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Literature Circles: Latina/o students' daily experiences as part of the classroom curriculum

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Literature Circles: Latina/o students' daily experiences as part of the classroom curriculum

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Abstract

Literature Circles: Latina/o students' daily experiences as part of the classroom curriculum

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After the Mexican-American war, the educational experience of Mexican and Mexican -American students was one of segregation, discrimination, and inequalities. Latina/o histories and funds of knowledge have not been historically part of the classroom curriculum. Although scholars, educators, and social movements have challenged such inequalities, they still persist. Students became objects of the educational process. New theories and educational practices, such as critical pedagogy, have helped empowered students to become aware of their situation and encouraged students to become social agents of change. Literature circles, an educational practice of critical pedagogy, enable educators to provide students with an educational experience where they become the Subjects of their own learning; thus, transforming their educational experiences.

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Introduction

Following the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848), the educational experience of Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and other racial groups has followed patterns of inequality, segregation, and exclusion. After the Mexican American War, theories based on genetics evolved to justify the superiority of the Anglo Americans culture over Mexican descent and Mexican-Americans, who were referred as "the other" (Urrieta & Quach, 2000; Menchaca, 1993). Once such rationales became obsolete, educators and administrators turned to cultural deficiencies (the culture of poverty), to persist in justifying White middle class superiority (Foley, 1997). Schools sought to implement strategies in order to "benefit" Mexican and Mexican-American students. This was the beginning of theories of assimilation and acculturation, which were implemented for the "benefit" of students from Mexican descent and Mexican-Americans. According to such theories, since their language, culture, and ethnicity were lacking what Anglo culture possessed, by assimilating to the American culture they were in the right path to academic and social success (Donato, 1997).

Children from Mexican descent as well as Mexican-Americans began to have a subordinated participation in education as well as in society. Their contributions were excluded and history was written from an Anglo perspective, for their language and culture were the only ones worthy of being told or written about. The role of schools became crucial as institutions of domination and structural subordination (Donato, 1997). Unfortunately assimilation and acculturation failed to transform the life of many students

from Latino, Mexican-American, and other racial groups. Students having to reject their culture and language became unsuccessful academically as well as socially. By rejecting their culture as well as their language, students did not have a sense of belonging, which was part of their academic failure. Urrieta & Quach (2000) highlight such conflicting feelings historically present in students and causing them such sense of belonging neither to one culture nor to the other. For Urrieta & Quach (2000), schools as part of the structured hegemonic relations have promoted an educational system of inclusion/exclusion. "This becomes a challenge to Latino students and often coerces them into rejecting their primary language and culture and adopting new labels in an attempt to become 'American'. Ironically for those who do consider themselves 'American', almost like a slap in the face, there are always the governmental and mainstream labels to remind them of their 'Otherness' (p.29). Historically Latina/o, Mexican-American and students from other racial groups have tried to adapt to the American culture, but they have found out they do not belong to a culture that in fact rejects them. Although there has been resistance by Mexican-Americans/Chicanos to assimilation, power relations have affected and influenced the lives of students (Darder 1991; Freire, 1993).

For some authors such as Brown & Souto-Manning (2008) the root of the problem is power relations manifested in school policies and societal problems. "In order to get at the root of Latinos' school failure it is critical to examine school policies, societal problems, and politics. Current problems in schools are only manifestations of these factors" (p.38). Deficit perspectives, as well as, assimilation perspectives have prevented Mexican-Americans, Chicano, and Mexican students from active participation,

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engagement, and successful maneuvering through the educational system in the United States. Since students have had to adapt or conform to the given knowledge and culture, the school system has promoted conformity. Students have had to conform to the given knowledge instead of being the producers of it. They have adapted and reproduced a different culture instead of maintaining their own (Soto-Manning, 2010; Foley, 2011).

New theories and pedagogical approaches such as critical pedagogy have been developed. They encourage educators to incorporate students' cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, and language in the classroom curriculum. (Freire, 1993; Darder, 1991; Souto-Manning, 2010). Advocates of critical pedagogy propose to humanize narratives, daily experiences, and histories of Latina/o, Mexican-Americans and other racial groups instead of consider them as a deficit. If historically schools were part of a structural and orchestrated domination (Darder, 1991), supporters of critical pedagogy have advanced an education where children should be the Subjects of their own learning (Freire, 1993; Souto Manning, 2010)

Following critical pedagogy proponents such as Freire, Darder, and Souto Manning, in the present pedagogical inquiry I propose that literature circles based on a critical pedagogy have the potential of providing spaces to engage students in their own educational process in order to be academically and socially successful in their educational endeavor without assimilating to the dominant culture or even worst rejecting their language, culture, ethnicity (Valenzuela, 1999); but at the same time acquiring a second language and a second culture. It is attainable for Latina/o, Mexican -American, and minority racial groups students to maintain their heritage language and culture while

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acquiring a second language and culture. Achieving such levels of bilingualism, bilateralism, and biculturalism demands from educators that students see their daily experiences reflected in the classroom curriculum (Bartolomé, 2003; Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Jimenez, 2000; Moll et al 1992; Arce, 2004). According to Ruiz (1984) there are several dispositions or orientations towards language, which are "language as a problem, language as a right, and language as a resource"; therefore, following Ruiz I also propose that language should viewed as a resource by educators. Students have the potential of becoming bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural.

Research Questions:

The following research questions will guide this pedagogical inquiry:

1. How can participation in literature study circles support literacy development, motivation to read, development of critical thinking skills, and social justice for a group of English Language Learners?

2. In what ways can literature study circles help third graders make the transition to biliteracy without loosing their interest in Spanish/ L1 literacy?

Theoretical Framework

This pedagogical approach is heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1993), who has been of one the most influential educators in the last decades. I would like to make clear that I do not intend to copy his work and implement it in the classroom. Although Freire's work was developed in the context of Brazilian, Latin American and African adult literacy programs, his work and ideas have overcome the test of time, and the cultural and physical boundaries. In the United States when educators and people hear about Freirean beliefs in many instances they immediately think about Marx's philosophy, and the ideas of oppressed and oppressor; however, my intent is to re-create Freirean ideals in our particular context. Freire himself does not want his ideas to be imported; however, his work can be "re-created" according to our context. Souto - Manning (2010) has been successful in recreating Freire's work in the United States working with elementary students in first grade, and working with pre-service teachers and in-service teachers. She has developed his work from Freirean culture circles and has changed it to literature circles. It is important to mention that his conceptualizations about education are not a structured program to be followed verbatim. This is why for some authors such as Jimenez (2000), Freire's approach to literature could be "difficult to transform into a program of literacy instruction (p.974)" due to all different contexts in which his approach was and is still applied. Once again, I do not intend to reproduce Freirean beliefs, but to re-create them.

Based on his personal experiences as a child, Paulo Freire challenged the traditional concept of education or what Mc Laren (1988) calls education's "sacrosanct

positions", which consisted in the students' ability to read and write. He also proposed a new conception of education, which encompasses "reading words and worlds, texts and contexts" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 17). For Freire the concept of literacy is not only for acquiring a set of skills for reading and writing, or to decode sounds, but students' ability to read their world and their context. "We need to go beyond this reading comprehension of literacy and begin to view it as the relationship of the learners to the world taking place in the very general milieu in which learners travel" (Freire & Macedo, 1987/2013, p.15). Foley (2011) highlights how Freirean concepts of literacy go beyond reading and writing, beyond mechanics and technicalities, and encompass students' understanding of their own history and reality. Bartlett et al (2011), present how throughout the history of education the concept of literacy has moved from the ability to read and write, to consider the cultural and political implications, "moving from literacy as a fixed category and discrete sets of skills to literacy as situated practices with social, political, and ideological significance" (p.155). They place special emphasis on the new literacy studies such as critical literacy.

Freire's (1993) conceptualization with regards to education deals with its political and social character. According to him, education is inherently political; thus the notion that education is neutral is a myth. Education cannot be reduced merely to a task serving the community or a personal a-political endeavor. Traditionally education has been related to power and the reproduction of culture (Darder, 1991; Foley, 2011). Unfortunately power relations have been asymmetrical for minority groups and students have learned to read discourses from the dominant culture (Gibson & Koyama, 2011;

Arce, 2004; Darder, 1997). In the introduction to the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993) Donaldo Macedo states that such students have been living with a "borrowed and colonized cultural existence" (p.11). Throughout history students have been denied access to their history, reality, culture and language (Ruiz, 1984; McCarty & Warhol, 2011). Asymmetrical power relations have allowed the dominant culture to reproduce their culture, ideologies, and experiences. Freire and Macedo (1987/2013) making reference to "cultural reproduction" in traditional education emphasize the reproduction of experiences of the dominant group. "By 'cultural reproduction' we refer to collective experiences that function on the interest of the dominant group rather than in the interest of the oppressed groups that are the object of its policies" (p.221).

Power relations and reproduction of the dominant society experiences have lead to the belief that students are objects of education. As students are considered objects of education, they need to be filled with words and narratives from the dominant culture. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire (1993) states that education "suffers a narration sickness". Instead of integrating students' realities and experiences in the process of education, teachers fill students with their narratives, which are detached from students' reality. The educational process has nothing to do with students' experiences, culture, and language. Thus, according to Freire (1970) students become alienated by education instead of being humanized by it. "As objects his task is to 'study' the so called reading lessons, which in fact are almost completely alienating and alienated, having so little, if anything, to do with students' socio-cultural reality" (208). This educational process has created passive students on what Freire (1993) has called "banking education". Students

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have been considered empty bank accounts that need to be "filled" by teachers with his/her own narratives. "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (p.72). Freire (1993) states clearly the attitudes and practices from the dominant society deeming students as objects of education and practicing "banking education".

The practices of banking education, reproduction of the dominant culture, and asymmetrical power relations have also affected students in their ability to speak and read their world. The culture, language, history, and experiences from the dominant society have been imposed on students who forcefully have adapted to such imposition instead of becoming producers of culture. Adaptation to the dominant culture has caused students to be passive in the educational process and have contributed to a "culture of silence". "The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world" (Freire, 1993, p. 73). "Culture of silence" refers not only to imposition and passivity, but also to what has been ignored from subordinated groups. Giroux in the introduction to Freire's work (1985) *The Politics of Education* makes reference to this reality of privileging the culture of the dominant culture while ignoring the subordinated group's experiences. It is "not only to confirm and privilege students from the dominant classes, but also through exclusion and insult to discredit the histories,

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experiences, and dreams of subordinated groups" (XV). Culture of silence excludes and ignores students' contributions to their own education.

Freirean conception of education also encompasses its social character. Freire along with Vygotsky (1978) emphasize that education is socially and culturally constructed. When education is socially and culturally constructed, it becomes a tool for transformation for it is related to students' lives. Freire not only challenges traditional concepts of education (banking education), but he also contributes to viewing the educational process in a different way. In this new approach, students become Subjects of their own education for it is based on their daily life, experiences, culture, history, and context. Freire (1993) challenges banking education and proposes a new approach, which is problem-posing education. "Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creating power, problem posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the latter strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality" (p.81). Problem posing education is based on students' reality, and daily life experiences; therefore, students become producers of their own culture instead of reproducers of the dominant culture and ideologies. Problem posing education in this sense becomes emancipatory. Freire (1993), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, summarizes the difference between traditional education (banking education) and his contribution to an emancipatory and democratic education. "In sum: banking theory and practice, as immobilizing and fixating forces, fail to acknowledge men and women as historical beings; problem-posing theory and practice take the people's historicity as their starting point" (p.84).

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Participants that engage in problem posing and problem solving education engage in dialogue for a transformation of their world. Freire urges a new relationship between teacher and students through dialogue, and between students and their world through the transformation of it. Effective education has to transform students' lives, and students have to transform their world. Students instead of being alienated, disempowered, and dehumanized, become an essential part of the educational process. Students are now at the center of the process as Subjects of their own education (Freire, 1993). The new approach consists mainly in providing spaces for students to think critically about their world in relation to the mainstream culture, to start a dialogue about ways of how to change their own world, and to become social agents of change (Souto-Manning, 2010). In her study Souto-Manning (2010), presents the power and possibilities of Freirean "cultural circles", which represent the best expression of Freire's new approach to education. It is crucial to emphasize that such "culture circles" do not represent a magic formula or program that needs to be followed in order to be able to implement the Freirean concept of education; however, there are common aspects pertaining to "cultural circles" that delineate the most important aspects of Freire's approach. Souto Manning (2010), provide displays of the different stages of the "critical cycle" of cultural circles developed to present essential points, which drive Freirean approach to education.

Having students' daily experiences as their starting point, culture circles are aimed to promote consciousness in students (conscientizacão) about their actual world in relation to the dominant culture in order to change it and become social agents of change (Freire 1993). Lloyd (1972) when developing the Freirean concept of consciousness

maintains this dual verisimilitude of being aware of the presence of power relations and a commitment to change them. "Conscientization both initiates and supports a process by which people become aware of the contradictions of the social structures and situations in which they live, in order to change such structures" (p.5). Although critical consciousness about power relations is a critical point in the process, it is imperative to mention that Freire (1993) states that the ultimate goal of the process is for students to become social agents of change in order to transform their world, which is not stagnant. "In problem posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p. 83).

Freirean ideals related to education will drive my study about literature circles. His emancipatory, dialogic, transformative, and democratic approach to education will inform my re-creation of his work in the context of my classroom. If Souto- Manning (2010) has been successful recreating Freirean work and ideas in the United States, I also intend to "resituate the practice in the times and places we inhabit" (XV). Educators in many instances are still more used to banking education than any other type of education. This seems opposite to real learning. Teachers have become used to lecturing during the week and assessing students at the end of it. Thus, teaching through problem-posing education, critical thinking, developing opportunities where students are able to express their voices, and students transforming their world makes teachers and administrators wonder whether students are learning or not, and whether or not that kind of education is good teaching.

Literature Review

After the Mexican- American War (1846-1848), the educational history of Latino, Mexican -American and other racial minority students in the US reveals trends of segregation, discrimination, and inequalities. (Menchaca &Valencia, 1990; Menchaca, 1993). Arguing biological, cultural, and linguistic justifications students belonging to the aforementioned groups have been segregated. Several theories and practices have been developed to justify the perceived inferiority of immigrant students (Mexicans in particular) and superiority of Anglo-Saxon students. Social Darwinism, Eugenics, Manifest Destiny, and practices such as psychometrics and tracking were among the most prevalent ideologies and practices to affirm superiority of one race over the other (Menchaca & Valencia, 1990). Valencia (1997) analyzes the "genetic pathology model", a term coined by him, to describe the intellectual superiority of whites over ethnic minority groups based solely on the genetic code. Following the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848) Latina/o students have experienced trends of assimilation, segregation, unequal access to unequal schools, and lack of validation of their language and culture (San Miguel, 1993; Donato, 1997). Menchaca (1993) narrates how over a century (1848-1947) racial and social deficits have been the rationales used to justify segregation, discrimination, and inequalities in the schooling process of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.

During the 1900's educators believed that Mexican students were an obstacle in the English-speaking students' academic development. Thus, they needed to be in separate schools. "Mexican Schools" were created and students segregated into such

schools (Gonzalez, 1990). Gonzales (1990) writes about the reasons used to justify the creation of Mexican Schools:

> Administrators and educators confidently insisted that Anglo-American and Mexican were substantially distinct culturally. Moreover, the culture of the Mexican child diminished his or her capacity to learn to such a degree that it was unwise to place both in the same school setting…. Second, the inherited intelligence of Mexican children, as measured by IQ tests, purportedly fell well below that of the average Anglo child…Third, the level of measured intelligence and the employment pattern peculiar (which parents seems to pass on to their children) appeared to contain the seed of a social inevitability (p.56).

These arguments contributed to the creation of vocational education as part of the curriculum in "Mexican Schools".

As immigrant students' language and culture were considered deficits (Valencia, 1997; Foley, 1997), such deficiencies needed to be "fixed" by learning the English language and the Anglo-American culture. Donato (1997) makes reference to assimilation and the role of schools in the process. "One of the puzzles of this period was that although these new immigrants were seen as a culturally backward mass, social reformers were indeed working to assimilate them into American life. Thus public schools assumed the role of introducing these children into the mainstream of U.S. life" (p.17). Spanish was removed from public schools giving supremacy to English. Not only the language, but also the Mexican culture was taken away from the school curriculum. This created an Anglo centric view of history, which diminished the contributions, values

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and language provided by Chicanos; thus, making them invisible (Oboler, 1995). Nevertheless, the quest for educational equality continued.

The creation of Colegio Altamirano in Texas constitutes one of several examples of resistance to Americanization where middle class Tejanos endeavored to provide access to education and to establish school for their children, which provided Tejanos with language and cultural identity (Salinas, 2000). Also the creation of LULAC, G.I. Forum, and court cases such as Lemon Grove and *Méndez v. Westminster* are examples of tactics, strategies, and court actions utilized by middle class communities in Texas, California and other states from the Southwest to desegregate public education (San Miguel, 1983; Gonzalez, 1990). The primary goal was the integration to the American-Anglo social and political life while maintaining their heritage language and culture.

Chicano Movement and the creation of The Young Lords Party on the 1960's has been one the most effective and representative movements from Mexican-Americans/Chicanos and Puerto Ricans resisting rhetoric and practices favoring assimilation of students to the mainstream culture, and political and cultural exclusion (Oboler, 1995). Oboler (1995) states how these movements responded to political and cultural segregation and other forms of discrimination experienced by these groups since the Mexican-American War. "Their movements responded to a long legacy of political and cultural exclusion, emphasizing their respective communities' histories in the United States" (p. 44). Two basic tenets professed by these movements were the creation of a new identity, which was viewed with pride, and reinstitution of their collective culture and language. As Oboler explains:

A key aspect of the growth of the Mexican-American/Chicano and Puerto Rican

social movements of the 1960s and 1970s was the acknowledgment of the

experience of exclusion as a significant factor shaping the diverse communities

and the individual lives of movement participants (Oboler, 1995, p.70).

Since traditionally education had been a strategic source of power, students realized their

goals could only be achieved through education. Thus, their demands as stated in "El

Plan de Santa Barbara" were mainly on access to higher education, culturally relevant

curriculum, and an education that valued what they valued.

La Lucha against political and cultural exclusion, the construction of a new

identity, and demands from the Chicano movement to participate in higher education as

well other factors mentioned by Ovando (2003) such as changes in immigration policies,

and immigration from Cuba contributed to the rebirth of bilingual education. All these

factors lead to the Bilingual Educational Act (1968) whose significance is expressed by

Ovando (2003) who argues that, "the Bilingual Educational Act marked a significant first

step moving away from the Darwinian sink-or-swim educational practices so prevalent

from the 1880s through the 1960s. Language minority students' ancestral language and

cultures were recognized in some form in the contents and processes of school life" (p.9).

This was the first time that by law, schools were forced to accept students' first language

as means to learn English. Lau v. Nichols and Equal Educational Opportunities Acts

(1974) followed this first legislation and contributed to the development of Bilingual

Education, which continued accepting students' native language in order to acquire

English. It was the appearance of English- only programs during the Reagan

administration that assimilation to the dominant language and culture reappeared again in the process of the schooling of Mexicans, Mexican-Americans/Chicanos, and other racial minority students (Ovando, 2003).

Despite efforts to integrate students' language, culture, and experiences in the schooling process, deficit rhetoric and assimilation have filtered through schools and educators. The process of assimilating students to the dominant culture has never been a successful process for minority students and their educational achievement. Levels of underachievement and dropout rates among Latino students and students belonging to other historical racial minorities continue to grow in alarming rates (Yosso, 2006). In recent years, new theories have been developed challenging traditional ways of educating children (assimilating and banking educating students), and proposing new constructions of literacy. Freire (1993) challenges banking education because it makes students merely objects of education. He proposes a problem posing education, which transforms students in Subjects of their own learning. This new construction also acknowledges the relation of culture and power in schools and encourages integrating students' experiences, language and culture in the individuals' educational process (Friere, 1993; Darder, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999; Camarota & Romero, 2006; Souto-Manning, 2010). As a new philosophical view of educating students, they have proposed what they call "critical pedagogy". Critical educational theorists do not propose critical pedagogy as a new recipe, method or profile to be followed by teachers educating minority students. Darder (1991) for instance states "it is a foundation that is clearly based on an understanding of the link between culture and power and firmly rooted in a political construct of cultural

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democracy and a commitment to student empowerment" (p. 75). Following Darder's conception of critical pedagogy, Souto-Manning (2010) also defines critical pedagogy in the context of culture circles:

> Critical pedagogy is an educational process which situates schools within societies and considers structural forces which influence and shape schools….It acknowledges that all learning is influenced by cultural differences and by the context in which it takes place (p.10).

Two basic tenets constitute the foundation of critical pedagogy. First, deconstruction of power relations perpetuated by schools' ideologies and practices, and how such power relations affect the lives of students. In the educational endeavor of Latino students and minority students, power relations have been always present (Diaz-Soto, 2002; Darder, 1991; Darder, 1997). Darder (1991) for instance criticizes schools for perpetuating underachievement of bilingual students by imposing the dominant culture. Schools have been the places preserving traditional Anglo-American values such as social control, the structure of society, individualism, meritocracy, passivity, and objectivity of knowledge. This is what Freire (1993) refers to as "banking education". Schools have also maintained traditional American School practices such a testing, tracking, grouping, and curriculum design. She states that such power relations have been asymmetrical:

> Instead of empowering teachers by assisting them to develop a critical understanding of their purpose as educators, most programs foster a dependency on predefined curriculum, outdated classroom strategies and

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techniques, and traditionally rigid classroom environment that position not only students but teachers as well into physically and intellectually oppressive situations (Darder, 1997, p.332).

Critical educators not only acknowledge asymmetrical power relations but they promote an emancipatory and transformative education by including students' voices in their own educational process, empowering students to be Subjects of their own education (Freire, 1993), and providing students with tools to recognize oppression instead of just passively accepting it. Souto- Manning (2010) states, "recognizing oppression is, after all, the first step towards change" (p.10).

In addition to perpetuating the ideologies and values of the dominant culture, power relations affect the lives of students. Schools, by preserving ideologies and values from the dominant culture, have become instruments of domination. Minority students do not see their values, daily experiences, and language reflected in the schools' curriculum (Darder, 1991; Diaz-Soto, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Darder (1991) emphasizes, "the language that many bicultural students bring to the classroom is systematically silenced and stripped away through values and beliefs that support its inferiority to Standard English" (p. 36). Valenzuela (1999) highlights the importance of race, language, and culture in the relationship between teachers and students emphasizing the significance of caring. In her study she analyzes school practices (the way students are taught, the lack of a caring pedagogy, and assimilation), which do not capitalize on students resources such as language and culture (subtracting schooling); thus affecting them socially and academically. The consequences of students' experiences of subtractive schooling are

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that students feel disconnected from school, alienated, and powerless. Critical educators, "realize students enter classrooms and schools with specific bodies of knowledge that are sociocultural and historically located" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p.11).

Challenging institutionalized racism and arguing against deficit theories, Yosso (2005) presents a new lens through which students' language, culture, and experiences are viewed as assets. Yosso challenges racism and reveals Cultural Community Wealth. Yosso (2006) also intends to humanize the reality of Chicanas/os students using critical race counter storytelling. Counter stories recounted experiences of racism (as individuals and as group), challenged injustice, and resisted inequalities. Also, Arce (2004) presents in her study how socially conscious and critical Latina/o educators resist multiple dominant structures. This is what she calls "counter hegemonic conditions". Counter hegemonic conditions are "conscious acts of resistance to the dominant ideology" (p.228). Moll (1992) and Valencia (2009) also present their studies to debunk those myths (assumptions) that Latino students speak a deficit language and participate in a deficient culture. Having these great theories as examples, critical pedagogy educators have to continue empowering students and parents to keep challenging and fighting inequalities.

Several studies have been conducted encouraging teachers to use literature circles as a powerful way to promote critical thinking skills among students even if starting in the primary grades. Martínez-Roldan & López-Robertson (2000) argue against teachers that believe students need to learn to decode first before participating in critical discussions. They believe that students are capable of learning and engaging in

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meaningful conversations if teachers create a non-threatening environment (community-like), which promote such conversations. Moreover, arguing against teachers having low expectations for working class or bilingual students, researchers believe that students' voices should not be silenced by preventing them from using reading as a mean to develop critical thinking. Following Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson, Carrison & Ernst-Slavit (2005), argue that students' deficiencies in reading and writing skills should not (and need not) prevent them from participating in meaningful discussions about reading.

One of the most powerful aspects of literature circles is a double interaction. The interaction among students by constructing meaning and asking questions about the reading, and the interaction between students and the text by making predictions, visualizing, and making connections with their daily experiences (Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005; Martínez-Roldán, 2005). Researchers mentioned in their studies that this double interaction contributed to make gains in students' oral communication, attitudes toward reading, and reading comprehension:

> The students engage in a process of inquiry as they addressed each other in the small group, entertained ideas, play with possibilities and tried to understand critical issues that affect the characters of the book while also considering the story's relevance to their lives (Martínez-Roldán, 2005, p.23).

Transactions or interactions promoted by literature circles lead us to view reading as a social process instead of an individual activity where the teacher's role is crucial by scaffolding students' interactions (King, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). In his study, King

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(2001) mentions the interactions of students who have been participating in literature circles for six months. Using one of the student's quotes "I don't just read the book I think about it now"; King states how literature circles, with the teacher as a facilitator, have challenged students to actively participate in the reading process. Based on Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (1978), this study emphasizes the role of the teacher as a facilitator and encourager. Students need to engage in conversations among themselves and not just to the teacher. I explored the power of literature study circles in my own third grade classroom to promote an emancipatory, and empowering education. Just because students are not able to decode, or are not fluent in their decoding such students should not be deprived from participating and benefiting from classroom discussions.

Method

Participants

My participants attended Cesar Chavez Elementary School (pseudonym), which is a Title I school located in an urban working class community at Austin, Texas. The year this inquiry was conducted (2012), 91.9 % of the student population was Latina/o; however, 95.9 % of the school population was considered economically disadvantaged. 20 students (11 male and 9 female) from a third grade bilingual classroom (late exit model) were part of this pedagogical inquiry. Since participants were Spanish dominant, none of them had made the transition to English yet; however, they were enthusiastic and proud of being in the process of becoming bilingual and biliterate. They had different levels of oral, reading, and writing proficiency in English and Spanish.

The first step towards the implementation of literature circles was during the first part of the year, which became our preparation as a whole group for literature circles. It is crucial to create a safe environment like a community where students feel confortable participating (Martínez- Roldán & López-Robertson, 2000). We started reading aloud the book *Sylvia and Aki* (2012) by Winifred Conkling as part of a project between some schools in Austin and the University of Texas to celebrate the Tomas Rivera Award. The book *Sylvia and Aki* was one the winners of such award, which is celebrated at Texas State University in San Marcos. During and after read alouds, we spent long periods of time in-group discussions about the book. Although the book is written in English, most of the time group discussions were conducted in Spanish, which was used as a support for students' comprehension and the creation of a nonthreatening environment due to

different language proficiency levels. Such discussions made students extremely interested in the book that they read it during independent reading time. Moreover, they took the book home to read (or talk about) it to their parents. Students made the book part of their daily lives. Using classroom literature that is culturally relevant to students and group discussions about the book(s) set the tone for reading and discussion about literature. I wanted students to know that we were going to use literature that was relevant to their lives and daily experiences, and that their voices were an essential part in their schooling process.

We started literature circles during the second semester (2012). This was our second step in the literature circles' implementation. Before assigning roles (Discussion Director, Connector, Literary Luminary, Researcher, and Illustrator), which encouraged students to engage with the books, gain independence, and generate their own questions, I modeled and practiced with students such roles using the book *Harvesting Hope* (2003) by Kathleen Krull. Building students' confidence regarding their abilities and independence is an essential part of literature circles.

Lastly, once students had practiced different roles, they were divided in four groups with five students in each group. Groups were formed with high, medium, and low students depending on their English and Spanish Language skills. Literature circles met twice a week for a period of 18 weeks to read and discuss the bilingual books *Friends from the other side/Amigos del otro lado* (1993)*, Esperanza Rising/ Esperanza Renace* (2000)*, and Maximilian the Mystery of the Guardian Angel* (2011). I selected the book *Friends from the other side/Amigos del otro lado* as the main source for data

analysis for this study. Moreover, I focused on the discourses, interactions, and utterances of one group, which was the most balanced group according to their English and Spanish Language proficiency. They became the focus group of this study.

Anecdotal notes and site notes about students' interactions, discussions, and questions in literature circles were collected; samples of students written responses to literature were the main sources of data to answer the research questions. Small group discussions from one the study groups were audio typed. They were transcribed, and later analyzed.

Data analysis was done based on recurrent themes generated from small group discussions, interactions, and writings. As a qualitative pedagogical inquiry, I was focused on students' perspectives (emic) in constructing their world (Merriam, 2009). The themes and patterns that I focused on were the ones regarding students' critical thinking skills, motivation to read, literacy development skills, and use of Spanish / L1.

One of the main motivations to conduct this study was my experience as an immigrant, educator, and member of the Latino community. Through my experience as an educator I have witnessed how a great deal of students in Middle and High School have lost pride on their culture and their language. In their effort to conform to the American culture they have rejected theirs. The hegemony of English and the American culture is visible and tangible in their schooling process at these stages. Nevertheless, a great number have not become successful in school for they end up being part of the statistics, which display increasing numbers of drop out rates from school. They intended to assimilate to the mainstream culture by rejecting theirs; however they end up not

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having the same educational opportunities as students belonging to the dominant culture (Yosso, 2006).

Also, as a third grade teacher I have experienced frustration because of the accountability system in the schools. Schools' priority relies in learning a predetermined set of skills, which are dictated to students. This fact has caused disengagement from the schooling process. In addition to this, accountability has made students exhibit low levels of critical thinking skills. Students are passive learners with emphasis on repetition, memorization, and standardization (Freire, 1993; Bartolomé, 2003). Due to emphasis on testing, educators focus on the final product and not on the process. Students receive a passive education for their voices a silenced instead of being part of their learning (Valenzuela, 1999; Valencia, 2009; Yosso, 2006). Following Darder (1991) and Freirean ideologies I firmly believe that students have the ability to become Subjects of their educational process and education should serve to empower students towards an emancipatory and transformative education.

Findings

Although the concept of literature circles has been around for a long time (Martínez-Roldán & López- Robertson, 2000; Martínez-Roldán, 2005; Souto Manning, 2010) its implementation in the classroom produces uneasiness. Teachers are constrained by several factors such as their philosophy of education, classroom management, students' inability to read independently, and testing preparation. Despite all these constraints, Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson (2000), Martínez-Roldán (2005), and Souto Manning (2010) conducted their studies of literature circles in first and second grade classrooms. They argue that developing critical thinking skills should not be delayed until students have learned to decode. Even though several students who were part of their studies were not able to decode or read independently, this was not an impediment in co-constructing meaning about their reading and students' discourses allowed them to express their voices instead of being silenced. Literature circles have the potential to provide students with opportunities of becoming independent, responsible for their learning, and have access to an "equitable education" (DeNicolo & Franquiz, 2006). De Nicolo & Franquiz (2006) refer to literature circles as "critical encounters with literature to address the specific moments in reading that disrupt the traditional social pattern of talk" (p. 157). Nevertheless, literature circles are completed when students begin developing critical skills (critical consciousness about power relations and how they affect their lives) towards an emancipatory and transformative education (Martínez - Roldán & López-Robertson, 2000).

After analyzing the data I found several gains made by students as a consequence of their participation in literature circles. Among such gains we can count their motivation to read; integration of their daily experiences as part of the classroom and their learning, which enhanced their learning; improving their higher order thinking skills; and empowerment to take action.

Motivation to Read

Data analysis exhibits gains and improvements in different areas students made throughout the process. First, literature circles improved students' motivation to read. Students wanted to be part of these circles and were looking forward to the days they were holding their meetings for small group conversations. This was true even for reluctant readers. It was amazing to observe reluctant readers reading the pages students had agreed on before going to their group discussions. It was even more fascinating hearing students asking at the end of the day if they could take the book home and read it again. "Can I take the book home and read it again?" "Can I read the whole book at home?" These were phrases heard frequently during literature circles. It was so powerful and rewarding to hear such voices coming from students not wanting to read before participating in literature circles. Also, when we were about to finish literature discussions, Melissa, one of the students from the focus group mentioned that having literature study circles was interesting. She was comparing the literature circles with telenovelas (soap opera).

"Maestro, having these conversations is interesting! (she sounded very

enthusiastic)". Adding to this point, Angela mentioned with the same enthusiasm

as Melissa "se termina cuando (it finishes when) you are like –oh my God I want

to see this part, I want to see this part—".

Angela was referring to reading just up to the pages the group had agreed on. Students

wanted to read the entire book at once for they had immense interest in the story;

nevertheless they were committed to read just up to the agreed-upon pages with the

purpose of making sure everyone could make predictions about the different parts of the

reading.

In addition, students whose role in the literature circles was to be the researcher

were eager to research about different topics related to the book. They did research in the

classroom, computer lab, and at home. "I have researched something on the computer. In

my research at home and in the classroom I found out that…." were comments I heard

very often from students throughout the process. During small group discussions about

the book *Friends from the other side/Amigos del otro lado* students were talking about

the life of Gloria Anzaldúa, her work as a writer, they were even talking about why she

gave the title to the book. They were also talking about interesting topics such as how

long it could take to cross the border, the dangers of crossing the border, reasons why

people crosses the border, and even stereotypes about Mexicans.

Angela: She (Gloria Anzaldúa) has done a great book that has been famous; it's

called " The Mestiza", on her life in the Mexican border and incorporated her

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life… In my research I found that almost 4 million people a year cross the border,

and not only men, women, kids also just because they wanna see their family.

Melissa: I found in my research on the book that Gloria that all the books that she

did some of them have been based on her true life.

Students' participation in literature discussions influenced them to extend the reading beyond the book. They did not limit themselves just to know about the author's name, but they went further to investigate about her life and her work. Only an emancipatory education is able to provoke students' interest in reading and inquiry in these ways.

Students' voices through discussions, discourses, and connections to the readings could have been lost if we had not implemented literature circles in the classroom. When students see their every day life experiences reflected in the curriculum, that fact sparks and maintains their interest in the reading. Borrowing from Freire's (1997) words, students were "reading words and reading their worlds" for their stories and their narratives were part of the classroom curriculum. Reading the book was just the initial moment to inquire, and explore their world. Students felt personally connected to the story, which increased their engagement in the readings as well as participation in later discussions. They mentioned how the mothers of some of them had crossed the border to join their fathers. When talking about their connections, Hector even mentioned that he and his mom had crossed the border when he was a child to join his father.

Integrating Experiences/Making Connections

Darder (1991) analyzes the link between culture and power as part of schools in the United States and argues that the link is "systematically asymmetrical" and affecting the life of students:

> Hegemony in American schools results, more specifically, from institutionalized social relations of power that are systematically asymmetrical, and therefore unequally privilege students from the dominant culture over students from subordinate cultures (pp. 34-35).

Also, Souto-Manning (2010) referring to the Freirean concept that education is "inherently political" challenges that knowledge is "culture free". If teachers want students to become biliterate and bicultural, it is imperative for them to integrate students' culture (ways of being) and language into the classroom curriculum; otherwise students will continue adapting to the dominant culture and disengaging from school. Students are placed in a constant struggle between assimilating to the dominant culture and discarding their own (Darder, 1991; Jimenez, 2000). The following excerpt is an example of students' engagement when their experiences are integrated in the classroom. They felt they had so much to contribute for their experiences were validated.

> *Mi papá me dijo que el cruzó la frontera en Arizona. Estaba muy caliente el clima. Arizona es el desierto (my dad crossed the border at Arizona. The weather was very hot. Arizona is part of the desert) " said Maria. Angela shared her dad's experience, "my dad crossed the border swimming". Angel shared his mom's experience, "my mom crossed the border to join my dad. She said that it could*

take days to cross the border" Victor who was the discussion director at that time

asked: *"Angel you asked someone how many days it takes to cross the border?*

Tell us how many days. Angel: It takes like four days or more to cross.

Making connections with their lived experiences, especially with their parents'

experiences, enables teachers to validate their students' experiences. The critical

pedagogy classroom no longer considers students' stories as deficits. Such experiences

become part of the classroom enhancing students learning. Parents become teachers and

learning extends beyond the classroom. Creating spaces for learning outside of the

classroom makes learning more meaningful for it relates to the students' lives. Instead of

just adapting to knowledge, students become producers of knowledge.

Students making connections with their own experiences was an essential part of

literature circles. Although some students made connections with books they have read,

the majority made connections with their families' experiences. I encouraged students to

talk to their parents about the reading with the purpose of integrating students'

experiences and language. The focus group did most of their interactions in English, but

for the conversations with their families students used Spanish. In order to share their

families' experiences, the group had to paraphrase either in English or Spanish. Their

native language supported gains made to make the transition to biliteracy. Students

shared the experience of their families crossing the border. Integrating parents into the

classroom's curriculum helps students to keep interest in their native language while

doing the transition to biliteracy.

It is important to mention that in a culturally relevant pedagogy students do not read only in their native language. They use both languages or more for the purpose is to become biliterate and bicultural. For instance, students used both languages during their discussions, and the books were written in both languages. Once students saw their language, culture, and experiences reflected in the classroom and as part of the curriculum, they started voicing their opinions. Sharing connections became pivotal to promote conversations. Darder (1991) when talking about constructing a critical pedagogy as the foundation for bicultural education mentions that schools perpetuating power relations very often ignore the narratives of minorities in their curriculum. In order to promote students' social empowerment she proposes "a critical pedagogy approach must appropriate students' own histories by delving into their own biographies and systems of meaning" (p. 80). Literature circles allowed integrating students and parents' narratives in the classroom; thus promoting spaces where students can voice their opinions for an optimum learning. Literature circles empowered and engaged students for they perceived their experiences and language embedded in the classroom's curriculum and not dissociation between home and school.

Higher Order Thinking Skills

The developing of critical thinking skills in a critical pedagogy education has to come from students' own experiences. Students should name their experiences, be critical about them, and transform them. Paulo Freire (1993) rejecting what he calls "banking education" whose purpose is to transform students in objects that can be "filled"

(controlled) inhibiting their critical consciousness, advocates for a problem –posing education. Problem-posing education is based on students' experiences from their world. Through dialogue students start developing critical consciousness (conscientizacão), which urges students to become social agents of change. As we mentioned before, critical consciousness enables students to acquire awareness of how power relations are part of the schooling process and affect them; therefore such awareness urges them to work for change.

The data also reveals improvements in students' critical thinking skills asking and answering questions, and developing critical consciousness. After modeling the role of discussion director and releasing the responsibility to students, I noticed that the discussion director (s) was asking questions requiring just recall facts, which did not elicit a conversation. "How does Joaquin (one of the main characters in the book *Friends from the other side*) feel at the beginning of the book"? Each student gave a one-word answer and the conversation stopped. If Hector, discussion director at that time, had asked students "why do you think that?" the conversation could have lasted longer. As the literature circles progressed, I noticed that questions posed by the discussion director required more analysis. "If you were to describe Prietita (one of the main characters in the book *Friends from the other side*) what words could you use and why?" These questions by Hector made the conversation more natural and rich. For instance, Angela's answer to the question was "she (Prietita) is brave and a good friend because she helped Joaquin from the other kids and now she is giving him food. She is still helping him". Upon hearing this words Luis continued the conversation "Yo estoy de acuerdo porque

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Ella no le tuvo miedo a los otros niños. Ellos le pudieron haber pegado por defender a Joaquín". (I agree because she was not afraid of the other kids. She could have been beaten for them for defending Joaquin). Students went from answering just facts to analyzing characters. In addition to this, students went from analyzing to applying the reading; thus developing critical consciousness. The following is an excerpt from one of the discussions where students were analyzing what to do after reading the book.

"Yo creo que la páginas que hemos leído tartan de decirnos que necesitamos ayudar a otras personas aunque no las conocemos. Algunas personas lo han hecho. Ellos no saben hablar ingles, pero vienen a visitar a sus familias" (I think all the pages we have read try to tell us we need to help other people even if we do not know them. Some people have done that. They do not know English, but still come and visit their families).

Through the process of participating in literature circles students became Subjects of their education by constructing their own meaning and understanding based on their experiences. Developing critical thinking skills gave them awareness of their reality and their ability to transform it. Martínez-Roldán (2000) emphasizes the importance of literature circles in this process. "Through this type of curricular engagement students have an opportunity to get away from a banking model of education and create room for a liberatory and transformative dialogue conducing to overcoming different kinds of oppression beginning with the oppression of not being allowed to think and speak" (p.24). The banking model of education creates passive students because problem posing does not come from students' narratives, but from teacher's narratives.

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Social Justice

> *When I was going to my house when school finished, I saw a girl that she was walking and some guys were telling her bad words but I didn't know the girl so I just said "stop telling her bad words and bad stuff," so they said to her sorry and they never told her bad stuff again.*

This example happened while literature circles were conducted. The above conversation is part of one of the literature circles. Melissa, one of the participants, when the discussion director asked for connections she shared with her group that based on the reading of *Friends from the other side* she decided to help one of the girls being teased by other kids. Students' educational process in becoming biliterate requires that they learn to read the world in order to transform it. An emancipatory education where students are the subjects of their own learning has the transformation of the world as an imperative. (Freire,1993; Darder, 1991; Souto-Manning, 2010; Martinez Roldan, 2005). Literature circles were the spaces where students began not only to converse about their world, but also to start transforming it. They started to become agents of change (Camarota, 2011). The purpose of reading in general and literature circles in particular cannot be accomplished if students do not take action. Melissa's actions exemplify how by participating in reading and literature circles she fulfilled the purpose.

The following example was not of the literature circles, but a direct consequence of them. During lunch and recess time one of the students was bullying several children from the class. Although he did not do it every day, this lasted for several weeks. He

even threatened students to do "something" to them if they let the teacher know. One day, after coming back from recess Angela told me the whole story. Once she said that to me, many students started complaining about the words he used to refer to them. Once the conversation finished, I asked Angela why she had not mentioned this to me before and she answered "I was afraid to say something, but once we read the book 'Friends from the other side' I knew I had to say something". This is a powerful example of students becoming agents of change as a consequence of being part of literature circles. These are significant examples of students becoming agents of social change. We need to consider this was the first time students had participated in literature circles with opportunities to express their voices. We should provide spaces for students to become subjects of their education with great hope they will continue naming problems, increasing consciousness, and continuing transforming their world. "These are small, but firm steps" (Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson, 2000) in their transformational process.

Literature circles provided optimum opportunities to engage students in their own process of learning. Latino students in general as well as students with low levels of achievement in many instances do not enjoy schooling because they do not feel part of their educational process. Participating in banking education, they have been told how to learn, what to learn, and when to learn. Their motivation for learning is absent for they have no choice in their own schooling process. Martínez -Roldán (2005) maintains that English-only propositions as well as prescribed reading programs have limited students' possibilities to engage in interactions with peers and exploration around text. During the whole process of literature circles implementation, students were given the opportunities

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of becoming Subjects of their own learning by becoming independent and responsible for their learning. First, by choosing their own book for literature discussions, students felt the freedom of engaging in the process of reading. Second, by assigning roles and exercising those roles, students felt the responsibility of engaging in literature discussions because they perceived their participation as an essential part of the process. At the beginning of the process such discussions were modeled by the teacher; however, as the discussion progressed they were entirely lead by students. Students also had freedom to speak the language they felt most comfortable using, which facilitated their engagement by being part of a nonthreatening environment where it was safe to talk. Students' response to such opportunities was distinguishable because they worked independently in creating meaning around their daily life experiences.

In addition to making students responsible for their own learning by becoming independent, literature discussions allowed children to see their own daily experiences reflected in the classroom curriculum. Deficit perspectives do not value students' language and culture for they are considered deficiencies (Foley, 1997), which has caused students to resist and feel disenfranchised themselves from the process of education (Valenzuela, 1999); nevertheless, literature circles were reflective of and enabled students to integrate their daily experiences to their learning process. By participating in literature discussions children had the opportunity to experience how their daily life experiences and school were not two different things, but unified and essential pieces in their schooling process. School and home were not detached, but integrated. Moll (1992) emphasizes how integrating "Funds of Knowledge" into the classroom enable educators

to consider students as a "whole". Integrating children's lived experiences sparked students' participation for they were constantly making connections between literature and their lives and attributing meaning to their experiences. Once students saw their experiences as part of the classroom, their participation increased immensely because they felt their narratives being validated; thus, they felt they had valuable contributions to their learning. During literature discussions, students participated more when the subjects were related to their lives or when they had talked to their parents about the subjects and themes related to the readings. In numerous instances during literature discussions students had to ask their parents about subjects related to the reading such as "how many days does it take to cross the border? or how it is like to cross the border? Once students obtained the information from their parents, they shared it during literature circles. Even children that rarely participate in whole group discussions were sharing their stories, connections, and experiences during literature circles.

Inquiry around text also granted students space to develop and improve their critical thinking skills and the quality of their verbal participations (Martínez-Roldán, 2005). Critical thinking skills are not only to compare and contrast different text, but students' ability to analyze and engage in meaningful conversations around text. High stakes testing accountability has caused teaching and learning to become about sets of skills that require memorization, recalling information, and repetition. And this has hindered students' ability to engage in dialogue and discussions in order to analyze texts. Literature circles have the potential of providing students with opportunities to engage in discussions about issues affecting their lives. For Darder (1990) literature circles are the

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space for students to talk about power relations and the role of such relations in their educational endeavor. For Martínez- Roldán (2005) literature circles are the space to talk about gender and inquiry. For Souto-Manning (2010) literature discussions are the space to talk about discrimination and segregation still present in schools' ideologies and practices.

Literature circles achieve their objective once students take action and become agents of change. It was not enough for students in their educational process to become aware of how power relations have affected their lives. At the end of literature discussions students felt empowered to transform their personal and social situation. As mentioned before in the section called "social justice", Angela felt empowered to take action once she read the book *Friends from the other side*. She knew that just reading the book was not the ultimate goal, but to take action. Angela, as well as Melissa, felt the urgency to exercise their agency to transform their world. Camarota (2011), when talking about Participatory Action Research (PAR), he states that the emphasis of education is not only on learning, but also on transforming students' world. "The emphasis is on 'learning,' but through a more formalized and pedagogical approach that elevates the potential of using knowledge to attain social justice" (p.519). Students' lived experiences at home as well as at school constitute just the beginning, but the ultimate goal is the exercise of their agency. Students have to move "from complaints to action" (Kwon, 2008). They have to become aware and transform their reality in order to have a transformative education.

Deficit rhetoric has silenced students' voices, and promoted students' disengagement from their educational process, and has disempowered students and their parents. Fortunately, educators can implement critical pedagogy in their classrooms, which can promote students' interactions between peers and adults. Critical pedagogy has empowered students to voice their opinions. It has challenged students to become social agents of change, and it has enhanced students' learning through students' native language and culture.

Implications

The Latino children participating in the study proved to us that it is possible to participate in an emancipatory, democratic, and transformative education without sacrificing the heritage language or discarding their culture (Díaz Soto, 2002). Students have the ability to become bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural when they become Subjects of their education (Freire, 1993) instead of assimilating to the dominant culture or speaking only one language in order to be considered American (Arce 2004). Students demonstrated that genetic deficiency and "culture of poverty" perspectives are obsolete when school and educators provide students with the right tools to achieve an emancipatory and transformative education. "Only when we move beyond simple acknowledgement of Latino culture to celebrating the uniqueness of every individual will we be able to incorporate, value, and respect a multitude of languages and cultures inside and outside educational settings. Only then will we be able to get past archaic assimilationist discourses" (Brown & Souto-Manning, 2008, p.39). Now the responsibility rests on educators to incorporate students' language, culture, ethnicity, narratives, and experiences in their educational endeavor.

- First, educators working with Latina/o bilingual children must research about students' previous experiences when they show up to the classroom in order to build upon them and integrate them in the classroom curriculum. Such experiences need to be validated for they are not deficits, but valuable resources. Moll (1992) accentuates the importance of teachers as researchers of their students "Funds of Knowledge" in order to integrate them in the classroom.

Yosso (2005) also highlights that the community in which minority students live possesses a "Cultural Wealth".

- Moreover, educators must commit to incorporate parents' experiences in the classroom. During literature discussions, students made constant references to their parents' experiences as opportunities for learning. Educators must validate parents' experiences by creating learning spaces between schools and the home where students learn from their parents. Once learning has occurred, children bring their home knowledge and share in the classroom.

- Finally, other students as well as teachers learn cooperatively from parents' experiences brought to the classroom. Students feel empowered when such experiences provoke and enhance their learning. As maintained by Martínez-Roldán (2005), "Culture and community are not just factors that impact learning; they are, as several scholars have point out, the meditational means through which ideas are developed" (p.29). Literature circles enable parents to mediate learning for their children.

Conclusion

Historically Latina/o students have been mis- educated by traditional schooling arguing biological, linguistic, and cultural deficiencies, which have been used to justify segregation, assimilation, racialization, and dehumanization. Therefore, the educational outcomes have not been successful for Latina/o students over decades into the present (Yosso, 2006). If such theories have been utilized to justify and create a structural racialization and segregation, it is imperative for educators to realize the power we possess in order to change such outcomes. Change can be achieved by creating a caring environment that capitalizes on students' resources, and integrates students and parents' resources into the curriculum. In short, it is by creating a classroom environment that humanizes students (Freire, 1993). Literature circles constitute a powerful tool in the classroom to make this possible. Literature circles should be included in classrooms for students to feel validated. Participation in literature circles enabled students to achieve a grand sense of belonging for their language, culture, experiences, and stories are validated throughout the process. In their educational process students are no longer "invisible", but the Subjects of their own educational endeavors. Classroom curricula integrated students' culture and their experiences as well as their parents' experiences.

Needless to say the creation of such environment constitutes a challenging endeavor. It is true that deficit thinking rationale is still prevalent in schools. Eugenics and IQ tests are obsolete, but cultural and linguistic deficit perspectives are still prevalent for teachers who often keep recycling such ideologies. In addition to such ideologies, high stakes testing accountability and test preparation have become a challenge for

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teachers to provide students with opportunities for literature discussions; nevertheless, it is possible to provide students with such spaces where students can engage in meaningful conversations. There is hope. "Although the challenges of establishing a critical pedagogy seem overwhelming at times, educators must stay on task to avoid failure and the continued subordination of their students" (Camarota & Romero, 2006, p.20). For Duncan- Andrade (2009), the process of humanization is reached through hope. Hope is the main ingredient to create cracks in the concrete so roses can grow.

There is hope that students will continue doing what they learned and experienced in literature circles such as voicing their opinions, thinking critically and exercising their agency in the future. One of the participants in the literature circles, Angela, gave the following explanation for her reaction to one of her classmates who had been bulling girls "I told him to stop because I remembered what Prietita did when we read the book". It is time to provide students with spaces for self-empowerment so they can feel proud of their language and their culture, and claiming their cultural citizenship (Franquiz & Brochin-Ceballos, 2006). Once students feel empowered, they will start claiming their cultural citizenship at the personal, social, and educational level.

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