008; Wien, 2008). Wurm (2005) noted, "In Reggio the child is viewed as strong, powerful, rich in potential, driven by the power in wanting to grow, and nurtured by adults who take this drive towards growth seriously" (p. 16). In order to sustain this, adults should actively seek out and listen to the voices of children and determine how their environment has affected them. This would be a radically different approach than what generally has been considered the norm for childrearing in which the adult has been the authoritarian figure that has made decisions on behalf of the child. Instead in this version, a child's voice should be considered as valuable as their parents. They no longer should be simply the property of their parents until they reach the age of maturity, able to make their own

decisions (Ndofirepi & Cross, 2015), but human beings learning and evolving, capable of critical consciousness and transformative participation (Christensen & Aldridge, 2012).

If children's voices were elevated and respected, their status as valuable beings in society would be lifted. They would be encouraged to take ownership over decisions, to have their voices heard, and to participate in society with a greater level of independence. To some, this might seem too demanding a task for young children who should be coddled and nurtured until they have reached a more suitable and appropriate age for such levels of independence. Horio (2006) noted that if part of children's rights was for children to have the ability to live out their childhood in a genuine way, then it might be assuming too much to force them into more adult-like conversations or decision-making realms. However, when viewing children as valuable beings in society, teachers could provide opportunities to create learning situations in which young students were more fully engaged as social agents—agents who were "knowledgeable, intentional, and skilled actors who deploy influential strategies to assert autonomy and contribute to life" (Ebrahim, 2011, p. 121). We could empower them with the fortitude to become democratic citizens and leaders by giving them options and decision-making power from a young age (Christensen & Aldridge, 2012; Segura-Mora, 2017).

It has been when we have valued the child as a being worthy of being heard that we have created the conditions that have empowered them to share their unique stance and worldview. It has been when teachers have honored their voices that we have opened ourselves up to being capable of making changes that could actually benefit society at large because we were taking into account the contribution of young children (Christensen & Aldridge, 2012). It has been partially the responsibility of the school, as the place where children spend the most amount of

time with children outside of their homes, to help in nurturing and fostering an empowering view of children as valuable beings and capable of reading, knowing, and transforming their world. As Carla Shalaby (2017) noted,

Classrooms must be places in which we practice freedom. They must be microcosms of the kind of authentic democracy we have yet to enact outside those walls- spaces for young people, by young people- engaging our youth to practice their power and to master the skills required by freedom. (p. xv)

Meaning-Making

Human beings have explored the world around themselves each and every day since time immemorial. Children also have experienced the world from the time of birth, constantly in a state of exploration and discovery. Although they have not been able to speak as eloquently, children have communicated and interacted with the world around them. They have been described as curious beings who have learned from their experiences in a process of meaning-making. In *Thinking and Speech*, Vygotsky (1987) described this meaning-making process by which children come into their understanding of the world around them as when they "attempt to make sense of the situation . . . to find a solution to a problem or plan the next action . . . [their meaning-making] emerges in response to the more complex situation" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 66).

There has been no question that Vygotsky's (1986, 1987) contributions to the field have helped teachers to better unveil the system of thinking and speaking—which have built upon each other—in order to expose children to the world around them. In this way, we have been able to better understand how children came to recognize the world and their place within it. Mahn (2012) noted that as children interacted with the world, for example, they attached

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symbols to represent the new concepts they had learned, therefore creating a system of generalization in their psyche around their different experiences. Hence, children always have been involved in the process of learning, whether in the classroom or in the world.

As Malaguzzi (1996, 1998) described in the Reggio Emilia approach to educating young children, we should recognize that children were already equipped with this meaning-making process before teachers went on with efforts to educate them. Malaguzzi reinforced that it was the teacher's role to facilitate and encourage this process of connection and creation by crediting students with these abilities and being there as a facilitator for their further development.

> I would like to emphasize children's own participation: they are autonomously capable of making meaning form their daily life experiences through mental acts involving planning, coordination of ideas, and abstraction. Remember, meanings are never static, univocal, or final; they are always generative of other meanings. The central act of adults, therefore, is to activate, especially indirectly, the meaning-making competencies of children as a basis of all learning. They must try to capture the right moments, and then find the right approaches, for bringing together, into fruitful dialogue, their meanings and interpretations with those of the children. (cited in Edwards et al., 2012, p. 55)

By evoking the spirit of Piaget (1997, 2001) and the notion that children would learn through exploration if they were set up in the proper conditions for learning, the meaning-making process would be able to thrive and allow students the space in which to develop their own complex ideas about the world. It would be the teacher's responsibility to make these conditions available and a living part of the classroom practice. In a study of first grade readers, Kachorsky, Moses, Serafini, and Hoelting (2017) found that young emerging readers utilized an

array of meaning-making skills in order to tackle decoding and comprehending new texts. Not only did students use their skills and knowledge around language, but they also utilized typographical features, paralinguistic features, illustrations, design features, and background knowledge to truly understand what was happening in a story. By modeling this type of thinking and allowing students the time and space to explore all of these pieces of literacy, instead of forcing them to decode and answer questions about a given text, teachers could promote a form of meaning-making that not only taught the reading of the word, but also of the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

The Hundred Languages. Vygotsky (1987) stated that before children developed their full understanding of the spoken language of their native tongue, they communicated through their own invented symbolic systems. Gestures, cries, giggles, drawings, humming, and even facial expressions were all a part of children's hundred modes of communication (Edwards et al., 2012). In the poem, *The Hundred Languages of Children* by Reggio Emilia approach's founder, Malaguzzi (1996), we could discover how these hundred ways of seeing, feeling, listening, thinking, and expressing were stifled by the school—the institution that told the child that there was only one legitimate way in which to communicate. Malaguzzi reminded us that despite the school's best efforts to "steal ninety-nine," the child knew otherwise. "The child says: No way. The hundred is there." This was not unlike the work of Howard Gardner (1993), who focused on multiple intelligences and engaged the different modalities through which people accessed and presented knowledge.

Vygotsky (1987) argued that children were able to be confident in their inherent or *egocentric* knowledge because it was what they had utilized since birth to communicate what

they needed. "Although children may not have 100 languages available to them, they certainly have more than the spoken words of their native tongue" (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 257). Educators could create the conditions that empowered students in their spaces by accepting, as Malaguzzi contended, all of the hundred languages as legitimate and acceptable forms of expression within their classroom and school spaces. This would create opportunities in which children would know that they were free to express themselves in all forms, and that although there might be certain things the teacher wanted to teach them about a new language, that did not make their form of expressing themselves any less worthy. This also pointed to the reality that "opportunities for creating spaces . . . do not just happen. Opportunities arise as we create opportunities for children to make visible what is on their minds" (Vasquez, 2014, p. 6), through the language that emerged from their own lived histories and experiences.

Reading the word, reading the world. Freire spoke passionately of the dialectical relationship between reading the word and reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). In essence, in order to develop a practice of critical literacy, teachers should teach not only the concept of reading of the word—meaning the words directly on paper—but should also support children in their reading of the world—the context in which the word has arisen which existed even before the word was spoken (Darder, 2015; Freire, 1998a, 2007; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Through a critical interpretation of the word and the world, teachers could support young children's empowerment with a true sense of sight and a more precise language with which to express their understanding of what was happening in the world around them. By considering, for example, multiple perspectives and facets of any given situation, students could develop a

more critical lens through which to better understand their own formation and the world around them (Christensen & Aldridge, 2012; hooks, 2003).

Listening

In any truly empowering context, people should listen to each other in order to honor each other's voices and thoughts. Particularly in the school setting, listening has been one of the most important things an educator could do to show care and express revolutionary love towards their students (Darder, 2015). In fact, silence on the part of the teacher has been described as a virtue and a necessity for effective teaching and learning to take place (Schultz, 2013). If teachers believed, as Freire (2007) argued, that students were not empty vessels waiting to be filled by educators, then we would know that young children were entering the room with their own knowledge and understanding waiting to be shared. For educators of young children, listening to students also has been a powerful way to kindle their curiosity for learning about themselves, others, and their world (Freire, 1998a, 1998b).

This idea has echoed the description of listening that has been fostered in the Reggio Emilia approach. Truly, in order to fully listen, we must also hear. Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (2012) stated that if listening meant understanding the literal words that were spoken, hearing meant fully understanding what was meant and what could be taken away. This would inevitably also create more space for students to question, explore, and dialogue together (Scheinfeld et al., 2008). The teacher in an empowering and liberatory classroom could utilize the skills of listening to not only support their students in their learning, but also to facilitate the skills of students listening and discussing with each other (Steen, 2017). By cultivating and supporting the role of teacher as researcher and creating space for dialogue through problem-

posing pedagogy, schools could facilitate more humanizing and affirming daily learning experiences for their students (Kincheloe, 2012).

The teacher as researcher. In the Reggio Emilia approach, documentation and research has been a large part of the work of being a teacher and, as such, the role of teacher as researcher has been well integrated into the everyday life of the classroom. Since teaching has been seen as a process of facilitation rather than of passing content from one person to another, teachers have been expected to listen, observe, and document in order to reflect and figure out how to guide further instruction (Cadwell, 2003). About this, Wien (2008) affirmed,

> If teachers are trying to understand, they are also studying, researching, and learning in response to what they are investigating. In emergent curriculum, there is the sense that teachers learn as much as children, through their own inquiries into children's learning and meaning making. (p. 14)

The central practice of emergent curriculum within both the Reggio Emilia approach and critical pedagogy has required research because it was from careful observation and reflection that the next idea unfolded. For example, if through research and documentation, the teacher has seen a trend of students interested in shadows, the logical next step in the inquiry-style classroom would be to do a unit the focused on the exploration of light and shadows (Wurm, 2005). For Freire, such a classroom environment could support student empowerment through kindling their epistemological curiosity and love for learning (Darder, 2015). Freedom of choice and authentic learning moments could create the conditions in which students felt the school was truly made *for* them—that they were the most important people in the building and that the practices employed were enacted in the interest of their well-being and liberation.

Dialogue and problem-posing pedagogy. In his work, Freire (1998a) spoke of a similar mode of facilitating learning which he termed *problem-posing pedagogy*. Through the process of problem-posing, a regenerating cycle of reflection, dialogue, and action supported learning through students' critical engagement of their world. Giroux (1988), similar to Freire, saw the role of *teacher as intellectual* as one in which the teacher was concurrently participating in the meaning-making process with students horizontally, as both teacher-students and student-teachers (Freire, 2007). Together, teachers and students manipulated their schema, or past knowledge, to think of new ideas and constructs for the world. In a process of investigation and the understanding that the teacher, too, was an incomplete being, the classroom was able to be transformed into a space of equity—a space in which all of the voices mattered and could be listened to for the betterment of all (Freire, 1998a; hooks, 2003).

Emancipatory Vision of Voice

All of the aforementioned empowering practices were meant to support the empowerment of student voice as a tool of emancipatory education. The question of voice within Freirean pedagogy was considered a significant political concern, particularly in the education of working-class students from racialized communities (Darder, 2015; 2012). Duncan-Andrade (2005) described Freire's pedagogy as "one that aims to help students become critical change agents who feel capable of and responsible for addressing social injustices in their communities" (p. 70). In order to develop this critical literacy and the skills and confidence needed to become change agents for social justice in the community, students should develop their voices from the time they entered school.

Barbara Bray's (2018) design of the *Spectrum of Voice* was particularly salient to this study in that it described one possible pathway of transition for students coming into their voice. Utilizing research from Toshalis and Nakkula's 2013 report regarding motivation, engagement, and student voice, Bray's (2018) chart (see Appendix A) designed by Sylvia Duckworth visually illustrated students' progress along this spectrum if they were given opportunities to foster their voice and empowerment within supportive classroom environment. Bray (2018) contended that as learners were given more opportunities to take control of their learning, they were more able to fully participate and lead in democratic and humanizing ways. Expression, consultation, participation, partnership, activism, and leadership were the points on Bray's (2018) spectrum with possible ways this might look in the classroom.

Expression

In expression, students were given opportunities to offer their opinions and answer questions. In the classroom, this might look like the active engagement portion of a reading or writing workshop lesson in which student's ideas were activated to get a feel for what they already knew about a topic and how the teacher wanted to proceed with the rest of the content he or she was about to present. Students were able to create art and to praise and object to one another's thinking.

Consultation

In consultation, students were given the opportunity to share their strengths and areas of growth as learners. This could be a conference-style time for students to discuss their goals with the teacher. They were able to develop a relationship with their teacher in a more one-on-one basis. In the classroom, this might look like a reading conference or a small group math lesson

where the students were given more personalized attention around what they were doing well with and what strategies the teacher hoped to help them develop.

Participation

In participation, students were able to participate within their classroom and within their school setting. Students participated by deciding on their learning goals with the help of their teachers, and they designed the ways in which they would show mastery of the content they were learning. In the classroom, this might look like group projects and presentations where students had more choice in how they showed their understanding. In the school, this might look like decision-making committees such as student council or other clubs.

Partnership

In partnership, students acted as partners with their teachers. There would not be necessarily one given lesson on which everyone was working, but rather a plethora of learning experiences that were happening simultaneously throughout the classroom. Students had choice in the content that was being learned and how they presented what they learned. In the classroom, this might look like exploration-style lessons where students were learning about a general topic in ways that interested them the most. The teacher here should act as the facilitator as the students took more ownership of their learning.

Activism

At the level of activism, students saw an issue that they were passionate about, and they purposefully drove their own learning to find solutions. Students shared their new learnings and solutions with others in order to genuinely and authentically solve problems within their community. Students might even have recruited others in a call to action in order to spread

awareness about an issue or help to make things better. In the classroom and the school, this might look like action-research work done by students in which they were actively voicing their concerns and resolutions.

Leadership

Students in the leadership stage might be self-driven and motivated by their passions. For this stage, teachers might completely relinquish control and responsibility to students and facilitate purely as a guide and support system. Students could decide what they were passionate about and find ways to make a difference in their world. In the classroom and the school, this might look like a complete open-inquiry style of learning where the teacher had very little to do with what was actually learned aside from supporting the students in their learning and projects and being there to advise. Students at this stage accepted responsibility for the outcomes of their work.

One of the major reasons that the *Spectrum of Voice* has been highlighted here was because it was one of the few constructs that attempted to engage the progression of the development of voice exhibited by young children. However, tensions could arise with such a linear-looking approach in stark contrast to the more dialectical, relational, and communal approaches that might create a greater liberatory experience for children through the lenses of critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach. Therefore, one insight I hoped to gain through narratives with liberatory practitioners was rethinking how we could engage and better understand the voices of young children through a more relational emancipatory vision of education.

Toward Emancipatory Possibilities

All children have been born inherently curious and able to communicate with one hundred different languages. As they have entered school, they have been conditioned and socialized into mainstream society. The world has told them that only one of their languages— the official spoken word—was legitimate. Even still, the limited voice that children have been permitted often has been stifled by adults' views of children's worth and how much they deserved to be heard. By evoking an emancipatory view of children's rights and empowering children's voices, educators could prepare students for their roles as citizens and leaders in a democratic society. Through the facilitation of listening and creating space for meaning-making in a variety of ways, educators could create humanizing, life-affirming, and emancipatory possibilities for all students. In *Monitoring Children's Rights,* Bosmans (1996) argued, "From a pedagogic point of view emancipation . . . is a process of learning and education aiming to enable an increase of individual and social freedom" (p. 726). Unfortunately, studies that have focused on emancipatory practices of critical educators in the early elementary grades have been few. Hence, this study represented an effort to contribute to our understanding of emancipatory teaching approaches when working with young children.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Lone classrooms cannot change a social system. Only political movements can

transform inequality. Egalitarian pedagogy can interfere with the disabling

socialization of students. School is one large agency among several that socializes

students. . . . Classrooms can confirm student rejection of critical thinking, that is

confirm curricular disempowerment of their intelligence; or teachers can employ

egalitarian pedagogy to counter their students' disabling education. (Shor, 1987,

p. 14)

In the systematic web of education, inequity could not be eradicated one classroom at a

time. However, each school and each classroom teacher could have the power to practice

liberatory and emancipatory teaching in order to create the space for young children to have a

more humanizing and democratic educational experience that would lead to the development of

voice and to their overall empowerment in their world as change agents. As Shor (1987) asserted

in *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching*, inequality should be tackled

through the ripple effect of political movements. Therefore, it has been of the utmost importance

for liberatory educators in the early elementary grades to share their stories in order to inspire,

provide examples of praxis, and collaborate with others in the profession.

The stories of how critical educators have worked to break through the status quo of

socialization and assimilation and to create a space of freedom and care for their young students

should be shared. This would be important to the field in order to promote the awakening of

others who might have experienced the inherent burden of doing things as they have always been

done. Teachers on the brink of critical awakening could be thought of as being in the midst of developing what Freire (2007) described as *conscientização*, or critical consciousness—a social phenomenon that could not be experienced alone but must be experienced through our labor with others (Darder, 2015). The aim of the methodology employed by this study then was to share the voices and the stories of some critical educators who have continued to struggle and grow each day as they have worked to create liberatory experiences in their interactions with young children. Through the collective sharing of these stories, other educators, teacher education programs, and those who could affect educational policy might gain a more in depth and personalized view of what really has happened in emancipatory classrooms anchored in principles of social justice.

Critical Narratives

The study utilized a critical narrative approach in order to highlight the stories of educators who were creating space each day for students to develop their voice and agency. The purpose of this qualitative methodology was to learn more about what educators were doing in their classrooms day in and day out that allowed their students to flourish as individuals and as a collective. Through this study, the narrative data helped to provide a deeper understanding of teachers' views of the value of young children, how the teachers developed critical consciousness, and how these beliefs impacted their classroom practices.

Since the ultimate goal of this narrative study was to view the ways in which teachers truly listened to their young students in order support democratic and liberatory classroom experiences, it was logical to utilize the critical narrative method of qualitative research which placed an emphasis on humanizing experiences for the participants by allowing them the space in

which to express their authentic ideas and beliefs (Paris & Winn, 2013). This form of autobiographical storytelling was reminiscent of the qualities present in Vygotsky's (1978) work on human learning and development about which critical educators might already have gained a frame of reference as part of their formation and development as educators. As critical thinkers, they listened deeply to their students and observed their interactions because they knew that learning and growing was social, that one could share what one was learning in a social way.

Schribner (1985) described consciousness as ever-developing. The critical narratives in this study provided a sense of teachers' perspectives at a particular moment in time and assisted us in understanding more deeply how they had grown into enacting a theory and practice of emancipatory education with their young students. Particularly for research involving teachers and education where so many others—from politicians, to parents, to administrators, to researchers, to community members—have had opinions, critical narratives were an effective way to give voice to teachers who had been doing the work on the ground level and were the true experts of their field (Moen, 2006).

Research Design

The following provides specific details on the research design utilized for conducting this qualitative study with emancipatory educators of young children.

Participants

For this research, I conducted narrative sessions with eight teachers who had experience teaching preschool, kindergarten, or first grade. These teachers self-identified as using empowering pedagogical practices in the classroom and having taught for at least three years. In order to locate these teachers, I reached out to others in my professional network who knew of

educators with this level of experience who identified as critical pedagogical or Reggio Emilia inspired. I contacted potential participants by email (see Appendix B) or telephone after brief introductions from others within my professional network. In this sense, I utilized a *purposive sampling*, typically used in qualitative research, "in that there is a deliberate choice of participants" who "are willing to provide information by virtue of [their particular] knowledge or experience" (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016, p. 2).

Data Collection

 Narratives. I conducted individual narrative sessions with each participant in order to allow them to share their stories in private spaces that honored what they had to share. To protect their identities, I gave participants an opportunity to choose a pseudonym. The pseudonyms chosen were either names important to the participants, or names of women important to me, including names of my former students. The initial meetings were approximately 60 minutes in length. Although I used prompts to support our discussion (see Appendix C), the conversations were very open ended to allow the teachers to tell their stories. The prompts allowed educators to delve deeper into how they viewed the rights of young children, the emancipatory practices they employed in their practice, how they developed their critical consciousness, what factors influenced their teaching philosophy, what drove them to reject the status quo within their classrooms, and how they had continued the development of critical consciousness as practicing educators (Carter, 2009). I recorded the conversations with an audio recorder to use as reference after transcription.

 Focus group. After many attempts to arrange a focus group, I was able to bring three of the eight participants together for a small focus group after I had coded the individual narratives.

During this focus group gathering which lasted approximately 90 minutes, I shared the major

themes identified and my preliminary analysis with the participants in order to triangulate the

data (see Appendix D). I recorded this conversation with an audio recorder and transcribed it for

further analysis. Through this triangulation process, the educators had the opportunity to add

further thoughts and insights about other common themes they had noticed as we spoke together.

Additionally, this sharing of ideas helped to facilitate a continued collaborative experience

among these educators in order to create emancipatory learning spaces as part of a collective of

teachers and learners who were working with young students in the various school settings.

Although gathering participants together for the focus group was indeed a major challenge of this

study, I decided to include the data from the small focus group because of its richness in

validating findings from the eight narratives.

Coding and Analysis

After meeting with each participant individually, I arranged for our conversations to be

transcribed through an online service. I sent each participant a copy of their transcription so that

they could add notes or further thoughts that they might have considered beneficial, as well as to

ensure that I had captured their perspectives accurately. I coded the data to find common themes

that were directly linked to the overarching research questions. Using a set of a priori themes that

I derived from the literature review, I broke down each of them into emergent themes that

showed through the process of coding and analysis. I reviewed the narrative data as well as the

observation notes in order to code the data based on common trends and themes that emerged.

The categories that emerged from the coding helped me form a baseline of discussion for the

focus group where I was able to share initial findings with the participants in attendance in a

shared space, ask them to respond, and note additional insights or new trends that surfaced during our discussion. This was another layer of data for me to code and analyze further.

Through the process of coding and analysis, I focused specifically on how critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach manifested themselves in the perspectives and practices of the participants as they worked with young students. From this analysis, I was able to better understand how emancipatory experiences could be employed with young students. In sharing the voices of these liberatory educators, I aimed to present recommendations for how teachers could create more liberatory pedagogical spaces for their youngest students in ways that created the conditions for the empowerment of children's voices and their social agency.

Positionality of the Researcher

As a critical educator of young children, I acknowledge that I entered this study with suppositions of my own around the rights of children and what constituted the employment of emancipatory practices. As a critical researcher, I committed to challenging my assumptions in order to see more clearly through the theoretical lenses I had chosen. Although it has been difficult at times to view my role in the classroom separate from that of the other educators in this study, I consistently reflected and made it a point to truly hear and capture each educator's experience as a part of this study. As both teaching and research could be subjective and political in nature, I believe my continued role as an active educator has helped to strengthen this study, due to my own constant reflection and juxtaposition of what the educators in this study named in relation to my own experiences in the classroom with young children.

CHAPTER 4

CRITICAL NARRATIVES

If men and women are searchers and their ontological vocation is humanization, sooner

or later they may perceive the contradiction in which banking education seeks to maintain

them, and then engage themselves in the struggle for their liberation. But the humanist,

revolutionary educator cannot wait for the possibility to materialize. From the outset, her

efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the

quest for mutual humanization. His effort must be imbued with a profound trust in people

and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their

relations with them. (Freire, 2007, p. 56)

The purpose of this study was to better understand how educators of young children

utilized critical pedagogy and/or the Reggio Emilia approaches to create emancipatory spaces for

young children, as well as the ways in which critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach

intersected in the education of young children. This chapter presents the perspectives on a variety

of themes offered by eight educators of young children who participated in this critical narrative

study. Table 2 highlights information regarding the participants, including types of school

settings, years in education, and current roles, as many of the educators had moved into different

grade levels or administrative positions. Four of the participants taught in early education

centers, while the other four taught in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms. All had at least

three years of experience in the early grades and most had had multiple years of experience in a

variety of grade levels. In narrative sessions, participants were asked to reflect specifically on

their experiences working with their preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade students.

Table 2

Participant School Settings, Experience, and Roles

Name	Type of School Setting	Years in Education	Current Role
Maryam	Independent K-12	20+ years	Elementary School Teacher
Ruby	Independent K-12, Charter Elementary	15+ years	Classroom Teacher
Nathalia	Early Childhood Centers	20+ years	Director of Early Childhood Center
Priscilla	Early Childhood Centers	5+ years	Elementary School Teacher
Jay	Traditional Public, Charter Elementary	10+ years	Elementary School Leader
Patricia	Traditional Public Elementary	10+ years	University Professor
Megan	Early Childhood Centers	10+ years	Co-Founder of Early Childhood Center
Ziggy	Early Childhood Centers	5+ years	Director of Curriculum of Early Childhood Center

Note. This material was obtained in the narrative sessions done as part of this study.

While some of the overarching themes were explicitly discussed in each narrative session using the discussion prompts, the individual narrative sessions with each participant exposed several other common themes that emerged through our dialogue. Those themes are also presented here, highlighting the voices of the participants and the experiences that had led them to their approach to teaching and learning with young children. The two major categories that emerged were (a) the educators' experiences and beliefs; and (b) the pedagogy and practices they had employed within their classroom spaces. Themes are presented within the context of these two categories.

Educator Experiences and Beliefs

Education has been described as an art, and one in which the educator was always evolving and growing, whether through their deliberate pursuit of knowledge or through their own life experiences. These experiences have pushed the educators to develop their consciousness and understanding of who they were and who they wanted to be as they have

continued their journeys. All of these experiences have shaped their personas as educators, as well as their beliefs about the rights of children and their image of the child. Furthermore, they have led these educators, in one way or another, to reject the status quo and embark on a different path towards more life-affirming approaches to educating young children.

Developing Consciousness

For all of the educators in this study, developing their own understanding of what schooling was and should be has been pivotal to forming their identities as educators. When speaking to participants about how they had formed their identities as educators, a number of themes stood out including the participants' K-12 experiences, teacher education and preparation, continuing development experiences and opportunities, as well as for some of them, the changes they noticed after becoming parents.

K-12 experiences. Though the participants had had varying experiences in school as children, a common connection was that many recalled their own schooling experiences as the catalyst for becoming educators and further pushing them to be the types of educators they wished they had experienced when they were growing up. Maryam shared how her experience in independent, or private, schools had begun her thoughts on creativity and exploration in the classroom:

> I spent my 28 years in two schools, primarily two schools, and before that, my student teaching in some other spaces, and I'm a product of an independent school, and that has shaped me very much. Just me, but also me as an educator. I think my journey started as a learner in school being really given the gift of not necessarily a progressive education, but really out of the box education. I went to a really unique school, and so I was invited

to continue to wonder, and be curious, and experiment, and be creative, the whole way

through high school, so that when I was an undergraduate education major, I pushed

back. I'm a very easygoing person, so it was kind of funny, because I think it was the first

time I'd ever pushed back on anything, when I was an undergraduate education major.

(Maryam)

Maryam shared her reflections on choosing a school in which to teach after her graduate

years and explained how her positionality as both a student and a teacher had helped her

understand her place. As a teacher of color in a predominantly white space, she had found that

her purpose was to provoke ideas that others might not think to bring up:

I think I've talked to you about unpacking privilege. That's really for me the joy of being

in the school I'm in. That I actually couldn't be in the school that I'm in and not actually

address the privilege that's there. And actually, to me as teacher of color, it's so

interesting. It's like I almost have this flip experience. . . . And so, for me, interestingly,

the private school, the place that I'm in is where I was raised, is very much my place. I

was the one kid of color in the white private school that I went to all my life, and I never

left the school. And so however, there were no teachers of color, there was no

multicultural programming, there was no recognition of privilege, there was no. . . . There

was nothing, there was nothing, there was a lot of beautiful . . .there's a lot of beauty, and

then there was a void, a big empty hole. So, for me, I think I told you this, but that's like

my heart space to specifically be in that private institution and bring up the conversations

that nobody wants to have. And teach the kids to bring up the conversations, especially

the white kids. And then of course to be there as that person of color in the schools that is

missing. So, it's funny that even though, my identity . . . I definitely was like struggling

with, where was I going to be most valuable. Where did I want to be? And then I think

actually more than where I wanted to be, I was really struggling with where was it. . . .

Where was the valuable place to be? And in my brain, I had convinced myself that it was

public schools because that's where Black and Brown kids were and I was a New Yorker,

and I felt like I should be with my people. (Maryam)

Maryam went on to clarify why she had not elected public schools and had chosen the private

school venue instead:

And then it was funny because it only took a few visits, a few. I looked at a few public

schools and I realized actually these aren't my people. I didn't go to public school, I went

to private school. I didn't go to school where I was one of many, I went to school where I

was one of few. I belong in this private school and I really need to be there. I need to be

there, and they really need me, and that's the best space is for me. So, for me like having

spent 30 years almost, I think it's now 30 years, in independent schools, wow, I mean my

journey has been deep and as in the past couple of years . . . but my shift has been . . .

was always around diversity and equity and inclusion, but my shift has been around non-

target positionality. So instead of really looking at solely kind of looking at the

experience of students of color, I'm really, really interested in the position of White

students, and the silence around what it means to be White or what it means to have

privilege or what . . . and what kids are learning about that and about themselves.

(Maryam)

Maryam's experience highlighted how being "one of few" rather than "one of many" had advanced her own trajectory of pushing others to think critically about race and privilege. Race also had played a factor in Jay's experiences growing up in school. Jay shared her experience of knowing that she had loved learning but somehow had not felt that attachment when in the school setting:

I think my growing up as a black woman at home, having conversations and internalizing, like working through my own experience as a person of color in schools. Processing what that looks like and feels like and why I didn't like school. Why I do love learning but hate school. All of that is how I developed being like the educator that I am today. (Jay)

For Jay, the lack of feeling affirmed in school had been the driving factor in who she has become as an educator:

I don't know if I'd necessarily . . . I obviously didn't have vocabulary or . . . the terms that we use today, or like after I'd gone to school, but I knew that school was different for me because I was a black person. And not in a good way. I think having conversations with my mom about how I was feeling every day I was going to school, that helped me become an educator that was like no way are my kids going to feel that way. Even though I don't know what I'm doing, I'm struggling, but no way are my kids going to leave the school year without learning something. So, I'm going to figure it out. . . . I think I've always known I wanted to be a teacher, right? I was at a summer program, and I met cool teachers. There were teachers of color. The first time I ever had those. And I've always loved, like, I like the idea of teaching and learning, but I hate school. I hated school,

right? But I've always known that I'm a school person, and that's what I need to be, and so then I just need to fix school. (Jay)

This feeling of knowing something was not right was also apparent in Patricia's reflections on her early schooling experiences:

I had a really kind of negative experience in schooling, and I never thought that I would be a teacher. All of that kind of stuff, right? A lot of that was because I had such negative experiences in school. I knew something about that was not right, because I knew that wasn't everyone's experience. I knew that because I had cousins that went to different kinds of schools, that were more affluent, and they had a completely different experience. I knew back then that something was not right, I just didn't have the language for it. . . . Well, I mean, I knew that there was a reputation that my school was a hood school, and I knew that when . . . my brother came out in the newspaper for one of the articles that came out about how low performing our high school was, and things like that. I knew that there was something off about us getting that kind of attention. Also, I knew because I was having long term subs constantly. It was something where I'd hear other people's experiences with their English teachers, or even within the same school. I'd have friends that were taking honors courses versus me, who was taking remedial courses. I literally had a long term sub the entire year for like two different years. I just knew that was not supposed to be right, you know? Something about that was off. (Patricia)

Much like Jay, Patricia had gone into teaching as a means to make things better for future students. She had chosen to be a kindergarten teacher, in particular, in order to spark the love of learning from a young age:

I wanted kinder, because I think kindergarten is when I started hating school, and so for

me, it was like I had such a horrible experience in kinder that I wanted to kind of feel the

kindergartner inside of me, so to speak, like have an opportunity to relive that, and to also

give students a different experience as early as kindergarten. It starts that early. I also just

love the fact that kindergarten, most of your students come to you with none of those

field skills that we. . . . You now, the hard skills. Then, they leave already reading and

writing, and you see so much growth right before your eyes. I really love that. (Patricia)

Priscilla's reflections on her schooling experiences focused on her learning style, rather

than on any particular aspect of her identity. Priscilla shared how learning visually as a student

had helped her to understand how to connect with her own students:

A lot of it has to do with my own personal experiences of how I was as a student and the

things that I needed to do well. One of the things was, I was very visual learner and I

realized that a lot of the kids need that. Or a lot of movement. I've always been a creative

kid growing up, even as an adult. So, some of that is influenced by the art background

that I have, as well. So, I have a lot of experience and I feel like that's my way of

connecting best with children. (Priscilla)

Priscilla also shared how her relationships with her own teachers had taught her how to

interact with her students when she had become the teacher. She reflected about how difficult it

had been to connect with "the teachers that were super uptight about things and didn't have any

flexibility. Who would often put kids down and things like that" (Priscilla). She continued by

talking about the teachers who had met her needs, and how this had taught her to create

relationships with her students from the beginning:

I needed someone that would challenge me and that would encourage me to keep going and provide me. . . . If I would be done with something, I needed more to supplement for the lack of enough material. The main thing was the relationships I had with those teachers. The ones that were my best teachers would be teachers that were personable, I could talk to them about things other than school. I think that's the biggest thing with the kids, to be able to have that kind of relationship first from the beginning. There [are] a few kids that I've worked with this past year that, from the start, you're close and there [are] a few that I've had to work the whole year to really get them out of their shell. (Priscilla)

Participants' K-12 experiences as students had had definitive, formative impact on their desire to become liberatory educators, dedicated to the mission of improving the schooling experiences for their own students. As these educators had gone on to teacher education programs, however, some of them had discovered that their own beliefs about teaching and learning did not align with what they were learning as up-and-coming educators. Others had found programs that supported their own reflections on how to make schooling a more emancipatory experience.

Teacher education and preparation. A few of the participants in this study had gone into teaching directly after their undergraduate experience, while the majority had not begun as educators until they had completed graduate school. For Ziggy, both her undergraduate experience in early childhood education and her graduate experiences in student teaching had helped her to figure out how to approach the early education of children in meaningful ways:

So the three years undergrad and then when I graduated in four years as a teacher. And their curriculum was very interesting to me because it wasn't traditional. You take your courses and it's very cookie-cutter traditional. They're going to learn their ABCs and one, two, threes, and not really thinking outside of the box. When I was taking my classes, I really got attached to different theorists that just had this idea of children learning in a different way. Theorists like Howard Gardner, just different intelligences and even adults; we all learn differently, but yet there [are] so many programs that don't reflect that for children, and then you wonder, why are they having behavioral issues? Or what's happening? And why is this child not engaging? It's like, well, because we're not really catering to their differences. And we have these expectations that everyone just has to fit this mold; and no, they don't. So being exposed to their science-based curriculum got me really thinking about lesson planning in a different way, because every year we would have some show up with a theme. So, we would have a big question we would ask, and it would involve three parts. So, what are we studying? Why are we studying it? And how are we going to study it? So, if I was in the toddler room at one point and if we did locomotion, what does that mean? How are we going to study locomotion? Is it just moving your body? Is it just studying how transportation moves? How are we doing this? And then from there we would sit in a group and everyone would brainstorm, and we would string it out for the entire year.

Ziggy spoke about the downside of using the same themes and the need for more critical engagement with what children needed:

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And I think sometimes we get overwhelmed, and I think especially in the preschool

setting you think, "Oh, we have to do themes." So, September is going to be welcome

back to school, and then October is going to be fall and Halloween and it's just not

interesting, and I think teachers get tired doing that every year. So, I think part of what

I've been doing here is just helping people expand and understand, one, not to do themes.

It doesn't have to be based on the calendar. There are so many different things if you just

pay attention to what the children are interested in that we can dive into and expand on.

So, I think [my university] definitely spoiled me. (Ziggy)

For some, like Maryam, the traditional teaching program she had started in her undergrad

years had not been fulfilling and that had been what led her to pursue further development in the

graduate program. Maryam shared:

It was a pretty traditional program, and I could think about the things that I was being

taught as an early educator, and it was not inspiring, really. I mean, there were a few

inspiring professors, but in general, it was very in the box. . . . It was basically a formula

for how to go about teaching a lesson. There was the anticipatory set that was supposed

to grab them, and then there was the this and the that, and checking for understanding. If

you didn't have all the pieces of that puzzle, you failed. I couldn't understand that,

because I did not feel that that is how I was taught for my entire life. I was trying to make

sense of, "Why is this the way? How could this way work for everybody?". . . . It was

always on a blue piece of paper. . . . We called them blue sheets. There were aspects of

that blue sheet that, of course, made sense. Yeah, grab the learner. Sure, check for

understanding, but why does it always have to be in that order? I started asking a lot of

questions, and those were not welcome, because, again, the model, I think, that I was

being shown was, "I'm the teacher and you're the learner, and you're supposed to do what

I say." Which is, again, not what my education was like, my early education. (Maryam)

Maryam's rejection of this formulaic methodological approach to teaching had been what had

pushed her to find a graduate program, recommended to her by one of her professors, that had

allowed her to be the type of educator she really wanted to be.

Coincidentally, both Maryam and Ruby had attended the same graduate institution,

though at different times, and the constructivist approach to teaching and learning that they had

learned there had had a profound impact on who they had become as teachers. Ruby shared how

her graduate teaching program experience had helped her to realize her passion for teaching:

I mean my journey of a teacher started because I was an actor. I was not wanting to be a

teacher, and I was doing a lot of theater and I was doing children's theater. And I ended

up loving the children's theater and leading workshops. In my background, I worked with

the National Theater of The Deaf, so I'm fluent in American Sign Language. I worked

with a deaf theater company and we would go into schools. And we would perform for

deaf kids and hearing kids. But then we would do workshops for deaf children, and we

would do workshops for hearing children around deaf culture and so, that . . ..So what

happened to me was, I wanted to stop doing theater, I went to graduate school, I went to

[a graduate education school on the East Coast] and I knew that I could design my own

Master's there. And I knew I wanted to do something with children, and with theater, and

with the arts, and creativity but I really didn't know what. And then I got really interested

in dreams and how dreams can be used creatively, and I was like okay. [This school] will

let me design my own Master's and then I'll figure it out. So, I went to [graduate school],

not wanting to become a classroom teacher. But basically, after a year, I just fell in love

with this pedagogy. This constructivist idea. It was like, I didn't know you could teach

like this. I didn't know that you could empower children's thinking and through group,

project-based learning and through experiential education. So that led me to want to be a

classroom teacher, basically. And so now, cut to 15 years later, I'm doing that work, but

I'm also really working with teachers a lot more. (Ruby)

For Ruby, teaching never had been the first option, but a passion that had developed as

she began to better understand the type of teacher she could be and the type of learning

experiences she could create. This was similar to Nathalia's trajectory of beginning her work

with students before actually setting the path to learn more about the profession and the

possibilities. Nathalia shared about how in learning to reflect, she had found the type of early

education programs through which she was interested in teaching and learning:

I wound up in preschool and had been teaching unconsciously for a long time as assistant

teacher just thrown into random situations in which I struggled and did my best. When I

went back to school and got my early childhood degree, the program there was really

based on mindfulness and reflective practice. We talked a little bit about Reggio, but it

wasn't a Reggio-inspired program. I feel like Reggio was just coming onto the scene in

the United States. There was a lot more inspiration from Waldorf and

Montessori.Because the emphasis was on mindfulness, we were always encouraged to

reflect on our experience as educators and to question our beliefs and motivations at all

times. That was essential to that program and who I became as a teacher, then later on as

a leader. I taught at the lab school there for a long time. That was a really collaborative, interesting group of people to work with. Then I moved to LA. Reggio was pretty solidified here. [I] started working at a Reggio inspired school. Got really curious about it because there was a lot of intersection between what I had been doing, the observation and reflection piece, and Reggio. What the schools of Reggio Emilia do really well, and what made it transferable, is that they developed a lot of systems for reflection in terms of the documentation, the collaboration with the teachers, [and] a lot of opportunities for the children to reflect. To me, that's what's really interesting about the Reggio approach. (Nathalia)

The participants' experiences in their teacher preparation programs had been incredibly meaningful to who they wanted to be as they stepped inside of their classrooms. Finding the right program had been key to their success and their continuing to pursue the profession. The next step had been finding the right school setting in which to teach and finding new ways to continue growing while in the profession.

Continuing development. All of the educators in this study had had experiences in continuing their development whether at their own school sites or through other organizations. These experiences, whether enlightening or frustrating, had continued to mold these educators, even while in the trenches of classroom life. For some of the participants, like Patricia, continuing development had meant finding an outlet for teaching as social justice work that was not taught to her in her own teaching program. Patricia shared how she had come to work with different organizations as she was learning to become a teacher:

I'd say once I was [in college], I had this class with [a professor]. She's a former Black Panther Party political prisoner who's a professor there, and she really politicized me a lot, just kind of understanding even my own internalized racism, internalized patriarchy, and then starting to kind of make those connections of what the roots were. . . . I think that's when I started to kind of develop that analysis. Once I started the credential program, I really knew, because it was not critical at all. It just was not . . . .It wasn't what I truly needed. Because I knew that, I started to seek out other organizations. For example, [Educators for Freedom], was the first organization that I joined that was a social justice teacher org, and I got really politicized within that organization, because it was literally kind of giving me access to conversations that I could never have within the profession. Going to the meetings, and the study groups, and going to the events, all of those things kind of played a major role in my politicization. From there, I started getting involved in other organizations shortly after . . . .I'm definitely still involved in all of those organizations . . . .I'm part of a lot of different teacher spaces and organizations. I think part of it is as I organize to create these spaces for other teachers coming up, I do it for myself as well, as kind of like feeding two birds with one seed. (Patricia)

Patricia had been forced to look outside of her teaching program and her school setting to find the fulfillment that she had been craving—the need to go deeper and explore topics others might never touch. For Maryam, however, this work had been essential to what her school already had been doing on a daily basis. Maryam shared what had drawn her to her school and how they had given her autonomy and freedom to explore with students. Maryam described her school:

Sort of constructivist, where kids are really part of creating their learning, where learning

is multi-dimensional, and young people are exploring their thinking in lots of different

ways, where teachers are allowed to create and to make things, new things, all the time,

where social justice in the curriculum is not only allowed, but is just an integral part of

what should be happening. It's like an expectation. You know, you teach math, and you

teach young people to take action where they see action is needed. Yeah, progressive in

that maybe the traditional structure of school, where the teacher is forefront, and students

are just receptacles, not that. (Maryam)

Maryam knew that the school at which she had chosen to work was in line with her views

about what teaching children should sound and feel like. This was unlike Ziggy's experience at

one of the schools at which she had worked in the beginning of her career. Working in a

predominantly conservative area that had done little to push children's insights and creativity,

Ziggy had felt obligated to take a stand:

It was just very standardized. Like we are not going out of the box, you have to do this,

and you're basically here to just take care of the children. We don't want to think

critically, don't push it. I hated it to be honest. I was not into it . . . .So, I would say a very

privileged demographic that essentially used the school as, "Oh, my kids get to come and

play all day, but I don't really care about what you're doing." I think not really taking into

consideration how much children can do at this age, it's just your childcare. Yeah, so I

think it's a very different mindset. So, I think there I really started becoming conscious of

the kind of work I wanted to do in the field and just really advocating for being more

conscious of how we treat children, and how we see them . . . .I remember one of the

centers I was working at, I got into a lot of conflicts with the teachers because I just didn't feel like they were respecting the children in the way that we needed to, and some changes were made. The director really backed me up, and I know that's not the case for a lot of people sometimes. And something that I've implemented in my practice and even here is just having teachers know that you have a voice, and I know sometimes it's scary and we feel like we can't use it but if we do it from the heart and we come from a place of passion and knowledge, that people will hear you out and maybe understand where you're coming from. And even if certain changes can't be made, at least you can make somebody listen, and always be an advocate for the child because that's what we're here for. (Ziggy)

This experience had helped Ziggy as she continued her teaching journey, and she reflected further on how her early experiences in the classroom had allowed her to become a more authentic and confident educator:

Yeah, I remember my first year I was just terrified. I just didn't know what I was doing. I was just second guessing myself with everything. I think that was it. There was a lot of self-doubt the first year. And I guess the way that I felt that something needed to go, didn't go that way, I would get really upset with myself, it's like, "Oh, I failed. What did I do wrong? And why didn't this work?" And now I realize, "No, it's okay. They're not even mistakes." As long as you had the intention of learning and really teaching something meaningful to the child, even if it doesn't go perfectly, it's still a teachable moment. There's still something to be learned through that experience, and then if you look at it like that then you can really figure out like, "Oh, well what could I tweak next

time? Or what can we do instead?" Instead of beating yourself up over it. I think I'm much kinder to myself now, and everything just flows more organically. I guess there's definitely a lot more confidence now, and I see it, and I've heard it from teachers before like, "How did you come up with that?" Well I'm just willing to try things. I think that's part of it. You just have to be willing to try something. If you have an idea, go with it and see where it takes you. (Ziggy)

Ziggy's experience of growing over the years was similar to Priscilla's experience of learning from her own successes and blunders. Priscilla shared how her ability to release control over the years had allowed her to be more creative in the classroom:

It used to be where I was always directing the learning. Now, it's been a challenge. I've had to learn how to step back from that and get creative with things. It's so different now. Now I trust children more than I used to. Whereas, before, I would have wanted to take control of every situation and micromanage everything. But now that I know that I can see it's done, I can see long term projects that I've done, things that they've worked on. I can step back and feel like I just have to give them the basis of the social interactions that they have and then just be there to facilitate their learning. (Priscilla)

Priscilla and Ziggy's reflections on growing as teachers were shared by Ruby, who had gained confidence and skill in incorporating the different aspects important to her into her classroom practices:

My teaching is much better, my integration, all those. And they're much more interdisciplinary, and I'm learning so much about how to purposefully integrate not only

academics, but social justice. Like, I'm looking at social justice standards, and I'm looking at SEL standards because those are all part of an effective project. (Ruby)

When asked how she had been able to continue pushing herself to grow even while in the classroom, Ruby reflected on the choice she had made to change schools:

Well, one way was leaving the private school that I was at and going to be a founding teacher at a public charter school. A very different community of families, and very diverse. A startup. I felt in that moment after being at this private school for eight years that I needed a challenge. I wasn't growing anymore. And my beliefs as an educator changed. I did not want to work in a private school anymore . . . .I left a pretty safe, cushy job to start something that was really hard. And then once I got there, just a lot of work on my own around things I talked about before, like standards and assessments and accountability. I think my teaching got better because I was being held more accountable for my teaching. I was being observed more. I was setting goals for myself and my principal. I was working with teachers who were from way different backgrounds than I was and learning from them. So, for example, I never taught an English-language learner. I never taught a student with special needs. It was a very homogenous community. So, my growth took place around the experience. But then also my work around project-based learning. . . . And then within my school we've been working on just doing a lot of working groups. So, we have a race and equity group, we have a SEL group. So, we've done a lot of work- a culturally responsive teaching group. So, there's been a lot of initiatives that I joined. (Ruby)

The educators spoke of using their own classroom experiences, as well as the support of groups within and outside of their school settings, to continue their growth and development as educators. From these experiences, they had grown their consciousness, deepened their skill sets, and honed their craft to be more in tune with their students and with the full extent of their passions.

Becoming a parent. A theme that emerged during our discussion on developing critical consciousness as educators was that of the impact of becoming a parent. Half of the participants included in this study were already parents, and the impact that this had on their experiences, particularly in relation to other parents, was presented in several accounts. Nathalia explained how her own experience becoming a mother had helped her to understand the vulnerability that came with being a parent of a school-aged child:

> I taught for a long time before I had my daughter. After becoming a parent, it really transformed the way that I think about working with parents. My understanding about their needs and level of empathy for them. I never quite got how vulnerable it is to be a parent. Your relationship with the school and the teachers in that school. I didn't understand the power that teacher has in that situation before I was a parent. Not only are you entrusting the person in your life that means the most into this place, these people, also, you as a parent are so vulnerable in that situation. You are at their mercy. You feel judged. You feel like there's this piece of yourself out in the world that's being evaluated and judged. Yeah. So that shifted for me. I feel like I'm a better educator now after being a parent. Then constantly thinking and wondering and reevaluating and screwing up and trying again. With the kids. With the parents. The whole thing. (Nathalia)

Nathalia's experience was similar to the ways in which Ruby felt she had grown her empathy after becoming a parent:

> So, I think that's one big piece, is really having empathy for parents, really having empathy during parent conferences, and I think I'm a much better empathizer with parents. (Ruby)

The teacher-parent relationship was also noted in Maryam's reflections on how her interactions with parents had changed after she became a mother:

> I definitely didn't understand. It was harder for me to understand where any of the tough stuff that parents were presenting came from fear and fierce love and care for their child. And so, I stopped taking things personally. Something came at me when I was a teacher after I was a parent. . . . Oh, I get you. You're scared. Looks like you're trying to attack me. I know you just love your child. Let's work with that. And it probably means that you don't understand something that I'm doing, and you want to understand it better and you have a hard time communicating it and it's okay, I can be engaged in that with you. (Maryam)

Nathalia, Maryam, and Ruby all had learned how to connect better with students' families after their own experiences with raising their children. These experiences, along with those of their own early schooling experiences, teacher education and preparation, as well as continuing their development had all shaped who each of the participants was and what they believed about teaching and learning. This, in turn, had allowed them to better understand their own positionality and power in relation to their beliefs in the rights of young children, how they

viewed the image of the child, and what drove them to reject the status quo and approach the education of young children through a more emancipatory and human-centered lens.

Beliefs about Children's Rights

In speaking with the participants, three clear themes emerged in their beliefs about children's rights: The rights to be respected, to have access and opportunity, and to feel loved and cared for were all apparent in listening to participants' reflections.

Respect. Many of the participants mentioned the notion of respect as their most prevalent thought when asked what they believed to be the rights of young children. Maryam was pensive and genuine as she explained her understanding of respect:

How do I view the rights of young children? Well, I think one of the things that I feel deeply is that young children should be respected. All people should be respected, but it should start when people are young, and when their brains are just open, and wondering, and they're curious . . . .Yeah, respect, like a deep respect, I think, is ultimately the right of a young child, because once a teacher can offer someone respect, then, I don't know, what else is there? (Maryam)

Jay also believed respect to be important to the rights of young children. She, like Maryam, named the role of the teacher in providing that respect to the children who had been entrusted to their care, and how this showed the understanding of children as fully human:

I would say the teacher's beliefs first and foremost, and how those beliefs are communicated through the words that they use every single day. Right now, that's where I'm at. It's really important to me that our words and actions align with what we say we believe. It just means that we're truly living the idea of kind firm. It means we're truly

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living, like listening to our students and making sure we're always following up with,

even when we make mistakes and we, I don't know, yell at our kids or whatever, we

follow up with an apology. We see them and talk to them as if they're human. (Jay)

Jay's understanding of showing respect through teacher's words and actions was seen in

how Priscilla had used the foundation of respect to create relationships with her students:

I have a lot of respect for the children. They have a lot of respect for me. That has

allowed for those relationships to build and the work to get done. (Priscilla)

This view was also in line with how Ziggy saw relationship building as a form of mutual respect

with young students:

I think it's really important to have mutual respect for children. I think in order to develop

a meaningful relationship from the get-go you need to let them know, "I see you. I

acknowledge you, and when you're ready I would love to have a relationship with you." I

see you as a person with opinions and ideas, and just because you're small doesn't mean

that I'm the authority here, we work together. (Ziggy)

All of these aspects of respect had created more humanistic spaces for young children,

and this was what had been apparent for Nathalia as she moved from teaching within her own

early elementary classroom space to founding a new early education center. Nathalia shared how

this change had pushed her to think about what respect meant throughout a school space rather

than just within the four walls of the classroom:

As director, I think about that all the time. How are we setting up a program that is

human centered and treats children as human beings with their own set of rights? Not

even the same as the rest of us. They're their own. I think that they deserve to be treated

as human beings. They deserve to be respected where they are in their development and their learning. School should feel human and respectful. That we're thinking about the way that we're talking to them at all times. The language that we're using: what does that communicate to them? Are we talking to them in the same way that we would talk to an adult? Just as respectfully? Just as mindfully? Offloading our own aggression or biases on them. I think about it more now, as a director, than I did when I was in the classroom. I want to set up a school in which the systems support kids and their rights. When I was a teacher, I got to just set up a classroom and my own interactions with them in a way that felt respectful of their rights . . . .I never had to think about the systems of it. As the leader of a school you're having to think about all these meta-systems. Even just the flow of the day. Even just how many teachers are in a classroom at once. Getting from point A to point B. "How are we serving snack as a school? How are we transitioning to the aftercare program?" That sort of thing. Making sure that there's a consistency and that there are systems that support those rights. That it's not just up to the individual teachers to figure out on their own. (Nathalia)

The participants considered respect of utmost importance when approaching children as full beings. They were able to see how their grounded beliefs in mutual respect had allowed them to approach children with more balance of power than would be seen in a more authoritative environment where the teacher was the one who was respected in the space. Respect for young children also worked alongside the notion of access and what it meant to give children opportunities to be their best selves.

Access. The theme of access that emerged here was linked to access to content, to learning and growing, and to a safe and welcoming environment. Access meant slightly different things to different participants, but generally it meant the right to having needs met on an individual level. Patricia shared what creating access and equity had meant for her in her kindergarten classroom space:

The way that looks in my classroom is making sure that I create space for young people to get their needs met, and every young person has different needs. Sometimes it's ranged from needing to kind of just do their own thing and not do what the rest of the class is doing, because that's just not where they're at right now, to having some space and time to unwind, because they've had a really rough morning, or you know, are just not feeling well that day. I think just finding ways to already anticipate that all of my students are going to have different needs and making sure that I set up either routines or spaces for them to get what they need. (Patricia)

Having the needs of all students met was also important to Megan, who shared what this had meant for the systems in place in her early childhood center:

Well, I think that each child has an irrefutable right to have all the best things. Access, equity, those are things that are very interesting and important to me, and something that I feel like we struggle with, at least in our current iteration of our school, as far as providing access. I feel like the systems that are in place are not put in place to actually support each child having their needs met, in the sense of education and their capacity to be served. Yeah, I think it informs our pedagogy. It informs the way we approach learning, being a child-led center, that the student's rights, the child's rights, the right to

learn, the right to be free, the right to play, the right to be loved and feel love, and to mess up and to fail, and to pick themselves up and to keep trying, all of those things are really at the forefront of how we deliver our learning. (Megan)

Ruby also shared how, as the classroom teacher, it had been her job to ensure that no one's access was interrupted by anyone else. Ruby talked about how this related to even the most basic of daily activities, including how children played with one another:

Certainly, I think about the right to learn in a safe environment. And not only safe but an inspiring, empowering environment. All students have the right to equity, to getting what they need to have access to a high-quality education. So, all students have that right, regardless of where they're coming from, or their families, or their background, or their language, or their abilities. I think about the rights within a classroom, so the democracy of the classroom and who has the right to make decisions, who has a right to have a voice, and what all students can do. And that if you see a student's right being taken away, it's my job to see that, to notice it, and then to empower others in my class to also notice it and then do something about it. So, it could be as small a child is being shunned in a game or excluded in a game, or teased or made fun of, or called a name. Well, that student has a right to be involved, to be included. How do we ensure that they have that right? Through offering all the kids in my classrooms tools to include, involve, and empower. (Ruby)

And to Jay, access meant reading, and specifically reading on grade level as a right of being a student in her first-grade classroom:

I think as a classroom teacher, I first just believe that all my children are children and

love them. [I] have high expectations for them, and a focus on making sure that they

could read before they left me. (Jay)

Although access meant different things to these educators, it overall meant young

children having opportunity and equity as a right when entering the school space. Along with

access was the belief that each student should be loved and cared for enough by the teacher to

stand up for their right to access.

Feeling loved and cared for. This theme emerged as participants described what it

meant for them to have had human-to-human connections with their students. The educators

named feelings of care and belonging as crucial to a child's experience in school, and therefore a

right. Patricia described how this notion of being loved and cared for had been lost in the goal of

getting students to be successful, and how we should pay more attention to students' basic needs:

Well, I mean, I think every student has the right to be well, to feel cared for, to feel loved,

to feel humanized, and to be nurtured. When it comes to schooling, I feel like we do a

very poor job at doing that particularly with young people, because we've kind of moved

to this place of obsessing so much about standards and how much a student should know

at a particular grade level, that we sometimes forget their basic needs. Again, like you

said, in the words that you're using, the right to having a space to feel cared for. (Patricia)

Jay also confirmed this instinct to love children as children and humans and to take care

of them as we would want others to take care of us:

It's so funny, because I just feel like so much of what I did as a teacher is just closely

aligned with who I am as a person and what I would want for myself as a child. And

everything is just rooted in authentic love . . . . Well, I think all children should be loved and cared for. I think all children have the right to be happy and have fun and be children. I think that influences my work because I try to push for kids to be loved, like truly, and seen as children, particularly children of color. I think the world pushes our kids to be grown fast and sees them as adults faster than they actually are. Therefore, I push for us to continue to remember that all of our kids are kids. That means that they can make mistakes. That means that we should love them regardless. That means that they should be learning, not just academics, but the values and things that we hope for them to learn. Like we're okay with them learning them; we don't expect them to already be adults. So yeah, I guess that part of that then is I view children to be able to make mistakes. All children. (Jay)

Priscilla extended this feeling of love and care not only to her students, but also to their parents. For her, vulnerability and reliability had been two ways of showing her kids and their families how much she cared:

Just being there, and I think those opportunities when they're hurt or they need my help, being there so that they know that I'm available and they trust that I will take care of them and they're safe when they're under my care. With the parents, same thing. We talk to them and we tell them they're our partners in this whole thing. Allowing yourself to be a little vulnerable in the beginning and asking them questions first rather than you saying, "This is what we're gonna [*sic*] do and this is what we expect," because they know their children the best. (Priscilla)

Feeling loved and cared for, along with being respected and presented with access and opportunities were all parts of the beliefs that the educators in this study expressed about the rights of young children. The inherent and undeniable rights children had, in turn, informed the participants' beliefs about the image of the child.

Beliefs about the Image of the Child

When asked about their image of the child, or adjectives they would use to describe young children, the participants in this study conjured images of the child as both curious and capable. Although other adjectives were brought to mind, these two themes—curious and capable—were highlighted as the most significant descriptions.

Curious. The concept of curiosity, of being a seeker of knowledge and understanding was mentioned a number of times as what these teachers thought of when thinking of young children. Maryam described this curiosity as "question askers" and shared her perspective on how this changed as children got older:

> Wondering, and asking questions, and curiosity, and openness, and the younger they are, the better they are at that. It's a little bit scary, actually, to see kids as they get older, how quickly they learn which questions they are supposed to ask or not supposed to ask, to watch them start to bury the questions, or be ashamed of the questions, or judge themselves, when I don't think you can learn if you're not asking questions. I think of question askers. (Maryam)

Jay also shared this understanding of curiosity as children who were working to figure things out:

As someone who wants to learn, and someone who is striving to be just happy. They're

trying to figure it out. They don't know yet, but that's really what they want. (Jay)

Megan described the curiosity of young children as a way of figuring out who they were

as people:

I see every child who's being called perfect and complete as being intelligent, as being

curious, and you just have to find those right motivators that want to inspire them to

continue to explore the world around them and who they are, who they are as people, or

who they're becoming as little people, right? (Megan)

Ziggy could also see the curiosity of young children, and explained with excitement how

she loved to watch them explore the world around them trying to see things through their eyes:

The image of the child, I mean they're just little scientists. To me they're just so

fascinating, and I think when you really see a child as who they are, you understand that

their behaviors are just part of their exploration. They are in their purest form right now.

They're honest, they're open, and they just want to have that space to be able to express

those feelings, and there are so many big feelings, and it's just so raw right now and I just

love it. Every time I'm with them in a room I'm so curious to know like, what they're

thinking and how they're thinking it, and just really understanding how they function.

Sometimes I'll just sit in the classroom and I'll just watch, and just watching there's so

much you learn from their habits to what they want to do and how they feel about things.

(Ziggy)

Such notions of children as curious beings had supported these educators in creating

spaces that allowed for exploration and provocation. This also meant that educators had had to be

able to assess the capability of the child so that they could trust in each child's learning process and give up the need to control each moment of the learning day.

Capable. The participants' images of the child as capable were tied to the child as self-sustaining and that, although the educator was in the room to facilitate the learning, the child could do the learning without being directed to do so. The educators who described children as capable did so by speaking about how they had seen students learning and growing without much assistance other than the nurturing and support of the caring adult in the space. Nathalia described her understanding of children as whole people, who already had everything they needed to be successful:

> To me, it means that kids come into the world with the tools that they need to become themselves. To become human. As educators, if we see them that way, as having those tools and that competence and that innate curiosity and intelligence, we're working with them in a very different way than if we see them being deficient. That they're these empty vessels for us to fill up or that there's innately something wrong with them that we need to correct. My first ten years of teaching or so, we talked about it as that basic goodness —that we see the children as complete and whole and ready to learn and grow in the ways that they need to. (Nathalia)

This capability also rang true for Priscilla, who understood her role in fostering that capability as "partners in the journey," allowing children the freedom to learn for themselves:

> I would say it's, for one, to give like a lot of empowerment to the child and seeing them as capable of being able to do anything. And our role as educators is to foster that independence and sense of willingness to be able to do things on their own. Seeing the

child as a whole and taking into account all the different backgrounds and experiences

that the child may have had, and how that comes into a larger component when you think

of the classroom and the community that you build in your school. The main thing is just

seeing them as capable beings and giving them the voice, the tools, and the power to do

what they need to do. . . . When you realize that your job as the teacher is not really to be

the person in the front of the classroom, directing everything. That's when you have that

ah-ha moment of this is really what my role is, to be this: a partner in their journey and to

investigate with them. At the same time, you're learning with them. Just having that kind

of attitude about they're capable. They're competent. I can give them tool that they need

to do really well. That's when you're really giving them everything that they need and

you're seeing them as competent people. (Priscilla)

Seeing herself as a partner in the work, Priscilla had been able to relinquish control and create

new opportunities for students to learn through trusting each other and the process.

Similarly, Patricia reflected on how she had identified with children both as her own past

and saw them as our collective future. As a partner in this sense, she had worked to understand

her students' needs in order to make available the tools they would need to help build a better

future for all of us:

I think when it comes to working with young people, when I view the child, I see them as

myself as a younger person, and I remember what I needed at that particular stage in my

development. I see them as someone who, you know, may have all the potential, and

love, and power in the world, but because of particular circumstances may not be able to

exercise that power or show that power in certain settings. I look to see: what do those

particular students kind of need in order to flourish? Some students need, you know, space and time to exercise creativity. Maybe, you know, time to just engage in art while somebody else might need actual physical attention. And being on the spot, I see every student as [a] willing learner. I see them as students, or people that need the same love and affection that I need in order to feel well. I see them as young people flourishing into soon to be adults that I'm going to be completely dependent upon. I kind of operate in that way, of like, "What do I want the future generation to be like, and to kind of emanate as they grow older and as they participate in society?" (Patricia)

These images of the child as both curious and capable had helped these educators to understand both their power and acknowledge their position in the classroom space, in order to help meet the needs of all of their students and allow them to reach their full potential as people. For these educators, beliefs about the rights of young children and the image of the child were what had led them to reject the status quo and work towards more humanizing and liberatory learning spaces for young learners.

Rejecting the Status Quo

When speaking about rejecting the status quo, the educators in this study named their driving forces in doing so, spoke about the ways they negotiated state-mandated standards and institutionalized requirements, and described the ways in which they pushed others' thinking around these concepts.

Driving force. The driving force in rejecting the status quo had been what made each of the participants reject much of what they had been socialized to think about teaching and learning and to approach the realm of the classroom with a different lens that had sparked them

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to make things more special, engaging, or humanizing for the students they taught and served. When speaking about what had pushed her to reject the status quo, Ruby noted:

> Everything. Because the status quo of education, I feel, is so demeaning to children and so disconnected from the way the world works. Like, even the idea of making a line, like line up to walk to the bathroom. When do we do this in the world? Maybe when we line up to go into a busy store or something like that. Maybe when we line up in the movie theater. Do we ever walk in line? Except in the military, do you ever have to walk. . . . So this is what pushes me to not . . . these kind of things, these kind of not-real-world structures, that's one thing. Okay. Also, the idea of telling kids what they have to know and not understanding, respecting that they have knowledge. Back to what the status quo is, right? "Read this book, let me tell you what's important in it." And that doesn't develop any critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, communication skills, all those skills that everybody's like, "This is what we want our kids to graduate and have." The status quo doesn't teach any of that. And so, if I want to develop thinkers and communicators and empathetic humans, and all these skills that are really how you become successful in the world, and I've got to push against the status quo because . . . .Also, the status quo doesn't address relationships in the classroom, or what you're coming in with, or how your day's been up until you got there. Or what happened on the yard. It doesn't take into consideration a child's mental health or social-emotional development. And so, a lot of my push-back is around integrating social-emotional development into my students' learning. (Ruby)

For Ruby, the status quo meant teaching to unrealistic concepts of what it meant to be a real person in today's world. In her eyes, we should be teaching kids how to deal with real-world concepts that they would actually encounter as they continued to grow and develop. For Nathalia, it came down to engagement with the learning process:

I think it's just boring. It's not at all exciting to me. I think I knew pretty early on that being a traditional preschool teacher was not going to do it for me because it's boring. You're committing to a day of doing the same shit every day. Investing in things that don't matter that much, like clean-up time or behavior. Those things matter but that's not what you want to invest in. That's not holding a high image of the child or yourself. It's just getting through the day. That never even crossed my mind to sample that kind of education. I had been in schools and classrooms that did things that way. That could never work for me long-term. I would have gotten really bored. (Nathalia)

For Priscilla, understanding that every child was different, and every family was different had meant needing to be attentive to differences, in order to meet the needs of all children. She shared:

I think it's the fact that everyone's so different. Even though, there's a lot of cultural diversity in the school and we're lucky that we have that. Although there is not much diversity in the socioeconomic status of the families. Despite that, in this country, race is a huge factor of difference and diversity. That we have that diversity, it's like we can't just meet the needs of white American children. We have to meet the need of different families and their backgrounds and stuff like that. Also, taking into account my personal life experience and my background and that of my co-teacher. That's hard. You can just

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have a cookie-cutter thing for everyone. It meets the needs of all these children, their

temperaments, and taking into account what families and their expectations are.

(Priscilla)

Megan also spoke about rejecting the status quo as understanding differences and shared

how her work with adults had made her come back to working with young children in order to

help them to understand the world and its complexities.

It doesn't feel right. It intuitively feels broken and wrong, and it doesn't fill the need, the

cravings, the urges that most people, both kids and adults, are having right now. . . . I

think that even in terms of early ed., the de-prioritization of early ed in our state, budget

in general, in the federal conversation. . . . I'm really committed to dismantling the broken

system, like burning it down and creating something that works. . . . I was educating seat-

level executives, basically. I was educating 50-year-olds on cultural respect and

appreciation. That's when we came together with this idea to create an early ed. center

that would help achieve that mission. Basically, every kid that leaves here needs to know

you are a perfect, whole, complete being in your own world and you exist amongst a

whole bunch of other people that are gonna [*sic*] look like you and not look like you.

That's okay, and that's to be respected and not feared, and hopefully we'll raise a

generation of kids that don't continue to perpetuate the hatred and the ridiculous things

that we are experiencing in our current day. (Megan)

This understanding of differences also was apparent in Jay's reasons for rejecting the

status quo and as a way to affirm students of color as important and valued:

I feel every day as a person, I see where evidence of black children, brown children, not being loved. I felt that, and so that's not an option for me. Never has been. I didn't want that for myself, I don't want that for any children in general. But black and brown children in particular. . . . But if I keep it really simple and what I think is truly emancipatory, is helping kids achieve and be happy and love learning and love school every day. And the part of the loving school every day is trying to manage how racism and all of that stuff impacts our school. That's why I'm trying to manage it, right. Because I haven't truly figured out what an anti-racist school looks like but trying to manage that as much as possible. . . . That has always been important to me. Because why I hated school was because there was no me in school. Almost so that black people are not strength. Like being black was like . . . it's not a strength to leverage. Or my culture or my home life or whatever wasn't important and just kind of like an extra thing. I think that first and foremost, but I think more recently the idea around civic empowerment. That's like Meira Levinson; that's her research, but she talks about this idea of being culturally responsive is not enough if we're going to change the world. She says yes, students need to be affirmed. Yes, students need to be taught how to read. Like basic goals. They also need to be taught explicitly in civic engagement and a responsibility towards improving the community through structures that we have already as well as activism and . . . local government. Well, that's a structure we have. But you know, a responsibility to make your community better. Like instilling that and teaching it explicitly. (Jay)

For the participants in this study, moving from affirmation to action had meant teaching students about how to navigate the pitfalls in the world they would soon enter into on their own.

To do so had meant to find ways to negotiate what the state had expected and what schools had expected teachers to do with what the teachers really had wanted—for students to become critical thinkers and problem-solvers ready to take on the world.

Negotiating standards and requirements. The educators in this study had found ways to negotiate both the standards and their specific school requirements. Some of the educators, like Jay, had found standards as a useful tool in ensuring that all kids across the country would have access to the same learning targets.

I think they create a bar of excellence for all our kids. I think if I think about before there were standards, and the differences in terms of quality for our kids just based on lower expectations or what we think our kids are capable of, particularly black and brown kids. If I'm just leaving that up to humans and Americans socializing this country, I'm nervous about that. I'd rather have standards and we all try to achieve and reach that bar than not. (Jay)

This sentiment was also strong with Ruby, who had grown in her appreciation of standards and learning targets over time:

Well, when I first started teaching, I was in a private school where standards were not focused on. And I didn't really have an understanding. I think I had . . . like a looking down on the standards. Like teachers would bring up a standard, that's just something we had to follow and those dirty words, like "standard" was like a dirty word. And I've completely changed. Like, there's nothing wrong with standards. They are good. They're helpful. And I think I'm much better now in terms of planning. But integrating. I still need to find purpose for the standard. I still always push back on, I'm not going to teach

this skill without a purpose and a relevance and an authentic context. So, my thing is [to] take the standards [and ask] where are those standards used in the world? Teach it that way. So, I think how I've grown is a sort of respect for the standards and accountability. And also, assessments. I think in my private school sort of, I think assessments were also sort of a dirty word. And assessments guide instruction. Like, there can be high-quality assessments. There can be peer assessments. There can be self-assessments. And I don't think, I think I'm much better at creating assessments and then also differentiating based on the data. All of that is something I did not do at the beginning of teaching. (Ruby)

Ruby had been working on sharing her newfound appreciation of standards and how to make them work to their optimal potential with fellow educators:

I do work in a space where standards are important to teachers. And I also have been working with a lot more teachers lately. And one of the things that has come up is how we can support teachers in seeing where choice could exist within the framework of the standards. And part of that involves really having expertise around the standards and what they mean, so that when a child takes a project in a direction or takes learning in a direction, you know the standard so well that you actually can find the space to connect it. And so, one thing that I'm working on with teachers is that, "Okay, this is where your kids want to go, let's look at the standards and see where it might apply." And so, it does take a lot of skill and mastery of the content in order to do that. (Ruby)

Although early education has had no set state standards, there have been concepts and skills that early education centers have guaranteed to incoming families as part of the learning

curriculum. Nathalia described the way her early education center had incorporated kindergarten readiness with the work they already had been doing:

The Common Core, that's our floor, not our ceiling. We're assuming that kids are going to be able to meet those skills or standards. We're imagining that they can do much, much better. (Nathalia)

Respectively, in the independent school setting, a similar skillset or checklist might be offered at varying grade levels as well. Maryam explained how she had navigated these requirements with her overall goal of making sure her students were having authentic learning experiences:

We do have to check some boxes. I'm pretty creative. I can definitely find ways to fit everything into the standard if you force me to. I usually don't tend to think that way, and I'm lucky that I'm at a school that doesn't make me think that way. I hope that I spend enough time thinking about, "What's the experience of a child from the beginning of the year through the end of the year?" And think about, "What are the skills, and strategies, and content? What are things that that child learns and takes away?" Ultimately, I definitely think I'm rooted in just feeling like young people. . . . It's schools that ruins them. Oftentimes, sadly, they box us in. I kind of feel like if you're really letting kids explore, and use their voice, and try things out, and investigate things, you can't miss the standard. The standards, for the most part, fit what we do in life. The good ones, anyway. (Maryam)

The participants agreed that negotiating standards could be difficult at times especially for a new teacher. It could be hard within the milieu of decisions that needed to be made each

day to decide what to keep, what to cut, and what to emphasize. Patricia had learned how to do this through her years of experience in the classroom and through her decision to move past the standards and really understand the student experience:

> Well, I definitely think my first year, I was really obsessed with like, "Well, am I teaching the standards? Am I showing?" I was just like really scared. At the time, when I first started teaching, it was also the time of Open Court curriculum, which was scripted. Just, the standardization was real, you know? I think I was really paranoid about that aspect of teaching, and just making sure that I was checking on everything. I think once I started to realize, "This pendulum is always swinging. It's always something new. It's always." . . . Then, I kind of let go. I didn't feel so pressured to have to adhere to all of these stupid ass standards that . . . you know, yeah. I think that's one thing. I think now, it really has become more about the human. What is every one of my students' experiences like when they are in my presence? Do they feel seen with me? Do they feel safe? Those kinds of things are more important to me now. Not that they weren't important to me then. I just don't know that they were as prioritized over standards, because I was so traumatized, you know? Well, because I think once I realized that basically these standards are created by the very people that are perpetuating inequity in our schools. Then, to me, was like . . . I mean, obviously I use my good judgment on what skills students need at particular grade levels. . . . I'm going to, you know . . . but ultimately, I do know that all of these things are just arbitrary. You know? They're all just arbitrary, and they're part of the mechanism. Part of this kind of machine, those cogs, that kind of thing. It just takes a lot of that pressure off now. (Patricia)

No matter their setting, the educators in this study had found ways to embed the standards and requirements into the work they had done in the classroom by being creative and knowing their content. Although this process had taken time, it was possible, and it was surely worthy when thinking of the possibilities that it could offer in creating emancipatory teaching and learning spaces. This was why many of the educators in this study had set forth in pushing others' thinking in rejecting the status quo along with them sending ripples of resistance and counter-narratives to what teaching was and should be.

Pushing others' thinking. Rejecting the status quo was a great feat on its own but getting others to join the cause could be even more difficult. Due to the *vocationalization* of teaching, many people might think of teaching as a grab-and-go career. The teachers in this study had found ways to begin confronting this, however, by pushing the thinking of their colleagues. Maryam explained how she saw the dilemma rolling out:

> I find it's not generally lack of will but seems to me more. Either it's like hitting up against some external structure that they can't find a way to break out of, or really, in my school, there's not so much of that, but there's a little lack of imagination. Not in a bad way, but I can't imagine what it could be because I never saw it before. (Maryam)

Both Maryam and Ziggy recounted instances of teachers going to resources such as Pinterest or TeachersPayTeachers to look for ideas. Although these sites have offered creative projects, they often have not necessarily enhanced students' critical thinking abilities, but rather have provided them with a fun or engaging activity with limited depth but a clean and tidy finished product. In the early childhood setting, Ziggy explained her frustration with trying to get

others to step outside of their comfort zones and to embrace the autonomy they had had as a privilege to be utilized:

> I'm dealing with young teachers with very limited experience and just very limited insight on what it means to have that privilege to be able to create this space and knowing that it involves a lot more work on our part to be creative and to think outside the box. So, I feel like I'm kind of stuck in this space where I don't know how to inspire them to show them, "Hey, you have a chance to kind of develop something really beautiful with the kids, but you don't want to, and how do I get you to. . . ." (Ziggy)

In helping to facilitate professional development experiences with her colleagues, Ruby had also seen similar constraints:

> So, that's what is happening right now as I've come into the school and teachers. . . . I'm doing some professional development, and they're going, "Whoa, we're actually not doing project-based learning. We're actually, we're really struggling with this. We don't know how to do that." So, right now, that's where we're at. We're at a place of, we really want to do this type of teaching. We see the benefits, but we are scared because how do we keep control? How do I keep control of my curriculum? How do I keep control of the standards? How do I keep control of my class? How do I . . . it's a very diverse class, there's lots of diverse learners. How do we do that?. . . . And a lot of the times, the teachers will say. . . . Or they'll see a model project that I've done, and they'll be like, "It looks like you just followed the kids where they went." And I'm like, "Let me explain. Let me unpack what I actually did." So, it takes just a lot of, I think, very purposeful

coaching and really talking to those teachers about what they're looking for and how you

can support them. (Ruby)

By taking opportunities to dialogue with other educators, these participants had been

working eagerly to reject the status quo as a collective means towards education as a liberatory

practice. All of the educators' experiences in developing their critical consciousness, as well as

their beliefs about the rights of young children and the image of the child and their active

determination to reject the status quo had allowed them to move towards liberatory practices

within their locus of control: their classrooms and school settings. It had been here that they

could see the true meaning of emancipatory teaching and learning brought to life.

Pedagogy and Liberatory Practices

The educators in this study all self-identified different ways in which they had employed

liberatory practices in their work with young children. The three most relevant themes presented

in the review of literature included opportunities for meaning-making, listening, and student

voice. Within each of these a priori themes, new themes emerged building the richness of each

practice with more meaningful and illustrative examples.

Meaning-Making in the Classroom

The themes of identity formation and building community emerged within the umbrella

of meaning-making and offered great insight into how the strategic choices these liberatory

educators had made had created a deeper sense of self and the world for their students as well as

greater opportunities to learn within these spaces.

Identity formation. Identity formation as part of meaning-making meant that through

classroom experiences and purposeful exposure, students had been given opportunities to better

understand themselves, their cultures, their strengths, and their needs. Through the inclusion of different opportunities to validate and affirm, these educators had supported students in learning more about themselves. As Maryam described, her own lack of identity formation growing up had taught her that she needed to include more of those opportunities in her work with her students:

> It was [at a graduate school for education on the East Coast], and they had a school for children, and I got to practice while I was in graduate school. They had incredible mentor teachers there. Somewhere in that journey, there was also this piece of learning about myself and learning about identity that was a miss in my own education, in my own growing up in my family, where I was not taught. . . . I was raised in a kind of colorblind, open-minded, liberal, progressive kind of world, but with the clear message of the typical folks in power that were like, "You don't talk about the differences." I knew that was missing, but I couldn't put my finger on it until I had a transformative experience in college, in my junior year, that definitely has driven me to say that I feel like it is every teacher's duty to make sure that every child grows up seeing themselves reflected in whatever way is possible, and having language for their own identity, being invited to ask questions about themselves and about other people. Kind of moving to color consciousness instead of colorblindness as an approach. (Maryam)

She further stated in the discussion of identity in the focus group,

> Whatever your identity is, I think there's this piece to me where I feel like we have this great privilege as teachers to bring all kinds of conversations to the surface that our society has taught us to not talk about. (Maryam)

For learning about self-identity with her young preschool students, Priscilla described the use of self-portraits to highlight each unique child:

In the first few months we did a self-identity piece. We did it across all six classrooms, so every classroom did their own version of an identity piece and that was pretty neat. We used loose parts in our fork, so basically random pieces of rocks and corks and feathers and things like that. And the kids did a self-portrait using those pieces. That was a thing. First, they were in here for a month or two, so they were still learning how to navigate the classroom. And then most of them didn't have a lot of language to, or the skills to draw. It was really nice to see how even the little boy who didn't speak any English was able to do it and it looked like himself. Some of them would describe, "I can use these pieces for my eyes because they're round. "Or, "I can use a feather for my hair." Things like that. That was pretty neat. And that piece stayed up for the whole year, the documentation. They began to notice things like, "I have a freckle on my cheek so I should put a little bead for my freckle." Yeah, they were looking at mirrors. One little guy, I have a picture of a little girl scrunching her nose and she . . . things that they were oblivious to or didn't ever really pay attention to, and then started noticing things. This time around, I think it would be nice to also have the teachers do something like that. So, we can also be represented in our work because we're also a very important part of the community, as well. I think that was a nice piece to do and it was pretty sweet to see. . . . It would have been nice to have done a second round or two of that kind of piece and see how it would have changed from the first time we did it. (Priscilla)

Megan also described how she and her early education center had created space for children to talk about their identities and share with each other, particularly in a community with so much diversity:

There are a lot of children of color. We are a very diverse school, and what we realize is also like I'm mixed, so my mom is white, my dad is black. I was born abroad. So, what we found is 30% of our families are actually Momma's Indian, Dad is Cambodian, Mom is white, Dad is black. We get a lot of mixed-race families, and because they get that, we get that identity development is so important. Sometimes, when you're raised a mixed kid, you feel like you have to choose or you have to dishonor a certain part of your heritage. Then there are a lot of parents that, if you're a white mom raising a brown kid and you don't even know what that feels like, they feel a little lost, so it's become a community of support, I think, for people with mixed race families, or different backgrounds even, just to honor Momma's Jewish, Daddy's Catholic, how does that work? . . . Yeah. Like I said, the first whole month of every year is spent honoring who they are, what they come with. We invite parents to come in and read a story that's important to their family, do a cooking class with the kids of their favorite food. We use holidays as any excuse to throw a party. (Megan)

When discussing this issue, Jay felt that making her students' identities visible had been critical in the process of affirmation:

I think in addition to that, making sure that they see themselves as beautiful, powerful people. Whatever I could do to do that. If that means reading stories, if that means watching videos, talking about our histories, talking about. . . . Just having pictures of

people of color on the wall, talking about how Barack Obama got elected. Making sure to talk about why that's so important with my kiddos. Just . . . making them visible or helping them to see that they are great. And not invisible. And just encouraging others to do the same. Other teachers. (Jay)

Jay also had talked about her own identity with her students and had shared how this had impacted her work with first graders:

Yeah, and just listening. And not shutting kids down when it's time to talk about . . . making that space available and talking about it. Like, "Hey, I'm black. This is important to me because I'm black." Or "I'm black, so that offends me when you say that. Not because it just hurts my feelings, but because I am black and proud of it, it offends me when you say that." When I'm talking to my first graders, you know, I'm talking to you about why it's so important that we go vote in November, because of this. Because of my history and why it's important to me at least. Why it's important to me that I wear my hair big, and why your hair is beautiful. Why I say that to you every day in the morning. I don't know. I think it's just all the time being aware of language that validates and affirms rather than closes doors. (Jay)

For Patricia, this affirmation showed up not only when talking about students' cultural identities but also about their identities as learners. She explained how having had continual disappointment in the process of learning could make a young learner feel stuck. She had set up multiple different opportunities for students so they could feel success as learners in different contexts and to ensure that all of her students felt motivated to continue feeling that same level of success:

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I think having the opportunity to kind of engage with your learning at your own level and pace is really important. For example, creating activities for them to always feel capable, I think, is really important. If all they're doing is whole group instruction, let's say around a particular math lesson, and they notice that they can't do what their peers can do, those kinds of small moments really stick out to them as feeling like they're not capable, that it's not smart, or whatever else. I think, for me, it's like the goal is to try to set up learning stations or opportunities for them to master what they do well, so that they can feel well and also build a really strong identity as they get ready to leave my classroom and go to first grade. (Patricia)

For these educators, identity formation was not only seen as helping individual students learn more about themselves, but it also supported the meaning-making process of building community and solidarity with others.

Building community. The educators in this study considered building community to be related to meaning-making because when we learn about others, we learn more about the world and who we are within it. As students had spent time building community, they had come to trust those around them to support them in their journey of learning and growing. As such, these educators had created space for building community by allowing time for students to process their understanding of themselves and those around them in order to create more meaningful ties to the rest of the curriculum and the year. Ruby, for example, shared one of her ground rules for a successful year of teaching:

Teach children that people mean something to one another. So, anything, any interactions

that I have through my teachings have to be around the idea that people mean something

to one another. (Ruby)

This was similar to Maryam's understanding that relationships needed to begin

developing from day one:

My big picture is we need to spend good time building community, and connecting as a

community, or nothing good can happen. We start there with community and connection.

We build in content, and whatever is the expectation of that. . . . I think content is

whatever. I think it's less about what you learn and more about how you learn. (Maryam)

Ziggy explained how this had looked in setting aside time for community building from

the start of the year:

Every September looks pretty much the same. We do our getting to know you month, so

that's the time when we bring parents in, we bring grandparents, families, so we can

really get to know, because our school year starts in September pretty much. So, we can

get to know our families. We love building community, so September is our month. We

do open house in September. We have potlucks, breakfast potlucks so the parents can

come with their children and we can get together, and they can get to know their teachers,

because it's hard during pickup and drop off, everyone's on their way to work, so it's like,

"Hey, good morning, we had a good night. Bye." So, we really want to build that sense of

community, so September is always the same. Then we do a peace curriculum that we

feel is just important to learn about. . . . So, from October to December it's just an added

piece to our curriculum. In the mornings they'll have mindfulness circles. They'll do little

activities throughout the day to just kind of reflect that and just being mindful of each

other, being peacemakers and just really being considerate of each other. (Ziggy)

In creating space for children to reflect on their relations with one another, notions of

classroom management, rules, and discipline could be replaced by more humanistic approaches

and norms and then working through them. Ruby explained why she always had taken time to

provide a rationale to her students:

I think giving them a reason why, so, really making them understand why I'm doing

things. That it's not just rules. That they've got a rationale. I personally hate rules with no

rationale, and I question them all the time. (Ruby)

Priscilla also described how the shift from punitive punishment to restorative practices

had helped her students focus on fixing the harm done rather than going through the motions of

artificial consequences:

But I think, for one, we're not shaming. We don't have to tell kids to say sorry for the first

thing. Kids don't understand what that means. They don't mean it, because they don't

know what it means. They're sure enough probably gonna [*sic*] do the same thing again.

What we've had here is when they do hurt someone or someone is not feeling too happy

about something that they've done, we have them check in with them and see how they're

doing. And then slowly we can start saying, "This person is really sad," or, "They're hurt,

and I know that because they're crying." Having them see the social cues and become

emotionally intelligent to know, "So and so is crying. I must have done something they

didn't like." The first few months, we would have them, we would facilitate the

conversation with them, but now they do it on their own. Once they see a teacher walk

by, they're already in the process of checking in. And they're like, "What do you need to

feel better?" We often have conversations of how. Is that the best way to do it? We

haven't asked, "Are you okay?" No. "What do you need to feel better?" And they'll say

like and icepack or a Band-Aid or a hug. And then they'll do it, so we're questioning, does

that really help? Or is that just an easy fix to get to the next thing? Is that really . . . we've

had this discussion with the teachers here and wondering, is that enough? (Priscilla)

Similarly, Nathalia shared how building community meant allowing children to help each

other, instead of looking to the adult in the space to always lead the way:

I think, it's interesting. This past year we had a child who was non-verbal for the majority

As a teacher I talked a lot about kids being experts in things. That's something that we

talk about here, too. We're always pointing the children toward each other in terms of

their learning experiences rather than us teaching them things. Even things as simple as

"You're having trouble opening that cheese stick. You know who is really good at that?

Why don't you ask so-and-so and she can show you how she does it?" The pole outside.

"I noticed that Javier figured that out the other day. Maybe he can show you how he went

down the pole." (Nathalia)

Furthermore, building community meant allowing time for students to get to know each

other, even if they were different from each other and might not be readily able to dive into

sharing space together. Priscilla described how one of her young students had spent a long time

saying nothing before he had felt comfortable enough to begin verbalizing in his preschool class:

I think, it's interesting. This past year we had a child who was non-verbal for the majority

of the time and he only understood a few things in Russian. That experience is something

that put the light bulb on. You need to make sure that he's heard and seen and he's a part

of the community. That was the biggest thing. One of the biggest things that we did was

holding a space for him. When we would talk in a circle, even though he may not have

something to share or wasn't sure of what was going on in the conversation, we still held

a space for him. With time, he started speaking responding in English and we would hear

a lot of Russian. (Priscilla)

Priscilla's narrative reflected how holding space had become an authentic and genuine

way of allowing a child to be seen and, if they chose, heard. Patricia had had the opportunity to

provide this space as well, but for her it had occurred by having each of her kindergarten students

buddy up with a sixth grader from the same campus. She shared how these experiences had

allowed each of her students to have individualized attention and space to be heard and seen:

Another thing that I do with young folks is they have the sixth-grade buddies, where

during the school year, they basically build a relationship with a sixth-grade buddy every

single week once a week, and through that, they get to learn on their own terms through

that one on one kind of care. For me, primarily, it's really for them to build relationships,

because a lot of these young ones in particular, the kindergartners are always kept away

from the older students, especially in the afterschool programs, and things like that. I also

know that many of these young people would love to have an older sibling, or just an

older young person to kind of help guide them, or you know, just to be their friend. They

love that kind of stuff. I think just trying to build as much relationships as possible is

really important to me. (Patricia)

Reading the word and reading the world. As teachers of young learners, the

participants in this study had worked to teach both the reading of the word and reading of the

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world to their students in ways that had supported them in making meaning and understanding for themselves as young people. As teachers, supporting the building of knowledge meant rolling things out bit by bit and allowing students the time and space to explore for themselves. Priscilla shared how this had looked in her preschool classroom:

Basically, just knowing when the kids are ready to do things. Allowing them to . . . first, we introduce the materials. Like, if we're gonna [*sic*] talk about clay, "This is clay, kids. Touch it, feel it. This is what you can do with it." How it works and stuff like that. First, it's introductory, just clay itself, and then it's clay and water. And then clay and maybe a rolling pin or something like that. It's a slow process and then once we know that the kids really can do it, then we just full-force give them whatever we have to. (Priscilla)

Making meaning and understanding through reading the word and the world might seem rather simple, but in many situations, complex concepts could be explored by allowing students the opportunity to see things from different perspectives. Maryam shared how she had helped students read the world by utilizing aspects of systems thinking:

I think it was the first year that I started doing systems thinking work. It was when I was teaching K, one, two, and then I moved the second year into a straight second grade. We had some really great professional development around what it means to be a systems thinker, and how to help young children think systemically. I had a blast thinking about how to do that work, like invite young people into that work, in a really . . . yeah, mind-freeing, open-bodied, playful way. I feel like I got to see their minds kind of go and make all these connections, but then also, I got to create a lot of things that they could do with their bodies, where they could show what a system was in their body. . . . Maybe you've

used the yarn ball and tossed it across the circle. I had done that before as a connecting

activity. As systems thinkers, we started talking about how . . . and I was inspired by

another teacher, a workshop I went to many years ago, where she had us pass a ball of

yarn around the outside of the circle and talked about how, as we tugged from one person

to the next, how this was a linear system. I tugged, and it impacted the person next to me,

and then the person next to them. Then we tossed the ball around, and somebody tugged,

and surprisingly, the person across felt, but other random people in the circle felt it,

because you could see that they were connected, but you couldn't see the connections.

She described that as a complex system. . . . I did activities like that, where we explored

what it meant to be connected, without always seeing the connections, or without them

being so obvious. We explored what individual action could do, and we used a lot of

physical ways to show that, and what individual action could do inside a system. For

example, I came up with this one activity where I said to the kids, I had a little djembe

drum, and I said, "Okay, right now, the djembe drum is here, on this side of the room,

and we have a task. As a group, we're going to line up one at a time. We're going to line

up and get the djembe drum from this side of the room to the other side of the room, but

everyone is going to be part of a system where you have to pass, or roll, or push, or

maneuver the djembe drum in a different way. It has to be a way that you can do

consistently, that you could do over again, kind of like a machine." (Maryam)

From this experience, Maryam's students had been able to better understand the

interconnectivity that we as people share. They had been able to tangibly understand connection

and teamwork and they had found ways to problem solve as a unit. This was also apparent in

Maryam's reflections regarding the doll stories she had used with her young students to solve conflicts she had noticed arising with her students:

I credit Louise Derman-Sparks [for] the persona dolls, and her work from a long time ago. My colleague, who I worked with, who created these stories around these little dolls she had, and then really, what was impactful for me was trying to solve . . . it was like a problem solving, trying to solve a problem that was present in my K, one, two classroom where there was some pretty targeted bullying behavior from the older girls towards a younger girl, and I was looking for some way to address it, and ended up creating these doll stories using whatever I happened to find. You know, some blocks, some unit blocks, and putting photographs on them that showed different kinds of people, and very quickly, this turned into my K, one, two version of my people study that I started so many years prior in my other school, where I connected those dolls to GroundSpark Films, the four square model, where we're asking young people to think about the choices that human beings have around the behaviors that they. . . I use the language, try on. When do we choose to try on aggressive behavior, unfriendly behavior, that can lead to bully behavior if it's repetitive and targeted? When do we become allies, and advocates, and upstanders? When do we try on that behavior? When do we just stand by and watch, and become a bystander? When are we put in this position of target, and when we are targeted, or threatened, or oppressed, or put down? What are our choices then, and what can we do? This model, I loved, because in the center of it was choice, and so I did a lot of work in that K, one, two, those five years really building, using storytelling as like a magical tool

to invite young people to come up with their own endings, think about how they

themselves deal with conflict, and how they think about themselves and others. (Maryam)

For the educators in this study, storytelling had worked as a powerful tool in teaching

students to both read the word and read the world. Through listening to a story and thinking

through the parts that each person had played, students had decoded meaning not only from the

words that they had been hearing, but how they had been working together in context. This

process was similar to what Patricia shared about how she used *read-alouds* in her classroom:

> I guess you can say when we're kind of doing read-alouds, [that] read-alouds are like a
>
> really important space for them to kind of make sense of world issues through the books.
>
> I do a combination, whenever any time I do read-alouds, it is always kind of the same
>
> routine where it is unpacking together with the whole group, but then also unpacking in
>
> partners, like doing think-pair-share. They have opportunities to kind of express their
>
> opinions and thoughts about what they're learning about within those stories with one
>
> another in that kind of way. . . . Yeah, I use the six elements of social justice framework[1]
>
> to plan out my units, and kind of the topics that we'll be covering. (Patricia)

Patricia also had utilized a print rich environment in order to support her kindergarteners

with reading the word:

> Things like with the reading, just because students can't read a particular level book,
>
> doesn't mean that they can't read environmental print, or other forms of literacy, or those
>
> kinds of practices. I try to think of those kind of things, like, "How can I set up spaces for

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[1]The six elements of social justice framework based on the work of Bree Picower (2012)
included (a) self-love and knowledge, (b) respect for others, (c) issues of social injustice, (d)
social movements and social change, (e) awareness raising, and (f) social action.

them if I know that they know particular words or scaffolds for them to go and practice those things at centers so that they can feel knowledgeable as they go to school, or whatever it is that they played during that time." (Patricia)

Creating opportunities for reading the word and better understanding the world also had meant really knowing your students and what they had needed on an individual basis. For Jay, this meant a focus on small group instruction so that she could support each of her students in reading the word as a pathway to greater opportunities and freedom:

But I think my love for small group instruction and meeting the needs of each of my children aligns and advances this idea around one, getting to know each of my kids individually, but two, giving them what they need to be successful with whatever the target is. Particularly around reading. Because I think, you know, I just imagine kids like adults, and thinking about if they're really going to have choice, what they really need right now to . . . be somebody who can navigate in our world and be free in our world. That just, I don't know, it makes it even important to me. . . . I just think that it truly is freedom. If you think about the opposite, right now if you're in LA and our kids can't read, then college is going to be impossible, or even a job that's going to allow them freedom to make choices, like very, very difficult. And just difficult to navigate the world in general. And, if I'm thinking about kids who are going to change our world, they got to be able to read, and write, and communicate effectively. And access ideas that won't be. . . . Access ideas beyond what's right in front of them, they have to be able to read at a pretty advanced level, you know? For them to be graduate students, for them to be

writers. I don't know. I just think it's a key, a gateway, to being happy. Just because I

don't know, I know very few counterexamples of this. (Jay)

The Hundred Languages—body, movement, and song. Although reading and verbal

expression are two common ways that students processed and built meaning about the world

around them, they are not the only ways. In understanding people's different learning styles, and

what the Reggio Emilia approach called the Hundred Languages of children, we could legitimize

the plethora of ways that students learned and expressed themselves. Through the use of

understanding the body, movement, and song, the educators in this study had legitimized the

Hundred Languages as part of the meaning-making process. Jay shared how she understood

students' nonverbal communication as part of their expression:

> I think kids tell us things outside of their words. As a teacher, I just try to get to know my
>
> students, but also give them opportunities to be fully themselves. (Jay)

> When describing one of her students who had not been ready yet to verbally

communicate, Priscilla explained how she had learned to understand them in different ways:

> I think just allowing the kids to, even if they can't verbalize something, ways of doing
>
> with either the physical movement or pointing. There's that book, *A Hundred*
>
> *Languages*. . . . Maybe through art we can see a lot of his work through art. Through the
>
> dramatic play. Just the interactions that he had with other children. (Priscilla)

Ruby also had utilized varying modalities of communication to support her students in

kindergarten:

> We do a lot of singing. A lot of my transitions are singing or movement games. A lot of
>
> brain breaks. You know, those kinds of things, like movement activities. We have in our

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classrooms, we have a peace corner which is a place where children . . . it's not like time-out, it's like, "I feel like I need to go there." So, it could be like self-regulation. I think that's a really good tool. The other things I've been doing a lot as far as culturally-responsive teaching practices are discussion protocols or attention signals, making sure that I'm not just, "Raise your hand.". . . What else can I do to get kids moving, talking to one another, especially kids who are ELL students or who need other means of communicating. I think just noticing them. (Ruby)

The use of song has been common in early education settings and it could truly be a beautiful way to support students in making meaning through a form of creative expression. Similar to Ruby, Maryam loved using song in the classroom with her young students:

I use a lot of song with students, with any and all ages. Certainly, with the little ones. We use song, and poetry, and oftentimes things that they created themselves to just experience joy, togetherness, community, and just kind of the freedom of singing together, you know? (Maryam)

Listening in the Classroom

Listening was a concept that seemed much simpler than it really was. To truly listen in the classroom, the teachers in this study had worked to strip away a sense of being the omnipotent keeper of knowledge. As noted above, they had attempted to listen deeply to students and show genuine care for their thoughts as equal people as they had moved into the role of partnering with their students in the quest for knowledge. This could be quite difficult, but when mastered, teachers here noted that it could offer fantastic advantage to both students and teachers in creating the space for dialogue.

Listening as caring. When thinking about listening in the classroom, the first instinct has been to think about the listening taking place around academic content. Are students understanding what is being taught, and how can we support them in understanding better? However, truly listening in the classroom, as participants noted, should first begin from a place of authentic love and caring. An emancipatory experience should begin first with the student as a human being who deserves to be heard. Ruby shared how listening had been tantamount to showing care and building relationships with students:

> When I observe teachers that come from more traditional backgrounds, I just want to say to them, "Listen and respond. Don't shove it under the rug what that kid just said." And you can't always do it, and I know that. . . . I think it's so much about listening and responding as opposed to just plowing through what your agenda is. . . . It's just two words. It's about listening and relationships. And aside from that, that's kind of all it is. If you boil down teaching, because if you listen, you can respond, and you can teach what you want to convey. And if you build relationships, you're gonna [*sic*] build trust with those students, even those really challenging students—students who sometimes present as having difficulties and challenges. When children trust you, your relationship changes. And, therefore, the learning changes. . . . Mostly it's hearing their questions or seeing when they're sad or not being like, "Just stop crying and get to work." It's noticing when they're frustrated doing an academic task**.** So not separating SEL from the academics but realizing that when a child has to confront something new or challenging, emotions come into play. And if I don't address those and give them space, they're never going to learn. They're not gonna [*sic*] be in a place to learn the academics. (Ruby)

In responding to this topic, Priscilla explained how listening was also tied in with allowing students to have their rights respected:

Allowing them . . . to give them those rights that everyone deserves and to be heard, and to be seen, and to have control in their learning. For me, as a teacher, it means that I have to step back from a position of leadership and just let them take their own direction into what ways they want to learn. I'm just there to facilitate that. (Priscilla).

Maryam also shared how teachers who truly listened to children should make it evident in the full use of their body language:

One of my kind of mentor colleague friends, she was a teacher, a K, one, two teacher, and one of the things that she taught me is that . . . I don't know, I remember her . . . basically, when a young child started talking, she would just bend down and be at eye level with them and listen so deeply to what they were saying [that] you felt like there was nobody else in the world. (Maryam)

Similarly, for Ziggy, listening to children meant fully immersing in the child's world and allowing herself to understand even the things that went unsaid:

I think for me, since the beginning, it's always been very important to give them a voice to understand that it's okay for you to express what you're feeling. I know in the past different programs that I've worked for, especially when I was working for [another preschool] I feel like I've heard a lot of teachers say, "You don't tell me no." And it just hurts my core to hear people talk to children that way, and to have that authoritative, very traditional, structured teacher that [says], "I'm the leader in this room, and you have to do what I say." So, I'm just very conscious of making sure that I understand every child's

personality. Even if you are a quiet child, that I can be there to help you model the language that you need in order for you to be able to advocate for yourself. To know that your opinion matters, even though you're quiet and even though you go with the flow, I want to make sure that you have a voice in what you're doing, and that you don't have to always agree with whatever your other friend wants you to do. (Ziggy)

Through the various ways in which these educators had shown care through their listening, they had been able to create spaces that allowed children to more fully express themselves. This space for expression also had been connected to allowing children to feel more at home and in charge in the school setting, further allowing them the freedom to learn and grow in meaningful ways.

Teacher as researcher. By taking on the role of teacher as researcher, the educators in this study had put trust in the children's hands and allowed the children to be masters of their learning. Meanwhile, the teacher-researcher would study their path and offer suggestions for further exploration. Megan shared how this teacher-as-researcher role had been vital to providing child-led experiences in early childhood education:

I think it starts with alignment, right, and the teachers knowing that they're here to facilitate learning and not deliver it, right? That's something that comes easier to some than others, and it's something that must be practiced if you're not well versed in it. I think, too, just the fact that we're not curriculum-driven, that we're not like, "This is the book and you have to follow the book." It gives the teachers a lot of flexibility to really drive what they're exploring and to be autonomous in making those choices as a community, in the classroom, right? It doesn't require them to do or study what they

aren't interested in. . . . My personal philosophy is that I don't wanna [*sic*] take anybody

else's idea and impose it upon our kids. Our kids can dictate and should dictate what their

needs are and then we should find ways to support meeting those needs, so that's why we

take the best out of everything. (Megan)

Ruby also shared how allowing the children to set the course could lead to incredible, and

often unexpected, results:

The whole idea of project-based learning, which is connected with my vision of a child.

This idea that children are capable and can think critically and can problem-solve. And to

drive their own learning and they can ask their own questions and then your answers.

That's all progressive education, but I know that it's connected to Reggio, too, because

any time I attended a Reggio training or observed pre-school, it's the same idea.

Following the questions and seeing where they lead and designing projects around those.

And also valuing their children's experiences. So, walking into a room and going, "You

guys have knowledge. You're four, but you have a lot of knowledge. What is that? Where

is that?" And that's just at the core of my teaching. I always like stuff that's very . . . like

when people ask me what my fundamentals of teaching are. . . . I have like five things

that I like to say. One of them is, a child asks you a question and your first response

should be, "What do you think?" And you know, I say this to parents, especially of young

children, and they're just like, "What? I can't answer their questions?" And I think that

underlies everything that I do. . . . Because every year I start a project and I'm like, "I

don't know where this is gonna [*sic*] go." And every year, it goes somewhere incredible

and amazing; and it's because of that. (Ruby)

Ruby also shared an inspiring example of unexpected results experienced with her students:

So, for example, last year the driving question was around, "How can we take care of our environment and inspire other people to help us?" And so that was our driving question. And the kids came up with. . . . I mean, I structure the project. I'm not saying, it's not like "Just do whatever you want." I structure it. But what happens is inevitably something happens that surprises me that leads us in a different direction. And if you follow it, it turns into something amazing. . . . So, with that project, I did not think about this. They came up with jobs to take care of the environment, we did work teams. And then someone was thinking about tools. She was like, "Oh, I wish I had this room to do my job." Now, you have to listen, right, and capitalize on it. But I was like said, "Oh you want to have tools? Let's design some tools. Maybe it isn't a tool that exists, maybe you guys want to design tools." Now, that wasn't part of my project design. So, a whole component of the project became designing a prototype, building it, presenting it, getting feedback. So that came from the students. So how my vision of them changes is because when I do these projects, they come up with these ideas that lead the project in a way that I didn't anticipate or plan for. That ends up being incredible. And so, what I learn is that I can trust them, they have so much capability and so much intellect. . . . Yeah. It's very inspiring to me. (Ruby)

Following children's interests can be a learning experience for both the teacher and the students. Ziggy shared how their center's garden had grown from the interests and experiences of the children:

So, we are child-led, so depending on the children's interests. We're really interested in the garden, because we have a garden here. So, we're actually developing a farmers' market study that we're going to do this year, because they just love to spend time in there and we talk about all the veggies we grow. We talk about what's in season and what we can plant and what we can harvest. (Ziggy)

This work of following curiosities meant being readily adaptable and this could often take the minds and hands of many teachers working together. Nathalia shared how the teachers at her school all had worked together to create opportunities for exploration with their students' interests in mind:

The emergent piece in terms of watching what they do, that's interesting. How can I scaffold that and make that more interesting? . . . How can I add my two cents to that? Hopefully, build upon it so that they will be inspired and continue their work and continue to make something bigger and more interesting than I would have thought of. . . That's where the observation comes in. I meet with each of the teams once a week. They might be like "We noticed a lot of our kids are making paper airplanes. They seem to be interested how to make the one that goes the furthest." "Okay. Let's organize that into a small group investigation." . . . That's where their responsibility lies. It's a lot for [teachers] to plan and organize for four groups versus one whole group. "As a class we're going to make a restaurant." (Nathalia)

Being a researcher meant documenting the journey in order to figure out where the next steps of the journey might lead. Many of the educators in this study shared the different ways

they had utilized documentation in the process of listening and researching. Maryam shared how her process of documentation had evolved over the years in her classroom:

> Well, I wish I was better at it. I mean, one thing that I learned [in my graduate program] was that you need to consistently document what students are thinking and put it on paper. Every . . . classroom is full of writing that reflected what kids were saying. On chart paper, all over the classroom. That's just what we did. That kind of documentation, that's where I learned. . . . Those were my first teaching years, so I didn't know how to do anything other than that. That's like documentation of thinking, and conversations we're having. Documenting the process of a project, or even documenting pieces of a conversation using some children's words, that felt new to me. . . . I loved it. I was like, "Oh man. I wish I had somebody that I could just have come around with me all day." It was a little bit overwhelming, thinking like, "I can't do that." . . . I definitely started being more conscious about it, and especially when I taught in K, one, two, and in the straight second grade, I was very aware of wanting to have nothing on the wall that was not clearly . . . where the process wasn't explained. I really loved that. (Maryam)

Documenting as part of researching and planning for learning content had been an important part of listening to children as they were learning in school. Priscilla shared how her center had extended this documentation to strengthening the home-school connection:

> Documentation, there's [*sic*] different ways that we do it here. For one, we document on large panels the work with small groups or a certain project that we've done. Every day we jot down things on a piece of paper, a *Planned Possibilities* paper; who the child is, what they were doing, maybe quotes of the children. That way we can keep a record of

the work that they've been doing, and we can see like, "So and so has been working in this area for some days now so maybe we can add more materials or invite someone else to come and join them." Daily, we send out stories of the day to the parents so the families can know what's going on, what the children are working on. Also, a conversation starter for when they go home. They can say like, "I heard that you were painting with water colors today. What was that like?" Then we also do individual pages of the kids and their work for their portfolio. We also have something called community panels, or community pages. That is just ways of bringing in community stuff related to, like maybe someone helped you open up a lunch container when you couldn't do it. Or we had a few where someone's sad and a friend comes to comfort them, and stuff like that. That lives in the classroom and is visible for the children, it's at their reach so that they can see it. And there's [*sic*] images there. . . . Yeah, we take pictures. So, when the kids ask, we can retell the story or remind them, "Remember when this happened? So, and so was feeling sad and this person came and comforted them." So, we share the story again. The documentation is accessible to them. It's reflecting their work and . . . past and present. . . . This last year we tried keeping most of it up and just added more and more. It always lived in the classroom. When it's something in the beginning of the year. . . . We're trying to, this year, do some of the same work in different time periods to see progress of how things have gotten different or stuff like that. We save most of it in their portfolios; so, it's kind of like a progressive thing that the parents get at the end of the year and can see all of their work. (Priscilla)

The participants in this study all confirmed that an effective emancipatory teacher should listen to both show love and care and also to support young learners in the learning process. By listening to their students, these educators had created space for student voices to flourish.

Student Voice

Participant narratives asserted that when students had felt secure in their ability to express themselves within their classroom spaces, they had been more apt to use their voices as an active part of a democratic education. By having choice within the classroom setting, the teachers noted that students had felt fully in the reins of their journey through schooling.

Choice. In large part within the school setting, participants considered choice as power. Extending their students choice in the daily happenings, the teachers here felt they had been giving children power to choose how their day might go. Instead of mandating certain things for all, choice had allowed children to receive what they had needed. Choice here had come in the shape of choosing the seating arrangement, the learning activity, and ways students wanted to show their learning, among other things. Ruby and Maryam shared how they had allowed students to make choices about seating that were best for them:

I'll give you an example. Seating choices. Kids, four to five. I am a firm believer in giving kids a choice of where to sit. I don't want someone to tell me where to sit. This is a good example of, like, they're a human being, right? However, are they able to make a good choice so that they could be in the classroom and learn and allow others to learn? They need scaffolding, right? They need support. So, I'm gonna [*sic*] help them do that. So, the way I do that is I, "Okay, I'm gonna [*sic*] give you a chance. You guys make your choice. You guys make a choice. Where do you think you're gonna [*sic*] do your best

learning? Your best thinking? If it doesn't work out, I'm gonna [*sic*] help you make that choice." (Ruby)

Maryam added:

It's interesting though, to me because I think the best teaching actually offers a space where everyone actually can gravitate towards their best learning, like you need to sit in the front, go ahead, sit in the front, there's no front here. You need to move a lot, great, don't sit down, nobody here is asking you to. Whatever the thing is. (Maryam)

Choice also could mean choosing how to spend one's time while at school. By these teachers creating open centers with different choices, their young students had been able to engage in learning activities that they had found to be most engaging or beneficial to their learning. Nathalia explained it in this way:

For them to decide whether they wanted to spend time in the communication center or whether they wanted to spend time in the construction area. Maybe over days and weeks choose the same thing. Maybe sample the classroom for a while, until they settle into something interesting. (Nathalia)

Priscilla also shared how her preschoolers had utilized their Planned Possibilities time to make choices that had been right for them for the day:

One thing is that we allow the children to make their choices for the day and what they have planned for their Planned Possibilities time. . . . We allow them to either continue their work on something that they've done prior or make a choice for something new to start on. And then we have to be recording and documenting what their interests are. That way we know like, "this may lead into a long-term project," in some small group area.

The common language that we use across all the six classrooms is, "You have a choice."

Or, "You can decide what you want to do." Or, "You want to invite a friend?" That

becomes an open and empowering way of giving the child a choice of doing whatever

they want to do. And then offering them help in a way that, "I can help you if need my

help." (Priscilla)

This was similar to the work that Patricia had done with her kindergarteners, both making

sure to give students opportunities to engage with materials that would help them to learn and

offering them access to using materials they might not be able to use outside of their learning

space:

I like to give free unstructured time for centers. Most times when I do centers, I just have

spaces set up, and they can go wherever they want or feel inclined to go. One would be

the puppet theater. I also have Legos. I have little small Legos and the big Legos

depending on what students need. I have a paint station. Usually at the paint station, I'll

have a bunch of different kinds of art supplies, like scissors and glue sticks, things like

that, in case they want to make something out of their painting afterward. I have centers

with, you know, those little magnet shapes where they kind of stick together to make

things, they're like magnet shapes that the kids love. Play-Doh. All kinds of random little

areas where they can kind of accidentally learn through play. (Patricia)

Choice could also occur when assessing student learning. Ruby described the different

forms of assessment she had used for different projects, and explained how this had allowed her

students to feel empowered to do their best:

And it's about choice, right? So giving students the choice of, "Okay, well, you just

designed this musical instrument," is what we're doing now, so I'm thinking about it. "So

you just designed this instrument; you can draw the instrument; you can use clay to make

the instrument; you can use recycled materials; you can." . . . But we're going to, in that

design, you're going to share with me the shape, how it makes noise, how you play it,

what it's made of. So whatever way you want to do it, and for a student who's an English

language learner, it could be pointing, it could be showing me how to use it. Those are all

ways to demonstrate understanding. (Ruby)

By offering students choice, these teachers were saying that children's voices mattered in the

learning process. The participants noted that some aspects of allowing choice might be easier to

set up than others, but all seemed to have allowed students more power in the learning space and

to have supported them in learning to the best of their potential.

Dialogue. The process of dialogue has been described as one in which deep listening

occurred for all parties taking part. In order to truly be involved in a dialogue, all participants

should be present in hearing each other without the need to respond immediately to what the

others had to say. For the teachers here, dialogue was at the center of ensuring that their students'

voices had been heard and acknowledged. Patricia shared how she had given students

opportunities to participate in dialogue with each other in a more relaxed setting through the use

of puppet theater:

I like to set up situations, like for example, in my classroom, I had the puppet theater, and

so I always can see what's going on in their lives, and in their minds, when they act out

with the puppets on their own, independently, with one another. I can see kind of some of

the stresses that they're carrying, some of the humor that they embody, see all kinds of

stuff in that kind of context. Then, also, just every day in my class, we do community

circle. In community circle, it's always the same prompt, which is, "How do you feel and

why?" Students always have an opportunity to kind of name their feelings and what

they're carrying into the classroom before school even starts, to give me context, and to

state what they need. Then they also go back immediately after their circle, and they

write about whatever they shared in their journal. It gives them kind of different outlets to

express themselves on a daily basis. (Patricia)

For students in a dual language program, it often would be the case that they would want

to speak to each other or their teachers in the language in which they felt most comfortable.

Giving space and validation for students to participate in dialogue in whatever way suited them

best had been of great importance to Megan, who shared,

We are, by no means, the center that it's like you're to be seen and not heard. And I think

that's a big shift from when we were kids—like you're here, we see you, but we don't

wanna [*sic*] hear you. Their voice is at the forefront of everything that they do, as well.

Using their words, giving them the words that they need to be able to express fully what

they're feeling in both languages, which is interesting, and they will mix it up. You know,

"Hey! No me *gusta* when you hit me!" They'll find the words to say it, and then [during]

circle time, their voices are always in the circle and always leading and guiding

conversation. A lot of what we do is collaborative and group work, so it requires them to

talk to each other and talk to us. We try to create an alignment where it's not about the top

down talking to you or talking at, but having a conversation and being in dialogue with a

person, with a real, live person, you know? (Megan)

Nathalia also acknowledged that when participating in dialogue with young children, it

was important to allow them to have access to collaboration in smaller settings as well in order to

support greater engagement. She explained:

In one of our classrooms we had a group of kids who wanted to build a house for the

hummingbirds that were visiting our tree. They met and came up with a plan. Talked it

out. Decided what hummingbirds needed. Then built it. That was a long, long, long-term

project. Some of them are like that. Some of them are just, "Let's make a plan for when

the seventh-grade buddies come in and visit our school. Let's make a game for them to

play with us." They always have to be dialogic. Some kind of high-level thinking skill

needs to be engaged. They need to offer collaboration. I feel like it's a great structure for

doing the things that we want to do. If it's in a small group of three to five kids, then

they're engaged and social in a way that they wouldn't be if [there were a lot more kids].

(Nathalia)

For Maryam, student voice was at the center of the work she had done with her students,

and each class dialogue that she had shared with her students shaped the way the lesson might

go. She had concerns, however, about how she had been supporting students specifically from a

more privileged background to learn how to use their voices in truly dialogical ways. She

described ways in which she had worked to support students in understanding that dialogue

included both speaking and listening to one another in deeply respectful and significant ways:

Student voice is something that is hugely important in our school, and in the past school I worked in, which was a progressive school. I'm curious. I keep thinking about how student voice empowers young people to continue to feel respected and valued, because we're listening. We're listening to their voices. We care. We want to hear what they have to say. At the same time, I wonder about voice and privilege. I worry a little bit, especially in spaces where there exists a lot of class privilege and socioeconomic privilege, that I worry about that connected to a progressive school experience. I'm seeing that young people are having a hard time understanding how to show respect and use their voice. . . . Student voice, to me, drives curriculum. Student voice shapes curriculum. This year in particular, teaching three sections of the same age level, I get to see how, depending on what students are thinking and talking about, it changes the course of the lesson. It changes the experience that the other students are having, the experience that I'm having as a teacher. If those students were quiet, or they didn't think they could use their voice, or if they weren't thinking and talking out loud, yeah, it wouldn't be teaching as I know it. I think student voice equals teaching. (Maryam)

Yet, despite her strong commitment to student voice in the classroom, Maryam noted that there was still much work to be done:

My question mark is how to continue to help students, yeah, use their voices, and maybe just use their power for good, wisely. . . . Parent ed. is probably a piece of what needs . . . It feels like, more and more, school and home [are] just coming closer and closer together, which is okay, in some ways, and necessary, and can be beautiful. Besides having conversations about voice, and power, and respect, and intentionally doing work

with young people to make sure that they're practicing life skills like respect, and deep

listening, and holding counsel circles where there's one person that speaks that has a

talking piece. Giving them ways of sharing their power, and I feel like there's just a lot

more work to be done, and there's kind of some partnership work to be done that I haven't

really focused on. (Maryam)

In setting up the space for dialogue to occur, these educators had made it possible for

their students to have greater care over their learning. In allowing students' voices to drive

discussions, projects, and situations, these educators had showed their young students the power

that their voices had in creating change in very tangible and concrete ways.

Questioning and problem posing. The narratives collected indicated that a large part of

creating truly emancipatory spaces for students was allowing them to follow their questions and

find solutions to their problems through their own explorations. Using questioning and problem

posing as practices in liberatory classrooms had allowed students to follow their instincts and to

learn critical thinking skills through deductive reasoning and curiosity. The educators in this

study shared the different paths on which students' questions and curiosities had led them in the

quest for knowledge. Ruby explained why she had started every year with an inquiry process of

asking questions:

I think a lot of times, another [characteristic] of traditional school is [that] a question is

like a negative thing. Like, "Any questions? No? Okay, we're moving on." So, for me,

question-asking is a skill that *needs* to be developed. And if you don' allow students to

practice, they're just gonna [*sic*] shut down in the upper grades. So, I think it sounds like

an emancipatory practice would be giving time to question during activities. Like, "We're

gonna [*sic*] write all the questions we have about the library. And then we're gonna [*sic*] follow those questions and we're gonna [*sic*] find the answers." Right? When I first start the year, I kind of do a little assessment around question-asking, like I'll put shells on the table and I'll say, "What questions do you have about the shells?" To see if kids can think critically. Most kids at that time, they just make observations. Like, "The shell is pretty. It's purple. I can put it up to my ear." They're not actually asking questions. And then over the course of the year it is so incredible to again, be like, "Okay guys, we're going to the library. Any questions you have about the library, I need every person to ask a question and put your name up here." And there's my assessment. And they all can do it. Maybe they take someone else's question, but they're no longer going, "I went to a library once." (Ruby)

By starting her teaching with asking questions, Ruby had allowed her students to start moving past their observations and into a deeper part of their minds where they could wonder. Maryam shared how encouraging her students to ask questions about their community had supported them in the civic engagement process:

Then, I like to have young people . . . learn about the needs of the community, and then what are the issues, or the problems or concerns. . . . One year, we discovered that the lost and found was a nightmare, and people were just leaving their clothes everywhere. The kids really got into taking on the job of returning the clothes. It was very right here, very right now, and a perfect problem for them to try to solve. They ended up practicing their voices, and coming up with solutions, and brainstorming ways to not only give clothes back, but to try to make the lost and found not such an enormous task. They got to

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address all kinds of really interesting issues, like privilege. They got to ask the questions

of each other, and then of the community, like, "Why are we leaving our sweatshirts

around?" They were able to understand that in our environment, it's cool in the morning,

and people come with their sweatshirts, and then they go outside, and they run around,

and then they get hot, and they take off their sweatshirts, and then they forget to pick up

their sweatshirts. That's all okay until they go home without their sweatshirt. Then I ask

them, "So, what happens? What happens the next morning when it's chilly?" Without

missing a beat, the majority of the kids say, "Well, you just put on another sweatshirt."

We ask the question, "What would happen if you didn't have another sweatshirt to put

on? What would happen?" They were like, "Oh, well I guess we wouldn't leave it at the

school." We talked about how, "What does that mean?" They got to not only investigate

that, but then they got to be teachers, and that's the third piece of the puzzle, or the story

arc. "How can I take what I've learned, what I know, the action that I've taken to solve a

problem? You know, I've found my sphere of influence. I've figured out a way to

interrupt the systems, impact the systems, make it better. I'm not going to solve it all, but

I know, as a kindergartner, or as a second grader, or as a fifth grader, I feel like I have a

stake it in it, and I have a solution that's something I can do. Not a [final] fixing, but

something I can do, and now I can share that." (Maryam)

Maryam returned again in her narrative to the power of student voice saying,

Without student voice, without voice, without knowing there's a problem, without

knowing that you can do something about it, you never will. They get to be people that

inspire other people. You don't have to be Martin Luther King to inspire people. To me,

that's kind of the arc of the year, is build community, find the appropriate content,

explore the content, [seek] out the issues, the problems, the broken parts of the system,

figure out what's the action, how can I take action, and then do something, and share what

you've done. Really make sure that other people can see you as a leader and community,

so you can see yourself. (Maryam)

The participants felt that students did not have only to observe the world around them but also to take part in understanding it and participating in it in evocative ways. Ziggy described an experience with her preschool students that had allowed them to gain a greater global understanding, even from a young age:

Every summer, we have summer camp. Last summer, our summer camp's theme was,

traveling the world. So, when we traveled through different countries, we didn't want to

do just your run-of-the-mill like, "Oh, we're going to study France and Egypt," it's like,

"No, let's get deeper." Like when we went to Asia, we did Syria, and we talked about the

children and we talked about what was going on, and not with gory, graphic details but

the kids were really interested and they're so compassionate, and it helps with their

empathy, and it helps with them understanding there are more people in the world.

They're so egocentric right now. We talked about what can we do, and that was our first

fundraiser. We made lemonade and then we sent some money to charity and they loved it

and it stuck with them, and even to this day they still talk about it sometimes, so they

know, "I know this country, and I know what's going on, and we made lemonade, and we

sent them some money." So really giving them tangible things, memorable things that

they can latch onto and embrace. We try to make things less abstract, making that

concrete and relatable to them, and knowing that together we can come up with great, fantastical ideas that we may think are overwhelming. Like, "No, we can't study that," it's like, "But we can. We can make it tangible for them." And then if we're excited, they're going to be excited about it, so it's beautiful. (Ziggy)

Ziggy's approach was similar to what Ruby had done in her classroom of kindergarteners, beginning with a simple question and allowing her young students to lead the way with what the possible solutions could be:

So, the driving question first was, "How can we make recess more fun?" Because when we got to our new campus, we didn't have any . . . it was a middle school campus, and we had no play structure, we had no materials. So, they came up with three big ideas. One was to have more toys. So, our first project was we designed toys. We had a driving question . . . and then we had a driving question for the project. So, the first project was how can we design toys to play with? So, we met a toy designer, and we went to Mattel. And that was one project. Project two, their second idea, was a butterfly garden. They wanted to see butterflies outside. So that became, "How can we create and take care of a butterfly garden?" And then we did that. We raised butterflies. The third was the library on wheels. They wanted to be able to read books at recess. So, our third driving question was "How can we make a library for our school?" . . . It's gonna [*sic*] be in our classroom. They decided because they thought: "We could change our classroom into the library." And that's what we're doing. So, we're gonna [*sic*] have kids come and check out books and then return them, and then they're all gonna [*sic*] be the librarians, the clerks, and the pages. So that's an authentic project. And so, this type of project-based learning is

who I am as an educator. But I think it's tightly connected to social-emotional learning and classroom environment. . . . Those are all things that I've kind of pulled along the way into this idea of constructivist pedagogy. (Ruby)

In problem solving, students had to get creative and really decide on the different ways in which they could try seeing something from a different perspective. Maryam shared another opportunity for students to practice this problem-solving process during a simple game of creating a working machine:

We had done the machine kind of games, you know, where everyone is part of a working machine, and your body is doing a repetitive movement. The kids got to move across the room by figuring out [how] one kid rolls it to another kid, and the other kid picked it up, and turned around three times, and passed it to the next kid. They worked out a system to get it from one end of the room to the next. Then, I said, "No, no. Parts of this machine are breaking." [I] went over and touched different people on the head, and said, "Come with me. Your pieces have broken." [I] pulled them off to the side, and asked them what would they do, what could they do to get the . . . They still had to use their same movements, but how could they use their movements and still get the drum to the other side of the room? They learned to adapt. They found ways of adapting their movement. They kept the same move, they adapted it. Then they had a great conversation. They were able to put it in their bodies, and then have conversations where I was like, "Oh my God. I can't believe they're six and seven and having these kinds of mind-blowing conversations around systems thinking, and what happens when systems change and adapt." Those kinds of activities. I felt really, not just like, "Oh, this is fun," but, again,

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deeply respecting their thinking they were able to do, but then asking them to put their thinking in their bodies, and then to problem solve. I think there's something about the problem solving that was, again, freeing them to just create, and make mistakes.(Maryam)

Summary

This chapter described a variety of findings of this critical narrative study with teachers of young children who offered insights and perspectives on their experiences and classroom practices. A myriad of significant themes surfaced here including those related to teacher formation, the development of consciousness, beliefs on children and their rights, and the negotiation of classroom life, along with specific themes tied to pedagogy and liberatory practices. Figure 3 illustrates how educators' experiences led to their beliefs and practices. The many themes and subthemes raised in this chapter are analyzed and discussed in the next chapter in an effort to move toward recommendations that can help to support the emancipatory education of young children.
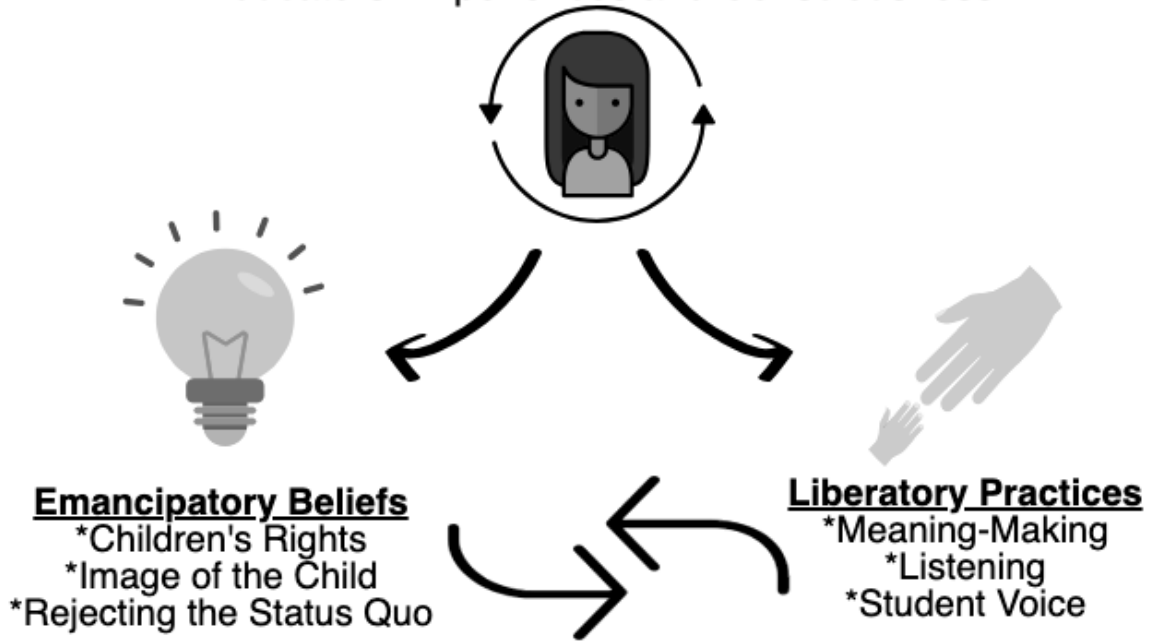
Figure 3. Summary of overlapping themes found in critical narratives of educators practicing critical pedagogy and Reggio Emilia inspired approaches.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Education is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know. (hooks, 2003, p. xiv)

Educators of young children have a unique role in introducing students to what it means to go to school. As such, there is a great responsibility to create experiences in school that honor the child, the knowledge they bring, the capabilities they possess, and their desire to learn. The teachers of young children who participated in this study shared the ways in which they had developed their own consciousness as educators and how they had practiced education as an act of liberation within their school and classroom settings. Through their voices, we can glean concrete examples of the work that is possible with children in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. This study sought to understand the ways in which educators of young children have utilized critical pedagogy and/or the Reggio Emilia approaches to create emancipatory spaces for young children. Additionally, it sought to understand the ways in which critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach have intersected in the education of young children.

The voices of the eight educators in this study were analyzed for evidence of the specific ways emancipatory practices were articulated, as well as the common themes that were found in the work of preschool educators and their elementary school counterparts. The emerging themes included the impacts of educators' beliefs on their practices, the emancipatory practices the

educators have used in their work, and the ways in which critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach have intersected in both the preschool and elementary school setting. This final chapter presents those themes, along with implications for praxis, recommendations for moving towards a more humanizing approach to education, and possibilities for future research.

Discussion of Findings

The authoritarian disposition of mainstream education persists. The teacher is the authority. The students are the vessels. Knowledge is transmitted one-dimensionally from the teacher to the students, and then is regurgitated through an assessment process in which the students display whether or not they heard and memorized everything the teacher taught them. In this scenario, rejecting the status quo means turning the whole cycle of hegemonic schooling upside down on its head. This means that educators cannot stick to the book and continue the cycle of a banking model of education but rather must become creative and courageous in addressing what students actually need to move forward. In order to disrupt hegemonic practices of education that permeate the educational landscape, educators should provide counter-narratives of what has been legitimized as the best ways to teach and to learn (Darder, 2015).

Through the voices of the eight participants, this study offered a counter-narrative—one in which children are valued and seen as true people capable of learning and growing, without being reduced to objects or empty receptacles. Listening to the testimonies of the emancipatory educators who participated in this study, it was clear that their beliefs about children and about education had had profound impacts on their work within the classrooms. It was also clear that all of these educators were practicing emancipatory styles, even though they were hesitant or unaware of the specific language of "emancipation" and "liberation." This led me to see how all

of the practices they described using different labels were actually tied directly to the practice of what Freire (1998a) called education for freedom. Finally, there were key overlaps in looking through the lenses of critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach at the work of these educators. In further examining these topics, it is my hope that more educators will dive deeper into their own process of *conscientização* through which they can continue to evolve into the affirming and liberatory educators our young children need and deserve (Darder, 2015; Freire, 2007.)

Impact of Beliefs on Practices

Emancipatory education should begin with what the adults in any school building believe about the children that are present before them. All educators, whether harmful or helpful to the creation of liberatory schooling, have beliefs about children upon entering classroom spaces. Christensen and Aldridge (2012) noted that it was these beliefs that lead them to stifle or advance children's opportunities to approach school in humanizing ways. For the educators in this study, a shared set of underlying beliefs emerged as paramount, while individual defining moments lead to the ways in which the educators responded to the communities they chose to serve.

Underlying beliefs. As Edwards et al. (2012) described Reggio Emilia philosophy, the image of the child was central to the interactions adults had with children in the school space and how children were perceived in the classroom. Similarly, Freire (1989b) also spoke to the importance of understanding our students before engaging in the work of education. In speaking to participants, it was clear that they all agreed that children were curious and capable beings who deserved to be loved and respected. The words "capable," "curious," "love," and "respect" shone through again and again in each educator's perspective. Completely antithetical to the

notion of adultism, wherein the young have been disrespected and adults have made themselves out to be most supreme (Bell, 1995; Farkas et al., 1997; Fletcher, 2013), the educators in this study whole-heartedly believed that young children were full beings whose words, thoughts, and experiences had as much value as their own. For example, Ruby described her understanding of children as capable:

> My vision of a child is that [of] being incredibly curious, capable, thoughtful, aware. I mean basically the same as adults. . . . As far as how I give them respect, how I respect a child is the same as with another adult. They are a person. They are a developing human being just like an adult is. So, my vision, my image of them is that. They're sort of a developing human. When I speak to children I don't think, "I'm speaking to a child now."
> (Ruby)

Ruby's view of children as "basically the same as adults" meant speaking to them with the same respect and humility as one would a peer. This directly related to the image of the child as described in Reggio Emilia work (Cadwell, 2003; Edwards et al., 2012; Hewett, 2001; Scheinfeld et al., 2008; Wien, 2008; Wurm, 2005), as well as Freire's notion of revolutionary love, which countered the idea of learners as empty vessels waiting to be filled up (Darder, 2015; Freire, 2007). It was by way of these underlying beliefs that the educators in this study stated that they were able to develop critical consciousness around a more just and humanizing pedagogy that centered the child in the practice of education.

Defining moments. Many of the educators in this study had defining moments that led them to grounding their work in emancipatory ideals. From their personal schooling experiences, to working in dehumanizing schools, to becoming parents, the process of *conscientização* had a

direct impact on decisions these educators made related to their practices with young children (Darder, 2015; Freire, 2007). For Maryam, it was the experiences she had being raised as "one of few," as a person of color in White, independent schools, which led her to continue on as a teacher in the same type of school in which she had been raised. Ruby had many moments that sparked change in her practice and thinking. One of the greatest was the shift from working at an elite independent school to a public charter school where she was able to help design the transitional kindergarten program. For Nathalia, becoming a mother helped her to better empathize with families and becoming the director of an early childhood center helped her to understand the systems that worked in the larger context outside of the classroom. For Megan, working in business with adults taught her that the foundations for global citizenship needed to be forged at a young age, leading her back to the early childhood setting. For Priscilla and Ziggy, the shifts happened in working in preschool settings that were dehumanizing before moving to Reggio-inspired preschools that were more aligned to their beliefs about children. Jay and Patricia both connected their desire to work with young children in loving and humanizing ways to their own feelings of being slighted and devalued as young children of color while in school. Because teaching has been seen as an incredibly personal and political act (Darder, 2015; Freire, 1998b; Giroux, 1988), it was clear that defining moments such as these could alter the ways in which educators approached their work.

Responsiveness to community. Educators who have taken time and care to understand the communities in which they have served have been able to better respond to the needs of their communities. For the educators in this study, their beliefs about children and the communities where they worked went hand-in-hand with supporting their daily practice and reflection. This

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"critically conscious purpose" (Duncan-Andrade, 2007) challenged these educators to do what was right by their students as opposed to what might have been easy or expected. As an educator of color in a predominately White space, Maryam stressed the importance of her role in challenging, disrupting, and teaching her students more about the idea of being an ally:

> Because we're graduating all these people that are going off to the world and for better [or] for worse or whatever, our kids in our private schools are going off and they're gonna [*sic*] be in charge of stuff, they're gonna [sic] own businesses. . . . And so, I see my job there as very instrumental to helping those young people, hopefully, I just always hope that there are little seeds planted where they'll go, "Huh, maybe I should think about that before I say that, do that, don't hire that person, whatever." So, I hope. (Maryam)

Maryam has used her positionality in this unique context to drive her work, just as Patricia and Jay have used their positionality as teachers of color working with other students of color. Patricia and Jay have both made it a point to talk to their students about people of color and about their identities, affirming students' cultures and creating space for them to ask questions. Jay shared,

> I make sure to give them access to books with brown people on the cover and authentic experiences that spark conversations. . . . We celebrate people of color. . . . It opens up the door to asking questions and telling stories. (Jay)

Entering a new environment, Ruby has also found herself working to better understand her community in order to meet the needs of all of her learners. Ruby's experience—moving from very homogenous to extremely diverse settings—has taught her how to differentiate the needs of her students in new and more creative ways. This was also true of Ziggy and Priscila, working

with students who were non-verbal upon entering preschool and learning to understand their hundred languages of communicating (Edwards et al., 2012; Malaguzzi, 1996; Vasquez, 2014). In better understanding their communities and their learners, these educators have been able to employ emancipatory practices in supporting their students in the meaning-making process.

Emancipatory Practices

While educators' beliefs and mindsets coming into the classroom space are of great importance, equally as important are the choices they make while working with students. An educators' pedagogy, as this study showed, powerfully reflects teacher beliefs in practice. Meaning-making is the way in which teachers and students come to understand the world around them and their place within it. Through forming one's own identity, building community with others, reading the word and reading the world, and learning and expressing through multiple modalities and the hundred languages, we can see how the spaces the participants have created for children to make meaning have allowed their students to feel freer and more fully human.

Making meaning does not take any one form. Students, especially young students who are exploring the world with wide eyes and first encounters, make meaning on a daily basis. The educators in this study did not all have a clear understanding of what I meant when asking about "emancipatory practices." Although the terminology was unfamiliar, the practices themselves shone through as they described different ways in which they created space for students to use their voices, create their own knowledge, and become masters of their own learning (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Jones & Nimmo, 1994; Wien, 2008). The following describes the practices the participants explained most often in their narratives that were in concert with critical pedagogy and/or the Reggio Emilia approach as discussed in the literature review.

Systems thinking. Maryam provided a good example when she described the work she had done using systems thinking in her classroom as a way of teaching students about how people are all interconnected. Through various hands-on exercises, she had helped young students to better understand the ways in which one person affects others. In turn, her first-grade students had been able to define problems they felt were worth solving within their school community and had taken on active projects to make changes happen.

Project-based learning. Ruby spoke much about her work with project-based learning and how she had learned to tie in standards to projects in ways that were more realistic to the skills students needed for the real world. From dreaming up new toys and musical instruments to constructing a school library, her kindergarteners had demonstrated their understanding and knowledge in meaningful ways.

Emergent curriculum. Both Priscilla and Nathalia shared how emergent curriculum had supported their preschool students in exploring topics that they found most interesting. Teachers had come together to discuss students' interests at the time and decided on new opportunities to learn about that topic (Wien, 2008). By scaffolding experiences for students, the teachers had taken a step back from teaching anything directly and offered their support in ways that allowed the students to take the lead.

Child-led approach. Similarly, Ziggy and Megan spoke of the child-led approach. Again, the teacher acted as researcher (Cadwell, 2003) and observed as the children explored their environment and their materials. Through this experience, children had shown interest in planting and gardening which led to a unit of study around farmer's markets. Instead of deciding

what the children should learn, the approach here had allowed the students to express their interests and made space for those interests to be explored in greater depth.

Civic empowerment. Jay talked about her work with civic empowerment and anti-bias education. In combining the affirmation of students' identities with the responsibility of making their communities better, civic empowerment encouraged problem-posing, dialogue, and action in the world. In teaching these skills purposefully and intently, these educators were setting young students up to be democratic citizens who could engage with the world around them in meaningful ways.

Six elements of social justice. Patricia spoke of the six elements of social justice in planning her units of study—especially for read-alouds. As they had moved through the six elements of social justice through the stages of knowing and loving oneself to recognizing and acting on issues of injustice, young students had been able to better understand the world and their place within it. From there, they had been able to make change towards righting wrongs and expressing themselves in deeper and more gratifying ways.

With the support of educators facilitating the process, making meaning could help students to form their identities, build community, read the word and the world, and dive deeper into acknowledging and utilizing their Hundred Languages of expression, as Malaguzzi (1998) noted. The participants affirmed that by allowing opportunities for students to learn and grow in the ways that fit best for them, teachers of young children could create more engaging and robust experiences where all learners could be actively involved in the co-construction of knowledge.

All of these different opportunities for students to think critically, to analyze, and to truly problem solve are really at the core of what the vision of emancipatory education could look like

for young learners. Instead of telling them what they need to learn, we could allow their voices to guide the path to richer and more grounded learning experiences that could actually work toward making a difference in the real world. Through amplifying student voice by allowing for choice, dialogue, questioning, and problem posing, the emancipatory educators in this study have worked to give the classroom back to the students and acknowledge their brilliance in the knowledge-building process.

The Intersection of Critical Pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia Approach

In setting out with this study, a key research question was understanding how critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach intersect when teaching and learning with young students. In speaking with both the preschool educators as well as the kindergarten and first-grade educators, it was evident that these two approaches absolutely interconnect in the work of emancipatory educators. Both approaches expand on notions of exploration, dialogue, listening to students, teachers and students working together as co-creators of knowledge, and reflection as an important part of the practice of education (Cadwell, 2003; Edwards et al., 2012; Freire, 1998a, 2007; Scheinfeld et al., 2008; Wien, 2008). In speaking with the eight educators in this study, three key intersections emerged: (a) the idea of children as changemakers who are actively participating in impacting the world around them; (b) the value and importance of curiosity and exploration as the key drivers in the educations of young students; and (c) a new insight about the relational vision of education that brings together elements of both critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach to imagine working with students as highly personal and grounded in radical love and a deep belief in children's capabilities and humanity.

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Children as changemakers. For students to act as critical change agents, they should have been given opportunities to practice making change within their world and from their locus of control (Duncan-Andrade, 2005). As Edwards et al. (2012) described, "Children are protagonists in society, bearing the right to be listened to and to participate, to be part of the group and take action alongside others on the basis of their own particular experiences and level of consciousness" (p. 150). The educators in this study gave many examples of the ways in which students had acted as change agents within their school communities.

Ruby described her students' experiences with problem posing and change making, recognizing the need for students to have more options of things to do during recess time. Through this deep dive, students had participated in designing and creating new toys with which to play, raising a butterfly garden that could be observed during recess time, and creating a library where all students throughout the school could come to check out books to read during their free time. As kindergarteners, these students had been able to participate in their society as democratic citizens and historical subjects. Maryam also shared how her young students had been able to problematize the school's lost and found and took the opportunity to raise awareness about issues of privilege with their older peers. Similarly, Ziggy shared the milieu of projects in which the students in her preschool had participated, from cleaning up the beach with Heal the Bay to raising money for Syrian refugees. Through acts of questioning and problem-posing, their students moved to gain independence and empowerment in their worlds. By being exposed to the process of critical thinking, students had been able to demystify the world around them and be more fully attuned with all that they experienced as they continued to grow and develop. Darder

(2015) described the emancipatory educator's role in creating space for students' change-making power to be stimulated:

> This implies a process of learning not necessarily dependent on a specific or determined curriculum per se, but far more concerned with the capacity of educators creating the pedagogical conditions for problematization, so students can critically question, deconstruct, and recreate knowledge without repercussions or reprisals, in ways that enhance their sense of ethical responsibility to self and community. (p. 89)

By creating the space and conditions for students not only to understand their world better but to act upon it in ways they hope will improve living conditions for themselves and others, educators in this study had been involved in the critical intellectual formation of students from a young age, assisting them to understand their personal and collective power. As students continue to grow and develop, they will no doubt, continue to act as democratic citizens who can take part in the collective work of liberation.

Curiosity and exploration. Curiosity emerged as a key feature of both the Reggio Emilia approach and critical pedagogy. As Edwards et al. (2012) explained, "Humanity exists and endures because we have developed our capacity for curiosity" (p. 240). Curiosity and exploration are therefore crucial to life-affirming practices of liberatory educators who are positioning young students for a lifetime of asking, "Why?" Freire (1998b) described the process of epistemological curiosity as it pertained to the reading of the word and reading of the world. Reading the word meant understanding what was said by what is written, and reading the world meant making meaning out of the situations in the world around us on a daily basis. In Freire's model, these two constructs worked together to create a full concept of literacy where working to

answer questions of "why" was ever-present in the process of meaning-making, as teachers and students developed human understanding and emancipatory potential together.

Freire and Macedo (1987) noted that becoming a literate person was critical in the process of liberation, and that it was the work of educators in emancipatory spaces to support students in the literacy process. By setting the stage for curiosity and exploration through the inquiry cycle of emergent curriculum, the educators here had allowed students to dictate what they deemed to be important and worthy of learning. In the preschool setting, Nathalia, Megan, Priscilla, and Ziggy all described different child-led explorations that had allowed their students to follow their curiosities and interests. When the teachers in these situations acted as researchers, they had been able to nurture young students' curiosities and learning experiences instead of directly teaching them the information they might deem most legitimate and worthy. Patricia and Jay also had allowed students to explore through the use of centers in their kindergarten and first-grade classrooms. By having been given many options or ways to explore content, their students had had the opportunity to learn in ways that best had accommodated them and their interests. These multiple approaches to developing and nurturing curiosity and exploration allows educators in both preschool as well as early elementary to support their students in understanding the world around them. Through this meaning-making process, children are given the space to become fully literate and critical beings, within a pedagogical context where young students and the knowledge they construct are valued.

Relational vision of education. From speaking with these eight emancipatory educators, it was clear that the Reggio Emilia approach and critical pedagogy absolutely have overlapping concepts that can be utilized in creating liberatory educational spaces for young children. In

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understanding the perspectives and experiences of these educators, I propose a new approach—the relational vision of education—in the education of young children. There are incredible opportunities for both the Reggio Emilia approach and critical pedagogical principles to support the education of children in all grades and age levels, but in supporting young students in particular, it is necessary to approach teaching and learning in a deeply relational manner.

In this proposed relational vision, educators' beliefs about children's rights and capabilities work hand-in-hand with the practices they deliberately employ in their classrooms. This pedagogical vision is grounded in love for children and love for the profession of teaching. Freire (1998b) described it as an *armed love*, "the fighting love of those convinced of the right and duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce. It is this form of love that is indispensable to the progressive educator that we must all learn" (p. 74). Along with this love is the belief that all children, no matter how young, are capable and curious beings who can participate in co-creating their education (Cadwell, 2003; Edwards et al., 2012; Hewett, 2001; Scheinfeld et al., 2008; Wien, 2008; Wurm, 2005). Once these underlying beliefs are brought together and solidified, the relational vision of education calls for emancipatory practices that center around the dialogical relationship of teachers and students as revolutionary partners in the co-construction of knowledge (Darder, 2018). This combination of beliefs and practices supports students' active participation as democratic citizens and change agents who explicitly participate in classroom conditions for transforming the world around them. This relational vision of education is presented in the figure below (see Figure 4).
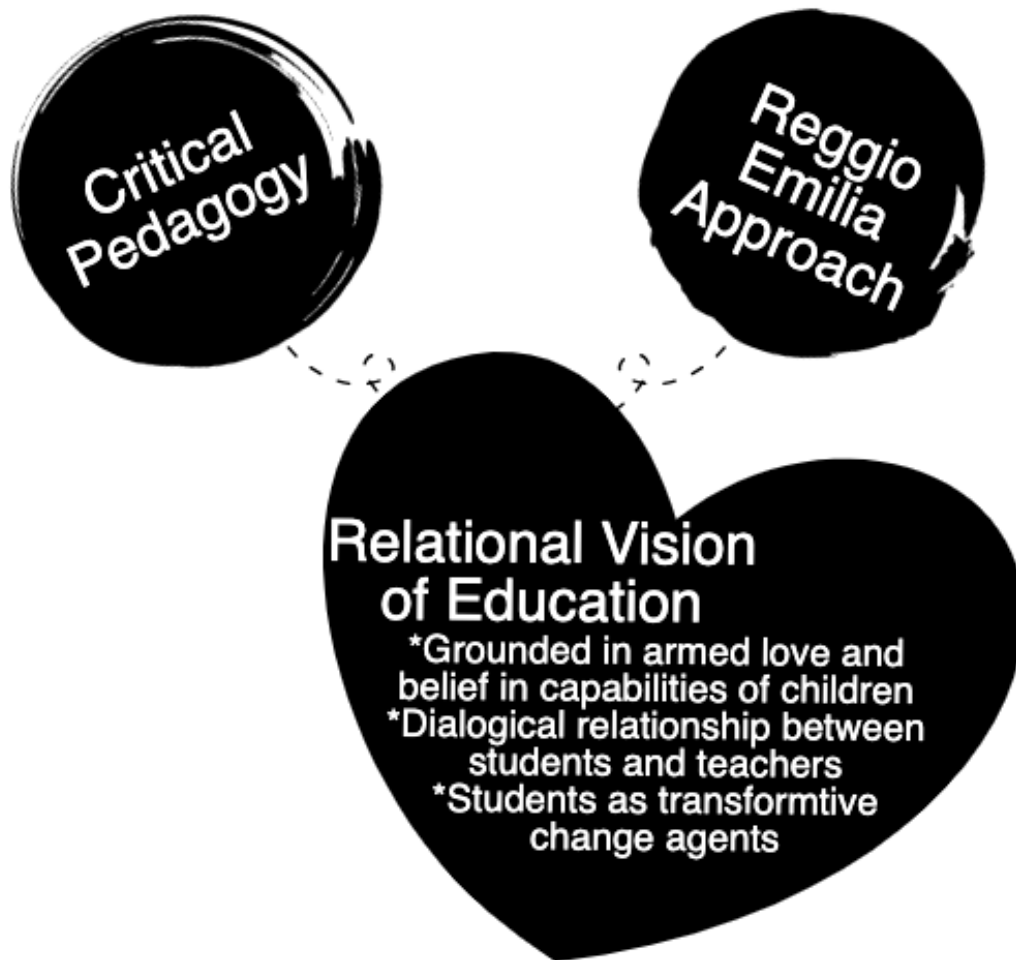
Figure 4. Proposed framework for the relational vision of education.

For example, opportunities for building community created by the teachers in this study allowed their students to better understand themselves and others. By creating space for relationships to be defined and built, the classroom culture is able to flourish as students see themselves as part of a community. Here, the concept of meaning-making is apparent, as students now understand the meaning of being accountable to others. As part of the relational

vision of education, collective opportunities for learning allow all classroom participants to feel affirmed, valued, and critical to the betterment of the school and society at large.

Implications for Praxis

In thinking about how to best support educators aspiring to this relational vision of education who may know that something feels out of place, some of the educators in this study shared words of wisdom for embracing this emancipatory vision. Jay shared:

> So, if I were to advise that teacher who doesn't know what to do, I would have them reflect on moments when they felt like the most loved and the most cared for, and have them align that to whatever the situation was. . . . Because I worry that sometimes we get too connected to . . . you're looking for a curriculum, or you're looking for a book, or you're looking for a strategy that is an answer. But I think if you truly did, like, grounded in loving our kids and are aware of what non-examples of what that is that currently operate in our school systems, it would be easier. There's lots of different research and lots of different strategies that, yes, you could implement, but also you could just say that doesn't feel right, so I'm not going to do that tomorrow. (Jay)

Similarly, Ziggy shared:

> I think I would definitely say follow your heart and follow your instincts on how you feel, because typically that's the right voice to listen to, and try to find at least one person in the place you're at to bounce off ideas. And maybe write down the things that you don't get right about and figure out a way to bring that up to supervisor or someone, because I think a lot of education now is just important to really speak up for those things, and it's difficult. It's hard to do, and I know especially obviously people can't afford to lose their

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jobs, but if you do it in a respectful way, in a place that really comes from knowledge and understanding of how to advocate for children, then it's worth taking that risk. (Ziggy)

By listening to instincts and starting from a place of authentic love for students, it is possible for all educators to be partner with their students in teaching and learning. In the process for *mutual humanization*, teachers and students can not only create more valuable learning experiences for themselves, but also set a course for a radical vision of what education can be for all. This speaks to a revolutionary educational approach that supports all students, even the youngest, to be free to learn as their full selves and rise to their greatest potential in the struggle for our collective freedom.

Praxis is the work of action and reflection, and therefore teachers who are working for liberation must constantly reflect and make decisions in their classrooms that have real consequences on their students. Teachers must then be cognizant of how their beliefs and practices directly impact their work with students. Participants in this study suggested that teachers must be vetted before entering classrooms so that all who stand before our children have a foundational belief in their capabilities and humanity, in the love it takes to be true to the profession and those we serve, and in our responsibility to continue the pedagogical praxis needed to create the relational spaces all young children require in their lives to learn and to thrive.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Much has been learned from the critical narratives of the teachers who participated in this study. Young learners are curious. They are capable. They have a right to be respected, to have access to learning that challenges them, and to feel loved and cared for. The liberatory educators

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in this study were able to take all they had learned through the process of their own development of consciousness to create and advocate for emancipatory learning experiences for the youngest students. By rejecting the status quo, these educators shed light on what is possible when working with young students in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. Through intensive and meaningful acts of meaning-making, listening in the classroom, and allowing space for student voice, these educators co-constructed classrooms and schools with their students that were deeply relational, life-affirming, and inspiring.

Moreover, in hearing the stories of these eight emancipatory educators throughout the course of the study, it was clear that there are those out there who refuse to be cogs in the machine of banking education. All of these educators knew that the status quo of education would simply not do for them as educators or for the children and families they served. They spoke of the ways in which they created space. The communities they created within their classrooms were conscious of how the image of the child was upheld. The language the educators used about their students and about their classrooms was in alignment with what they said they believed about their students. The lessons they situated for their students and the materials they described providing in their centers had been meant to allow students to explore the world at will and to allow the educator to support them in the learning process. These practices worked to counter the traditional hegemonic ideas about children, those that infantilize children as simple and empty vessels with no needs or desires of their own. This was the spirit of love and liberation at work.

In analyzing the findings and themes, the following recommendations support edifying the important work that we do with our youngest learners, children entering preschool,

kindergarten, and first grade. These recommendations reflect the ways in which critical pedagogy and the Reggio Emilia approach intersect through a relational vision of education. It is important to note that the structures inspired by neoliberal agendas are in direct opposition to these recommendations, but that if we want our world to change, we must support our schools in changing. A larger systemic change is necessary for many of these changes to take effect, but the difficulty in changing does not undermine the necessity.

Recommendations for Teacher Education Programs

Teacher education programs are the breeding ground for all educators, and as such should be more than just places for aspiring teachers to learn instructional methods and strategies for teaching math and reading. As teachers of the teachers, these programs must not only praise, but also model what it means for teachers and students to work as revolutionary partners through a dialogical practice. We can no longer continue to teach teachers the practical knowledge of the profession without first working to support them in understanding their hearts, their purpose, and their beliefs about children. Teaching cannot be a profession that people come into when they fail or have become tired and disillusioned by their first career choices. Our children are too important! Hence, teacher education programs should take the responsibility of growing teachers more seriously with regard to the kinds of people who are vowing to dedicate themselves to our craft.

The work of unpacking privilege, forming consciousness, and seeing the interconnectedness of all forms of oppression with relation to power dynamics in the classroom must be explored at a much greater depth within courses on foundational knowledge content and lesson cycles. Ruby and Maryam both noted how their graduate programs in education

fundamentally awakened and laid down their emancipatory roots as educators, but these should not be unique experiences. Why, for example, did Patricia have to look to outside sources of inspiration to understand her positionality as an emancipatory educator? Although many teacher preparation programs span over multiple years, their time is still co-opted by accountability to accreditation, and though there is much time to be used, very little time is given to the formation of teacher consciousness. One multicultural education class does not make the grade. Future teachers must be constantly exposed, pushed, and given freedom of creativity in exploring their biases, their motivations, and their grounded understandings regarding the rights of young children, as well as the cultural factors that are at play when leading a classroom.

Recommendations for Schools

The work done in progressive and liberatory teacher education programs must then transfer into the work that administrators do in coaching teachers at schools and into the spaces they create for collaboration towards emancipatory practices. Questions regarding beliefs about children and their rights should be on every interview protocol. Professional development should begin by understanding the context of the communities in which schools are located. Teachers should constantly be given opportunities to observe each other and observe others outside of their schools who are doing the important work of education as a practice of freedom. Teachers should be observed and coached not only in the ways they teach addition and reading or writing workshop, but also in the relationships they form with young students, their families, and communities. As the teachers in this study asserted, teaching cannot come from a manual or textbook, but rather from students' curiosities, experiences, and questions. Administrators must give teachers autonomy by hiring those they trust to carry out this level of freedom and

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responsibility, as well as work with students' best interests at heart. Schools should not run as some sort of well-oiled machine but as creative environments for student discovery and exploration. In simpler terms, they should feel alive and free.

Recommendations for Teachers

Most critical to this work of liberatory spaces for young students is the role of teachers. Teachers must recognize the power they possess as the authority figures within the classroom space—an authority that Darder (2017) posited could be used in the interest of democratic life. They must constantly work to break down the binary relationship of teacher and student to support in their students the unabashed courage to be their true selves. Teachers must constantly learn from and with their students how to reject authoritarian practices within the classroom that objectify and dehumanize young students. Instead, teachers must earn their respect by being with their students in the quest for knowledge. Most importantly, teachers must love their students. They must love them in a way that can be felt deep within their hearts and within their purpose as educators. They must know how to say "no!" and "enough!" in the face of all that shrivels their profession to "teacher-proof" curriculum and empty learning periods that do not allow their young students to express themselves and be affirmed. Teachers must push each other's thinking, must be unafraid to admit mistakes along the journey, and must be ever-evolving as they act and reflect in the endless cycle of praxis.

Lastly, teachers of young children must commit to their own process of *conscientização*, by knowing that they do not know everything and, thus, they will always have room to grow. Teachers committed to such a relational vision of education must push forth with passion, resilience, and a bottomless well of hope. In the words of Freire (1997),

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The idea that hope alone will transform the world, and action undertaken in that kind of

naïveté, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. But the attempt to

do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced

to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion. (p. 8)

Future Research

Many possibilities for future research arose through carrying out this study. As

mentioned earlier, little work has been done looking at ways in which early childhood educators

and elementary school educators could learn from each other and their respective settings. That

would be a good place to further develop our understanding. Additionally, the scope of this study

was unable to illicit the voices of those who are most directly impacted by daily classroom life—

the children. It would be excellent to study the perspective of young children to better understand

if these emancipatory spaces that educators are working to provide are actually meeting their

needs and fulfilling their desires to be seen and heard within their education.

Finally, it is my hope that more research can arise which speaks in particular to the

liberatory work that is being done in communities of color. This study did not focus as much as I

had initially hoped on the factors of race and class at play in the presence or lack of liberatory

classroom spaces for young children of color. As children of color are those who have been most

stigmatized by notions that have surrounded their performance and academic achievement, it

would be interesting and highly humanizing to better understand the ways in which classrooms

with predominantly children of color could be entrenched in the praxis of education as freedom.

This study is merely a starting point for the larger discussion of how to evoke the spirit of love

and liberation in working with young children—and really, all children—and should be used as a

starting point for deeper engagements with the question of how we evolve into an emancipatory and relational praxis for the education of young children everywhere.

Epilogue

The last few years that surround this study and this degree program have been nothing short of a whirlwind experience. This work is deeply personal for me as an educator of young students. They can do so much and have so much to offer the world and yet, often when talking with others about my work, they refer to how much fun it must be and how cute the children are. We live in a world that simply does not value children for who they are, rather than the labor related to their education. We are always asking what they want to be when they grow up, as if who they are now is merely a stepping stone into a better version of themselves. In dealing with both adults and young children, I wish to put forward a provocative question: what if who we were as children was actually our best selves? Of course, years of experience and a greater vocabulary allow us to have a different type of impact, but nothing really compares to the kindness, wonder, and truth with which one is confronted in a first-grade classroom.

This is why liberatory spaces for young children are so important to me. Our children simply deserve a better education than we are providing them. They deserve for our voices to be used to amplify theirs. They deserve for us all to listen. The process of this study—hearing all of the stories of educators who were also deeply entrenched in this work—both lifted me up with hope and pushed me to continue challenging my own daily practices. I felt genuine conflict, day in and day out, as I told students "not right now" when they approached my table as I was engaged in a small group. I would hear myself saying things like "we're not talking right now" or "show me a line" and be faced with my own perpetration of contradictory practices that often dehumanize

young children. From here, I had to engage in my own cycle of praxis. I had to learn how to better ground what I was asking of my students and what I wanted them to uphold—love and respect for each other and for our community of learning.

In Lak'ech

Tú eres mi otro yo.

You are my other me.

Si te hago daňo a ti,

If I do harm to you,

Me hago daňo a mi mismo.

I do harm to myself.

Si te amo y respeto,

If I love and respect you,

Me amo y respeto yo.

I love and respect myself.

Figure 5. "*In Lak'ech*". Adapted from "*Pensamiento Serpentino*" by Luis Valdez (1994, pp. 190-191) based on Mayan tradition. In L. Valdez. "*Pensamiento Serpentino.*" *Early Works: Actos, Bernabé and Pensameinto serpentino* (pp.190-191). Houston: Arte Público Press. Copyright 1994 Luis Valdez.

Early on in my teaching career, I began using the poem "*In Lak'ech*" (see Figure 5) as a daily affirmation, starting each morning by reminding ourselves and each other that we must honor one another's presence in ways that humanize us all. I found myself feeling as though I was constantly making mistakes as if I was some sort of imposter preaching and writing about revolutionary ways of teaching and being in the classroom, all the while employing dehumanizing practices in my own work. It gave me great dissonance, and to be honest, at times it still does. But through speaking with these educators, and others who are committed to this struggle of education in the pursuit of freedom, I feel myself consoled as an imperfect being.

In my relational vision of education, the foundation begins with armed love for students and this work and in the undeniable belief in the capabilities of children. I know with every fiber of my being that I possess those attributes. I am not an imposter in that regard. From there, the rest of the work happens in my own quest to be better and do better. Every day I step into the classroom, I aim to *be love.* As Shalaby (2017) stated in her book, *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School*, a book that has been incredibly encouraging and inspirational to me not only as an educator of young children, but also as a researcher learning with other educators of young children

> If you BE LOVE, as a teacher, then what you model is the belief—through the everyday things you do—that no human being deserves to suffer any threat to or assault on her personhood. . . . You be love by modeling healing over harm. You be love by restoring community instead of excluding from community (p. 172).

I end by affirming that I full-heartedly believe that if all educators could start in the quest of being love, we would have an educational system that was more humanizing, more liberating, and more enjoyable for all of our children. I believe it is our responsibility, as educators who have been introduced to this radical vision for the future, no matter how imperfect we are, to not only continue to make ourselves better for our children but to push the educators around us to do the same. We must stand up for our kids. We must allow them to be heard, seen, and understood. We must edify the spirit of love and liberation in action through the choices we make with and for them, in their quest for knowledge and building a better tomorrow.
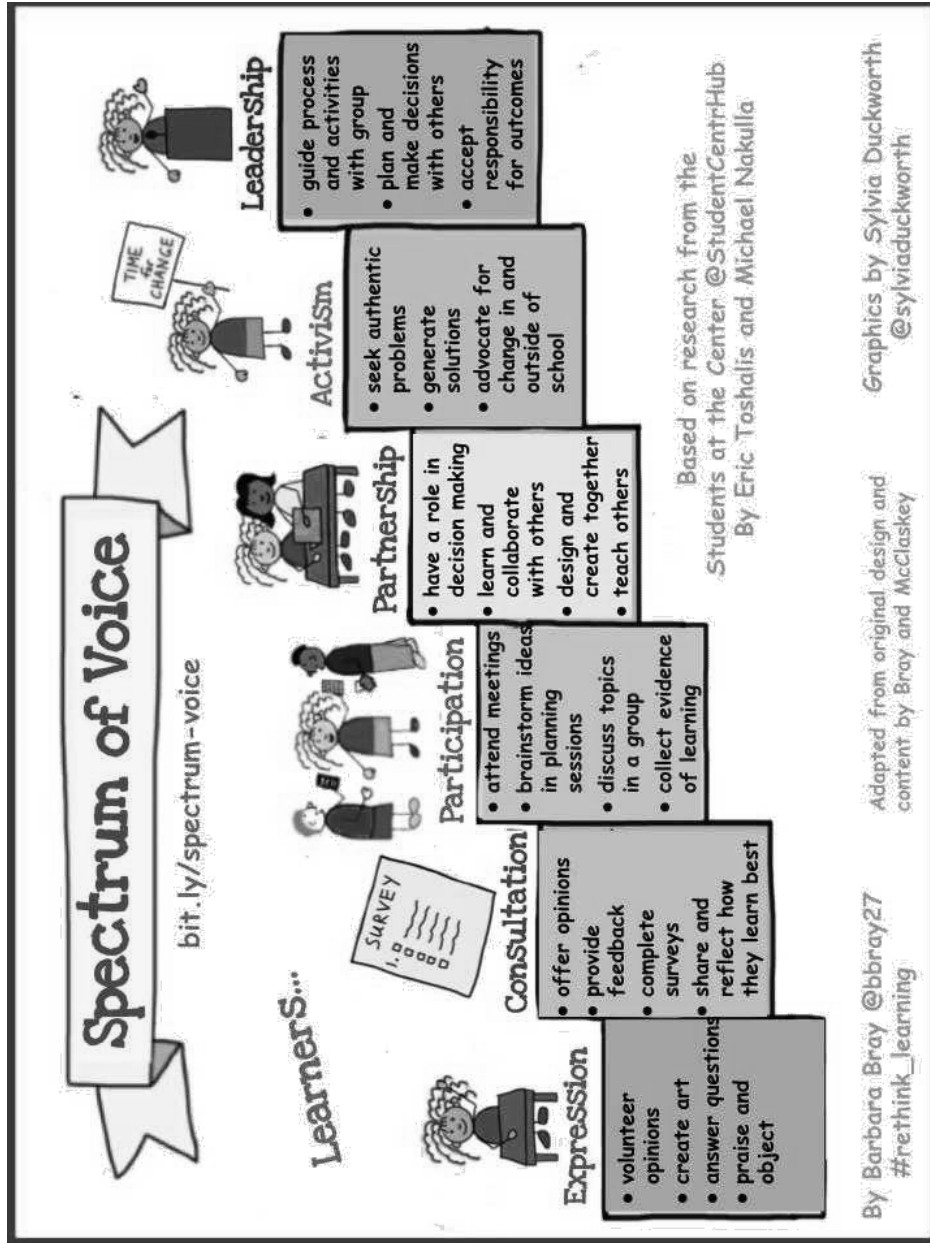
Spectrum of Voice

Figure A1. The spectrum of voice. Adapted from "Motivation, Engagement, & Student Voice" by E. Toshalis & M . J. Nakkula for Students at the Center. Copyright © 2013 Eric Toshalis and Michael J. Nakkula with Jobs for the Future. "Spectrum of Voice" by Barbara Bray. Copyright 2018 by Barbara Bray (barbara.bray@gmail.com). The content in the graphic was originally developed by Bray and Kathleen McClaskey (2015) as the Continuum of Voice and is a new derivative developed by Bray along with new graphics by Sylvia Duckworth (sduckworth100@gmail.com). Used with permission.

Participant Contact Script

Hello,

This is Shadi Seyedyousef* from _____ (personal or professional network from which we know each other). I hope this email finds you well! As you may remember, I am currently a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University in the Educational Leadership for Social Justice program. I am working on my dissertation which is designed to understand the experiences of teachers working with young students in Early Childhood, Kindergarten, and First Grade. I am inviting you to participate in this study because I know you have been teaching for three or more years, because you have taught students in these early grades, and because I know you identify as using critical pedagogy or the Reggio Emilia approach to inform your classroom practice.

Participation in this research includes an individual interview, as well as a focus group with all of the participants involved, each of which will last approximately 90 minutes. If you participate in this study, your total time commitment will be approximately three hours.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, please respond to this email. I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Best,

Shadi Seyedyousef, M.A.Ed.
Second Year Doctoral Student
Loyola Marymount University
Founding Teacher, First Grade
KIPP Iluminar Academy

*Please note that although Seyedeh Zahra A. Seyed Yousef is my legal name, I am more commonly referred to as Shadi Seyedyousef.

APPENDIX C

Participant Discussion Prompts

Focus on emancipatory practices with young children:

1. How do you view the rights of young children? How does this influence your work with your students?

2. What is your image of the child?

3. How do you view children's utilization of their voice within the classroom space? How does this influence your work with your students?

4. What emancipatory practices do you employ in your classroom practice?

5. How do you believe your teaching practices enhance your image of the child?

6. How do young children respond to emancipatory practices in your classroom?

7. What do you consider to be the most important issues when using emancipatory practices with young children?

8. How do you navigate the state mandated standards? (for elementary teachers)

9. Please share any examples of activities that have allowed your students to express their voices in liberating ways.

Focus on teacher's development:

10. How did you come to develop critical consciousness as an educator?

11. How have your teaching practices changed since your first year of teaching?

12. What factors influence your teaching philosophy?

13. What drives you to reject the status quo within your classroom?

14.   How are you continuing the development of your critical consciousness as a

        practicing educator?

APPENDIX D

Focus Group Script

I'm happy to see you again. As you all know, I have completed my analysis of your narratives and I would now like to share with you the major themes that emerged from your stories.

- As you heard me speak of these themes, are there any questions or thoughts that come to mind?

- Do you have new insights that you would like to share about your teaching?

- How do you compare the Reggio Emilia approach to critical pedagogy? How are these similar? How are they different?

- In what ways might teachers of K-1 grades be able to better utilize the Reggio approach in their classrooms?

- Are there any things I may have missed?

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