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In this qualitative research the author explores, investigates, and analyzes dis/connectedness—and the many ways it manifests within the individual, social, and political spheres—by drawing on multiple perspectives (philosophy, history and sociology).

This research also examines the relationship between dis/connectedness, critical pedagogy and social justice education; and how interjecting dis/connectedness discourses into cultural foundations in education course might advance a better understanding of social justice issues in U.S. society, and in the school system in particular.

By employing multi-dimensional methodology approach, the empirical portion of this research examines how pre-service teachers and school social workers responded to a Pedagogy of Connectedness — which emphasizes community, identity, and social responsibility. Using five sections of a cultural foundations in education course, including more than 120 reflection papers written by the students and 11 interviews, the results of this study show that a pedagogy that is grounded in investing in relationships, cultivating a sense of community, understanding the ways identity markers function within power structures, and realizing one's social responsibility to the communities one belongs to are key components in becoming social change agents. Furthermore, emphasizing community, identity and social responsibility becomes a vehicle that assists students to ask new questions about the social constructs, norms and values while assisting educators' efforts to facilitate students' transformation.

CONNECTEDNESS IN EDUCATION AS A SOCIAL CRITIQUE  
OF INDIVIDUALISM: AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL  
FOUNDATIONS COURSE

by

Revital Zilonka

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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To Lilach Zilonka, whose untimely departure sparked my unfinished journey of searching for meaning and purpose. I carry you in my heart, baby sister; and I miss you every day.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Revital Zilonka, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
First Things First: Prologue .....	1
The Full Double-Rainbow .....	4
Where I am From: Positionality Statement.....	6
Israel/USA: Life Experiences .....	9
Problem Statement: Battling Disconnectedness .....	12
Dis/connectedness, Social Justice, and Love .....	15
A Brief Introduction to the Study .....	20
The Research Questions.....	24
II. LITERATURE REVIEW: SOCIAL DIS/CONNECTEDNESS .....	26
Introduction to the Literature Review .....	26
Connectedness and Disconnectedness .....	29
The Wounds: Unpacking Disconnectedness.....	32
From Collectivity to Individualism.....	40
States of Destruction .....	47
The Deterioration .....	50
Digital Spaces .....	59
The Many Paths to Restore Connectedness .....	61
Religion and Spirituality .....	63
Social Justice Activism .....	68
Dis/connectedness: Conclusion .....	70
III. LITERATURE REVIEW: CONNECTEDNESS IN EDUCATION.....	74
Introduction to the Third Chapter .....	74
The World and the Word .....	77
Paulo Freire’s Critical Pedagogy Guiding Principles .....	81
Validation and Relevancy as Vehicles of Connectedness .....	87
Imagining Possibilities of Connectedness .....	89
Connectedness, Communities, and the Classroom .....	91
Connectedness and Social Justice Education.....	96
A Brief Introduction to (Critical) Social Justice Education .....	96
The Social Justice Classroom .....	101
Connectedness in Education: Conclusion.....	104

IV. METHODOLOGY .....	106
Introduction to the Methodology Chapter.....	106
Qualitative Research, Knowledge and Epistemology.....	109
Feminist Qualitative Research .....	111
The Critical Paradigm .....	113
Overview of the Research Design.....	116
The Pedagogy and Curriculum of the CFE-300 Course .....	117
The Research Site .....	120
The Participants .....	121
Main Sample: Artifacts .....	122
Sub-sample: Interviews.....	123
Data Collection .....	124
Data Analysis .....	126
Coding the Data .....	127
From Coding to Conceptual Categories to Themes .....	129
Trustworthiness, Positionality, and Subjectivity .....	131
Research Limitations .....	134
V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION.....	136
Introduction to the Analysis Chapter .....	136
Welcome to the CFE-300 Course .....	138
Expanding Critical Pedagogy .....	140
How We Began.....	143
The Themes.....	147
Analysis of the Themes.....	148
Theme #1: Education Requires Vulnerability, a Sense of Connectedness, Belonging, and Community.....	148
Theme #2: Connectedness can be Taught, Learned, Modeled, and Practiced; it is a Process That Must Traverse a Path of Disruption of Power and Understanding Identity.....	156
Theme #3: Pedagogy of Connectedness Helps Students to Find/Strengthen Their Voice, and to Develop/Deepen a Sense of Agency.....	187
Theme #4: Pedagogy of Connectedness Can Help Educators to Facilitate Transformation.....	196
Analysis and Discussion: Conclusion.....	208
VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	211
Introduction to the Conclusion Chapter .....	211
Dis/connectedness: Crossing Paths.....	212

CFE-300’s Pedagogy of Connectedness .....	215
The Unfinishedness of Unlearning and Constructing Reality .....	220
Pedagogy of Connectedness: From Rupture to Wholeness .....	224
Recommendations.....	230
Epilogue .....	233
REFERENCES .....	238
APPENDIX A. CFE-300’S SYLLABUS .....	260
APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT FORMS .....	269
APPENDIX C. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	276

CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

**First Things First: Prologue**

Living within the tension between connectedness and disconnectedness has been part of my life for more than two decades. While revisiting journals I wrote between 1991-1998, my teenage years and early 20s, I was pretty shocked to read how lonely, depressed, and hurt I had been for many years. As a teenager, I was quite lost. My parents and I were not on good terms, to say the least. I ran away from home more than once, argued a lot with my family and friends, and moved in with my grandmother when I turned 17. I missed school a lot and did not care much about my grades. My rebellious years as a teenager were a direct result of the fact that I was not allowed to enroll as a music major in high school, despite the fact that ever since I was a young child I have been a singer, whether in family gatherings, parties, or school functions. As soon as I was forbidden to pursue a singing emphasis in high school, I stopped paying attention in classes. I finished 11<sup>th</sup> grade with seven Fs. The high school I attended kicked me out and I had to redo 11<sup>th</sup> grade in a different school so I would at least complete high school.

Back then, there were only two places I wanted to spend my time: at the library and on the beach. When I did visit my high school, I checked out books, skipped classes, and went to read on the beach. Books and music were the two things in the world that kept me going through my sadness and disappointment from life.

Books have saved my life. I read two to three books per week. Music brought joy into my life. I went to see live music whenever I could, even as a teenager. Night after night, I fell asleep while music was playing in my double-cassette player and a book was resting on my chest. I was a struggling teenager. My teachers did not see my pain, and even when I addressed it, they dismissed it. I hated my life, but I loved books and music. I loved singing and dancing. I also wrote a lot, especially in my journals and, later on, short stories that have helped me to make sense of things that happened in my life.

Music, books, and writing kept me grounded and hopeful even in the darkest days: when a close friend suddenly died, when suicide bombs killed dozens in Israel, when classmates lost their lives in a bloody war in Lebanon, and when our Prime Minister was assassinated. I documented my personal events side by side with national events: a nasty breakup with my then-boyfriend and a description of a suicide bomb terror attack on a bus in Jerusalem were both detailed with the same amount of attention. My 1990s were full of uncertainty, absent of a sense of belonging. I was reaching out for help, but I felt that no one heard me.

Year after year, event after event, I was devastated to learn that people can often be indecent, mean, abusive, manipulative, and exploitive. Revisiting my journals in hopes of finding out what has drawn me to write my dissertation on connectedness and disconnectedness – although it has been a painful experience – was quite a rewarding one. Reading my journal entries more than 20 years later gave me a perspective. I gained some wisdom and clarity since then, so I was able to find something beyond hurt and shame and sadness. Throughout the hundreds of pages there was hope. At younger ages, I

believed that as soon as I finished high school and the mandatory military service, got a job and had financial security, things would get better because that is what I have learned from reading all those books. My books taught me that it was possible to overcome a broken heart and loss, it was possible to live life without fear.

A sense of connectedness prevailed within me when I read, wrote, sang, and danced. Books have given me hope, music has given me joy, and writing has provided me a space to articulate my dreams and passions in my life, and not just my day-to-day misery. Even though I hated my life, I could not wait to be a grown-up woman who had the courage, the agency, and the determination to have a meaningful life.

Years went by. My passion for writing paid off and I started to work as a journalist. Around the same time, I became an activist and got involved in a few social justice activism initiatives in Israel. One thing led to another, and I took a leadership in activism class in 2005. In one of the class meetings, I met a professor who told me about a feminist-critical pedagogy program for pre-service teachers. I was 29 years old that year and decided to enroll in an undergraduate degree in education. That decision turned my life upside down. I finally went to college at the age of 30, and in that feminist-critical pedagogy program, I found my voice again.

Higher education was one of three things that led me to pursue happiness and gain a sense of belonging while realizing that life can be purposeful. The other two were social justice activism and spiritual practice. In my life, these three things became my pillars. In this study, I will explore what it means when we talk about dis/connectedness, and how it is related to spiritual practice, social justice and liberatory education.

In this chapter, I will do four things. First, I will discuss the reasons that brought me to studying dis/connectness. Second, I will discuss my positionality as an international student from Israel, and how my positionality stemmed from my life experiences. Third, I will briefly explain how my interest in dis/connectness, positionality, and life experience are related to the pedagogy I have developed and applied in a cultural foundations in education course I have taught for pre-service teachers and social workers undergraduate students. And lastly, I will briefly discuss the study itself and the frameworks that inform it.

### **The Full Double-Rainbow**

The way I see it, if you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain.  
– Dolly Parton

In March 2010, I had dinner with a friend. After we shared a meal and conversation, he walked me home. A couple of minutes after I got inside my house, he called me on the phone and said “if you want to see something truly beautiful, step outside and look at the sky to the north-east direction.” I put my shoes and coat back on and walked outside. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life: a full double-rainbow that looked so close that I thought if I walk less than a mile towards its direction I would be able to stand beneath it.

The full double-rainbow was something I had never seen before. I was speechless. I had goose-bumps. It was both an emotional and aesthetic experience. I have seen many rainbows before, but nothing like that. Never so perfect, so vivid and colorful. While I stood outside and witnessed that spectacle, a couple of young people – they were

probably in their early 20s – walked by. When I noticed them, I said, still in awe, “look at that!” and pointed to the full double-rainbow. They looked up for a couple of seconds, mumbled a brief *meh*, shrugged their shoulders, and continued to walk and talk. And there I was, speechless again; this time due to these strangers' decision to dismiss the optical spectacle.

A couple of minutes later, the rainbow was gone and I returned into my house. I sat on the couch and wondered about the young men who declined my invitation to witness a full double-rainbow, and thought to myself: “What is going on with *those* people?” I was trying to figure out what was perhaps lacking in my invitation, and how come they declined it so quickly. The two guys might have been in a very intense conversation. They might have seen many full double-rainbows before. They might have been color-blind. I could find many excuses for the way they dismissed my invitation; however, I kept thinking of their reaction long after it happened. The rainbow anecdote was not an isolated incident. There have been many experiences that left me wondering about the nature of American ways of being, thinking, acting, and interacting. The longer I thought about that, the more I researched and read about the phenomenon of dismissive behavior, the “whatever attitude.”

I had not yet named it back then; I kept on reading and asking questions, and when I started to teach American undergraduate students in 2010, I began to realize that the dismissive behavior, the whatever attitude, the shrugging shoulders, and the often inability to bare any discomfort – they all had something in common, but I still could not name it. However, I started to connect some of those behaviors to other phenomena I

have observed in my early years in the U.S. These phenomena include bullying, suicide, mental illness, addiction, and even mass shootings in American society. All of these manifestations of violence I have read about have been increasing tremendously in the last couple of decades.

The full double-rainbow experience was perhaps the first time that I started to unpack the difference between me and Americans. As an international student from Israel, I had the privilege of an outsider perspective to look at those manifestations with an amount of curiosity, wonder, and compassion. Even though violence has been part of my life – personally, politically, and culturally – the levels of violence I was exposed to during my years in the U.S were very new for me.

### **Where I am From: Positionality Statement**

My journey of exploring dis/connectedness is also directly related to my own experiences as an international student from Israel. I came to the U.S with a student visa in August 2009. Although a long time has passed since, I am still new to this culture, mainly because I have lived in two different states throughout my graduate school experiences. My first interactions with Americans was in Idaho where I arrived to earn a Master's degree in Bilingual Education. There were numerous incidents that were all teachable moments for me to better immerse myself into American culture, a culture that for me was incredible to participate in – for better and for worse.

The little that I knew about Americans before my arrival to the U.S came only from the internet, movies, news channels (such as CNN), and TV shows. The entertainment industry, of course, did not prepare me for my first four years in the U.S,

where I had to reevaluate almost everything about my identity and pedagogy (Zilonka, 2016). I also had to reevaluate my ways of being an instructor, a colleague, and an emerging scholar who carries different perspectives due to my identities as Israeli, Jewish, biracial, and a person coming from a blue-color immigrant family.

After spending a year in the U.S, I started to realize the connection between my life experience from my teens and twenties to things I have seen, heard, and read about in the U.S. Things got clearer: disconnectedness is experienced in many ways. Sometimes it is a sophomore student who drinks too much every weekend until they lose consciousness. Others eat too much, or shop too much, or suffer from anxiety, or are subjected to untreated depression. Some will be consumed by violence so deeply that they will arrive to their high school with weapons and kill their classmates and teachers. Sometimes, it will be manifested in a couple of guys walking down the street, dismissing the sight of a full double-rainbow. In other words, disconnectedness varies, and it can be manifested in some or few areas in one's life, like it has been with my life. I felt alone and neglected, but I did not care much about it while I was dancing or singing, or while reading books on the beach. I will always cherish those memories, those moments of connectedness, that later have become an anchor to broaden my sense of connectedness in my life, especially in my years in the U.S, where I had to start all over again, twice.

As an immigrant in the U.S, I am familiar with the possibilities of disconnectedness; living away from my immediate support system, family and friends; living in a different culture and speaking a language that is foreign to me – all of those factors have been informing my personal struggles, but also assisted me to gain a better

understanding of the disconnectedness I have witnessed among many Americans. It also helped me to understand my own experiences of disconnectedness I had back in Israel and the new ones I have had in the U.S. For example, I could relate to Americans' sense of loneliness. Many move out of their childhood home and go to college before they turn 20. Many graduate students move to a different state to pursue advanced degrees and then they move to a different state for job opportunities.

Given my *othered* identity as a non-American, non-Christian, woman of color with an accent, the disconnectedness kicked in very fast. Even now, more than eight years after I arrived in the U.S, I still need to make extra efforts to maintain relationships with friends and colleagues, so I will not sink into feelings of despair.

My international student status has taught me a lot about being away, disconnected, sometimes scared and lonely. Moreover, in every visit to Israel, I felt less and less like I belong there, yet at the same time I know that I will never become American. I have become some sort of a cultural hybrid. My Israeli citizenship informs where I am from. However, the experience of living for more than eight years in the U.S has shaped my complex identity into a new one: a special type of immigrant that has an expiration date on her passport: as soon as I complete my degree, I have 60 days to leave the country. My “In-Betweenness” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 78) – living in two different worlds – has impacted everything in me. My biracial background, my bilingual brain, my privileges, and my experiences of oppression and discrimination – all of that and much more have also found their way to become parts of my pedagogy and teaching.

Disconnectedness is not an on/off button that can be switched. It is not a binary state of mind. In my life, for example, I can identify times and places where I experience disconnectedness (i.e., social functions where I know almost no one but am nonetheless obligated to attend), while in others I feel fully connected (usually at my own house, cooking one of my grandmother's recipes while listening to Israeli music).

I cannot ignore the fact that there were long days – sometimes weeks – that I felt socially isolated and very much alone. My experiences of disconnectedness were many and I had to understand those experiences, which in a profound way assisted me to better understand the phenomenon of disconnectedness among many Americans I have encountered since 2009. At the same time, my wish to reconnect and to experience connectedness has contributed to my teaching philosophy, my pedagogy, and my interaction with education and social work major students I had the privilege to teach.

### **Israel/USA: Life Experiences**

I come from a collective culture. As an Israeli, I saw my family members very often. Living an hour's drive away from my parents and grandparents, for example, is a common experience for many Israelis. For a couple of years, I lived with one of my grandmothers. In the year before I arrived in the U.S, I lived with my younger sister. Our parents and brother came to visit us often. Now that my sister is married with two young boys, she and my parents see each other once or twice a week. We would often visit our grandparents and spend weekends with them. I was born to a Jewish family, therefore Jewish and non-religious Israeli holidays (about a dozen of them) are usually celebrated

with the extended family. Thus, for me, being close to my family – even though there were times we had complicated relationships – has always been a given.

The Israeli collective culture is also reflected in our ways of life. Not just the proximity to parents, siblings, and extended family members, but also in the way we interact with each other, expressing our opinions, and being direct with each other. We are very explicit, we hug often, we touch, we argue passionately. If someone offends us, we are likely to call them out. When I moved to the U.S, I noticed how reserved people were with each other and even with their children. Hugs were very short, and mostly only the shoulders and arms were used (in contrast to Israelis who usually hug with all of their entirety). I noticed that Americans keep much more physical distance than Israelis, and it made me think about what it does to people, especially to young children and youth.

I remember one time I saw a couple of parents and their young daughter saying goodbye to their college student son who happened to be my neighbor in 2012. His mom briefly hugged him and patted his face and his dad shook his hand. His younger sister, on the other hand, clutched him for a long time. I saw them in the parking lot on my way back home, and I could not stop thinking about this for days. My dad hugs and kisses my brother every time they depart. Hugs and kisses have always been a part of greeting or saying goodbye in my family, so it was weird for me to watch that young college student with his family that day. As his parents and younger sister entered the car and left, he kept standing and looking at the road. When he noticed me on the other side of the parking lot, he smiled a bit and hurried up into the building. Until this day, I remember his facial expression and how I felt watching him and his family.

I know that I do not know the full story of the family in the parking lot, just as I do not know why the guys from my double full-rainbow experience could not care less. However, these little incidents accumulated and joined to my collection of observations. As an outsider, I kept inquiring among my friends and colleagues about the nature of their ways of being, thinking, and doing: some visit their parents, siblings, and grandparents only once or twice a year, even if they live close, in the same state. Coming from a collective culture, where I used to see my family very often, I could not understand how come anyone – who has no apparent issues or bad experiences with their family – visits their relatives so seldom. In other words, my personal and academic curiosity about dis/connectedness was ignited by paying attention to the cultural differences I found between Americans and Israelis. Those observations gradually contributed to the foundations of my pedagogy. As an international graduate student who has taught social justice issues in education while situated in the American educational system, culture, and society, I could not separate the social justice issues from my constant inquiry about the nature of the many manifestations of disconnectedness that I have witnessed among my colleagues, students, and friends.

I have become inquisitive. I wanted to understand why many young students drink a lot, why there are such high rates of drug abuse and mental illnesses, why there are more than three million people in the U.S who experience homelessness, why suicide became the 10<sup>th</sup> cause of death in the U.S in 2008 and has since kept its rank, why more children between the ages of 10-14 died from suicide than from car accidents in 2014 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016), why bullying in schools and

campuses has become so prevalent, how come almost everyone that I know in the U.S has at least one close friend or a family relative who copes with addiction or mental illness, why there are so many mass shootings in the U.S?

For me, these questions are interrelated. I believe that the examples I have provided thus far cannot be a coincidence. I have been asking these questions for more than eight years now. Almost every time I have asked about these manifestations of disconnectedness, stories started to pour from friends, colleagues, and students. I was astonished when I learned that that many of these stories revolve around pain, social isolation, and practices of violence. And the more I questioned, the more I realized that in their core, the stories are also about the human yearning to connect, to experience validation, to restore a sense of humanity, and to feel whole and free. Disconnectedness cannot exist without connectedness; they are both located on the same continuum. No one, to my understanding, has experience only with one or the other. We experience both, because they are both contextualized by past experiences, locations, relationships, and other physical, emotional, and intellectual factors. In this study, my intentions are to explore, identify, and define these contexts and factors.

### **Problem Statement: Battling Disconnectedness**

In my second year in the U.S, while earning a Master's degree, I co-taught a Cultural Foundations in Education course to undergraduate students who aspired to become teachers. I came across the *It Gets Better Project* ([www.itgetsbetter.org](http://www.itgetsbetter.org)) that exposed me to the increasing number of LGBTQ youth in the U.S who commit suicide due to bullying in schools. I brought to the classroom a newspaper clip of a story about

Brandon Bitner (Brenckle, 2010), a 14-year-old gay teen from Pennsylvania who was subjected to bullying in his school. Bitner ran into a highway and threw himself under a tractor-trailer, which resulted immediately in his horrific death. One of the students – he was maybe 19 years old – dismissed it, bluntly. “He knew that being gay was wrong,” said the student. “No wonder he chose to kill himself. Being gay is a sin.” I remember how shocked I was. The student then added that the gay boy did everyone a favor, and that “he will be judged by God, not by me.” The obvious contradiction was astonishing to me. Making a blunt judgment and refusing to see it as a judgment, losing all human capacities to feel empathy to a teenager who suffered from bullying so much that he could not imagine a possibility that life can get better. Calling his suicide “a favor” was one of the moments I will never forget for as long as I live. My then-student was lacking the empathy to see a struggling, suffering 14-year-old teen, who was not only gay, but also a loved son and friend. He was a young, talented teenager who played the violin, and my student could not see all the other parts of his identity. All he could see was a sinner that “did everyone a favor.”

I remember going home that evening after class, furious and outraged. My heart was heavy, and I could not feel any compassion for my student. For months I kept thinking about the student's blunt and dehumanizing words. I thought about what I could do to reduce such thinking among future teachers, so they can become agents of change in their schools rather than enablers of bullying. What could I do to address disconnectedness, not only in my life as an immigrant, but also in the classroom, as an

instructor, while recognizing the characteristics of the American culture that the students and I encounter live in.

I started mapping out my observations while keeping track of my readings – I have saved dozens, if not hundreds, of website links, newspaper clips, magazine stories, and academic articles about hatred, violence, despair, isolation, loneliness, and loss in the U.S. For me, those human conditions were the opposite of social justice, so I wanted to find social justice-oriented stories that were rooted in hope and determination that life can be better not only for a few, but for everybody.

In one of my undergraduate courses in Israel in 2007, we learned about socio-economic issues in the Israeli society. One of the tenets of the course was to learn about success stories of social justice organizations. The professor believed that it was important not to only learn from failures and mistakes, but rather to understand what went well, so as social justice educators we can duplicate the tools and practices that have led to success. That principle resonates with me until this day; therefore, I looked into what people who experience wholeness and connectedness in their lives do. The more I read books and stories that were written by people that have gained a sense of belonging and felt hopeful with their endeavors, the question “What is going on with *those* people?” that I have asked myself in my first year in the U.S has changed into “what can I learn from people who feel connected and whole?” Instead of focusing merely on disconnectedness, I started to explore ways of connectedness. What might be fundamentally different among people who have found balance in their lives? How does connectedness relate to social justice? What informs their determination to keep on

fighting for social justice for all? What is their “spiritual backbone” made of? How come they do not give into despair and do not feel the need to numb the pain in harmful ways?

I have found that there is a connection between establishing a sense of connectedness, activism, and spiritual/religious practices. As an activist educator myself, I already knew that liberatory education and critical pedagogy were a big part of my growth as a feminist woman and as a community organizer. Now that I am situated in the U.S, I had to learn about Americans and their history of dis/connectedness.

I have learned that although the history of the U.S is embedded with horrific events of immense violence, it is also the history of radical activism. For decades, women, African-Americans, LGBTQ communities, people with disabilities and immigrant communities around the country have been responsible for pushing back bigotry, hatred, discrimination, and oppression. Even in the darkest times, many Americans believed that it can get better and that *they* can do better. While facing an unprecedented increase of addictions, mental illnesses, and acts of violence in the U.S., we should also remember two things. One, there are numerous of initiatives that are being led by thousands of people who feel responsible to battle different forms of violence. Second, the human yearning for connectedness (Palmer, 2004) is interwoven with hope. Hope that we are worthy of saving, and that at the core of connectedness lays love.

### **Dis/connectedness, Social Justice, and Love**

Current social inequities and injustices in the U.S are historically, sociologically, and politically contextualized. One thing that they all have in common is the violent practices employed by those with power. We live in a hierarchical society where people

are categorized based on signifiers such as social class, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion. Within this social system, some groups have greater status, power, and wealth than other groups. In the U.S, the current social order can be traced back through the history of the country from deculturalization of the Native Americans, enslavement and oppression of Africans, and subjugation of women. People of Color and other marginalized groups have been struggling to gain equal rights and access to opportunities, and to be treated with fairness.

There is much evidence that manifestations of disconnectedness, competition, and social isolation – which are partly associated with the ideology of individualism – impact our well-being and the way we treat ourselves and each other. As human beings who are subjected to acts of organized violence (by the government and corporations), we often internalize those practices. For example, there is a disturbing increase of addiction (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2015), suicides/suicide attempts, and unaddressed mental health problems (National Alliance on Mental Health, 2015). Much of the internalized violence oftentimes is rooted in loneliness (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959), disconnectedness, and lack of sense of belonging (Brown, 2010). To add to that, policy makers and legislators often diminish the urgency of responding to such issues by defunding necessary public services. All these factors contribute to our collective and individual sense of cynicism and despair which feed into the vicious cycle of ubiquitous disconnectedness and fragmentation in our society. These factors also become a common denominator within mechanisms of social inequities and injustices.

My intentions in this study are to make clear the relationship between social justice and dis/connectedsness and how cultural values in the American society have been informing malpractices on both the individual and collective levels. Disconnectedness is not just an individualistic matter. Disconnectedness flourishes in an inequitable reality, and inequities are fed by notions of disconnectedness. We would not dehumanize a person if we understood that their well-being is interconnected with ours; we would not kill, abuse, or manipulate a person that we see as a whole human being, with feelings, aspirations, and dreams.

Investment in relationships, restoring communities, and realizing social responsibility are social justice issues and should be one of the foundations in social justice education scholarship. For example, the constant competitive attitudes in the education system create conditions in where schools become a space “with no compelling individual or social purpose beyond getting the best grade you could get with the least effort” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 11).

In hyper-competitive spaces such as the education system, students are taught that “it is competition (and not love or cooperation) that is the primary source of human motivation” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 53). Competition becomes normal and leaves very limited room to invest in relationships and build a loving community. When discussing the meaning of success, we cannot ignore its link to inequities and injustices in the society: in a competition-driven society, we meet many students who experience anxiety, social isolation, loneliness, and often a lack of a sense of belonging. We have become obsessed with ranking students, teachers, and schools; and this constant race leaves many students

hurt. In this study, I wish to expand the social justice scholarship and add to it a very necessary discussion, that in my opinion is, in Freire's (2005, p. 2) words, a *raison d'être*.

At the core of my pedagogy lays love. I love the students who take a class with me even before I meet them in person. I love them in the first time I see their names on the course roster. In the moment my eyes meet their names, I start imagining the possibilities for the next semester: their growth, their collaboration, the way they might work in groups, and co-create a community of learners. The love I already have for them before the first class keeps me up late, excited to meet them in person, and to embark on a semester-long journey of revelation. Beneath my preparation for the class – sharpening my pedagogical strategies, finding new readings, movies and activities that can benefit the learning journey – there is love. Love for the profession, love for books and the arts I incorporate in my lesson plans, and first and foremost, love for the students<sup>1</sup>.

For me, social justice education goes hand in hand with critical pedagogy. Freire's (2010) critical pedagogy principles resonate in my work with students and colleagues. Freire's notions of radical love assist me to "build an emotional, scholarly, and activist oriented telepathic global community dedicated to supporting one another and the larger epistemological and socio-political goals of criticality" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 178). Kincheloe asserts that a notion of connected and loving community is crucial in order to change the world, thus the commitment should be building "larger and larger communities of connectedness around the planet" (p. 178-179). In his vision, critical

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge that love has many interpretations, and is defined in various ways by different cultures, traditions and scholars. My interpretation of love is based on bell hooks' concept of love ethic, while I also draw from Tibetan Buddhism's (the Mahayana tradition in particular) concept of love. In Tibetan Buddhism, loving a person means wishing them to be happy.

community will “produce transgressive, power-literate knowledge, develop transformative pedagogies, and engage in social action to alleviate human suffering” (p. 179). Members of a critical community that is rooted in radical love “must have each other’s backs,” writes Kincheloe (2008, p. 179).

Having each other’s backs also means that we are mutually responsible for each other’s thriving. A success of a society is measured by the success of its weakest and most marginalized members. Thus, critical community should also pay attention to its oppressed, marginalized members and their identity markers. The importance of adding the layer of people’s identity stems from my own positionality as an international student situated in American society and culture. Since the pedagogical strategies used in the classroom are drawn from critical pedagogy principles (e.g., analyzing power structures, empowerment, critiquing reality, and sustaining a meaningful dialogue), it is imperative that the students' identities, as well my own identity as the course's instructor, are part of my study. In Freire’s (2005) words,

I believe that the first step [...] is the recognition of our identity, the recognition of what we are in the practical activity in which we engage. It is by doing things in a certain way, by thinking or speaking in a certain way [...], by having certain likes and habits that I recognize myself in a certain way, as being similar to other people like me. These other people have a class categorization identical or similar to mine. It is experiencing the differences that we discover ourselves as I’s and you’s. Precisely, it is always you as an other who constitutes me as an I as long as I, like the you of the other person, constitutes that person in me. (p. 127)

The relationships we have with ourselves and share with others are crucial to examine while understanding dis/connectedness, specifically in cultural foundations in education courses. This study is concerned with understanding dis/connectedness and how it

functions on the individual and collective levels in the context of teachers and social workers' preparation programs in college.

Although my interest in dis/connectedness is broad, this study focuses mainly on my classroom practices as a Cultural Foundations in Education course instructor. In that capacity, I will investigate how pedagogical strategies I have developed and employed for five semesters have assisted me to address dis/connectedness, specifically in American culture and society. In addition, I investigate how the students who agreed to participate in this study articulate their understanding and conceptualization of themes that branch out from an ongoing discussion on dis/connectedness in a semester-long course.

This study makes the case for the importance of developing a pedagogy that emphasizes connectedness (whether it be emotional, spiritual, religious, or intellectual, or on the individual, communal, collective, and societal levels), addresses disconnectedness (and the ways it manifests), assists students to establish a sense of belonging to a community of learners, and to realize a shared responsibility for injustices and inequities in society.

### **A Brief Introduction to the Study**

My work as the instructor of the CFE-300<sup>2</sup> course between 2014-2016<sup>3</sup> was deeply inspired by bell hooks (2010, 2003, 2001, 1994), Paulo Freire (1998, 2005, 2010), Antonia Darder (2002), Joe Kincheloe (2008a, 2008b), and Maxine Greene's (1995) work

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<sup>2</sup> In order not to identify the students, I will use a pseudonym for the course title. CFE stands for "Cultural Foundations in Education" and the 300 is the course level for education and social work undergraduate students who were offered this course.

<sup>3</sup> Although I have taught undergraduate pre-service teachers and social workers from 2014-2017, the study will focus on five semesters from 2014-2016, which I went through the IRB to conduct this study.

who emphasize the importance of engagement and connection between teachers and their students. My work is also influenced by Peter Block (2008), who argues that community is the optimal space to restore the sense of belonging we have lost. Cultivating communities is important because communities have the potential to bring people together in a society where many individuals experience social isolation.

In this study, I argue that dis/connectedness, community, and social responsibility are social justice issues. Thus, as a social justice educator, I include them in the course I have taught. Including discussions and pedagogical strategies to better understand dis/connectedness, community, and responsibility can assist the students to examine injustices and inequities in the school system and other public systems. By employing and modeling Freire's (1998, 2010) critical pedagogy principles, students are able to understand the relations between social justice issues and how they/we are impacted personally and collectively by cultural, political, and socio-economical aspects.

In this study, I describe, explore and analyze the pedagogical strategies and the supporting curriculum that I developed for the CFE-300 course. The pedagogy of the course assisted aspiring teachers and social workers to have a better understanding of how dis/connectedness functions within society, and how injustices and inequities are themselves practices of violence and are fed by disconnectedness. In other words, the CFE-300 course assisted the students to better articulate practices of violence, but it also provided them with epistemological and practical frameworks to battle disconnectedness and achieve a sense of connectedness, belonging, and responsibility.

The CFE-300 pedagogy drew on hooks' (2001) ideas of love ethic. hooks asserts that community is the best place to learn and practice the art of loving, thus “when we lack the sense of community in our lives, we lack the opportunity to practice love” (Zilonka & Job, 2017). hooks (2001) writes that,

[...] love lays the foundation for the constructive building of community with strangers. The love we make in community stays with us wherever we go. With this knowledge as our guide, we make any place we go a place where we return to love. (p. 144)

Love as a verb, as a proactive practice, is the kind of love I do my best to model in the classroom. It is not a romantic notion of love, but rather an ongoing practice that includes “care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge” (hooks, 2000, p. 94). hooks' articulation of love ethics resonates with me since I have been “praxising” Freire's (1998, 2000) critical pedagogy principles in my personal and professional endeavors.

I believe that love, as hooks (2003) asserts, indeed has the power to “prepare teachers and students to open our minds and hearts. It is the foundation on which every learning community can be created” (p. 137). Thus, my love praxis starts even before the semester begins, by envisioning the class as a space for the students and myself to deepen our skills in cultivating a loving and caring community – skills we can take outside the classroom and incorporate within the communities we belong to, personally and professionally. These relationships in the classroom allow a safe space to have discussion on difficult topics such as cultural oppression, racism, sexism, ableism, Islamophobia, and anti-LGBTQ discourses. Uncomfortable, often taboo topics, can be introduced and

unpacked when students feel that they belong to an accepting community where they feel welcome, their emotions are validated, and their voices are heard.

I assert that pedagogy that draws from ideas of connectedness, community, and social responsibility is also a pedagogy that critiques American society and the concept of individualism in particular. Based on students' papers, interviews, and end-of-semester evaluations, I believe that exploring the ways we are dis/connected and the possibilities of restoring a sense of connectedness while realizing social responsibility challenges students in profound ways. The pedagogy I have developed encouraged students to first take a look into their own lives, and to examine their stance on dis/connectedness and community. That became their entry point into a discussion about different social justice issues, because everybody experiences pain during some part of their lives. For example, a person who was raised by a single mother and did not have good relationship with their father can feel more empathy to a teenage immigrant whose undocumented father was deported back to Mexico. Another student who copes with mental illness can relate to linguistic oppression and the feeling of anxiety and powerlessness when dealing with filling out official forms for Social Security. My pedagogy asserts that dis/connectedness is something we can all relate to because of our lived experiences. Thus, examining them allows us to relate to others in profound ways, especially when it comes to our work as teachers and social workers who meet diverse individuals and groups in the school system.

## The Research Questions

In this study, I address dis/connectedness in two ways. The first is an examination of dis/connectedness from different theoretical perspectives. The second is an examination of the practical applications of connectedness in the CFE-300 course. The theoretical perspectives of connectedness will address the following questions:

- (1) How do we understand the meaning of dis/connectedness?
- (2) What are the individual and the social consequences of disconnectedness in the American culture/society?

The practical implication portion of the study will discuss what I mean when I say “connectedness in education.” That portion of the study will answer the following questions:

- (3) How and in what ways might a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* address disconnectedness in American society?
- (4) In what ways, if any, does a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* impact the CFE-300 students' notions of power relations, social justice, and identity?

The second chapter is a literature review on dis/connectedness that will answer the first and second questions by drawing on multiple discourses that are concerned with the individual, social and political aspects of disconnectedness. In the third chapter I will continue reviewing literature on Critical Pedagogy and Social Justice Education; with

that in mind I will make the case why addressing di/connectdness is essential to be included in these bodies of scholarship.

The latter two questions will be answered by analyzing the CFE-300 course experience (Chapter Five). The analysis includes reflection papers from 50 students and interviews with 11 of those students. The data also includes my own notes as well as photos of the course activities I took every week. In the analysis, I will address how the students responded to readings, movies, activities, and classroom discussions on dis/connectdness and community, and how the pedagogical strategies I employed throughout the semester assisted them to realize personal/professional responsibility while being introduced to social justice issues in the education system.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW: SOCIAL DIS/CONNECTEDNESS

#### **Introduction to the Literature Review**

Give light and people will find the way.  
– Ella Baker

Connectedness and disconnectedness are interwoven concepts. We know disconnectedness because we know connectedness, and vice-versa. We experience them both throughout our life. Therefore, discussing these two concepts cannot be done separately. Although the overall study is concerned with Connectedness in Education, I believe that understanding connectedness and disconnectedness outside of the classroom context is fundamental in order to better analyze the CFE-300 course, which I do in Chapter Five.

In this chapter, I establish a thorough literature review of connectedness and disconnectedness and it includes two main parts. The first part entails a discussion about dis/connectedness by drawing from multiple discourses and resources that are concerned with their individual, social, and political aspects. The second part of this chapter will focus on two concepts: religious/spiritual practices and social change activism. These often function as spaces to restore connectedness and reduce disconnectedness. The reviewed literature in this chapter is organized in three aspects: the individual, the social, and the political. The individual portion represents the emotional and the intellectual

aspects of how individuals experience disconnectedness (e.g., sense of loneliness, despair, spiritual emptiness, and social isolation). Those experiences oftentimes contribute to practices of self-harm (Brown, 2010; Fromm-Reichmann, 1959; Portman & Garrett, 2006; Rybak & Decker-Fitts, 2009; Wesley-Esquimaux & Snowball, 2010), and to an increase in mental health illnesses and practices of violence that adversely impact others.

The social portion is concerned with the relationships that individuals have with their families, friends, and the communities they belong to. Families are the smallest unit of community (Hull, 2003; Lin, 1994); and the communities that one belongs to are varied: neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, spiritual/religious affiliations, activist groups, social/professional organizations, and online communities. The social layer also includes the social norms and values that are attributed to American society.

The political layer includes power relations (Orloff, 2013; Pyke, 1996) within the society which are shaped by government institutions, religious institutions, and corporations. By that I mean public policies, legislation, and government authorities/agencies that provide public services such as education, welfare, infrastructure, and healthcare. The government, religious institutions, and corporate sector all have great power and they directly impact both government-based services and the ways individuals and communities are being treated and participate in social realms.

I assert that a discussion about dis/connectedness must include these aspects (individual, social, and political) because they are interrelated and inform one another. Nonetheless, it is impossible to extract one and discuss it in isolation, specifically when it

comes to how individuals and communities function within a society that is affected by political powers.

The literature review includes themes that are related to dis/connectedness (such as loneliness, despair, shame, trauma, and violence) alongside the role of community in one's life, faith and American values. There are two important things regarding the themes I have chosen to emphasize in this chapter. First, the themes are in accordance with topics that were discussed in the CFE-300 course. Students who agreed to participate in this study have shared the many ways they experience dis/connectedness. For example, they attribute addiction, loneliness, and shame to disconnectedness; they also attribute faith, family relationships, and friendships as ways to gain sense of connectedness.

Second, these themes cannot be discussed in a linear way. Some of them are interconnected and will be discussed alongside one another. In that sense, I draw from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the *rhizome*, “a model of thought, which challenges both conventional knowledge and the means of acquiring this knowledge” (Allan, 2011, p. 9). This philosophical concept allows me to make multiple, non-hierarchical connections between social theories, individuals' lived experiences, and interdisciplinary scholarship in the reviewed literature I present in this chapter and throughout this dissertation. Allan (2011) writes that Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) model “grows or moves in messy and unpredictable ways” (Allan, 2011, p. 9), and that it has “multiple connections, lines and points of rupture, but no foundation or essence, and the connectivity of these lines make a rejection of binarism inevitable” (p. 9).

Thus, I acknowledge the potential of the messiness of discussing connectedness and disconnectedness. Although they are experienced as opposite states of mind, they cannot be examined separately and out of broader contexts. For example, discussing connectedness cannot be complete without examining the role of community in one's life, while examining the role of community cannot be done without paying attention to American values such as individualism and meritocracy. Additionally, it requires an examination of the social structures in U.S., and the political power relations within it. The personal experiences of many are interwoven with the social/political reality. Hence, the messiness.

This chapter will answer the first two research questions: **(1)** How do we understand the meaning of dis/disconnectedness? and **(2)** What are the individual and the social consequences of disconnectedness in the American culture/society?

The third and fourth research questions: **(3)** How and in what ways might a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* address disconnectedness in American society? and **(4)** In what ways, if any, does a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* impact the CFE-300 students' notions of power relations, social justice, and identity? will be answered in the next chapters.

### **Connectedness and Disconnectedness**

In this section I will do two main things. First, I will define connectedness. Second, I will review the literature that is concerned with disconnectedness and the ways it affects individuals, communities, and society. Since connectedness and disconnectedness are reflected in each other and inform one another, I would like to first

briefly discuss connection and connectedness, and to explain how they differ from one another before I review disconnectedness at length.

The Oxford Dictionary (n.d.) defines connection as (1) “a relationship in which a person or thing is linked or associated with something else,” and (2) “the action of linking one thing with another”. *Connection* originates from the Latin words *connectere* and *connexion* and was included in the English language in the late 14th century. At that time, the word meant “a binding or joining together”. *Connectere* is the combined words of *con* (“together”) and *nectere* (“to bind, tie”). In the mid-18th century, *connexion* shifted to *connection*.

The verb *to connect* originated in mid-15th century from Latin. Per the Etymology Dictionary (n.d.), in 1881 the French *connexer* became *connecter*, meaning “to establish a relationship (with).” In 1926, *to connect*, in English slang, meant “get in touch with”; and from 1942 it began to mean “awaken meaningful emotions, establish rapport.” Over the years, *connection* as a noun, and *to connect* as a verb, have shifted from physical characteristics to also including an emotional one.

Connectedness is defined as “the state of being connected” and “a relation between things or events” (“Connectedness,” n.d.). Dictionaries often look at connection and connectedness as synonyms. However, for the purpose of this study, I would like to suggest that connectedness is much more than connection. Connectedness, as I define (and experience) it, also constitutes expression, meaning, communication, mutual efforts to understand one another, and context. For many – myself included – connectedness constitutes a spiritual aspect: some sort of energy that has its power to unite people, to

humanize each other, and to recognize and honor the divine that lays within ourselves and others.

Connectedness is often discussed in scholarly work on spirituality and religion (e.g., de Souza, 2012, 2011; Tacey, 2010). De Souza (2011) describes a spiritual linear continuum which demonstrates how, when a separated individual deepens their connectedness through spiritual practice, they will achieve a sense of ultimate unity. She writes that connectedness is what an individual feels about everything other than themselves. Individuals start off as separated from the Other (family members and the communities they belong to) and as they pass “a relational continuum [...] they grow closer to and feel connectedness and empathy with others who are the same as themselves” (p. 46). De Souza (2011) introduces a model where people gradually shift from separation into ultimate unity. She explains that individuals' life experiences “may take them forward to feel connected to others,” and ultimately “the individual becomes one with the Other, Self becomes part of the whole which comprises the Other. The individual has passed the point of relationality and entered the reality of Ultimate Unity” (p. 46).

When it comes to interpersonal relationships, sense of connection is often rooted in validation. As such, Brown (2010) defines connection as “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship” (p. 19). Although Brown's definition resonates with me on a personal level, I find her definition somewhat limited as a scholar and as an educator. Brown's definition lacks

some essential components, such as the community's role in one's life, and the possibility that connection or connectedness can be also found outside the realm of relationship with others (e.g., feeling connected to religious or spiritual deities, or the sense of connectedness many experience with different forms of arts). For me, connectedness is the experience of feeling whole, validated, belonging, and free of violence, and that experience is not limited to interpersonal rapport.

In the absence of sense of connectedness, we often experience disconnectedness, which may lead to undesired feelings and emotions that can deepen our sense of disconnectedness even more. In the next part, I will discuss how disconnectedness is often experienced at the individual and social levels.

### **The Wounds: Unpacking Disconnectedness**

there is dark  
and  
there is anti light  
these are not the same thing  
– Nayyirah Waheed

“Life is difficult,” writes Scott Peck (1978, p. 15) in the opening of his book, *The Roads Less Traveled*. “Life is a series of problems,” he continues (p. 16) and explains that the difficulty lays in the painful process of “confronting and solving problems” (p. 16). He continues by stating that the problems “evoke in us frustration or grief or sadness or loneliness or guilt or regret or anger or fear or anxiety or anguish or despair” (p. 16), which are uncomfortable feelings, often painful ones. Peck finds meaning in

meeting and solving those problems and associates spiritual growth with those who are willing to solve problems with courage and wisdom.

The unwillingness to often cope with uncomfortable feelings is observed in many scholars' work (Brown, 2010, 2015; Kramer, 2003; Lerner, 2000; Palmer, 2004) on the increase of people's daily misery. If life is indeed difficult, then we ought to find ways to lessen the emotional and psychological outcomes that hurt our ability to overcome difficult times. The fear of the pain involved in coping with difficulties has the potential to keep us from taking action, therefore dooming ourselves to a vicious cycle of despair.

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness - The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, Parker Palmer (2004) explains that he yearns to be whole, however, “dividedness often seems the easier choice” (p. 4). He writes about the price he pays for living a divided life: “feeling fraudulent, anxious about being found out, and depressed by the fact that I am denying my own selfhood” (p. 5). Dividedness, asserts Palmer, “comes in many and varied forms” (p. 6). He lists how we refuse to invest ourselves in our work, thus diminishing its quality, or how we stay in bad relationships that “kill off our spirits” (p. 6).

Similarly, Brown (2010) argues that disconnection is rooted in the absence of love and sense of belonging, which she explains are “essential to the human experience” (p. 23). She writes that “when those needs are not met, we do not function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick.” (p. 26). The absence of love and sense of belonging, she asserts, “will always lead to suffering” (p. 26). Both Palmer (2004) and Brown (2010) agree that a deep sense of

disconnection/dividedness can be a toxic burden in one's life. The burden is heavy and it causes us to retreat from authentic, meaningful relationships, “we conceal our true identities for fear of being criticized, shunned, or attacked” (Palmer, 2004, p. 6). He explains how our lives can feel awful, whether because of pain, hiding our beliefs, or putting ourselves in vulnerable positions. However, he suggests that this type of vulnerability is not the one that assists us connect with others, but rather the undesirable type of vulnerability where we need to keep track of everything we say and do, so people will not call our bluff and see through the smokescreen. For Brown (2010), a desired sense of vulnerability necessitates “the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcomes” (p. 4). Thus, an authentic connection with others requires us to show who we truly are, and how we really feel. That kind of vulnerability, argues Brown (2015), can be powerful and transformative because it requires us to be brave, to take risks, and be truthful in our lives. Practicing Brown's (2010, 2015) type of vulnerability can help us address emotional issues that harm our well-being.

We tend to ignore our pain until it is too late. In some cases, we feel powerless, believing that there is nothing we can do about it. A sense of powerlessness can be related to traumatic experiences we have endured. Herman (2005) defines trauma as an event (either a single event or a recurring/continuing series of events) when a victim can “neither resist nor escape,” and the victim’s self-defense system becomes “overwhelmed and disorganized” (p. 34). Trauma occurs when people are stripped of their power to act, whether by an individual (e.g., robbery at a gunpoint, bullying, physical, emotional or sexual abuse), or by the government (e.g., police brutality or legislation that takes

people's power away). Another way to strip away people's power is to convince them that they do not have any power in the first place, and whatever they do, it will not matter. As the poet and activist Alice Walker<sup>4</sup> said once, “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.”

When people lose their power, they lose their agency. Sen (1999) defines an *agent* as “someone who acts and brings change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives” (p. 19). Agency, write Scott and Marshall (2009), is “often no more than a synonym for action, emphasizing implicitly the undetermined nature of human action” (p. 11). In other words, when people lose their ability to make decisions regarding their ways of being and doing, when individuals cannot act upon their will, their notions of hope that things can be changed is drastically reduced. This is especially true for disenfranchised and marginalized individuals and communities who experience oppression and discrimination due to their identity makeup.

Trauma also contributes to social isolation (Herman, 2015; Spitz, 2008), and the ramifications impact our ability to connect with others. The more we deny how trauma hurts and isolates us, the more we potentially suffer. Van der Kolk (2014) writes about one of his mentors that taught him and his colleagues to look at the humane aspects of psychiatric patients rather than just their mental illness. He taught them to “acknowledge, experience, and bear the reality of life - with all of its pleasures and heartbreak” (p. 26). His mentor taught them that the greatest source of human suffering is the lies that we tell ourselves (p. 27).

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<sup>4</sup> attributed.

Oftentimes, the wounds are already there, but we are not aware of them until they surface. We tend to ignore, to deny, to repress. Denial, perhaps, is one of the most important issues that should be acknowledged in regard to the divided, wounded life many experience and the traumas they endure, as individuals and as communities. We deny many things in our lives, and we deny them in many ways, in such a fashion that oftentimes we even deny our own denial.

Cohen (2001) recounts the ways in which we deny: we turn a blind eye, see what we want to see, hear what we want to hear, say that “ignorance is bliss,” “it has nothing to do with me,” and “there’s nothing we can do about it.” He says that even when “the information is available and registered [it] leads us to a conclusion which is knowingly evaded” (p. 5). Cohen claims that denial can be “individual, personal, psychological, and private - or shared, social, collective and organized” (p. 9). We just do not want to know, or we know, but prefer to ignore what is evident. Palmer (2004) suggests that oftentimes we are rewarded for not addressing what is in front of our eyes. Perhaps it is the fear of dealing with the things we deny that makes us scared to experience more pain, in addition to that which we are already suffering.

As our sense of dividedness and social isolation deepen, we experience more and more despair that is rooted in the belief that we are incapable to change the course of our life. The possibility of defeating the causes of our immense pain oftentimes cannot be seen on our horizon, and many experience a sense of despair. Rob Bell, a former evangelical Christian pastor, defines despair as a spiritual condition. He says that despair “[is] the belief that tomorrow will be just like today” (as quoted in Brown, 2015, p. 202).

As trauma deprives people of power and agency, despair flourishes. Our untreated wounds - whether they are physical, emotional, or mental - extend our sense of disconnectedness. We tend to retreat from social functions and isolate ourselves. We simply fold into ourselves.

One of the symptoms of this isolation is the intense loneliness many people endure. In one of her poems, Emily Dickinson describes loneliness as “The Horror not to be surveyed” and captured its often unbearable feeling<sup>5</sup>. Fromm-Reichmann (1959) characterizes loneliness as a “painful, frightening experience that people will do practically everything to avoid it” (p. 1). She writes that, as a distressing and painful experience, loneliness “by definition [is] the common fate of many people of this culture. Unverbalized as it may remain, it is nevertheless potentially a communicable experience, one which can be shared” (p. 2). The kind of loneliness Fromm-Reichmann describes ultimately leads to “the development of psychotic states. It renders people who suffer it emotionally paralyzed and helpless” (p. 3). The longing for interpersonal intimacy, she writes, “stays with every human being from infancy throughout life; and there is no human being who is not threatened by its loss” (p. 3). Fromm-Reichmann adds that people are born with the need for personal contact as well as tenderness. Essentially, the experience of loneliness occurs when people do not experience intimacy.

Fromm-Reichmann (1959) writes that loneliness can lead to anxiety and depression, creating topics that lonely people cannot talk about, thereby turning them into secretive issues. Thus, she explains, “it produces the sad conviction that nobody else has

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<sup>5</sup> “The Loneliness One Dare Not Sound” / #777

experienced or even will sense what they are experiencing or have experienced” (p. 6). Fromm-Reichmann adds that even people with “mild borderline states of loneliness” do not talk about it. They hide it as a secret from others and keep “its conscious realization hidden from themselves” (p. 6).

Fromm-Reichmann's assertions are supported by empirical researching that shows that social isolation affects one's “neural, neuroendocrine, and behavioral responses that promote short-term self-preservation” (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Capitanio, & Cole, 2015, p. 93). The researchers state that social isolation (loneliness) increases anxiety, hostility, and social withdrawal. Additionally, it causes an increase in “sleep fragmentations and daytime fatigue [...], vascular resistance and altered gene expression and immunity” (p. 93). The list goes on and includes “decreased impulse control in favor of responses highest in the response hierarchy [...], increased negativity and depressive symptomatology; and increased age-related cognitive decline and risk of dementia” (p. 93).

The high rates of anxiety and depression in the U.S. should be examined more carefully. According to the National Alliance on Mental Health (2015), twenty percent of children and teens age 13-18 live with a diagnosed mental health condition: 11% with a mood disorder, 10% with a behavioral or conduct disorder, and 8% an anxiety disorder. Suicide is the 3<sup>rd</sup> leading cause of death among youth ages 10-24. Adults also suffer from mental health problems in great numbers. Forty-four million adults in the USA have mental health issues, a number equivalent to 20% of the adult population. 13.6 million have a serious mental illness, 2.4 million have schizophrenia, 6.1 million have bipolar

disorder, 16 million have major depression, and 42 million have an anxiety disorder (National Alliance on Mental Health, 2015). These numbers reflect not only a mental health crisis in the U.S., but also raise questions, such as whether American culture and its values (individualism, meritocracy, competition) might escalate this crisis.

It is apparent that there is a correlation between the growing prevalence of mental illness and the dividedness we experience as a society. The more we experience disconnectedness, the less intimacy, love, and compassion we practice, and the more we suffer. This unnecessary suffering deepens the disconnectedness because we feel ashamed to be categorized as ill.

Johnson (2009) defines shame as hesitation to express thoughts and feelings because “we feared exposure, vulnerability, attack or ridicule” (p. 225). Shame, she writes, is associated with humiliation, embarrassment, and mortification that are rooted in the fear of exposure or betrayal. Shame hurts our sense of self, and we “typically respond to shame by trying to mask the reaction all together” (Johnson, 2009, p. 225). We feel that we need to “hide our shame, our blush, our thoughts, and the parts of us that have been exposed” (p. 225). Johnson writes that these reactions are followed by experiencing disconnectedness and fragmentation. Shame affects our body language (for example, by avoiding eye contact) and our cognition (it shifts our ability to perceive reality), thus interfering with our thinking, which in turn hurts our ability to think clearly, solve problems, and be creative. Shame also “interrupts our emotions and emotional communication” (p. 225) and contributes to limiting intimacy and empathy.

Similar to trauma, shame isolates us. In severe cases of shame, people can find themselves caught in an unbearable and painful situation and they cannot “move beyond their inner world of thought into expression because the fear of exposure, attack, and ridicule is too great” (Johnson, 2009, p. 226). It also leads to feeling unworthy in a culture that demands perfection (Brown, 2010) and it is linked to despair and depression. In severe cases of shame, we feel that we want to retreat from relationships, so we will not feel judged more than we already judge ourselves. Brown (2010) explains that our tendency to feel shame that results in disconnectedness goes against our human needs. However, she also reminds us that as human beings, “we are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong” (p. 25). If that is true, one might ask what went wrong along the way. Why do we experience so much pain, fear, despair, loneliness, and mental illness in our society? What if our core is about sharing, loving, and caring for each other?

### **From Collectivity to Individualism**

Nobody could make it alone.  
– Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

In her book *Mothers and Others*, the anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (2009) demonstrates Brown’s assertion regarding the way we are “wired” to live in communities. In her study, Hrdy claims that “a human child is born eager to connect with others. In gathering and hunting society, that child also would become accustomed to being cared for and fed by others in nurturing environment” (2009, p. 23). Children, even

before they can talk, are taught to share and give, and we can witness until this day the human,

[c]hronic readiness to exchange small favors and give gifts [...] Custom, language, and personal experiences shape the specifics, but the urge to share is hard-wired, and neurophysiologists are getting to the point where they can actually monitor [...] the pleasure humans derive from being generous, helping, and sharing. (p. 25)

In her study, Brown (2010) focuses on individuals and their relationships with others. She conceptualizes connectedness in a more social capacity, while Hrdy (2009) situates the human need for connection from the moment we are born (p. 73). Hrdy claims that being eager to share and willing to cooperate were critical during the long stretch of time when our ancestors lived as hunters and gatherers (p. 11).

Hrdy's anthropological research is important because it shows that humanity did not begin as separated and divided. Tracing human behavior 10,000 or 15,000 years ago and studying our pre-history can help us better understand when we went wrong and why. When did we lose touch with our primal instincts to survive while taking care of others and not only for ourselves? According to Hrdy (2009), our survival in the prehistoric era was dependent on cooperation. Taking care of each other was in the community's best interest, although there were some infrequent violent events. She writes,

[N]o doubt our Pleistocene ancestors experienced jealousy, competed for reputation, and harbored grudges or desires for retribution that occasionally escalated into mayhem. Homicides among hunter-gatherers are well documented, often crimes of passion involving women. But such killing tends to involve individuals who know each other than warfare between adjacent groups. In spite

of abundant evidence documenting intergroup conflict over the past 10,000 to 15,000 years, there is no evidence of warfare in the Pleistocene. (p. 19)

Humans fought, expressed negative feelings, and have even harmed each other. However, at the same time different customs across cultures conveyed the equivalent message of “You are cared for and will continue to be. Love [...] is a message babies are all too eager to receive” (Hrdy, 2009, p. 113). Stirling (2009) believes that we have lost most of our community orientation and that is why we can only see ourselves. The loss of a sense of community is linked to the beginning of dividedness, separation, and ultimately, war.

The process of moving away from collectivity and embracing ideas of individualism can be observed in the way American society has embedded individualism as one of its fundamental values. Since its inception, individualism has been one of American society's core values (Pai & Adler, 2001). Individualism is a doctrine that favors the idea of people's independence and self-reliance (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, 1996). It also emphasizes the idea that individuals' needs are more important than the needs of the whole society or group of which they are a part. In addition, it favors freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control.

Other values that were added along the way during the evolution of American culture, such as meritocracy and equality of opportunity (Pai & Adler, 2001), are also impacted by the individualism doctrine and cannot be discussed without addressing cultural, social, and political power structures. The myth of meritocracy – the idea that one's success depends on one's efforts – feeds the notion of a possible social mobility that

is solely based on hard work, while disregarding institutionalized sexism, racism, classism, and other forms of oppression (see Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Every, 2005; McCoy & Major, 2007). Similarly, the widely held idea that equality of opportunity exists in the U.S. can be easily refuted by studies (for example, Acker, 2006; Alexander, 2010; Verloo, 2013) that show how women, people of color, and other marginalized groups in the U.S. are being discriminated against. Thus, one's efforts to succeed in American society might be futile due to social power structures that limit one's efforts to achieve economic security and/or financial stability, no matter how that person is deeply invested in hard work.

Individualism has been perpetuated throughout the years while strengthening mechanisms of oppression that benefit those who are in power – mainly wealthy, white, heterosexual, Christian men. These two ongoing processes – individualism and meritocracy – contribute to separation, dividedness, and social isolation that become a fertile space for acts of internal and external violence.

Individualism often contradicts ideas of collectivity and interdependence (Bellah et. al., 1996). Individualism does not necessitate cultivating communities, and when combined with neoliberal ideology and practices, it atomizes existing ones. The individual person relies solely on themselves. This stance has the potential to keep the individual all alone. Thus, when the individual's efforts to achieve something fail, they often blame themselves and internalize low self-worth and low self-esteem (Brown, 2010). As an antidote to the ramifications of low self-worth and low self-esteem, Brown (2010) urges us to invest in relationships and cultivate the practice of compassion. Pema

Chödrön, a Buddhist nun (Mahayana tradition), asserts that compassion is rooted in communication and vulnerability (2008). She writes,

To relate with others compassionately is a challenge. Really communicating from the heart and being there for someone else -- our child, spouse, parent, client, patient, or the homeless woman on the street -- means not shutting down on that person, which means, first of all, not shutting down on ourselves. This means allowing ourselves to feel what we feel and not pushing it away. It means accepting every aspect of ourselves, even the parts we don't like. To do this requires openness, which in Buddhism is something called emptiness -- not fixating or holding on to anything. (p. 65)

Chödrön's sentiment resonates with both Brown (2010) and Hrdy's (2008) writing about the foundations of connectedness that are rooted in the way we relate to each other. The shift in how we experience and maintain relationships with others is a topic that occupies many.

We are born into families and communities, and we thrive in those that welcome us just the way we are. We are seen and heard, loved and cared for. In given optimal conditions, babies are taken care of, nurtured, and loved. As social creatures, we subject our babies to social norms little by little. On one hand, we socialize them to compete and we raise them into a divided life where gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and religion are binary boxes for them to fit into rather than explore. On the other hand, we do our best to situate them in the best position that we can to make sure they will be successful in life, even by exploiting and harming others. On both accounts, we deprive children and youth from practicing genuine compassion and empathy. Remen (2000) suggests that recovering compassion requires us to confront the core values of our culture. She writes,

We are a culture that values mastery and control, that cultivates self-sufficiency, competence, independence. But in the shadow of these values lies a profound rejection of our human wholeness. As individuals and as a culture we have developed sort of contempt for anything in ourselves and in others that has needs, and is capable of suffering. It is not a gentle world. (p. 9)

When we mask our true selves, we do not fully participate in life and the communities we belong to. Additionally, competing with others cannot go hand in hand with practicing compassion. Competition as a way of life goes against our true self that yearns for connectedness. Under these circumstances, we sometimes even go against our family and community members. As a result, we lose the sense of connectedness to other people, our sense of belonging, and the ability to practice compassion as well as the ability to love or to be loved fully. In this kind of reality, we destroy our communities and their potential to lift us up in our darkest times. Brown (2010) writes that “we can only belong when we offer our most authentic selves and when we are embraced for who we are” (p. 27). In today's reality, we simply do not.

Dis/connectedness is contextualized by what we do, where we are at, with whom we are in a relationship with, and so on. It seems that the way we experience dis/connectedness has a lot to do with how we relate to others and how we let others relate to us. Therefore, special attention should be paid to the way we maintain relationships. It seems that, as we tend to experience the world as disconnected and isolated, we use “things” as well as people to meet our needs. In many encounters with others, we are likely to ask, “what is in it for me?”

Buber (1937) argues that the human tendency is to look at something or someone as *It* rather than *Thou* in his essay *I and Thou*. The I-It is an instrumental relationship; it is

assumed as fixed: a relationship that comes with an expiration date and cannot evolve beyond its functionality. Lerner (2000) expounds on this and argues that selfishness has become part of our culture. People, while at work, spend time thinking “in terms [...] of bottom line” (p. 72), a habit that trickles into our personal, off-work life. Success, he explains, is measured by “maximizing the bottom line of money and power” (p. 72). Our wish to experience a human connection conflicts with capitalist social norms. “Living in a world based on money and power and you soon find that all relationships get corroded,” writes Lerner (p. 72), who is concerned with the “marketplace quality” (p. 73) nature of the relationships people have in their lives. He writes that “when friendships are based on market model, people give care and support to each other only if they can expect a good return on their investment” (p. 73) which results in a loss of solidarity.

The Buberian *I-Thou* relationship, on the other hand, is a relationship that we foster without getting something out of it: the purpose of the relationship is the relationship *itself*. It is the connectedness we experience with other people, or in Buber’s (1937) words: “no aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervenes between I and Thou [...] only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about” (p. 11-12).

Instrumental relationships contribute to the lack of authentic, meaningful interpersonal bonds. The desired relationships that can help our wounds heal and our spirits grow oftentimes become rare. Consequently, we witness two processes within the capitalist society: one, an increase of internal and external forms of violence, and second, an increase of materialism and consumerism that for many compensate for a sense of emptiness. Those processes can be better understood by examining the way society is

organized and how political powers impact the ways individuals and communities function within socioeconomic systems in the U.S. Those systems are fed by ideologies (such as individualism and meritocracy) that advance their massive influence on the way we experience disconnectedness and despair.

### **States of Destruction**

Individualism and meritocracy contribute to disconnectedness. They go against ideas of collectivity while perpetuating dividedness and competition. They result in anxiety and a sense of spiritual emptiness since they lean heavily on materialism and monetary gratification. Ultimately, they can lead to greed and corruption that enhance disenfranchisement and the exploitation of marginalized individuals and communities (e.g., women, people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, LGBTQ). Violence prospers in a society where disconnectedness prevails, and disconnectedness deepens through acts of violence. The violence that we witness and are affected by comes in many forms. It can be an addiction to shopping or heroin, a mass shooting in elementary school or road rage, millions of people losing their pension savings due to Wall St. fraud, or stagnation of wages while life expenses increase that results in increasing poverty rates. The more we participate in violence - passively or actively - the more we experience the world as traumatic, harmful, and unsafe to live in.

Since the 1980s, we have been witnessing a well-organized, multinational system that was swept up by neoliberal ideology. Harvey (2007) explains that the creation of neoliberalism:

Has entailed much destruction, not only for prior institutional frameworks and powers (such as the supposed prior state sovereignty over political-economic affairs) but also of divisions of labor, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life, attachments to the land, habits of the heart, ways of thought, and the like. (p. 23)

The practices of neoliberal ideology include privatization, free trade, deregulation, and other practices that reduce the government's role and shifts power from the public sector to the private sector.

Levinson, Gross, and Hanks (2011) write that the term neoliberalism “refers to the resuscitation and intensification of certain economic principles of classic liberalism, which emphasizes free enterprise, privatization, and market solutions to all human problems” (p. 233). Ironically, since the 1980s, neoliberal practices have caused the very same problems and created the current powerful, global system whose main goal is to maximize profits.

Harvey (2007) describes in length on how achieving that goal necessitates privatizing public assets, public utilities (e.g., water, telecommunication, transportation), public services (e.g., housing, education, healthcare, and Social Security retirement), and public institutions (e.g., universities, research laboratories, prisons). It also necessitates commodification of natural resources (i.e., land, air, and water), cultures, histories, and intellectual creativity (p. 35). He goes on and writes how “deregulation allowed the financial system to become one of the main centers of redistributive activity through speculation, predation, fraud, and thievery” (p. 36). The financial system, Harvey writes, emphasizes stock values, which results in “manipulations in the market that created immense wealth for a few at the expense of the many” (p. 37). The third practice that

many are affected by is the manipulation of crises. One of the examples that Harvey (2007) provides is the “creation of unemployment” in order to “produce a pool of low-wage surplus labor” (p. 38). Those practices, which have been led by corporations and implemented by government officials for decades, harm individuals and communities immensely. Defunding public services, cutting government assistance programs to people in need, while dehumanizing millions and subject them to a lifetime of hardship put the entire society at risk and in despair. More and more ascribe to the idea that nothing is going to change any time soon, or ever. As a result, people are more likely to fear losing their job, to be more competitive in advancing their lives, to exploit others, and even to engage in criminal behavior in order to survive.

Oftentimes, people respond to violent government/corporate neoliberal practices with violence. The violence is overwhelming and varied, and it “makes us feel unsafe and deprives us from a sense of certainty in life” (Zilonka and Job, 2017, p. 396). Shapiro (2006) argues that “the familiar and comforting contours of home, relationships, and community no longer seem so dependable or permanent” in a world of “violence, intolerance, social injustices, alienation, addictive materialism, egoism, and spiritual emptiness” (p. 15-16). Feeling alone and often disconnected is an experience that many share. Nonetheless, Shapiro (2006) reminds us that at the same time there is “hunger for communities where people can feel recognized and needed” (p. 67). Many people live within the tension of feeling disconnected while also yearning for human connection. The dissonance itself can be immensely painful, thus leading to self-medicating and suicides

for many. By not addressing the causes of this shared experience of suffering, despair and violence continue to flourish.

How did we come to this point, where so many people experience unnecessary suffering? How come those in power neglect to address nationwide problems such as extreme poverty, addictions, underfunded mental health treatment, homelessness, and other manifestations of violence? Or in Marvin Gay's words, "What's going on?"

### **The Deterioration**

Those of us who submitted or surrendered our ideas and dreams and identities to the "leaders" must take back our rights, our identities, our responsibilities. Then we will have to confront. I don't only mean external confrontations. We have to confront ourselves. Do we like what we see in the mirror? And, according to our light, according to our understanding, according to our courage, we will have to say yea or nay--and *rise!*  
– Maya Angelou

Since 2012, Chris Arnade has been following heroin addicts in Hunts Point, the poorest neighborhood in New York City. His photojournalism project, *Faces of Addiction* (Arnade, 2016a), portrays 279 stories of people who cope with addiction and extreme poverty. His other photojournalism projects, as featured in the *Guardian*, capture the horrific reality of addicts across the U.S. He couples text with mesmerizing photos that reveal the multifaceted nature of the opioid addiction epidemic in American society.

Arnade's (2016a, 2016b, 2016c) photojournalism projects provide a glimpse of the "other America," where more than two million addicts around the country suffer from the consequences of addiction. Many addicts experience physical and mental illnesses, homelessness, and extreme poverty. According to the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC), the number of overdose deaths involving opioids nearly tripled since 1999. A study entitled *Increases in Drug and Opioid-Involved Overdose Deaths — United States, 2010–2015* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016) shows that among 47,055 drug overdose deaths that occurred in 2014 in the U.S., 60 percent of them (28,647) involved an opioid. Between 2000-2015, more than half a million people died from a drug overdose. Approximately 90 people die every day from an opioid overdose. In 2015 alone, 52,404 deaths were related to a drug overdose and 33,091 (63.1 percent) of them involved an opioid. In the beginning of June 2017, the *New York Times* published a piece about drug deaths in the U.S., revealing that based on preliminary data compiled by the newspaper, between 59,000 to 65,000 people died from drug overdose in the U.S. in 2016 (Katz, 2017).

It is estimated that in 2012, about 2.1 million people in the U.S. suffered from addiction related to prescription opioid pain relievers, and an estimated 467,000 people were addicted to heroin that year (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). A 2015 national survey on drug use and health (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2015) revealed that more than 27 million people in the U.S. reported current use of illegal drugs or misuse of prescribed drugs. More than 66 million reported binge drinking in the past month. The report is cited on the U.S. Surgeon General's *Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health* (2006), and its executive summary reveals that,

only about 10 percent of people with a substance use disorder receive any type of specialty treatment [...] over 40 percent of people with a substance use disorder also have a mental health condition, yet fewer than half (48.0 percent) receive treatment for either disorder. (para. 4)

Behind the stunning numbers of addicts across the country, there are people whose daily struggle rarely told on mainstream media outlets. In an interview with Arnade (2016c), Bertha Porter, a twenty-eight year old woman from Tennessee, states that “My dad was a dealer, and all my friends used. We didn't have anything else to do. There was no other jobs, coal mines were closing left and right”. That short quote demonstrates how disconnectedness is not just a series of personal cases of disgruntled individuals who are bored with life and cannot find anything better to do besides shooting heroin. Disconnectedness of individuals and communities mirrors an eroded society where millions of people suffer tremendously.

The stories Arnade (2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2015) gathered suggest that drug addiction is rooted in many circumstances, such as traumatic events in addicts' pasts, experiencing homelessness, and domestic violence. Governmental organizations who research substance abuse and addiction show that there are different reasons why people become drug and alcohol addicts. For some, peer pressure and boredom during adolescence are contributing factors. For others, it is the wish to escape from hardship or to numb the pain of unaddressed current or past trauma. Coping with stress or undiagnosed mental illness such as anxiety, depression, or bipolar disorders are also common reasons for drug use (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 2014; National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2016; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2015).

In his *TED* talk, Johann Hari (2015), an investigative journalist who writes about addiction and the drugs crisis in the U.S, argues that “the opposite of addiction is connection.” He says,

Human beings have a natural and innate need to bond, and when we're happy and healthy, we'll bond and connect with each other, but if you can't do that, because you're traumatized or isolated or beaten down by life, you will bond with something that will give you some sense of relief. Now, that might be gambling, that might be pornography, that might be cocaine, that might be cannabis, but you will bond and connect with something because that's our nature. (Hari, 2015, 6:03)

In an article published in the *LA Times*, Hari (2017) provides two explanations for the rapid increase in drug addiction. The first is that pharmaceutical corporations promoted prescription opioids “as the solution to America's physical pain” (para. 2). Because these drugs are powerful, many get addicted to them. The other explanation is that people feel “more distressed and disconnected, and are turning to anesthetics to cope with their psychological pain” (Hari, 2017, para. 7). He adds that the addiction is soaring in areas “where people there may be lonelier and more insecure than they have been in living memory” and ascribes these social phenomena to the collapse in “people's sense of status, meaning or community,” which contributed to people's distress and made many of them “vulnerable to addiction” (Hari, 2017, para. 10).

With increasing numbers of drug abuse and drug related death in the U.S., one might wonder what happened in American society for the past several decades that had led millions of people to turn to drugs and alcohol in order to cope with their hardship. Arnade (2016b), similar to Hari (2015, 2017), suggests that the drug epidemic in the U.S.

has a lot to do with social processes. He ties drug abuse to the need to “escape from an ugly reality,” and adds that drugs “allow people in pain, whom society has rejected, a way to integrate into a community that does work for them” (Arnade, 2016b, para. 5). The dose of drugs that addicts use, Arnade explains, “is often a measure of how much pain they have suffered, how isolated they are.” Arnade's description of how people who suffer from addictions find some sort of comfort in addict-based community demonstrates how dis/connectedness are parallel processes in people's lives. Even in the darkest, most anguishing moments, people find ways to restore some sense of community, one that welcomes them and does not judge them. Throughout Arnade's photojournalism projects, we can witness the friendships and love stories among addicts who face cruel realities where pain, suffering, and social isolation prevail.

Arnade's (2016b) choice of words – rejection, pain, suffering, and isolation – resonates with many scholars who have been researching and writing about different types of addictions in American society, their origins, and consequences. In the book *Affluenza* (De Graaf, Wann, & Naylor, 2001), the authors detail the consumerism epidemic in the U.S., and analyze it as if it is a medical condition that American society has developed. The Oxford Dictionary (n.d.) defines affluenza as “a psychological malaise supposedly affecting wealthy young people, symptoms of which include a lack of motivation, feelings of guilt, and a sense of isolation.”

Affluenza is a combination of two words: influenza (known as the flu, caused by a virus) and affluent (wealthy). The authors of *Affluenza* agree that it is a modern illness that affects American culture, and they describe its severity by stating that it is “a family

problem. In a variety of ways, the disease is like a termite undermining American family life, sometimes to the point of collapse” (p. 46). They explain that the more Americans buy things and become attached to their possessions, the more they tell professional caregivers, faith communities leaders, friends, and family members that they feel “empty inside” (p. 72). The more they have, the less fulfilled they feel.

De Graaf, Wann, and Naylor (2001) link the sense of emptiness that many people who live in the U.S. experience to hyper-consumerism in American culture. They write that when Mother Teresa came to the U.S. to receive an honorary degree, she said, “This is the poorest place I've ever been in my life” (p. 72) Robert Seiple, as quoted in the book, explains that “She wasn't talking about economics, mutual funds, Wall Street, the ability to consume [...] She was talking about poverty of the soul” (p. 72).

There are several theories about what happened in the American society in the past decades that caused many people to feel that they lead meaningless lives that are full of despair and disconnectedness. Putnam (2000) suggests that the “Erosion of America's social connectedness and community involvement” (p. 277) is rooted in a complex network of factors. His theory about the decline of social engagement in American society includes alternative explanations involving the individual (changes in the traditional family structure), social (racism), and political (the economic system). He suggests that changes in the American traditional family structure (mother, father, and children) contributed to the “loosening of family bonds” (p. 277) due to an increase in the divorce rate and the growth of single-parent families. He writes that more Americans divorce, have fewer children, and live alone than in previous generations. According to

the *Pew Research Center*, in 1960, 73 percent of all children in the U.S. lived in a household with two married parents, compared to only 46 percent of children in 2014. More than half of children nowadays live in a household with a single-parent or cohabiting parents (Pew Research Center, 2015). The shift in the traditional family structure may have also contributed to the way that people interact with their parents, siblings, and extended family members. At the same time, studies show that since the 1960s there has been a decline in church attendance (Edgell and Robey, 2015), and there are more and more Americans who prefer to join inclusive churches.

On the other hand, we witness the emerging concept of *chosen family* (Gazso and McDaniel, 2014; Parry, 2008; Sharma, 2007; Smart, 2007) that have “extended beyond genetics to include emotional intimacy and personal commitment as foundation of their family” (Parry, 2008, p. 289). Within the *chosen family* category, we can find infertile women (Parry, 2008), people who regularly attend church (Sharma, 2012), and LGBTQ (Smart, 2007). Smart (2007) notes that LGBTQ are “often more concerned to identify who matters to them than to follow strict rules of genealogy” (p. 675), while Sharma (2012) is in agreement with Putnam (2000) when it comes to the changes in the traditional family structure and the growth of single-person households, “‘blended’, and stepfamilies” (Sharma, 2012, p. 818).

With regards to the social aspect of dis/connectedness, Putnam's (2000) theory attributes part of it to the increase of racial relations in the U.S. He writes that “the decline in social connectedness and social trust began just after the greatest success of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s” (p. 279-280), and the loosening bonds might have to

do with racism. Putnam writes that White Americans wanted “to withdraw from community associations” (p. 280) due to forced desegregation during the mid-1950s and the early 1960s. However, Sennett and Cobb (1973) remind us that segregation in the U.S. was not only between White and Black people. Segregation between different communities of immigrants was a result of how American society was organized by class and ethnicities. In their book that discussed the history of American laborers, they write that within cities, ethnic isolation was upheld for decades. Ethnicity, they explain, “[was] a way of preserving some special identity in the midst of the American mess, a way of maintaining distinctive traditions and rituals” (p. 15).

Sennett and Cobb (1973) explain that maintaining ethnic isolation was a result of racism. Many of the immigrant communities who came to the U.S. from East Europe, including Slavs and Jews, were stereotyped and dehumanized. They were “accused of dirtiness, secretiveness, or laziness,” and were seen as “potential criminals” (p. 14). Thus, ugly stereotypes combined with economic hostility that “forced the ethnic worker to turn to people like himself for comfort and warmth” (p. 14). Little Italy and Little Poland were hostile to outsiders, but since the 19<sup>th</sup> century they have been “urban villages” for those immigrant communities (p. 14).

The urban villages' economic context is broader than the immediate needs of communities who were targeted due to their identity and the stereotypes they were associated with. Integration into the larger American society was forced (Sennett and Cobb, 1973, pp. 16-17), and was accompanied by the understanding that “they are powerless in the hands of the economic and political forces controlling the cities” (p. 17).

Additionally, integration meant “integration into a world with different symbols of human respect and courtesy, a world in which human capabilities are measured in terms profoundly alien to [them]” (p. 18). In other words, in order to be respected, they needed to “acquire middle-class *things* [...] to become 'cultured,' in the intellectual's sense of the word” (p.18, emphasis theirs). However, write Sennett and Cobb, the demand for social mobility created anxiety because it mostly meant an increase “in material power and freedom of choice” (p. 29).

The economic status of communities in the U.S. is also contested by Putnam (2000) who reminds us how during the 1990s, “local banks, shops, and other locally based firms” were replaced by “far-flung multinational empires” (p. 282-283), which contributed to the decline in “civic commitment on the part of business leaders” (p. 283). He writes that “As Wal-Mart replaces the corner hardware store, Bank of America takes over the First National Bank, and local owners are succeeded by impersonal markets, the incentives for business elites to contribute to community life atrophy” (p. 283).

Putnam's theory resonates with De Graaf, Wann, and Naylor's (2001) analysis of the hyper-consumerism epidemic in the U.S. Currently, supermarkets carry an average of 39,500 items in their stores (Food Marketing Institute, 2015), yet the bottomless despair cannot be cured by the materialist abundance we can find in those aisles. As social justice educators, we should pay special attention to the many causes of this widespread despair we witness in many aspects of our day-to-day life that cannot simply be addressed by numbing our pain with “things.”

## **Digital Spaces**

It is also important to mention how people have been organized differently due to an increase in technology usage, specifically the internet. Online social media, specifically, brings people together in new ways we have not witnessed in the 1980s or 1990s. There is a constant growth of online participation all around the world. This phenomenon provides new ways in which people connect with each other based on personal, cultural, social, and political interests (see Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Stern & Dillman, 2006), and new friendships and communities that are not restricted to geographical proximity are formed. Like with disrupted ecological systems that fix themselves (Oliphant, 2016; Webster et al., 2016; Wendle, 2016), so do individuals and communities. By forming new ways to be connected, they compensate for loose or even lost connections. Where communities decline due to social or economic changes, people have found or co-created new spaces where they can connect and restore a sense of belonging. As Palmer (2004) asserts, the yearning for connectedness has always been part of being human. In that sense, the growing numbers of chosen families and the increase of relationships, friendships, and communities that are formed online are especially new.

We are in the midst of an internet-based social revolution. The vast growth of online platforms, social media in particular (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr) allow people from all walks of life to connect. Therefore, the social aspect of dis/connectedness and its impact on individuals and communities has yet to be fully grasped. However, we can already witness how some scholars ascribe personal and societal problems to technology usage. Turkle (2011) believes that technology “redraws

the boundaries between intimacy and solitude” (p. 11) as adolescents hardly speak on the phone and prefer to text, tweet, or use online platforms to communicate with family members and friends.

Although I share Turkle's sentiment about the decline in personal interactions, I also find these online platforms powerful tools to stay connected with people afar, not to mention the possibilities of forming new relationships, friendships, and communities in spaces that are not limited by geography. As an international student, I have been spending most of my time at home or on campus, and I cannot imagine my graduate school experience without my Twitter community where its Israeli members (which some of them have become close and dear friends offline) have been supporting and encouraging me throughout my years in the U.S.

However, as with many things in life, there are two sides to the online participation phenomenon. Studies have shown the prevalence of internet addiction (Blaszczynski, 2006; Diomidous, Chardalias, Magita, Koutonias, Panagiotopoulou, & Mantas, 2016; Griffiths, 2011; Young, 2004), pornography addiction (Rieth, 2008; Thomas, 2016), and internet sex addiction (Young, 2008). Internet-based violence (such as cyber-bullying and cyber-racism) is also enhanced because of the anonymity (Diomidous et al., 2016) that the internet allows. Turkle (2011) expresses her concern that our human vulnerabilities are being exploited by technology, and she is afraid that “(d)igital connections [...] may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other” (p. 2).

Tanis (2008), on the other hand, sees the positive potential in digital connection. She writes that although traditional social support was provided by family members, friends, professionals, and social organizations, with the increase in internet access “people are able to interact with others who would otherwise be less easy or even impossible to reach, and in a manner that can be quite different from the more 'traditional' face-to-face form of support” (p. 291). Tanis continues by stating that the online support group “gives people more control over the situation” (p. 292) and it responds to people's need to belong. For people who feel isolated, “being surrounded by similar others can be especially important” (p. 299). Tanis cites studies that show that, in online support groups that are comprised of understanding members, “very little suspicion exists, and interactions are characterized by low levels of negative emotional remarks and high levels of empathic communication” (p. 299). There are positive and negative outcomes to technology and the constant option of online connectivity.

The human need to experience connectedness, often by fostering a meaningful, loving and caring relationships is a basic need for most of us. This need can be met in the communities we take part in. In the next and last part of the chapter, I will review the relevant literature about two ways people use to reconnect and gain a sense of belonging: spiritual/religious practices and social justice activism.

### **The Many Paths to Restore Connectedness**

The yoga pose is not the goal. Becoming flexible or standing on your hands is not the goal. The goal is to create space where you were once stuck. To unveil layers of protection you've built around your heart. To appreciate your body and become aware of the mind and the noise it creates. To make peace with who you are. The

goal is to love, well..., you. Come to your yoga mat to feel; not to accomplish.  
Shift your focus and your heart will follow.  
– Rachel Bratten

There is not one right path to restore connectedness. We often seek and find a path that is a good fit for us and that meet our individual needs. Sometimes, we need to combine different methods or techniques in order to ease our pain, to deal with hardship, or with unaddressed past trauma. The ways are many. Some people find refuge in religious practices and they may decide to attend services at a church, synagogue, mosque, or Buddhist/Hindu temple. Others might find refuge in spiritual practices and will try out online guided meditations and/or download podcasts of spiritual teachings. Some people reclaim their sense of belonging and connectedness through social justice activism: they might join a cause that is close to their heart or will decide to volunteer for a social justice organization to assist diverse groups of people in need. In many cases, people will seek a new community to join that is comprised of like-minded people. Although it is an individual journey, it requires others to mentor, to guide, to support, to listen, and to advise. Connectedness oftentimes requires investment in relationships, and sometimes it means we need to pay attention to the relationship we have with ourselves and our past.

In this subsection, I will briefly review the literature that is concerned with a few ways people restore connectedness. I will focus on spiritual/religious practices and social justice activism. Both, I assert, can function as a vehicle to restore connectedness in one's life. As a social justice educator and scholar, I cannot separate spirituality practices and activism from the work I have been doing since my early 20s. Social justice activism and

spiritual practice oftentimes have one important thing in common: like education, their goal is to liberate individuals and communities.

### **Religion and Spirituality**

Religious and spiritual practices can assist individuals to restore connectedness, to gain a sense of belonging to a community, to gain self-worth and confidence, to ease one's pain, and – ultimately, if we are lucky enough – to heal one's wounds and be happy (or at least content). Even if it seems too late, even if we are in the midst of a storm that rips up everything we know, have, or are, there is still hope. Hope is there to reconnect to what is meaningful. In that sense, hope is the antidote for despair.

In the book *My Grandfather's Blessings* (2000), Rachel Naomi Remen offers her reflections and wisdom in regards to her work as a physician. She connects her work with her patients to her spiritual and religious experience while growing up in a Jewish family.

Remen writes:

Sometimes a wound is the place where we encounter life for the first time, where we come to know its power and its ways. Wounded, we may find a wisdom that will enable us to live better than any knowledge and glimpse a view of ourselves and of life that is both true and unexpected. (p. 25)

Remen connects the internal struggles that can result in illness to the external conditions that keep us disconnected and in despair. The body-mind connection (or its disconnection) reflects an external disharmony we experience in a world where “life becomes colder and somehow harder” (p. 10). Remen writes that we try to find ways to feel safe and secure, but we fail because we build places of security that end up separating us from one another. She explains how illness forces people to look at their

own vulnerability, and claims that once recognizing vulnerability, one cannot fail to respond to it. The wound that signifies our vulnerability as humans is there, and calls us to take care of it. If we are lucky enough to be able to hear that call, we might have a chance to start a journey of healing that involves developing a better, deeper connection to life itself, even in our most dire moments.

When it comes to religious or spiritual practices, connectedness is often discussed in terms of healing or wholeness. Specifically, it is a tool used to heal by assembling the fragmented pieces and regaining some sense of control in a society that is saturated with violence. Restoring wholeness or connectedness is a decision (Lewis, 2015; Remen, 2000), and requires a proactive approach.

People suffer both alone and together. When we experience trauma or a tragedy that causes us to feel broken and suffer, many often turn to a belief in a higher power for help and comfort. Spitz (2008) describes the experience of brokenness as if we were “shattered vessels in a broken world” (p. 40). However, he investigates ways to heal both ourselves and the world. For Spitz, healing the world means healing ourselves as well as healing the relationships we have with others and the communities we belong to. Theuring (2014) writes that “suffering is an experience that transcends religious differences” (p. 549). Later, she writes that our experiences of suffering and loss “are intimately tied to how we experience the Divine or see the role of religion” (p. 551).

The literature often relates concepts of connectedness to the desire to heal from the ramifications of hardship, by adopting religious and/or spiritual practices. The process of healing (for example, see Herman, 2005; Johnson, 2009; Stirling, 2009; Van der Kolk,

2014; Zupanic & Kreidler, 1998), has a lot to do with coping with negative feelings and emotions, and finding meaning in suffering (Frankl, 1992). Spiritual and/or religious practices can also assist us while we go through hard times and cope with despair. Many therapeutic models incorporate spiritual/religious beliefs with healing or recovery practices. For example, in Alcoholics Anonymous, the third step includes “a decision to turn our will and our lives over the care of God as we understand him” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 35) or any other higher power we feel comfortable to relate to. This is done in hopes that it will, eventually, help the recovering alcoholic to gain “true independence of the spirit” (p. 36).

Religious and spiritual healing are grounded in belief and hope that the ritual will be successful. In non-Western healing traditions such as among some Native-American practices, healing is about one’s well-being, and spirituality is an integral part of every aspect of life because “Healing and worship are considered one and the same. For many Native American people, the concept of health and wellness is not only a physical state, but a spiritual one as well” (Portman and Garrett, 2006, p. 456). Portman and Garrett (2006) write that this concept of wellness is embedded in the harmony one experiences with the multitude of connections they have “within oneself, with others, and with one’s surroundings,” by cultivating “an active relationship between the physical and the spirit world [...] along with the importance of seeking harmony and balance in both. For many Native American people, wellness through spirituality is not part of life; it *is* life” (p. 456-457, emphasis their). The authors emphasize the necessity of finding balance and

harmony not only at the individual level, but also at the family, clan, and community levels.

The important role of a community in one's healing process is also articulated by Spitz (2008). He writes that although healing can be an isolating experience because we may believe that no one can understand our pain and suffering, he states that community is the "antidote to isolation and despair" (p. 98). Furthermore, he writes that he found healing through his faith community and connects his healing process to his Jewish beliefs. In his description of the rituals, he lists other good deeds that Jews are obligated to do, such as visiting the sick, comforting the mourner, and supporting an orphan (p. 99). These Jewish traditions are rooted in community responsibility and mutually helping each other in dire circumstances. Teutsch (2009) adds to the list acts of kindness and supporting community members who are going through divorce, being the victim of a crime, losing a job, or any other "major source of life disruption" (p. 45). These acts of kindness are evidence of the commitment that benefit the healing process. Spitz (2008) explains that as we heal, "we accept commitments. Fulfilling these commitments gives us a sense of capacity to achieve goals that in turn allow us to heal more fully" (p. 104).

Spitz (2008) recounts the spiritual and religious practices in his faith community and writes that prayers offered him "a sense of belonging" and helped him to open his heart "to express hopes, fears, and gratitude," and to find "an enduring, caring, divine presence receiving my words" (p. 97). Similarly, Frankl (1992) explains faith as a way for some people to survive and stay connected while enduring the Nazi concentration camps.

All religious faith communities emphasize the importance of community, relationship, and sustainable congregations. Faith is a very strong force that provides a sense of belonging and a sense of self-worth to many believers. Prisoners in Nazi concentration camps relied on their religious beliefs and found meaning in their faith and in their suffering. Frank (1961), a Western psychologist who studied religious healing practices among indigenous people, claims that religious healing “emphasizes the profound influence of emotion on health.” He writes that “anxiety and despair can be lethal [while] confidence and hope [can be] life-giving” (p. 61). He also observes that Western society finds it difficult to move beyond notions of mind-body dualism. Considering Arnade's (2016a, 2016b, 2015) portraits of addicts in the U.S., it is no surprise that what we often witness in recovery contexts only addresses the physical aspects of addiction that expects people to be fully recovered after 21 days in a rehabilitation facility. Curing symptoms is not equivalent to caring for the soul. The emotional needs of addicts should also be brought into consideration, and so should be their reasons for turning to drugs or alcohol in the first place.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, despair is rooted in the belief that tomorrow will be just the same. The idea that nothing will change contrasts to one of the Tibetan Buddhist core concepts of impermanence. The Tibetan Buddhist idea of impermanence teaches us that “everything is changing all the time” (Tsering, 2006, p. 93), an idea that might raise one's spirit. “Things will change, regardless, because everything is impermanent, but I can recognize that I have the ability to make it change in the way best for me” (Tsering, 2006, p. 93). In that, Tsering means adopting practice of mindfulness,

which he defines as “an antidote to the mind that obsesses about the past and future” (p. 93) that can benefit the suffering one. The Tibetan Buddhist epistemology, in that context, is aimed at “bringing the seeker an understanding of how sentient beings can overcome their problems and eventually experience liberation – the cessation of suffering and its root causes” (p. 95).

Tibetan Buddhism helps a person gain connectedness because it offers many practices to enhance compassion, patience, and love. Traditionally, it offers three main training modalities: concentration (meditation), wisdom (the Buddha's teaching), and ethics (the rules of discipline). The three are dependent on each other, as Tsering (2006) explains, “without meditation, wisdom is dry and intellectual and ethics are tight and lifeless; without wisdom, meditation progresses slowly and ethics are clumsily applied” (p. 87). By implementing Tibetan Buddhist principles, one can achieve a content life, and even experience happiness, even in dire circumstances. Thus, what Tibetan Buddhism offers is a hopeful approach to defeat notions of despair. Everything changes, all the time. This understanding can bring comfort to our lives.

### **Social Justice Activism**

Devastated and heartbroken after my younger sister's unexpected death in November 2001, I remember myself searching for ways to make sense of her untimely death. One of the paths that assisted me to find my purpose in life was joining a couple of social justice causes. Only a decade later, I realized that my decision to take part of social justice activism was a result of feeling that I failed to protect and save my little sister; therefore, I was determined to save others. Activism has become a force that kept me

engaged with life. It gave me strength, hope, meaning, and new friends with whom I shared values and determination that our activism will, eventually, save the world. What it actually did was save my life. Social justice activism opened new spaces for me to feel connected. I gained a new sense of belonging to communities of social justice activists. Radical feminists, queers, people with disabilities, the anti-war activists – even the communists! – have become my chosen family, until this day.

Bell (1997) describes social justice as both a process and a goal. She defines the goal as the “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 3). This goal is linked to resource distribution that guarantees that “all members are physically and psychologically safe and secured” (p.3). The goal of social justice also entails a society where “individuals are both self-determining [...] and interdependent,” so individuals will gain a sense of agency and social responsibility. As for the process, Bell describes social justice as “democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change” (p. 4). Drawing from Bell's conceptualization of social justice, it is easy to understand how it related to connectedness. Individual identity is informed by one's social identity (Stets & Burke, 2000) and responses to political reality. My identity as an activist within a social group membership has shaped and impacted my self-perception (Muñoz, 2015, p. 95).

When studying undocumented youth immigrants, Muñoz (2015) writes that “change and motivational factors focus primarily on the self, and trying to change the attitudes and opinions of others through activist work” (p. 75). She explains that

“activists develop themselves, formulate new ways of thinking and feeling, and critically reflect on themselves and the society that they are attempting to change” (p. 75). By doing so, argues Muñoz, “activists reclaim dignity and freedom through fighting for equity in a holistic sense” (pp. 75-76).

In these challenging times, more and more people are refusing to subscribe to the paralyzing denial that keeps us passive citizens. Groups and communities all around the world are proposing strategies to foster justice (Muro, 1999). Social justice activism is the enacting of changes we want to implement in our society in order to become more just and fair. Social justice activism requires united efforts: individuals, families, and communities can come together and campaign for social justice causes. There are many social justice activism projects, programs, and organizations that unite many individuals and communities all over the world.

With a market-driven society that emphasizes consumption while putting profits before people (Muro, 1999), social justice movements are a symbolic beacon for possibilities; social justice activism empowers people and provides them a sense of agency. Social justice activism gives people a sense of belonging to a community of passionate individuals, and most importantly, it gives them hope. Specifically, hope that tomorrow is going to be different.

### **Dis/connectedness: Conclusion**

To be loved and taken care of are two of our deepest, most basic needs as human beings. However, for many of us, living in this world means living with many contradictions. We live within the tensions of care and neglect, hope and despair,

connectedness and disconnectedness. Our human hunger for meaning, our desire for wholeness and our wish for well-being are often blocked by negative feelings and emotions we have towards ourselves and others (e.g., apathy, anxiety, and anger), current/past traumatic experiences, and social norms/values that construct our beliefs system. Connectedness and disconnectedness are two states of mind that are governed by many internal and external factors which I have discussed throughout this chapter.

In this chapter I have conducted an interdisciplinary inquiry that draws from multiple discourses and sources in order to answer my first two research questions which are: (1) How do we understand the meaning of dis/connectedness? and (2) What are the individual and the social consequences of disconnectedness in the American culture/society? To address these two questions, I organized the answers in a non-linear fashion, recognizing the fact that dis/connectedness cannot be analyzed in a “clean” way due to its messy nature. Thus, I decided to use three sets of lenses to research and better understand dis/connectedness: the individual, the social, and the political, which allowed me to look at different causes/ramifications of dis/connectedness from multiple viewpoints.

While researching different forms of addiction, it has become apparent that drug addiction is one of the most extreme manifestations of disconnectedness. The phenomenon of addiction also demonstrates how the individual aspect of disconnectedness is, in fact, embedded in the socioeconomic reality of many communities across the country. In addition, it also highlights how they are influenced by

political powers in a nation that does not take care of its weakened members due to neoliberal ideology and values.

Dis/connectedness is multifaceted. Both are reactions to the emotional, socioeconomic, and political conditions we live in. I have chosen specific themes and threads to better understand dis/connectedness from the angle of the individual (despair, trauma, shame, denial, loneliness, addiction, and mental health). Adding the social and the political themes (individualism, meritocracy, and neoliberalism) provides further depth by describing the social and political processes in the U.S. in the past few decades.

Feeling heartbroken while researching the magnitude of internal and external manifestations of disconnectedness, I must also add that, despite the evidence presented in this chapter, my entireness is being led by hope. My hopefulness is rooted in the possibility of liberation that is folded within social justice activism, spiritual practices, and education for social justice and equity. Another thing these three have in common is the wish to better the conditions that foster a sense of connectedness among individuals and communities. In the next chapters, I will solely focus on education as a vehicle to advance these efforts.

In the third chapter, I will continue the conversation on connectedness while situating it in the context of education. Specifically, I will focus on the relationships between connectedness, education, critical pedagogy, social justice education and classroom practices that are related to community building. As a college instructor, I recognize the wish to restore connectedness among many of the students I have taught. The wish to reconnect and to gain a sense of belonging is evident, and the additional

literature review in the third chapter will demonstrate how *Critical Pedagogy* and *Social Justice Education* can assist educators to create pedagogical models in order to cultivate a sense of connectedness and belonging within the classroom. I will argue that the application of critical pedagogy—its principles and praxis—have the potential to make social justice educators' work more relevant to the students if they choose to include dis/connectedness as a vital component in their courses.

## CHAPTER III

### LITERATURE REVIEW: CONNECTEDNESS IN EDUCATION

#### **Introduction to the Third Chapter**

The earth, they taught me, like all of nature, could be life giving but it could also threaten and take life, hence the need for respect for the power of one's natural habitat.

– bell hooks

Back in 2010, I was a teaching assistant in an undergraduate course for pre-service teachers, titled *Cultural Diversity in Schools*. At the beginning of the semester, the instructor of the course facilitated a classroom discussion about how we became disconnected from Mother Earth. He argued that separation from nature has advanced the ways we have been exploiting natural resources for profit; a process which later expanded into the exploitation of humans.

Around that time, I watched Brene Brown's *TED* talk (2010b), where she discusses the relationship between connection, shame (which she explains as the fear of disconnection), and self-worth. She argues that the ramifications of disconnection within American society are disastrous and evident. She states that “we are the most in debt, obese, addicted, and medicated adult cohort in U.S. history” (Brown, 2010b, 15:32). Brown adds that we use these behaviors to numb bad feelings such as grief, shame, fear, and disappointment. By numbing these feelings, we also numb joy, gratitude, and happiness, thus making us feel miserable (Brown, 2010b).

Brown's *TED* Talk and book, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed To Be and Embrace Who You Are* (2010a), resonated with the experiences I had during my first year in the U.S. while adjusting to a new culture and social norms. Her book helped me to better understand what I experienced and witnessed – from being stunned by a stranger on the street who dismissed a gorgeous double rainbow, listening to students' accounts about the levels of anxiety and/or depression they have experienced, to watching the news reports on poverty, gun violence, and corruption.

I started to look at all of these phenomena through dis/connectivity prism. I began to see the connection between disconnectedness, violence, dehumanization, and exploitation, and how they are informed by American social norms and values. For me, injustices and inequities in the U.S. (and around the globe for that matter) have stopped being inevitable forms of oppression ascribed solely to “human nature.” It occurred to me that analyzing and understanding dis/connectivity was the missing link that can explain, for example, why we have been dehumanizing women, African-Americans, immigrants, people in poverty, people with disabilities, the LGBTQ communities, Jews, and Muslims for so long.

It is important to me to state that I have also witnessed and experienced courage, love, care, and compassion, which I ascribe to notions of connectedness and hope. I have met people who came together to help their own people as well as strangers by donating their time and money to a variety of just causes—locally and globally. I am not blind to those efforts I have witnessed (and participated in), some of them back home in Israel, in Idaho, and in North Carolina. I have also read about incredible social initiatives on news

outlets and social media platforms, learned about others in the classes I took as a student, as well as classes that I have taught. I have seen and met generous, kind, and devoted communities with beautiful, tenacious people who have moved mountains to make the world a better place. I have seen hope. Thanks to them, I have become hopeful myself.

Looking at the local/global political and societal realities (e.g., poverty, homelessness, addiction, privatization of the public good - alongside social justice activism carried by individuals, communities, and non-profit organizations) through the dis/connectedness prism has become a significant part of my educational and pedagogical work since 2010. In this chapter I begin to answer the third research question: How and in what ways might a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* address disconnectedness in American society? I respond to this via reviewing the literature that has been guiding my work, which emphasizes efforts to restore connectedness both in the classroom and outside of it. This chapter continues the conversation I started in the first two chapters regarding dis/connectedness, which now I situate in the context of critical pedagogy and social justice education. In this chapter, I investigate how connectedness, critical pedagogy, and social justice education intersect. As a *Cultural Foundations in Education* course instructor, I have developed and employed pedagogical strategies that have assisted me in discussing and analyzing disconnectedness, while restoring a sense of connectedness and belonging within the classroom, efforts which I facilitated by implementing critical pedagogy principles (which I will discuss later in this chapter) while teaching social justice issues.

In recent years, more attention has been paid to connectedness in education. Connectedness in education has been studied from different angles, such as collaborative learning (e.g., Summers, Beretvas, and Svinicki, 2005), education psychology (e.g., Boorn, Hopkins-Dunn, and Page, 2010; Roffey, 2013), and spirituality (e.g., de Souza, 2006; Fraser and Grootenboer, 2004). While acknowledging the growing interest in connectedness in education in other disciplines, this chapter offers a new approach that situates dis/connectedness within critical pedagogy and social justice education. In this chapter I focus on: (1) critical pedagogy as both political theory and praxis as a framework to enhance understanding of disconnectedness, and to cultivate connectedness, community, a sense of belonging, hope, and social responsibility; (2) the importance of imagining possibilities of connectedness; (3) the role of communities in defeating despair and cultivating connectedness, and (4) social justice education scholarship as a body of knowledge which assists to understand and analyze the ramifications of disconnectedness in order to provide tools to bring people together in meaningful, constructive ways to cultivate connectedness and strengthen communities.

### **The World and the Word**

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.  
– Lila Watson

In Chapter Two, I looked at the world where we oftentimes drift between despair and hope, experiencing social isolation and alienation while yearning for human connection (Palmer, 2004) and a sense of belonging. We live in a chaotic world that is

ruled by cruel, greedy, and corrupted government officials and corporations that advance neoliberal ideology and practices that leave millions of people defenseless. Shor (1987) writes about the powerlessness and confusion that people experience and argues that these experiences can only be understood through critical thinking. He admits that “most people are alienated from their own conceptual habits of mind” (p. 47), wonders why there are no masses of people “engaged in social reflection,” and asks “what prevents popular awareness of how the whole system operates and which alternatives would best serve human needs” (p. 47). As educators, we cannot ignore the harsh reality that many cope with daily. One of our responsibilities is to challenge what Shor describes as “conceptual habits of mind” (p. 47) wherever and whenever possible. For that, we need to engage in developing a new toolkit that includes radical language, thought, and praxis in order to challenge the dominance and hegemonic paradigms within society. Giroux (2011) writes that,

[e]ducators and other cultural workers need a new political and pedagogical language for addressing the changing contexts and issues facing a world in which capital draws upon an unprecedented convergence of resource – financial, cultural, political, economic, scientific, military, and technology – to exercise powerful and diverse forms of hegemony. (p. 69)

Giroux, who has written extensively about neoliberal attacks on higher education and the education system in general, asserts that countering the ways capitalism and globalization affect our lives requires “developing forms of critical pedagogy capable of appropriating from variety of radical theories” (p. 70), using frameworks such as feminism and critical theory, that “might be useful in both challenging neoliberalism [...]

while resurrecting a militant democratic socialism that provides the basis for imagining a life beyond the 'dream world' of capitalism” (2011, p. 70). Steinberg (2007) writes that critical pedagogy is “grounded in the understanding of the origins and underpinnings of power within society and in the fabric of schooling,” and adds that “critical pedagogy isn't a talk–liberals talk. Critical pedagogy takes language from the radical–radicals must do” (p. IX).

Critical pedagogy is comprised of the radical language, thought, and praxis that is needed to challenge the chaotic reality we live in and to empower the powerless. Its philosophy and methods can assist us to reconsider our role in the world—as teachers and students—and to instill hope that this reality is not permanent, and can be changed. Paulo Freire, who was the first to theorize and develop a philosophy of critical pedagogy in his groundbreaking book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2010), argues that the reality of oppression is not a fixed one (Zilonka and Job, 2017) but rather “a limiting situation which [people] can transform” (Freire, 2010, p. 49). Freire recognizes that “we live in a dehumanizing era (which he connects mainly to economics and focuses on the exploitation of low socio-economic classes), where we all experience dehumanization to some extent” (Zilonka and Job, 2017, p. 393). The powerlessness many experience is attributed to dehumanization, which ultimately leads to losing our ability to develop a sense of agency. The struggle for humanizing personal and professional space becomes the struggle for “the emancipation of labor, for the overcoming of alienation [and] for the affirmation of men and women as persons” (Freire, 2010, p. 44). Huerta-Charles (2007) reminds us that “within the critical pedagogy perspective there is a hope that teachers will

become agents of social change” (p. 250), thus employing critical pedagogy in our classrooms can advance a sense of agency. In a critical classroom, not only can we feel less powerless, but we have the opportunity to reclaim our power. Thus, education becomes a liberatory, radical act that humanizes people who find their voice.

Critical pedagogy is therefore hopeful and sees education “as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination” (Freire, 2010, p. 81). It is an “educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux, 2010, p. 15). To become a liberatory critical pedagogue, one must recognize that education is rooted in loving relationships we cultivate with others and with the world. Freire (1971) writes,

To be a good liberating educator, you need above all to have faith in human beings. You need to love. You must be convinced that the fundamental effort of education is to help with the liberation of people, never their domestication. You must be convinced that when people reflect on their domination they begin a first step in changing their relationship to the world. (Freire, 1971, p. 62, as quoted in Shor, 1993, p. 25)

Rendón (2009) adds that “faculty can assist students to raise their self-awareness, find purpose, voice, and self-worth, as well as develop tolerance and learn to recognize social inequities and take action against them” (p. 142)—much needed traits from which we can all benefit. Critical pedagogy recognizes that education involves “an exercise in consciousness growth” (Shor, 1987, p. 47), and one of the first steps to achieve growth is to investigate what stops us from achieving critical awareness. He writes that “[y]ou

know you are part of the big picture, but someone else is doing the painting” (p. 47) and then asks, what can we do about that sense of powerlessness?

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, a sense of powerlessness is attributed to different reasons (e.g., oppressive practices such as discrimination, legislation that limits people's freedom) and manifests itself in diverse ways (e.g., loneliness, depression, and anxiety that can result in addiction). All of those can lead people to experience disconnectedness, which consecutively deepens the sense of powerlessness. The guiding principles of critical pedagogy (which I describe in the next section) can be seen as a means to counteract what Giroux (2011) describes as “a real educational crisis in North America” (p. 8) due to the neoliberal attacks it has been subjected to in the past decades, in order to “defend public and higher education as a resource vital to the democratic and civic life of the nation” (Giroux, 2011, p. 77). While I agree with Giroux, I am also intrigued by Weiner (2007) who asks, “what if critical pedagogy’s project was neither the end of capitalism nor the radicalization of democracy... but rather the end of the world as we have learned to know it?” (p. 65). To his question, I add two of my own. First, what if the critical pedagogy project is about connectedness? Second, what will it mean to expand critical pedagogy and emphasize dis/connectedness discourses and praxis?

### **Paulo Freire’s Critical Pedagogy Guiding Principles**

In this section, I explore four main critical pedagogy principles through the prism of dis/connectedness. First, uncovering, analyzing, and understanding power structures. Second, a commitment to empowerment that contributes to developing a sense of agency.

Third, sustaining dialogue that enhances connectedness and a sense of belonging. Lastly, critiquing the reality and generating—individually and collectively—new knowledge(s).

I assert that the first principle conveys the ways individuals and communities experience and respond to disconnectedness as it borne by American social/cultural values (e.g., individualism and meritocracy), legislation (e.g., efforts to deny access to healthcare and deregulating polluting factories), and neoliberal practices that lead to inequities (e.g., privatization of natural resources and defunding public services). The second and third principles—empowerment and dialogue—are fundamental to create classroom conditions that allow a sense of connectedness to form and thrive.

Empowerment and dialogue are also necessary to grow social consciousness and restore agency and hope while analyzing and understanding inequities and injustices. The fourth principle, critique, allows us to generate new knowledge(s) individually and collectively while empowerment and dialogue are both utilized. The act of critiquing can take place once the students and the educator get to know each other, trust one another, and feel safe to voice their thoughts, ideas, and understanding.

**(1) Uncovering, analyzing and understanding power structures.** Critical pedagogy advances the idea that liberatory education involves uncovering and understanding power structures by analyzing the dominant culture, norms, ideologies, and ideas that shape a given society. This process assists in understanding, for example, how race, gender, ability, and social class are constructed and how social constructs and arrangements advance a sense of disconnectedness among marginalized individuals and communities in particular. By understanding power and growing consciousness about

domination and hegemony we can challenge our attitudes and change society to be less oppressive and discriminatory.

Uncovering, analyzing, and understanding power should also include the school system as a powerful social agency and the classroom as a microcosm that represents the larger society. Apple (1995) notes that it is important that educators and students understand economic and cultural reproduction in the school system, and expose “ideological hegemony in all its power and contradictions” (p. 106) which cannot be solved and reformed. The first principle advances the growth of consciousness, a process that can be hard for some. Cultivating a sense of connectedness in the classroom can help to lessen the tension that is caused by dealing with hard truths. Ada and Campoy (2004) write that,

[T]he process of growth is not easy, as it usually involves the awareness of some degree of tension between the conscious goals to which we aspire and the deeply held, often unconscious beliefs that are manifested in our actions. None of us is able to fully live out the ideals we hold. (p. 10)

Consciousness growth is oftentimes inevitable, even if we choose to ignore or deny what we have learned. Thus, with the next two critical pedagogy guiding principles—empowerment and dialogue—the liberatory educator can assist students to better handle with newly truths.

**(2) Empowerment.** Growing consciousness and reclaiming one’s voice are important in the process of liberation. As educators, we want to make sure students are empowered to consider possibilities of hope, liberation, and connectedness, while they discover ways to empower themselves.

Empowerment constitutes the educator's willingness to share their power and authority with the students. This aspect of empowerment is interconnected with the previous principle. Educators can demonstrate an alternative that goes against the idea of a given authoritarianism (Freire, 2010), one that is reinforced in mainstream educational thought that relentlessly promotes the notion that educators must control and manage the classroom. Sharing power and authority, writes Freire (2010), assists the critical pedagogue to dismantle authoritarianism. That can be accomplished by allowing students, for example, to grade their own work, to suggest changes in the syllabus, and to lead classroom discussions.

Another aspect of empowerment is validation. Empowerment occurs when students' histories, lived-experiences, and knowledge are validated. A space where empowerment occurs is a space where students feel safe to "name the oppression," and become "aware of privileges" (Ada and Campoy, 2004, p. 24-25), express their emotions (hooks, 2010), reclaim their voice, articulate their needs, and discuss and debate sensitive matters. Students who feel safe are students who trust and who are empowered to become agents of social change informed by love, compassion, and hope. Shore (1993) reminds us that critical pedagogy "challenges teachers and students to empower themselves for social change, to advance democracy and equality as they advance their literacy and knowledge" (p. 25). Thus, empowerment assists the students to restore a sense of agency, which can be followed by considering the possibilities of social change.

**(3) Dialogue.** Understanding how power structures inform practices of oppression and privilege requires us to collectively engage in dialogue. Freire's (2010) idea of

dialogue lays in the premise that a genuine dialogue always involves “an intense faith in humankind” (p. 90) as a prior condition to even begin a dialogue. It must acknowledge the power relationships between the educator and the students, it must engage in critical thinking, and it has to include proactive hope (Freire, 2010). Shor (1993) adds that,

In Freirean critical classrooms, teachers reject the methods which make students passive and anti-intellectual. They do not lecture students into sleepy silence. They do not prepare students for a life of political alienation in society. Rather, Freirean educators pose critical problems to students, treat them as complicated, substantial human beings, and encourage curiosity and activism about knowledge and the world. (p. 25-26)

Dialogue is crucial and essential in restoring a sense of belonging and cultivating connectedness in the classroom. Brown (2010) writes that people feel connected “when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship” (p. 19). When students are engaged in Freirean dialogue, “the uniqueness of each voice is heard” (hooks, 2010, p. 57), and they do not feel afraid they will be shamed by classmates and/or teachers (hooks, 2010).

Dialogue opens up spaces where students feel safe to share, to make mistakes, and to reclaim their voice without the fear of being judged or mocked. When we cultivate practices of Freirean dialogue, when students experience connectedness with their teachers, classmates, and with the curriculum, students can progress to critiquing reality and generating new knowledge(s).

The critical classroom setting is untraditional and counteracts the “banking system” that Freire (2010, p. 76) argues against. The pedagogical process, writes Freire,

should occur spontaneously, and we should not treat the students as passive receivers of information where the educators are perceived as the only knower. Instead of the banking system, Freire offers a “problem-posing” education (p. 79) which “is aimed at helping people to achieve conscientization” (Hyttén and Bettez, 2011, p. 17), defined as the ability to “perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 2010, p. 35). Since dialogue is an essential component in the act of liberation, knowledge is a mutual creation that is rooted in collaboration; in order for a transformative education to take place, a critical inquiry is required.

**(4) Critique.** Empowered students who begin to uncover and understand power structures while participating in a Freirean dialogue develop social and political consciousness. With these new competencies, they can engage in critiquing their reality and generating new knowledge(s) that can serve them personally and professionally. In his forward, Stanley Arnowitz suggests that students might learn that “people are conditioned but not determined by their circumstances” (Freire, 1998, p. 12), which contributes to their sense of agency and powerfulness. The act of critiquing necessitates making connections between one’s lived-experiences and the bigger picture. Social, political, economic, and historical contexts are brought into account. The personal becomes the political and students realize that individual hardship and struggle do not occur in a vacuum. The personal stories are products of unfair, dehumanizing, and oppressive systems.

Critiquing the reality assists students to expose hidden mechanisms of oppression and privilege that reproduce dominance and hegemony. Students bring new and empowering meaning to lived experiences and prior knowledge, which can improve their self-esteem. Shor explains that Freire's methods "ask teachers and students to question existing knowledge as part of the questioning habits appropriate for citizens in a democracy" (p. 25). Shapiro (2006) writes that "authentic learning is the process in which a student seeks answers to his or her concerns, and struggles to give meaning to his or her own experiences" (p. 109). Within a Freirean classroom, students participate in the collective effort of critiquing and generating new knowledge(s) that are rooted in the "conviction that change is possible" (Freire, 198, p. 72), where the future is seen as "something that is constructed by people engaged together in life, in history" (p. 72). And most importantly, asserts Freire, "the world is not finished. It is always in the process of being" (p. 72).

### **Validation and Relevancy as Vehicles of Connectedness**

The four critical pedagogy guiding principles I described in the previous section cannot be prioritized nor structured in a hierarchy. They are equally important and supplement each other; together they aim to raise social consciousness and to further liberation. These principles are grounded in hopefulness and determination that social change is feasible. Hope is embedded in a commitment to restore connectedness and involves an investment in meaningful relationships that feed our souls and lift our spirits. We cannot be hopeful alone; hope requires togetherness. Freire (1998) writes that,

Hope is something shared between teachers and students. The hope that we can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together, produce something together, and resist together the obstacles that prevent the flowering of our joy...hope is an essential component and not an intruder... Hope is a natural, possible, and necessary impetus in the context of our unfinishedness. (p. 69)

In order to instill and cultivate a sense of hope that social change is attainable, educators are encouraged to be attuned to where their students come from, understand their individual and collective histories, and to honor students' identity makeup. Thus, it is important that educators develop curricula that are relevant to the students' experiences and the knowledge they bring to the classroom. Curriculum that is relevant to the students' life is an act of validation which advance a sense of connectedness. Rendón (2009) reminds us that “validation theory calls for faculty and staff to get closer to students, to reach out to students to offer assistance, and to help students make social and emotional adjustments in college, if not in their personal lives” (p. 35). This commitment calls for a dialogue in order to make a genuine connection with students that allows a space where the educators are not the only valid source of knowledge and information. Giroux (2011) writes,

personal experience becomes a valuable resource, giving students the opportunity to relate their own narratives, social relations, and histories to what is being taught. It is also a resource to help students locate themselves in the concrete conditions of their daily lives while furthering their understanding of the limits often imposed by those conditions. (p. 157)

Critical pedagogy principles assist us in creating a classroom in which educators and students are engaged in a meaningful dialogue, together critiquing reality, and co-creating a community where its members share power. In that desired setting, educators

become students and students become educators. Critical pedagogy emphasizes group work and communal effort to work and learn together, as well as from each other, which restores a sense of connectedness.

### **Imagining Possibilities of Connectedness**

Those who do not move, do not notice their chains.  
— Rosa Luxemburg

Thus far in my literature review, I have described and analyzed critical pedagogy foundations that can be considered for the development of a Pedagogy of Connectedness. I assert that a pedagogy that is concerned with dis/connectedness must include critical pedagogy principles in order to open up a space where students can (1) contemplate disconnectedness, (2) analyze and critique social norms, values, and culture, (3) engage in community building, (4) realize social responsibility, and (5) imagine a brighter, more hopeful future for themselves, the communities they belong to, and for American society at large.

Change necessitates imagination accompanied with wisdom and action. From Plato's allegory of the cave to Greene's (1995) call for realizing the world with our consciousness, one concept connects these two philosophers 1,500 years apart: social imagination. Green explains that as social creatures we experience the world as polluted and that we are "caught in the taken-for-granted, in the everydayness of things" (p. 47). In the allegory of the cave, Plato describes the captive men who assume the shadows to be the reality, what they are able to hear and see is only a small portion of what the actual world has to offer. In order to explore what is outside of the cave of our ignorance, we

need to cultivate an inner urge to unchain ourselves from limitations, whether those chains are symbolic or real.

To some extent, we are all held captive by ignorance. The men in Plato's allegory sit in a dark cave and perceive their reality as if that was all there was in the world; they have no room to move, no room to imagine, no hope to lean on. Greene (1995) writes,

treating the world as predefined and given, as simply there, is quite separate and different from applying an initiating, constructing mind or consciousness to the world. When habit swathes everything, one day follows another identical day and predictability swallows any hint of an opening possibility. Only when the given or the taken-for-granted is subject to questioning, only when we take various, sometimes unfamiliar perspectives on it, does it show itself as what it is - contingent on many interpretations, many vantage points, unified (if at all) by conformity or by unexamined common sense. (p. 23)

Critical pedagogy is about possibilities that are grounded in the notion that reality can be changed. Because of this, one of the possibilities I suggest in this study is the possibility of restoring connectedness, which requires our collective capacity to imagine and to cultivate a sense of hope. Greene writes about "the great importance of imaginative thinking about alternative social arrangements and possibilities of things being otherwise" (p. 34), thus when it comes to notions of despair and hope, the role of imagination is crucial. When we experience despair, we tend to imagine a dark, unpleasant future. However, hope can generate a brighter one, not only for ourselves but also for others. Greene asks, "[i]f we can link imagination to our sense of possibility and our ability to respond to other human beings, can we link it to the making of community as well?" (p. 38). She adds that thinking of community requires emphasizing "the process words: making, creating, weaving, saying, and the like" (p. 39), because community,

cannot be produced simply through rational formulation no through edict...it has to be achieved by persons offered the space in which to discover that they recognize together and appreciate in common; they have to find ways to make inter-subjective sense. (Greene, 1995, p. 39)

Imagining possibilities, according to Greene, necessitates finding ways of “being together, of attaining mutually, of reaching toward some common world” (p. 39), ways that lead to reducing the sense of powerlessness and reclaiming agency. Weiner (2007) acknowledges the “enormous challenges to teach against and imagine through the formative proto-fascist discourse of corporate and religious power brokers” (p. 58). As he critiques the paralyzed state of imagination, he calls for the reinvention and radicalization of imagination as it is “manifested in the act of seeing what is not yet there, speculating how it might come about, rewriting what has come before, and breaking through ‘the real’” (p. 58). Giroux (2007) reminds us that “pedagogy always represents a commitment to the future... to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world” (p. 2). In that case, the big picture that someone else is painting (Shore, 1987, p. 47) can be repainted, together as a community.

### **Connectedness, Communities, and the Classroom**

Without a community there is no liberation... but community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.

– Audry Lorde

Recognizing that “the search for meaning and connection arise from a basic human need to belong” (Noddings, 2017, p. 1), critical pedagogues oftentimes strive to create classrooms that foster a sense of community. Working together, learning from each

other, considering multiple perspectives, and participating in a collective act of imagining better, brighter possibilities for the future can result in meaningful learning experiences.

Two possible outcomes might be that students will realize the importance and benefits of investing in I/Thou relationships (Buber, 1937) and abundant communities (Block, 2008).

Communities nurture a sense of belonging (Block, 2008) and affirm practices of love (hooks, 2001) and care (Held, 2006), as well as enhance notions of hope (Miller, Brown and Hopson, 2011). Critical classrooms that engage in collective efforts to build communities also function as a form of resistance to neoliberal ideology and individualism in a market-driven capitalist society. Attick (2017) reminds us that,

In a neoliberal model, where students' economic productivity and market value become the purpose of schooling, teaching becomes less an act of developing well-rounded, civic minded, engaged human beings, and more focused on developing the specific skills that students will need to participate as both producers and consumers in the market. (p. 41)

Thus, shifting the focus from market-driven education to a liberatory education that "might help students to get meaning from their academics" (Noddings, 2017, p. 4) becomes an imperative task for critical pedagogues who want "to prepare students for effective citizenship in a participatory democracy" (Gutmann, 1987, as cited in Noddings, 2017, p. 5). Consecutively, cultivating communities can reduce the culture of consumerism, loneliness, powerlessness, and anxiety that are associated with disconnectedness.

Shapiro (2006) argues that nurturing a sense of belonging to a community should be "our vision for education [that] speaks strongly to the need for meaning and purpose in

our lives” (p. 75). Community, he writes, “provides the means through which we may receive the recognition of our presence, and affirmation of our value,” and that “we are ‘made’ for relationship” (p. 76)—two assertions that resonate with the claims that as human beings we are “wired” to connect (Brown, 2010) and to live in communities (Hrdy, 2009). Block (2008) argues that community is the optimal space to restore the sense of belonging we have lost and that community is where we can act on and value “our interdependence and sense of belonging” (p. 3). He explains that when we feel we belong to a community, we “act as an investor, owner, and creator of this place. To be welcome, even if we are strangers, as if we came to the right place and are affirmed for that choice” (p. 3). He urges us to foster communities where everyone has “the experience of being connected to those around them and know that their safety and success are dependent on the success of all others” (p. 3).

Community teaches us to take care of one another, understanding that our well-being is a reflection of the well-being of others (Block, 2008). hooks (2001) believes that a community is also essential to learn the art of loving, and argues that the absence of sense of community leads to lacking opportunities to practice love (p. 129). She writes that,

love lays the foundation for the constructive building of community with strangers. The love we make in community stays with us wherever we go. With this knowledge as our guide, we make any place we go a place where we return to love. (p. 144)

Cultivating community and a love ethic cannot be separated. Thus, hooks encourages us “to make a commitment to love” (Zilonka and Job, 2017, p. 394) because “this is the

most precious gift true love offers - the experience of knowing we always belong” (hooks, 2001, p. 164). hooks’ love ethic includes “care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge” (p. 94)—traits that can be translated into classroom practices by applying Freire’s critical pedagogy principles.

Adding the community element to critical classrooms fosters the conditions in which students might experience closeness and intimacy with classmates they learn to trust and care about. Shapiro (2006) believes that the classroom can become “a space where all children are fully recognized and their unique presence unconditionally valued” (p. 76) and “provide care and support for everyone” (p. 77). He writes,

[c]ommunity is both a place that asserts the fundamentally equal value of all lives, and, at the same time, a place that compassionately addresses us as being with differences that must not be treated as sources of humiliation or unfair disadvantages. (p. 77)

Building communities—within the school system or elsewhere—necessitates collective efforts. It necessitates going against the grain of how we were socialized to live, learn, and love. What is possible is oftentimes hidden from us or, at the very least, under-discussed in the education system. Education can bring people together while opening up spaces for students and educators to experience what hooks (2003) defines as a “practice of freedom [that can] enable us to confront feelings of loss and restore our sense of connection” (p. XV). Both hooks (2003) and Shapiro (2006) wish to witness efforts of generating meaningful connections in our education system. hooks suggests that we should confront what stands in the way of connectedness (2008, p. XV), while Shapiro reminds us that “when we say that something is meaningful we are making a

statement about connections. Something becomes meaningful to us because it seems to connect things together in our minds” (p. 78). He adds that, “it seems that we are... compelled to take the separate and nominally unrelated fragments we encounter in our world, and find ways to connect them together so that they can be understood as whole and related phenomena” (p. 78).

We cannot deny that many of these fragments, which “leave us disturbed and troubled” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 78), are not there by mistake. In other words, governments, corporations, and religious institutions put many obstacles in our way that impede our ability to connect, care for, and wholeheartedly love one another. Moreover, values such as individualism and meritocracy, driven and deepened by neoliberal forces (which are very much reflected in legislations, regulations and policies), lessen the role of communities in our lives. Shapiro reminds us that “the more we live, think, and act in individualistic ways, the more we live in ways that separate us from others, the more shrunken is our sense of meaning” (p. 79).

Communities make sure that we are not alone. Shapiro writes that meaningful community “cannot be separated from social justice” (p. 77). Thus, in order to counteract the often-experienced social alienation, fragmentation, and loss of meaning, we ought to recognize what we have lost, and calculate the immense costs of these losses. In order to accomplish this, we need to imagine new possibilities for ourselves and others, and to fight against cultures that are “pushing human beings toward lives of spiritual emptiness and despair” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 79). Thus, the classroom can become a space for students to generate meaning and new possibilities, to combat despair and cultivate hope through

community building, and to practice love ethic and wrestle with concepts that are concerned with dis/connectedness.

### **Connectedness and Social Justice Education**

Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.  
— James Baldwin

In this section I situate the dis/connectedness discourses within Social Justice Education (SJE) scholarship. I assert that (1) teaching SJE through a dis/connectedness prism can strengthen students' understanding of current injustices and inequities, and (2) incorporating dis/connectedness discourses into SJE courses opens up critical spaces to develop new perspectives on individualism, meritocracy, and neoliberalism. Interjecting dis/connectedness into SJE may pave new ways to continue the important work of theorizing, praxis, and broadening SJE scholarship, as well as make it more inclusive, accessible, relevant and engaging for students.

### **A Brief Introduction to (Critical) Social Justice Education**

Social Justice Education (SJE) draws from multiple perspectives and simultaneously relies on the guiding principles of Critical Pedagogy in order to create the necessary conditions within the classroom for transformation to be facilitated. SJE is concerned with pedagogy, content, and practices of teaching about social justice issues. SJE examines forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, ableism) and provides tools to understand social phenomenon, such as xenophobia, homelessness, and rape culture that are politically, economically, socially, and historically contextualized. It also

examines how privilege and power structures shape social inequities and impact access to public spaces and services.

As a scholarly discipline, SJE draws from various critical theories (e.g., critical race, feminist, LatinX, indigenous, queer, poststructuralist, postcolonialist, and disability/crip theories) which have added tremendous value to its scholarship. Other discourses that contribute to SJE are cultural/multicultural studies, environmental justice education, democratic education, anti-oppressive, and anti-racist education. These evolving disciplines and discourses are often overlapping, feeding each other, and contributing to the emergence of new theories and discourses.

Similar to critical pedagogy, SJE involves critiquing and asking epistemological questions such as who creates bodies of knowledge, who gets to decide what is the truth, and whose knowledge is counted as important. It also asks questions regarding policies and curriculum decision making such as whose knowledge is excluded from the curriculum, whose history do we keep outside of the textbooks, and whose voices are silenced while others are granted with freedom to exercise their privilege and maintain it. SJE offers new ways to look at the world around us and to advance social change. In Hytten's (2006) words,

a disposition to ask why we believe what we believe, and how we have become socialized to accept certain realities, can help us to ask better questions about our social condition, challenge givens and open up alternatives and possibilities. (p. 443)

To better tie education to social justice, I go back to Bell's (1997) work, which connects to the framework I introduced in Chapter Two, where I explored the individual,

social, and political aspects that are impacted by different forces and processes in society. Bell's conceptualization of social justice as both a process and a goal resonates with my work as it is grounded in understanding how individualism, meritocracy, and neoliberalism inform and impact manifestations and practices of disconnectedness in the U.S. According to Bell (1997), the goal of social justice is "full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (p. 3). The wish for equality and equity is linked to fairness within a society, where "individuals are both self-determining...and interdependent" (p. 3) so individuals can gain a sense of agency and social responsibility.

As I briefly mentioned in Chapter Two, Bell (1977) describes social justice as "democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change" (p. 4). Bell writes that social change cannot eradicate domination "through coercive tactics" (p. 4) in order to achieve the social justice goal. She states that any discussion about social justice requires an analysis and understanding of oppression and how it operates on the individual, cultural, and institutional levels. Murrell (2006) writes that social justice involves "a disposition toward recognizing and eradicating all forms of oppression and differential treatment extant in the practices and policies of institutions, as well as a fealty to participatory democracy as the means of this action" (p. 81). Both Bell (1977) and Murrell's (2006) definitions of social justice speak to dis/connectedness in profound ways. As an ideal, it recognizes the institutionalized unfairness and speaks to the despair, loss of agency and hope many experience due to indoctrination of individualism and the ways neoliberalism

functions in public spheres. Analysis of power, privilege, and oppression requires that we understand what it means to live within a society saturated with injustices and inequities, where participatory democracy is in decline.

Recognizing the “devastating human and environmental costs” (Hyttén, 2006, p. 441) that neoliberalism, globalization, and capitalism have caused over the years, Hyttén connects SJE to democratic education and argues for teaching “the habits, dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors necessary for democratic citizenship” (p. 441). She explains that teaching for social justice means “to engage the very real struggles that exist in the world around us in classrooms and in the broader life of schools” (p. 441), which requires us to think critically about what is in front of us, envisioning and “imagining alternative possibilities” (p. 442) for the future. Thus, critical thinking and reflection become necessary components of SJE that seeks not only to raise awareness about what is wrong in our society, but rather to equip people with radical tools so they can right the many wrongs.

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2010) write that “a great deal of scholarship in social justice studies is focused on the gap between the *ideals* of social justice and the *practice* of social justice” (p. XVIII, emphasis theirs), while they prefer to use the term *critical social justice* in order to distinguish their “standpoint on social justice from mainstream standpoints” (p. XVIII). Those mainstream standpoints are related to the common understanding of social justice “as the principles of ‘fairness’ and equality’ for all people and respect for their basic human rights” (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2010, p. XVII). Sensoy and DiAngelo argue that this common understanding is not enough because it does not

engage us in critically thinking of what fairness, equality, or human rights mean. They suggest adopting a critical approach for social justice education, one that “recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change it” (p. XVIII). Their critical SJE principles acknowledge the individuality of people while understanding that people are also members of unequally valued social groups which determine their access to resources in society.

The critical component in Sensoy and DiAngelo’s stance on SJE is also related to one’s willingness to subject themselves to self-reflection. Those who participate in social justice work “must be engaged in self-reflection about their own socialization into [certain social] groups (their ‘positionality’) and must strategically act from that awareness in ways that challenges social injustice” (p. XVIII). In other words, when it comes to the critical SJE classroom, as educators we are committed to keep sharpening our work by updating, reinventing, and questioning our methods and our stances. Going back to the required radical tool kit I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Hytten (2006) reminds social justice educators that,

As part of the journey toward justice, we need to use the best tools that we have available to us now, including the tools of critical thinking that philosophers so value and the models we have developed of what a just society looks like, while also troubling those tools and remaining reflexive about the ways in which our social positionalities (and the blindnesses that are necessarily part of those positionalities) limit the potential effectiveness of these tools. (p. 445)

Critical SJE means that the scholarship does not stagnate or remain on the theoretical level. Social and political consciousness must be translated into action. Critical SJE means that, alongside learning social theories and understanding that

inequalities and inequities exist in our society, we make sure that we also engage in praxis.

### **The Social Justice Classroom**

Social Justice Education is hopeful. Even in dark times rife with institutionalized injustice, dehumanization, hyper-capitalism, overvaluing individualism, and other harmful practices (not only to people, but also to animals in the food industry and to ecosystems), we can witness a growing number of educators who advocate for SJE and implement its discourses and scholarship in all content areas.

Similar to critical pedagogy, SJE calls for a nontraditional classroom setting where a student can be “an active participant, not a passive consumer” (hooks, 1994, p. 14), where pedagogy and education open up spaces for students to defeat notions of individualism by collaborating, investing in relationships, and restoring a sense of belonging and connectedness. A classroom setting that incorporates critical pedagogy and SJE is a classroom that values students’ well-being (hooks, 1994, p. 15) and expressions (hooks, 1994, p. 20), where social justice consciousness can flourish.

Nontraditional classroom settings acknowledge the significance of community building, relationships, and the importance of genuine and inclusive dialogue. hooks (1993) reminds us that “[d]ialogue is a powerful gesture of love. Caring talk is a sweet communion that deepens our bonds” (p. 122). Thus, investing in relationships and communities become central to the work of SJE. Bettez (2011) explains,

Critical communities thus might be defined as interconnected, porously bordered, shifting webs of people who through dialogue, active listening, and critical question posing, assist each other in critically thinking through issues of power,

oppression, and privilege...Such critical communities...are essential to sustaining social justice efforts. (p. 10)

Achieving a sense of connectedness within critical classrooms is possible. Educators can strive to create a space where students can learn about social justice issues related to education while investigating those issues and realizing their personal and professional responsibility to be part of desired social change. Giroux (2011) reminds us that,

it seems imperative that educators revitalize the struggle to create conditions in which learning would be linked to social change in a wide variety of social sites, and pedagogy would take on the task of regenerating both a renewed sense of social and political agency and a critical subversion of dominant power itself. (p. 71)

When it comes to the classrooms, Hackman (2005) writes that “social justice education encourages students to take an active role in their own education and supports teachers in creating empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments” (p. 103). The active role that students take happens only in critical classrooms where the educator recognizes their own role as a part of a transformative education. Hackman (2005) characterizes five essential components that social justice educators need to have: content mastery (factual information, historical contextualization, and a macro to-micro content analysis), tools for critical analysis (e.g., debating and critiquing contents, praxis in order to provide students pathways for action instead of overwhelming them with only knowledge and information), tools for social change (to help move students from cynicism and despair to hope and possibility), tools for personal reflection (self-reflection is critical, specifically an analysis of power and privilege), and an awareness of

multicultural group dynamics (critiquing the makeup of the class, including racial relations, diversity of the students, and social justice issues that are concerned with immigration, language, etc.) (p. 104-108).

These components can be seen among many SJE scholars (e.g., Boler, 2004; Darder, 2002; hooks, 1994, hooks, 2010; Renner, 2009; Vacarr, 2001) that have written about their teaching and the experiences they have had with students in their own classrooms. In their writing, one thing emerges repeatedly: a sense of hope and possibility that both critical pedagogy and SJE are embedded with, as well as other virtues. Freire (1998) writes,

It is fundamental for us to know that without certain qualities or virtues, such as a generous loving heart, respect for others, tolerance, humility, a joyful disposition, love of life, openness to what is new, a disposition to welcome change, perseverance in the struggle, a refusal of determinism, a spirit of hope, and an openness to justice, progressive pedagogical practice is not possible. (p. 108)

Both critical pedagogy and SJE hold the hopeful belief that our future is not yet determined. Critical pedagogy and SJE provide us with opportunities to rethink our stances on individualism, meritocracy, and neoliberalism. They open up spaces to deeply understand the immense costs of disconnectedness and begin the important work of restoring connectedness. Making the world a better place for everybody is a lifelong journey that requires commitment and collective effort from all involved in this important work: teachers, students, school administrators, policy makers, and so on. What is possible is only limited by our ability to imagine. Reinventing and expending pedagogical tools and strategies while equipping educators and students with radical

language, thought, and praxis can revolutionize not only the school system, but society at large.

### **Connectedness in Education: Conclusion**

In this chapter I began to answer the third research question, How and in what ways might a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* address disconnectedness in American society? I have done so by making the case that considering a pedagogy that is concerned with dis/connectedness requires the combination of both critical pedagogy and SJE scholarship. In the beginning of the chapter, I explored and analyzed the main concepts of critical pedagogy (i.e., uncovering power structures, empowerment, dialogue, critique, validation, relevancy, love, agency, and hope) and linked those concepts to ideas of connectedness, a sense of belonging, community building, and the importance of imagining a better, more just future. Later, I reviewed relevant literature that is concerned with Social Justice Education, and again related its scholarship to ideas of connectedness, hope, and rejection of oppressive practices. Additionally, I explored the components of SJE classrooms, including the relationships between students and educators, which are interrelated in critical pedagogy theory and praxis.

In Chapter Four, I will do three things. First, I introduce the research design and the theoretical frameworks that guide my work (qualitative, feminist, critical, transformative). Second, I will discuss the CFE-300's pedagogy and curriculum which I have developed, and I will detail the research settings and its participants. Lastly, I review the data collection and data analysis methods.

In the fifth chapter – the analysis – I analyze the pedagogical strategies and the curriculum I have developed for the CFE-300 course. I explore how the students conceptualized dis/connectedness, community, and social responsibility in a social justice education course grounded in critical pedagogy theory and praxis. I analyze students' papers and interviews, and review notes I took as the CFE-300's instructor throughout the semesters. By doing so, I answer the third and fourth research questions that are concerned with the CFE-300's pedagogy that I suggest as a theoretical and practical framework to be incorporated in critical pedagogy and social justice education scholarship.

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODOLOGY

In my tradition we are taught to look at a tree or something like that for a long time. At first you don't know what use it is to look at a tree like that. You have to look until you can truly see it. And one day the tree reveals itself to you as a very substantial, real identity. It is not that you have a new tree or that the weather is better so that you can see the tree clearly, but something in oneself has changed so there is a new kind of relationship between you and the tree. Whether we can see the tree or not depends on us.

— Thich Nhat Hanh

#### **Introduction to the Methodology Chapter**

In Chapter Two, I discussed disconnectedness in the U.S., how its many manifestations harm individuals and communities, and how it often subjects them to social isolation and despair. In Chapter Three, I situated the discussion on dis/connectedness within critical classrooms, suggesting that adding discourses and praxis that are concerned with dis/connectedness to critical pedagogy and social justice education scholarship might benefit students' level of engagement in and outside the classroom.

The case I make for interjecting dis/connectedness discourses and praxis into critical pedagogy and social justice education scholarship is anchored in my experience with teaching cultural foundations in education course for seven semesters—five of them are analyzed in this dissertation. The pedagogy of the CFE-300 course drew on critical, feminist theories and praxis, and was supported by a curriculum that spoke to ideas of

dis/connectedness and communities while addressing social justice issues. I assert that the pedagogy I employed in the CFE-300 course spoke to both minds and hearts. The connection the students made with social justice issues is not merely intellectual, but also emotional.

In order to answer my third and fourth research questions — How and in what ways might a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* address disconnectedness in American society? (which I started to answer in Chapter Three), and In what ways, if any, does a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* impact/challenge the CFE-300 students' notions of identity, power, and social justice? — I now shift to describe where the research study leads to.

In this chapter I do three things. First, I lay down the foundations of the qualitative research design—its theoretical frameworks and methodology. Then, I discuss the pedagogy and curriculum that I developed for the CFE-300 course and the study specifics—the study settings and the participants. Lastly, I detail the data collection and data analysis methods. The third part also includes discussions on trustworthiness, validity, positionality, ethics, reflexivity, and limitations of the study.

Given my own conviction as a critical pedagogue that education is “a practice of freedom” (Freire, 2010, p. 80), my work is aligned with critical social theories’ intention to “[detect and unmask the] beliefs and practices that limit human freedom, justice, and democracy” (Usher, 1996, p. 22, as quoted in Glesne, 2011, p. 9). Glesne (2011) asserts that the role of critical theory is to uncover and critique the ideologies that “distort reality,” and the “associated structures, mechanisms, and processes that help to keep them in place” (Prasad, 2005, as quoted in Glesne, 2011, p. 9).

As both an educator and a researcher, I acknowledge that my work is political since it focuses on “issues of power and domination” and is rooted in the wish to advocate “understanding from perspective of the exploited and oppressed” (Glesne, 2011, p. 10). My work is grounded in possibilities of freedom, resistance, justice, equity, democracy, agency, emancipation, hope, inclusion, and love—possibilities which I associate with connectedness. Those possibilities also resonate with critical-feminist research (Gannon and Davies, 2007), which focuses on transformation of “asymmetrical power relations” (Glesne, 2011, p. 11), and “marginalized knowledge” (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2007, p. 145).

By conducting this research, I am asking new questions about the possibilities of cultivating spaces where pedagogy can be expanded and include aspects that are not always given enough attention. This study is committed to challenge “power and oppression [and to produce] research that is useful and contributes to social justice” (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2007, p. 150). As I mentioned in Chapter One, I assert that dis/connectedness, community, and social responsibility are social justice issues and thus reflect power structures and mechanisms of oppression within society. The empirical portion of this qualitative study – which analyzes how the CFE-300’s students responded to ideas of dis/connectedness and community as they were embedded in the course’s pedagogy and curriculum – is in accordance with the course’s commitment to challenge notions on power and oppressive practices within the individual, social, and political aspects.

## **Qualitative Research, Knowledge and Epistemology**

Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) assertion that qualitative research studies "things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3) resonates with my intention to find ways to better serve students by developing a praxis that has the power to challenge and transform their viewpoints on power and oppression. This intention calls for a qualitative research methodology that allows me to pay attention to "the larger social institutions that inform the ways people live and are able to name their experiences and situations" (Ropers-Huilman and Winters, 2010, p. 40).

It is important to note that the act of paying attention (a reoccurring theme I constantly emphasized in the CFE-300 course) to the world we live in and to the ways we experience it is imperative to advance social justice. Denzin (2010) explains that qualitative inquiry can contribute to social justice in different ways, such as identifying "different definitions of a problem and/or a situation that is being evaluated with some agreement that change is required" (p. 24). Merriam (2009) adds the *critical* component to the qualitative inquiry and writes that "[c]ritical qualitative research focuses on societal critique in order to raise consciousness and empower people to bring about change" (2009, p. 23). Qualitative researchers, adds Merriam (2009), "would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 23)—three themes that guide my work as a critical-feminist qualitative researcher. Following Merriam's guidance, I acknowledge that there are multiple ways of interpretation; and different people have different ways to

understand their experiences. Thus, as a researcher I recognize that the data I analyze in the Chapter Five – which is derived from the CFE-300’s students’ lived experiences – can be interpreted in many ways.

Flick (2008) reminds us that qualitative research allows us to study complex social relations, recognizing the “**pluralization of life worlds**” (p. 12, emphasis his)—a worldview which rejects notions of one, universal, objective *Truth*, but rather recognizes the existence of many truths that represent multiple voices. Crotty (1998) writes that,

[a]ll knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context. (p. 42)

While acknowledging complex social relations, the qualitative research approach stresses “more naturalistic, interpretive and critical inquiry” (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2010, p. 1) which necessitates the researcher to consider epistemological questions (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2010). More specifically, how do different people produce different bodies of knowledge, given their subjective, personal interpretations of reality and their location in society—a theme that has been explored throughout the CFE-300 course.

Villaverde (2008) defines epistemology as “the study of knowledge, its nature origins, limits and methods. It outlines certain conjectures about knowledge: what can be known, and through what methods it can be known” (p. 107). Bentz and Shapiro (1998) explain that epistemology concentrates on “the way in which features of the knowing human mind shape, structure, and set conditions for anything that we can know” (p. 169).

In other words, a person's subjectivity determines how they know *things*. In this study, I am interested in knowledge that tries to “emancipate people or help them gain more freedom, justice or happiness” (Fay, 1987, as quoted in Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p. 9), and how this type of knowledge connects to the subjective knowledges that students bring to the classroom. My commitment as a qualitative, feminist researcher is to center the CFE-300's students' multiple voices and perspectives in the empirical portion of this study. Thus, I turned to feminist qualitative research scholarship which allows me to deepen my analysis of the CFE-300 course, as I show in the next section.

### **Feminist Qualitative Research**

The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian--our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.  
—Gloria Anzaldúa

Similar to research traditions that have branched out of critical theory, feminist research refers to an abundant realm that is “inhabited” by multiple perspectives and voices. Feminist inquiry centers gender and feminist epistemologies, while recognizing the challenging task of conducting qualitative research in an academic world that values the positivist approach, rejects subjectivity and multiple realities, and “assumes a unified truth with the idea of testing out hypotheses” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 14). Ropers-Huilman and Winters (2011) remind us that “feminist theory places gender at the center of its analysis, suggesting that gender is a primary organizing characteristic in society,” and

thus “can offer different interpretations of social interactions and, potentially, provide possibilities for change both in higher education as well as in other settings” (p. 668).

At the heart of feminist inquiry lay questions of marginalization and the intention to produce new bodies of knowledge that represent and include those whose voice have been silenced and marginalized. Feminist epistemology layers onto this study, which is situated within a course offered to pre-service teachers and social workers. In the fields of education and social work, where most of the students and employees are women, one cannot ignore the importance that feminist epistemologies and research give to voice, affect, relationship, and connectedness. Hesse-Biber (2007) notes that “feminists ask ‘new’ questions that place women’s lives and those of ‘other’ marginalized groups at the center of social inquiry.

Feminist research disrupts traditional ways of knowing to create rich new meanings,” and that “feminist research is mindful of hierarchies of power and authority in the research process” (p. 3, emphasis hers). Feminist research recognizes that the work of feminist theories and praxis “means to challenge knowledge that excludes, while seeming to include” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 3). It recognizes the exclusion of women’s thought, experiences, work, and contribution. Feminist research focuses on gender and feminist ways of being, knowing, and acting; it brings to the center those rich bodies of knowledge, and incorporates “women’s lived experience, emotions, and feelings into the knowledge building process” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 10).

Placing gender and feminist epistemologies at the center of research is important for the purpose of my study because it allows me to continue asking questions about

power structure and social values, and how those feed into notions of dis/connectedsness from various feminist perspectives. Hesse-Biber (2007) notes that feminists, by asking new questions, “expose the power dynamics of knowledge building” (p. 16)—dynamics that the CFE-300 course challenged by providing various voices of women and people of color. The act of challenging evolved into collectively building new knowledge(s), while reconsidering notions of womanhood, feminism, and gender roles within different contexts (e.g., oppression, exploitation, and marginalization, alongside imagining possibilities of liberation for marginalized individuals and communities).

Asking new questions also involves a collective exploration into intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) to understand how power, privilege, and oppression are interwoven and intersect in people’s lives—an exploration that is embedded in the CFE-300 course. Given the fact that the vast majority of the students in the CFE-300 course were White, Christian women, exploring the intersectionality of gender, race, faith, sexual orientation, ability, and social class was also part of understanding concepts of dis/connectedsness and community. Asking new questions and building new knowledge(s) were two of the purposes of the CFE-300 course, and are also the purposes of this research study.

### **The Critical Paradigm**

Within the qualitative inquiry, we can find various research paradigms that determine the researcher’s approaches to conduct a study. Guba and Lincoln (2004) define paradigms as “the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of methods but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways” (p. 17). They explain that a paradigm “represents *worldview* that defines, for its

holder, the nature of the ‘world’, the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts” (p. 21, emphasis theirs). Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) write that “it is the choice of paradigms that sets down the intent, motivation and expectations for the research,” which becomes the basis for “subsequent choices regarding methodology, methods, literature or research design” (par. 5).

The pedagogy I explore in this study draws on critical paradigm–stance that has informed my work as the instructor of CFE-300. Thus, as I am situating the empirical portion of this study in order to answer the third and fourth research questions, I follow the spirit of the CFE-300 course that is informed by a blend of feminist and critical theoretical frameworks.

The critical paradigm is derived from critical theory, which rejects notions of pre-determined reality. Guba and Lincoln (2004) assert that the intention of critical theory inquiry is to critique and transform “the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender structures that constrain and exploit humankind, by engagement in confrontations, even conflict” (p. 30). Calhoun (1995) adds that, “at the heart of critical theory lay the notion of ‘immanent critique,’ a critique that worked from within the categories of existing thought, radicalized them, and showed in varying degrees both their problems and their unrecognized possibilities” (p. 23). Creswell and Miller (2000) note that,

As a challenge and critique of the modern state, the critical perspective holds that researchers should uncover the hidden assumptions about how narrative accounts are constructed, read, and interpreted. What governs our perspective about narratives is our historical situatedness of inquiry, a situatedness based on social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender antecedents of the studied situations. (p. 126)

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) remind us that critical theorists initially “advocated for a type of liberal humanism (individualism, freedom, and peace) but quickly turned to a *rejection* of liberal humanities” (p. 5, emphasis theirs), given the multiple realities of marginalized individuals and communities that have been subjected to oppressive ideology and practices due to their class, gender, race, nationality, ability, or sexuality. The promised freedoms, opportunities, and equality were not attainable for marginalized social groups (women, Blacks/African-American, Native/Indigenous people, LGBTQ, people with disabilities, immigrants, etc.). Thus, those marginalized groups critiqued the perpetuated power structures within society and its institutions. Hesse-Biber (2007) writes that,

Critical theory is especially cognizant of the role that power plays in producing hegemonic knowledge. Critical theories seek to expose dominant power relationships and knowledge that oppresses with the goal of ‘critical emancipation’—creating an environment where oppressed groups ‘gain the power to control their own lives in solidarity with a justice-oriented community’<sup>6</sup>. (p. 11)

Critical theory, thus, cannot be referred as one body of work, but rather as multiple theories that are grounded in different social perspectives that inform one another and often intersect. Critical theories are led by theorists and activists that are engaged with critical work and are “guided by the belief that society should work toward the ideals of equality and social betterment” (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012, p. 4).

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<sup>6</sup> The last portion of the quote belongs to Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 282; as quoted by Hesse-Biber, 2007

## **Overview of the Research Design**

The empirical portion of this study focuses on two main things. First, how the CFE-300's students responded and articulated their understanding of themes that branched out from dis/connectedness discourses, as they were related to education and their vocation as educators. Second, how did the pedagogical strategies and tactics I employed in the CFE-300 course assisted me to facilitate efforts to co-create a sense of community and belonging in the classroom. I intend to analyze and demonstrate how the pedagogical efforts functioned as a platform for the students (1) to reflect and analyze on dis/connectedness, and (2) to unpack and understand social justice issues through a dis/connectedness prism.

Bentz and Shapiro (1998) write that research “simply means structured inquiry—trying to answer some question or questions using some appropriate methods likely to produce generally valid and reliable knowledge” (p. 87). While considering methodology and methods for the research study, I was reminded by Glesne (2011) that “in practice, neither research paradigms nor methodologies are as neatly segregated... think of them as philosophies in dialogue with each other and with prevailing intellectual and cultural thought” (p. 24). The possibilities of qualitative, feminist, and critical inquiry are many; thus, the act of bringing together approaches and research traditions requires a delicate weaving of the components.

I constructed the research in order to know and better understand the students' worlds within the context of cultural foundations in education course for pre-service teachers and social workers. It also helped me to map out and initially theorize a

pedagogy that stands both on- and in- conversation with other theories; a theory that borrows concepts from various traditions and epistemologies, a triangulated research that operates “at several levels—for example, by using several theories, methods, techniques...weaving together and describing the results from each point of the triangle” (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p. 89). In the next sections I detail the CFE-300 course, its participants, the research site, and how I approached my data analysis.

### **The Pedagogy and Curriculum of the CFE-300 Course**

I began teaching the CFE-300 course with an hypothesis, which is that disconnectedness is embedded in American society and culture and it advances various forms of violence. The other part of my hypothesis was that a critical-feminist classroom can become a space where disconnectedness is addressed, and that practices that emphasize connectedness can be modeled and facilitated. For seven consecutive semesters, I have tested that hypothesis as the CFE-300’s instructor. What I realized during that process is that I have developed a pedagogical praxis that is concerned with dis/connectedness and speaks to students’ hearts and minds in ways I never anticipated.

The CFE-300 course provided weekly opportunities to rethink and reconsider social ideas and practices that are ingrained in American culture. We explored social justice issues while interrogating how individualism and meritocracy function in a divided, polarized society. Analyzing the reality and critiquing it in meaningful ways require rich, diverse pedagogical strategies and curricula that validate and empower students from all walks of life and challenge their beliefs and assumptions.

The pedagogy I developed for the CFE-300 course functioned as a disruption of power structures/relations. The pedagogical strategies and tactics included investment in relationships between me (the course's instructor) and the students, as well as among the students. It assisted us to create strong group each semester and to establish a sense of community and belonging. Several tactics were used to accomplish this. First was a destabilization of the traditional classroom setting (i.e., check-in every meeting, asking the students if they need a break, sitting in circles, group work). Second, the deliberate creation of a safe and inclusive space to express emotions and to share opinions and personal stories. Lastly, critiquing individual lived experiences and social phenomena in American society, such as homelessness, addiction, and mass shootings.

Those pedagogical strategies and tactics allowed me to facilitate discussions that advanced not only the students' intellectual connection to social justice issues, but also to make emotional connections. By addressing dis/connectedness in the beginning of each semester and inviting students to explore what dis/connectedness means to them personally, it set the foundation for them to relate to injustices that they have never experienced nor considered, and to develop a sense of compassion, empathy, understanding, and social responsibility. In this study, I investigate how that happened time and again, semester after semester.

Providing multiple practices, voices and perspectives exposed students to different ways of being, thinking, and living. The curriculum, for instance, did not provide "absolute answers" (Schubert, 2016), but rather opened up spaces for students to ask more questions about the society and culture they participate in. The CFE-300's

curriculum provided what Walker (ASCD, 1980) calls “rich confusion” (p. 81), which, to some extent, is echoed in this study. The spirit of the CFE-300 course is critical, feminist, and inclusive, and is about people’s lived experiences. The curriculum brought to life silenced voices and forgotten histories and *herstories* (Carroll, 1976) of those who unnecessarily suffer. Situating people’s lived experiences in the center of the course, while focusing on meaning and providing opportunities for challenge and change is what the CFE-300 was all about.

The CFE-300 course was designed in such way that for a semester the students were introduced to a variety of social justice issues through a dis/connectedness prism. The written curriculum components (e.g., the syllabus, the lesson plans, and the occasional handouts) included poems, music video clips, short stories, documentary movies, books, and scholarly articles which demonstrate the richness of our humanity and its struggles. The curriculum exposed the students to local and global perspectives of the ways we are disconnected and the human yearning to restore a sense of connectedness, belonging, and hope.

The CFE-300’s curriculum supported a pedagogy that enhances a sense of connectedness, belonging, and hope – three pillars in the course that assisted students to learn about social justice issues as well as analyze and understand them through a dis/connectedness prism. The curriculum included readings, movies, and classroom activities which assisted the students and I to foster philosophical discussions on dis/connectedness, community, and social justice issues. The pedagogy of the course created opportunities for students to invest in relationships with each other and co-create

a sense of community in the classroom (which I lengthily detail and analyze in Chapter Five). As we began each semester as a group of strangers, the pedagogy and curriculum assisted us to gradually establish meaningful relationships that are rooted in love, compassion, and care, while unpacking social justice concepts such as power structure, oppression, and possibilities for liberation. Only after establishing some understanding of dis/connectedness and the role of community in one's life can the collective investigation on social justice issues begin. In other words, concepts of dis/connectedness and community become our frameworks.

The unwritten curriculum was the ways we were all living curricula for each other (Schubert, 1986). The “living” curriculum, carried by the course's participants—the students, the instructor, and the guest speakers—was rich and diverse; it brought lived experiences that resonated with the written curriculum. Schubert (1986) writes that, “teachers and students who learn from each other take with them an attitude that all life's encounters have a pedagogic or curricular quality [which is] the drive to encounter increased meaning and growth” (p. 423). Schubert believes that everyone we meet “is a curriculum for us... each of us embodies a complex set of knowledges that interacts in ever unexpected ways when we encounter other people who also embody unique knowledges of their own” (Harper, 2014, p. 67). In the next section I detail the research specifics and demonstrate how its components work together.

### **The Research Site**

The empirical portion of the study involves five sections of the CFE-300 course I taught between January 2014 and April 2016 (total of 60 students; 51 of them agreed to

participate in this study). The CFE-300 course is offered to education and social work undergraduate students through the School of Education at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), a public university located in the Southeast U.S. The university is known for its diverse student body, with 26.2% Black/African-American, 8.3% Hispanic, 3.3% non-residential aliens (international students), 9.6% other minorities, 2% unknown, and 50.5% White (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Office of Institutional Research, Fall 2017 report). The gender divide among the university's student body is 66% women and 33% men. Within the School of Education (SOE), 15.7% are Black/African-American, 7.3% Hispanic, 1% non-residential aliens, 3.5% two or more races, 2.3% Asian, and 69.6% White. The gender divide in the Fall 2017 semester in the SOE was 93.3% women and 6.7% men. The vast majority of the SOE undergraduate students are 18-22 years old (78.7%), followed by the second largest group (6.8%) who are 23-24 years old, and 4.6% are 25-29 years old (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Office of Institutional Research, Fall 2017). These percentages are reflected in the CFE-300 courses. The majority of the students in the five sections that are in the heart of this research study were 18-24 year old White women.

### **The Participants**

The participants in the research were 51 students who took one of the five sections of the CFE-300 taught by me. The sampling process has been done over a span of five consecutive semesters (January 2014-April 2016). The students were invited to participate in the research and gave their informed consent by the end of each semester.

The 51 students who agreed to take part in this study were 83% of the students who were enrolled in the five sections of the CFE-300 course sections I taught.

Participants in this study were divided into two groups (main sample and sub-sample). The main sample include the 51 students who gave their informed consent to use their artifacts (reflection papers, writing assignments, and outcomes of group activities in the classroom). The sub-sample was comprised of 11 students of those 51 students (21%) who also agreed to be interviewed.

One important note about the consent forms: in summer 2017, I moved to Idaho and shipped my belongings via the U.S. Postal Service. Four boxes were lost on the way and one of them contained the original consent forms that were signed by the students. A couple of weeks after not receiving the boxes, I contacted the IRB and decided to obtain consent from the students. As of November 12, 2017, I have obtained 35 signed consent forms out of the 51 that were lost. Since the research was exempt, I can still use the students' papers, although I was instructed by the IRB to de-identify the papers that were written by students who I could not obtain a signature on a new consent form for different reasons (e.g., no contact information for the students who have already graduated or no response by email).

### **Main Sample: Artifacts**

At the time when the data was collected, participants in this study were 46 women and 5 men. 50 of the participants were undergraduate students, 38 majored in education (elementary/middle school and/or special education), eight majored in social work, and

three students majored in other disciplines. The students' ages ranged from 19 to 47 at the time of the data collection, however most of them were in their early 20s.

**Recruitment protocol.** At the beginning of each semester, I informed the students that I am collecting data which included scanning their reflection papers and taking photos during group activities in the classroom throughout the semester. After the students received their final grades for the course on the last day of class each semester, I again explained about the IRB recruitment protocol, read it out loud, read the informed consent form (appendix B) with the students, answered questions, and then left the classroom and waited in the hallway so they could decide whether they wanted to sign the consent form. In that part of the class, I also handed out the course evaluations so both of the forms could be completed if they chose. Usually after 20 minutes, one of the students would come out and call me back. The consent forms and course evaluations forms were put in folders, and then the class continued as planned.

### **Sub-sample: Interviews**

**Recruitment protocol.** After receiving IRB approval for the interviews, at the beginning of the Fall 2016 semester I approached students via email or Facebook messenger and asked to interview them. I decided not to ask all 51 students at the same time. In the span of two weeks, I approached six out of 10 students from the Spring 2014 semester, 8/12 from the Fall 2014 semester, 6/10 from the Spring 2015 semester, 4/4 from the Fall 2015 semester, and 11/14 from the Spring 2015 semester (a total of 35 students out of 51). Nineteen of them were initially approached through Facebook, which I followed up with an IRB approved email script sent to their preferred email address.

Three of the students were approached in person on campus and were sent a follow-up recruitment script afterwards via email.

The efforts to recruit and schedule students for an interview took place in September and October of 2016, and in May 2017, and resulted in 11 interviews: 9 in-person interviews (lasting between 50 and 110 minutes), one phone interview (55 minutes long), and one correspondent interview (the student preferred to receive the questions by email and submit the answers in writing). Nine interviews were conducted in October and November 2016, and one interview was conducted in May 2017. They were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. During the interviews, I followed a semi-structured interview questions protocol (Glesne, 2011, p. 102; Reinharz, 1992) (Appendix C).

### **Data Collection**

The data I use in this research study is divided into three categories: documents, observations, and interviews. Merriam (2009) explains that interviews and observations “are two data collection strategies designed to gather data that specifically address the research question,” while documents are “a ready-made source of data easily accessible to the imaginative and resourceful investigator” (p. 139). In this sub-section I explain each of the categories and describe how I have obtained each data source.

**Document review.** Merriam (2009) writes that document is an umbrella term which “refer to a wide range of written, visual, digital, and physical material relevant to the study at hand” (p. 139). For the purpose of this study, I use the term artifacts to distinguish those from the interview transcripts. My main three sources of documents are

the students' reflection papers, the photos I took in the classroom, and the notes I took as the course's instructor.

**Students' papers.** As noted, I scanned the students' reflection papers and other writing assignments throughout each semester, and stored the scanned materials on my university online account and my personal laptop, both secured with passwords. In each semester, students wrote between five and nine papers. For the current analysis, I will be using **(1)** the first paper(s) in which they were asked to reflect on concepts of dis/connectedness and community and connect them to critical pedagogy guiding principles; and **(2)** the last reflection paper where they were asked to reflect on the entire course, make connections between the course's units, and articulate their personal and professional commitment to social justice. I scanned the students' papers after I made comments and provided feedback to each and every one of them. I treat my own written comments/feedback as part of the document as well.

**Observations.** I kept reflexive memos after class meetings that describe moments in the classroom. My intention was to use those notes to support my analysis of the classroom discussions and activities (about 30 pages, typed). I have additional notes I wrote down before each class to complement lesson plans (about 35 pages, typed).

**Photos.** Each semester, I took many photos of the activities in the classroom (e.g., group work, art, posters created, games played, what students wrote on the whiteboards). I also took photos of what I wrote on the whiteboards as the course's instructor. My intention was to use the photos as supporting artifacts when needed to describe moments in the classroom.

**Interviews.** The third portion of collected data is the interview transcripts. I arranged to meet with the students at the School of Education building in a time that was convenient for them. Nine interviews were in person, one was on the phone, and one student submitted the answers to the interview questions via email. The 10 in-person/on the phone interviews were digitally recorded, and ranged from 55 to 110 minutes. I gathered those documents in order to provide the most accurate, rich, thorough accounts of how including dis/connectedness discourses in the CFE-300 course was received by the students. The reflection papers provide the students' perspectives while participating in the course; the interviews allowed them and me to revisit specific aspects of the course in a reflective, retrospective manner; the photos add a visual layer to demonstrate some of the activities and discussions in the classroom; and my own notes helped me to capture some of the evolving thoughts and realizations I have obtained while teaching the course.

### **Data Analysis**

The empirical portion of this study utilizes a general qualitative data analysis in order to investigate what happened when dis/connectedness discourses were interjected into the pedagogy and curriculum of the CFE-300 course. Throughout the process I borrow various methods for qualitative data analysis in order to stay true to the theoretical frameworks and epistemologies that influenced my pedagogy.

The first layer of the analysis involves understanding how the students responded to discourses of dis/connectedness and community while taking the course. The second layer of the analysis involves an examination of the pedagogical strategies/tactics grounded in critical pedagogy philosophy and praxis. My intention is to understand how

students responded to those strategies and tactics. The third layer of the analysis involves the students' ways of articulating their social responsibility and commitment to social justice, given what they learned throughout the course.

### **Coding the Data**

I started the coding process by reading the interview transcripts and the students' reflection. My initial coding began with words "that reflect actions" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). Those initial codes mostly included what the students believed, thought, learned, and experienced before they took the course (i.e., they shared personal experiences with family members and friends, articulated attitudes and notions about dis/connectedness, described their schooling experience, and reflected on American social norms), and during the semester (their responses to the course's pedagogy and curriculum, their understanding of concepts they were introduced with, and the challenges they faced while grappling with those new understandings).

The main code list is lengthy and includes a range of words and terms that came up frequently in the students' reflection papers and interviews. I divided the codes into three sub-lists: **(1)** reflection papers for the first two units of the CFE-300 course ("Connection and Community" and "To be an Educator"), **(2)** final reflection paper, and **(3)** interview transcripts. I organized the codes of each data source by three additional sub-lists which are **(1)** concepts, **(2)** verbs, and **(3)** pedagogy and curriculum.

Most of the codes I used in the students' reflection papers are their words, not mine. As Charmaz (2006) suggests, I remained open. I stayed close to the data. I kept the codes short, simple, and precise. I preserved actions. I compared data with data (p. 49). The

data sources I compared were the reflection papers and the interview transcripts. I also used the notes, photos, and the syllabi of the five courses that are included in this research to create more accurate descriptions of moments in the classroom that demonstrate the pedagogical praxis I employed in the classroom. A very small group of codes I came up with were meaning I gave to some of the students' accounts. For example, I used the code word *critique* when I noticed that they shared some kind of analysis or judgment of the way things are in American society. Many of the students took the opportunity in the reflective writing to genuinely rethink social norms that were brought up in our classroom discussions, especially after activities or documentary movies that discussed social justice issues and captured their attention (usually when an issue was close to their heart, or, in the other extreme, when they admitted that they were ignorant about a topic or an issue, and learning about it made them rethink social norms). I also used the term *agency* or *a sense of agency* as codes to capture how I perceived what students shared in their reflection papers or interviews when they discussed their capacities to act upon the knowledge and understanding they have gained in the CFE-300 course.

In addition, I borrow Saldaña's (2013) approach to coding in order to discover categories, patterns, and themes to assist me with describing students' experiences in the course. Following Saldaña (2011), I observed how different categories and patterns "interact and interplay" (p. 92) in the students' papers and interviews. Thus, while reading them for the second time, I looked for patterns: reoccurring words, terms, and phrases that were used cross-courses (i.e., *vulnerability*, *banking system*, *to open up*). Some codes overlapped between the first reflection papers and the final reflection papers

(i.e., *safe space, courage, sense of belonging*), and between reflection papers and interviews (i.e., *responsibility, relationships, faith*).

Some of the codes, however, did not appear at all in the first reflection papers; *identity, oppression, privilege, and feminism* were mentioned only in the final reflection papers and were brought up in the interviews. This is part of the data gap that is inherent to this study: it does not include the rest of the reflection papers students wrote during the semester. In this study, I show the beginning of the course – the foundations I laid when it comes to pedagogy, and the curriculum that supported the pedagogy – and then I “jump” to where the students were at by the end of the semester. The data that I gathered from the interviews supplements and enriches the study by adding the students’ accounts of their experience as my CFE-300 students – and how the course still resonates with them in their professional and personal lives.

### **From Coding to Conceptual Categories to Themes**

Each of the sub-lists represents different aspects of the data (and the different aspects of the CFE-300 course). In this subsection, I explain what conceptual categories I created, which I later thematized.

**Concepts.** These are the concepts that the students responded to, especially in their papers. I divided the concepts into two sub-groups: beneficial (i.e., *connection, community, courage, compassion, vulnerability*), and harmful (i.e., *shame, fear, disconnection*). The concepts represent the philosophical, epistemological aspect of the course.

**Verbs.** The verbs are the words students used to describe and represent desired actions/behaviors (i.e., *opening up, expressing feelings/emotions, paying attention*) and undesired actions/behaviors (i.e., *shaming, abusing power, fitting in*). This sub-list also reflects the students' movement from (re)thinking concepts to constructing new knowledge while incorporating new language and concepts and translating them into actions and/or practices.

**Pedagogy and curriculum.** This includes what students wrote in their reflection papers and said in the interviews about the pedagogy and the curriculum of the CFE-300 course. This category includes how the students responded to the pedagogical strategies and to the curriculum that supported the pedagogy. This sub-list allowed me to deepen the discussion on the *Pedagogy of Connectedness* and the curriculum components that supported it. Additionally, it includes the students' testimonies of how they were challenged throughout the course, and what was meaningful for them.

After dividing the codes, I organized them in conceptual categories which represent the process the students went through throughout the semester. These categories also focus on the students, whose voices and experiences are central to this study. Thus, the conceptual categories are:

1. Learning a new vocabulary.
2. Responding to critical-feminist pedagogical strategies.
3. Understanding identity, power, and realizing social responsibility.
4. Developing a sense of agency.
5. Finding one's voice, meaning, and purpose.

In Chapter Five, I focus on a few main themes that came out of the five conceptual categories, i.e., how the new vocabulary and pedagogical strategies helped the students to look at connectedness and community (conceptual categories 1 and 2); and what happened to the students once they had the opportunity to practice new vocabulary and pedagogy that is concerned with connectedness. I sought what possibilities opened up for the students, both personally and professionally (conceptual categories 3-5). For example, by looking anew at connectedness and community, students had to grapple with social norms such as individualism and how the entrenched competition within the school system can result in depression and anxiety.

### **Trustworthiness, Positionality, and Subjectivity**

**Trustworthiness.** Good research is trustworthy research. In this section I describe the steps I have taken to make my work valid and credible. First, I have collected very rich data: reflection papers from 51 students, 11 interviews, dozens of pages of notes and memos taken for almost four years, and photos I took every week in the classroom. Second, the research design is in accordance with the research purpose. The paradigms (critical, transformative) fit the foundations of feminist, qualitative research. I did my best to be as descriptive and transparent as possible throughout this chapter about my methodology-related decisions.

One component that also contributes to the trustworthiness of both the research and the researcher is the ability to maintain reflexivity. Reflexivity, writes Rallis (2010), “demands [an] on-going interrogation” (p. 436) that includes questions about what the researcher sees, and how others might see the same thing. Reflexivity involved thinking

about the researcher's relationship with the study's participants and the nature of their interactions—questions I have been wrestling with due to my double role as the researcher and the instructor of the CFE-300 course. Rallis (2010) reminds us that, to maintain trustworthiness, researchers ought to maintain ethical relationships with the participants, to identify their own values, and be critical about their conduct. In other words, do researchers walk their talk?

I assert that I have maintained my research ethically. I was transparent with the students from the very beginning about my intention to collect data. I followed IRB protocol throughout the process to make sure the data collection was in accordance with the university's policies.

Ethical conduct also has to do with the relationships I have with the CFE-300 students. I care about them, and as a researcher I do not disclose sensitive details about their lives. The commitment to protect their privacy as much as possible reflects my efforts as their course instructor. I am confident that the loving, caring, and compassionate relationships I shared with the students will be reflected in Chapter Five, as the ways I will represent the students' notions of dis/connectedness and social responsibility.

**Positionality and subjectivity.** My positionality includes the insider/outsider perspectives I hold as an international student from Israel who has been living in the U.S. since 2009. As I mentioned in Chapter One, I come from a culture that emphasizes collectivity over individualism, thus I acknowledge that where I come from and whom I have interacted with in the U.S. (whether in person or through books and articles) have

shaped the ways I read the many realities that coexist in this country. As I reflect on how I have changed in the last eight years, I cannot separate those changes from my scholarly journey, the people I have met, taught, argued with, and loved. My insider/outsider have evolved into one, complex, multi-layered me. My positionality as an immigrant with an expiration date on my visa (Zilonka, Carvajal Medina, Cai, & Chung, under review) is embedded in my passion to understand what constitutes connectedness, community, and a sense of belonging. I recognize that that passion stems from a need to situate myself in a chaotic world full of contradictions, confusion, and hypocrisy—alongside a human yearning for connectedness and a wish to make sense of what stands in front of us.

Another aspect of my positionality is related to my double role as the CFE-300 instructor and the researcher of this study. I study my own work, and I investigate the ways the CFE-300 students conceptualized dis/connectedness. I arrived in the U.S with assumptions and biases about Americans and throughout the past eight years I have had numerous opportunities to unpack, challenge, and transform them. The many interactions with students provided me with a broader look at the ways people experience dis/connectedness, and I have learned from the students both as an instructor and a researcher.

The last aspect of my positionality is rooted in my subjective identity make-up as a biracial, international student with an accent, who speaks English as a second language, who is a critical-radical-feminist, socialist Jew who practices Tibetan Buddhism. In both my teaching and research, I bring my political stances as well as my beliefs in the human capacity for resilience, agency, love, and compassion. My political views as a feminist

and cultural worker, my spiritual practices, and my years of social justice activism have all been informing my thinking, writing, understanding, and representing the various voices and perspectives in this research study. My educational work has been—and always will be—political (Shor, 1987).

I embrace the positionality and subjectivity I bring to my work with students as well as my research. I am aware of where I come from, I recognize my knowledge gaps, and I always welcome opportunities to challenge and advance my ways of being, thinking, and living.

### **Research Limitations**

The first limitation is that I do not have all of the re-signed consent forms from students who already gave me their consent at the end of each semester. However, since the IRB concluded that the research was exempt, I was given permission to analyze those papers without identifying anything about the students' biographical backgrounds. This situation challenged my ability to represent them precisely in my writing. Another issue with the data is that some of my notebooks were lost in the mail with the consent forms. However, since I typed more than 30 pages of notes before I moved, I still have a very rich body of data, just not as rich as I had in May 2017.

A second limitation is that I did not have research questions and research design from the very beginning of the data collection process. This means that I did some of the steps backwards. I collected data without considering what I was actually researching. Only as I dived in the gathered data after I reviewed the literature, I realized that what I

am looking into is articulating a pedagogical theory that is concerned with dis/connectedness.

A third limitation is the gender divide in the study's participants. I have only five men (out of 51 participants) who gave consent to participate in this study (out of six male students who attended my classes). I recognize that my pedagogical theory leans heavily on women's epistemology, but I also recognize it is a limitation. Further research should include more men's voices. As I anticipated in Chapter Two, this project has become a messy, unpredictable one. In other words, I embrace the unpredictable in every step of this journey.

CHAPTER V  
ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

**Introduction to the Analysis Chapter**

As an undergraduate student in Israel in 2007, I did my internship in a first grade classroom. My co-intern Yael and I realized that the young students seemed to have merely three emotional modes: happy, sad, and angry. Yael and I decided to equip the young students with a new vocabulary of emotions and feelings, so they could better express the many emotions and feelings they experienced. We planned an activity where they described feelings and we named them based on the situations they presented. We taught them sorrow, bliss, grief, jealousy, frustration, joy, and so on. We discussed at least 25 different emotions and feelings, broadening their emotional vocabulary. I remember our class discussion, and how Yael and I were moved by their openness and eagerness to learn new words and to demonstrate their understanding with very personal, raw examples.

An additional activity that my co-intern and I planned for that class was a word search puzzle. We handed out the papers and asked them to find the words and circle them – all were emotions and feelings. At some point, one of the students in the class got off his chair, and with a big smile on his beaming face he ran towards me while screaming “I found happiness! I found happiness!” I remember how much I laughed, and

I remember the warm hug we shared. At that moment, he had most certainly found happiness and it was beautiful and powerful to witness.

While reading through the data for the empirical portion of this research project – more than 120 reflection papers, 11 interview transcriptions, my own notes and photos – I thought about my first grader who “found” happiness. I thought about the importance of having enough words to explain and describe what we feel, what we hope for, and what we imagine for our loved ones. I thought about my first grader because, after reading the students’ reflection papers and interview transcripts, one theme that came up time and again was the new vocabulary that the CFE-300 course introduced to the students. In one particular interview, a student said that terms such as connectedness and vulnerability were new to her. Understanding their meaning and their role in her life gave her a new way to experience life, to embrace vulnerability, and to practice it with those she feared mostly to show her true-self. She realized that allowing herself to be vulnerable opened up something new in the relationships she shares with people.

The core of the CFE-300 course has always been relationships. As I mentioned in previous chapters, Brown (2010) asserts that in order to experience meaningful relationship, we ought to practice vulnerability. In a hyper masculine culture that is saturated with violence, the mere idea of appearing vulnerable is deemed a weakness. Practicing vulnerability as a strength rather than a weakness was new to many of the students, much like it was new to me back in 2010 when I was first introduced to Brown’s work. Since then, I have decided to practice and model vulnerability in the classroom and to include Brown’s work in my courses’ pedagogy and curriculum.

Vulnerability allows us to experience relationships at a whole new depth and I wanted to bring that to the courses I taught. The CFE-300 course became a practice lab for relationships, which are a part of the foundations of the *Pedagogy of Connectedness*. The relationships that the students and I cultivated both in the classroom and beyond it, the relationships the students cultivated among themselves and with themselves – all those were the foundations of the course I had the honor and pleasure to teach while earning my doctoral degree.

In this chapter, I continue answering my third research question, How and in what ways might a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* address disconnectedness in American society? which I began to address in Chapter Three through theoretical frameworks and perspectives, and in Chapter Four when I discussed the foundations of the CFE-300 curriculum. In this chapter I also answer the fourth research question, In what ways, if any, does a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* impact the CFE-300 students' notions of identity, power, and social justice? The analysis portion of this chapter includes the students' papers and interviews, supported by some of my notes and photos I took in the classes. The analysis will also include the key concepts and practices of *Pedagogy of Connectedness*, which I will summarize and conclude in Chapter Six.

### **Welcome to the CFE-300 Course**

you will find your way.  
it is  
in the  
place  
as  
your love.  
— Nayyirah Waheed

First, there is the course roster. A few days before the semester starts, I take a look at the roster. I go through the names and I decide to love each and every one of them even before I meet them in person. I read the very few details the university's system allows me to see: their full names, their hometown and current address, their major. I can see at what point each of them is at in their degree program – most of the education majors are sophomores and juniors. The social work students are all seniors.

The excitement to getting to know them grows daily in the week before class starts. I plan the course thinking of them, thinking of the society and the communities they grew up in. I think about their families and the churches some of them might attend, about the dorms in which some of them have been living for a year or two. I think about the city where they attend college and the politics of the South. I think about history.

I envision the course as a house. I think about the foundations of it. They must be strong and solid. They must represent the historical, the philosophical, and sociological aspects of the society whose college students I was asked to teach. The foundations must represent the past, the present, and the possible futures. Past struggles for emancipation and redemption as well as current strife many individuals and communities encounter must both be addressed. Alongside the past and the present, there are dreams and hopes of liberation and ending unnecessary suffering. I envision a hopeful house.

Then, there are the walls. Those walls are built with bricks that are shaped like puzzle pieces. Each semester, the students and I build the walls together, one piece at a time. Each one represents a fraction of the whole: a student shares a childhood memory, a poem is read out loud in the class and then analyzed collectively, a guest speaker

challenges the students to rethink a myth, an email exchange between me and a student, a heated classroom discussion or a documentary that makes many of us tear up, an a-ha! moment and then another one, and the list goes on. Those moments usually happen when we sit in a circle or in groups. We look in each other's eyes and we talk. We really talk. We listen. We write. We listen to music and we watch movies. We teach each other, together. We build the walls together and make the place our own, one week at a time.

Binding it all is the cement that holds the puzzle-shaped bricks together. I would like to think that the cement is the energy that held the CFE-300 together each semester; the energy of connectedness that allowed us to foster a sense of community and to cultivate a space where we felt safe, heard, seen, and belonged. The energy that ultimately made that house into a home.

In this chapter I do my best to capture that energy of connectedness that the students co-generated, felt, and responded to. I assert that the process of co-creating that energy is one way that the disconnectedness in the U.S. society can be addressed, be critiqued, and ultimately – be transformed.

### **Expanding Critical Pedagogy**

We are so much more than educators. We are protectors, we are an example, and we are the motivators.  
– Grace, 2015, first reflection paper

The CFE-300 course structure had a multidimensional quality and provided multiple entry points for the students to find their place in it, and to decide when and how to engage with its vocabulary, philosophy, pedagogy, and curriculum. Students came to

the course with different levels of readiness, with many of them not eager to have conversations about injustices and inequities. Therefore, my course needed to get us, if not to be on the same page, then at least in the same book. In other words, one of the most important things was to cultivate the optimal conditions to have all students engaged in a community, so later when injustices and inequities came up, they would be willing to listen and learn about those important issues. The course was designed in a way that it met the students where they are at from the very beginning of the semester.

Discussing dis/connectedness was done by first asking students to look into themselves and their lives, and articulate their thoughts and opinions on dis/connectedness and related terms they were introduced to through the readings and videos. Starting where the students were was in accordance with critical pedagogy's emphasis on relevancy and allowed the opportunity to validate students' experiences by giving them enough room to express and share.

The structure also adopted a dialectical approach. Although the units were organized chronically, the terminology was revisited and reexamined as it intersected, overlapped, and associated with different social justice perspectives. For example, when we learned the term socialization in the third unit, "Identity," we revisited that term when we explored different identity markers, such as disability, social class, gender, and race. We looked at how the process of socialization shapes and impacts our ways of being, thinking, and acting when we interact with people who carry those identity markers (while investigating into what it personally means to carry those identity markers and how socialization impacts the way we perceive ourselves and internalize the stereotypes

that society puts on us). Like with dis/connection, critical pedagogy principles and other terms that are related to power and hierarchy (i.e., marginalization and privilege), we revisited socialization in order to deepen our understanding of hegemony and mechanisms of oppression. Furthermore, understanding socialization in the context of dis/connectedness not only provided new ways to look at social norms, values, and beliefs, but also at “structures of educational institutions” (Gross, 2011, p. 7). In other words, how socialization continues to be reinforced within the school system.

In Chapter Three I asked two questions: can the critical pedagogy project be about connectedness and what will it mean to expand critical pedagogy and add aspects of dis/connectedness to its praxis? Weaving new layers of dis/connectedness into the CFE-300’s pedagogy and curriculum, as I show in this chapter, helped students to better understand social justice issues in education. Before inserting the dis/connectedness vocabulary into the CFE-30 curriculum, I had to teach it to myself and to experience the little waves that rippled throughout my own existence. Self-immersing into the realm of dis/connectedness has broadened my understanding of social phenomena such as wars (which are possible once we dehumanize individuals and communities), suicide (which is in most cases related to one’s sense of despair and being caught in cycle of unbearable suffering), and other manifestations, as I discussed in Chapter Two.

The new vocabulary of dis/connectedness included words such as vulnerability, courage (Brown, 2010), belonging (Brown, 2010; hooks, 2009), compassion (Brown, 2010, Chödrön, 2008), love ethic (hooks, 2010), radical love (Freire, 2005; Kincheloe, 1993; Thomas and Kincheloe, 2006), and community (Block, 2008; hooks, 2003). Those

new words – including connection and disconnection – became the backbone of the CFE-300 course’s philosophy and pedagogy, its thought and practice. Education and social justice issues were framed within this new vocabulary.

### **How We Began**

In our first meeting of the semester, after a brief introduction to the course and the syllabus, I facilitated at least two activities that helped the students to get to know each other. The first, “The Human Domino,” helps to find connections between the students (common favorite TV shows or foods, hobbies, etc.). The second activity involves sharing a memory or an experience that is related to social (in)justice. The third activity provides the students with an opportunity to talk about people they love and care about or people that they are intrigued by or admire. All ice-breaker activities were designed to begin the process of fostering a sense of community in the class by finding out where students come from and what they might have in common.

**Knowing each other’s names.** In the first week we already started to learn each other’s names in a fun game where each student tells their name, and then students volunteer to repeat the names either in the sitting order or randomly. During the first month, I made time (about 5 minutes each class) to play the game to reinforce this knowledge. Before working in groups, I also asked the students to introduce themselves. By the end of the first month of the semester, we all knew each other’s names.

**Free writing.** One of the tools I incorporated throughout the semester was free writing. Students were asked to have a designated notebook to bring every class. In the first week of the semester, the students were asked to answer a few questions, such as

when and where they feel connected and disconnected, what do they know about social justice, why they want to be teacher/social worker, and if there is anything I need to know about them (i.e., learning disabilities, PTSD – anything that can come up during the semester that might need accommodations or special care/sensitivity)<sup>7</sup>.

The students were engaged with free writing every week. I asked them to write their fresh, raw thoughts and feelings after we watched documentaries and participated in activities. Their course assignments were all reflection/analysis writing in which they were asked to make connections between the assigned readings and videos, the classroom discussions, and their own personal experiences. “When you tell,” writes Greene (1995), “... you are making connections, creating patterns, making sense of what seems devoid of meaning” (p. 105). Reading itself, she writes, “is never enough.” Writing become “essential [...] to make my own sense of what I read, to incarnate it, to *learn* what it had to tell me” (Greene, 1995, p. 195. emphasis hers).

In a couple of course sections, I facilitated an ongoing in-class writing activity in which students were asked to create three lists. The first list included the things they are good at and can teach others. The second list included their achievements (whatever they consider an achievement – whether it was being a the first one in the family to go to college or getting out of bed while struggling with depression). The last list was about things that they are/were grateful about (health, education, a car that runs, enough money to pay bills, enough sleep at night). Occasionally during the semester, I asked the students

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<sup>7</sup> The last question is important because the course oftentimes dealt with issues such as addiction, homelessness, and rape culture. Each semester I wanted to make sure I did not trigger any emotional issue that perhaps had not been addressed in students' lives. Also, sometimes students are also parents or are the main care-giver of a family member – all of which are important for me to know (I don't need to know the details, just to understand their needs), in case they miss more than a class or two due to family obligations and commitments.

to go back to those lists and update them, and then invited them to share items from those lists as another way to get to know each other and create connections between the students. Lastly, writing down the lists functioned as a practice to strengthen the students' self-worth and self-esteem.

The reason I emphasized writing is because it helped the students to articulate thoughts and opinions, to express themselves in a creative way, and to purposefully focus on and speak to specific issues. Writing helped the students make connections between the course's curriculum and classroom discussions/activities and their own lived experiences, and consequently helped them to find their own unique voice or amplify an existing one. hooks (2010) writes that "writing short paragraphs which students read in class" is an exercise that "allows everyone's voice to be heard and usually lays the groundwork for more engaging classroom discussion of assigned reading" (p. 57-58). Students' voice is one of the themes I analyze in this chapter.

**The curriculum of the "Connection and Community" unit.** As I mentioned in Chapter Four, the course was divided into units. The first unit, "Connection and Community," introduced the students to the new vocabulary as it spoke to the individual and social aspects of dis/connectedness. In that unit, students considered the role of communities in their lives and how the arts bring people together. The students read two chapters from Brown's (2010) book and watched her two *TED* talks. In addition, the students watched Chimamanda Ngozi Adichí's (2009) *TED* talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, Sir Ken Robinson's (2006) *TED* talk, *How Schools Kill Creativity*, and the documentary *Alive Inside* (2014). Finally, the students watched a variety of short videos

of initiatives people have organized, such as *The Free Hugs Campaign* and various flash mob events from all around the world. Those short videos demonstrate the human yearning to connect and to come together in creative ways, even if it is only to experience a sense of connection for a few minutes.

**The curriculum of the “To be an Educator” unit.** In this unit, the students were introduced to critical pedagogy and the U.S American school system. They read excerpts from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2010), Ira Shor’s *Education is Politics* (1993), bell hooks’ (1994) *Teaching: Introduction, Critical Thinking, and Engaged Pedagogy*, Svi Shapiro’s *The Banality of Evil* (2006) and *Schooling for Life as a Race* (2010), Anna Pennell’s *Toward Compassionate Community* (2003), and Lynnell Hanock’s *A+ for Finland* (2003). In the classroom we watched Rita Pierson’s (2013) *TED* talk titled *Every Child Needs a Champion*, and read the children’s books *My Great Aunt Arizona* (Houston and Lamb,1992) and *If She Only Knew Me* (Gray and Thomas, 2005).

Similar to the first unit, the second unit introduced the students to a new vocabulary and concepts, including critical thinking and analysis, critical pedagogy philosophy, and praxis. In this unit we learned how to analyze texts and the difference between schooling and educating. The premise of the second unit was very simple: in order to achieve meaningful educational experiences, we ought to invest in relationships with our peers as well as foster a sense of community and belonging, so we feel comfortable with sharing our thoughts and opinions, expressing our feelings, and willing to have classroom discussions that are rooted in respect, care, and love. In the next

section, I will analyze students' responses to both units and demonstrate how the dis/connectedness discourse contributed to a deeper, more meaningful understanding of critical pedagogy.

### **The Themes**

Creswell (2003) writes that “themes are the ones that appear as major findings in qualitative studies” (p. 194). Since I gathered a lot of material (more than 120 reflection papers and 11 interviews) it was possible to extract more than a dozen major findings that demonstrate different aspects of the CFE-300 course's pedagogy and its impact on the students' notions on social justice issues in education. Students spoke passionately about the arts, technology, and faith, alongside the ways they were moved and challenged by the course's curriculum.

For practical reasons, I chose four themes that spoke specifically to the course's pedagogy: **(1)** Education requires vulnerability, a sense of connectedness, belonging, and community, **(2)** Connectedness can be taught, learned, modeled, and practiced; it is a process that must traverse a path of disruption of power and understanding identity, **(3)** Pedagogy of Connectedness helps students to find their voice and to develop a sense of agency; and **(4)** Pedagogy of Connectedness helps educators to facilitate transformation.

## **Analysis of the Themes**

### **Theme #1: Education Requires Vulnerability, a Sense of Connectedness, Belonging, and Community**

In the first unit “Connection and Community,” students were introduced to concepts related to dis/connectedness, such as the role of community in one’s life, the necessity of practicing vulnerability to foster a sense of connectedness (by opening up, expressions feelings, and sharing opinions and experiences), and how courage and compassion are vital components in achieving connectedness, which in return provides us a sense of community and belonging.

The investigation into dis/connectedness was not merely theoretical and it included activities and discussions that revolved students’ notions and experience regarding dis/connectedness – on the individual, communal, and societal levels (Figures 1-4). For many of the students, it was the first time they were asked to reflect, write, and address those concepts. The context of the course – Cultural Foundations in Education – focused on the school system, and on the diverse individuals and community the students plan to or currently serve as teachers and school social workers. Thus, the students incorporated their new knowledge and understanding of dis/connectedness (and dis/connectedness-related concepts) into their writing during the semesters. This was also reflected in the interviews I conducted with them months and years after they took the CFE-300 course.

Figure 1. Connection, Individual. Fall 2014

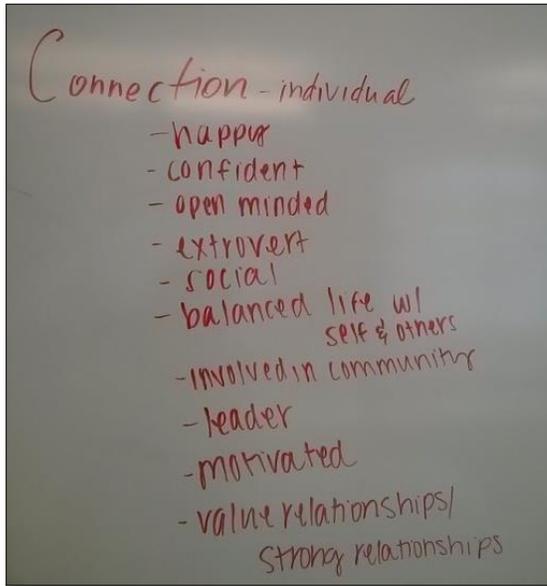


Figure 2. Connection, Community. Fall 2014

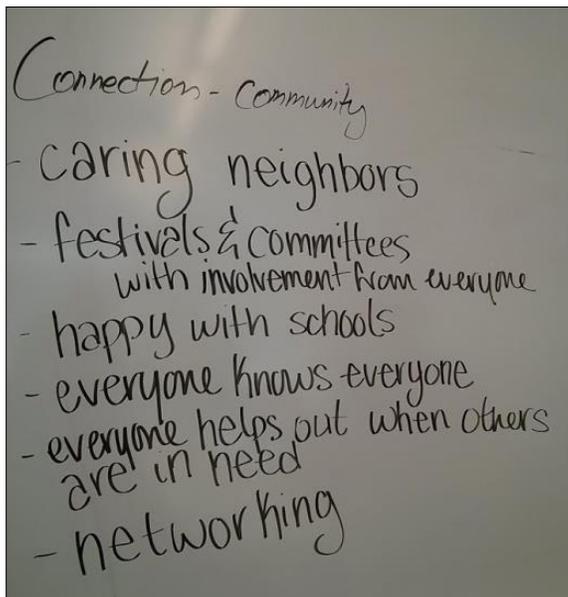


Figure 3. Disconnection, Individual. Fall 2014

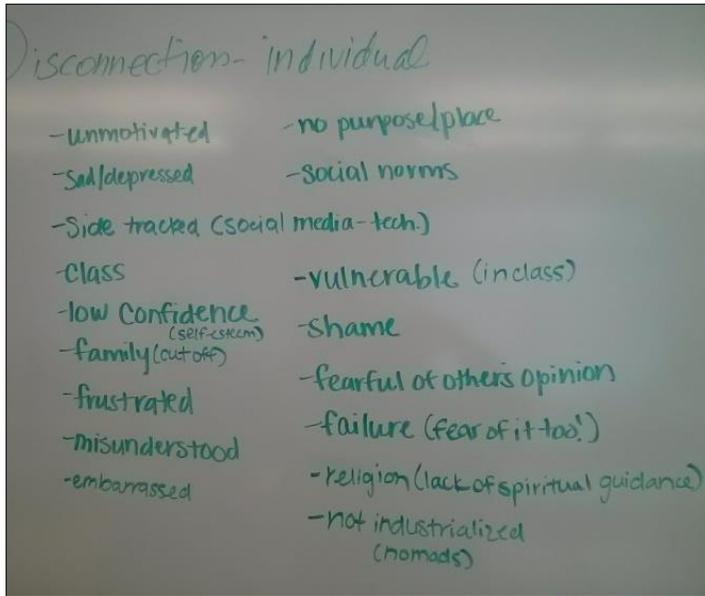
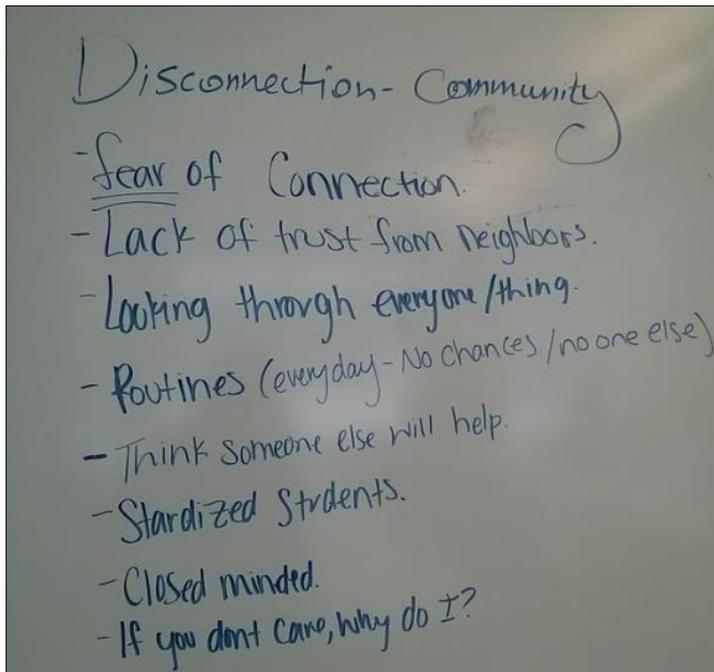


Figure 4. Disconnection, Community. Fall 2014



The CFE-300 course provided the students with the opportunities – both in the classroom and in their writing assignments – to break down the components of dis/connection. Jenny (2014, reflection paper) was intrigued by the idea that vulnerability has a lot to do with connection. She writes,

We open up, show our vulnerable side, and trust others with ourselves which I personally find to be very scary thing to do. Being vulnerable leaves the possibility of being hurt, but vulnerability is a very important step in establishing connection with others. You have to open up in order to make that connection.

The fear of sharing and opening up in the classroom was also mentioned by Sofia (2014, reflection paper), who describes her reactions to the classroom ice-breaker activities and discussions. She writes,

I don't allow myself to be vulnerable to sit and talk to someone new every day just because of my fear of rejection from my peers... I wasn't ready to allow myself to be vulnerable enough to share with 'strangers.' I didn't want to look weak or look for pity and that's what I think being vulnerable is about, you have to be able to let your guard down and trust others to see the good or whatever else may come of it.

For some of the students, discussing vulnerability was accompanied by related topics, such as co-creating a space in the classroom where students feel comfortable allowing themselves to be vulnerable and to create intimacy and rapport – qualities that have the potential to advance sharing and speaking up. Lindsey (2015, reflection paper) explains that “As we become more comfortable with each other, we have been able to speak our mind, become invested in topics and show our passion, without feeling judged.”

Rhonda (2015) was surprised to find herself in a classroom where feelings and relationships were addressed. “I admit I was a bit skeptical at first,” she writes in her reflection paper, “I wanted to be a teacher, not the reincarnation of John Lennon.” Discussing dis/connectedness-related topics made Rhonda rethink what those topics have to do with being a teacher. She shares that,

The past [weeks] have pushed me to dig deeper inside myself and understand a part of me that I didn’t even know was there... I read and listens to what others had to say, I realized that disconnection is a huge problem in our society. Rita Pierson’s *TED* talk says ‘No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship.’ If this is true, then our society is stagnant. It seems that everything in [CFE-300] us built on that belief. I’ve heard words I thought were even remotely connected to teaching six weeks ago. Things like ‘vulnerability’ and ‘worthiness’ and ‘value.’ I’ve spoken to more of my classmates in [CFE-300] than in any of my other courses. We are all beginning to understand that no (wo)man is an island, we need each other.

The opportunity to sit in a classroom and discuss such concepts in a group was translated into what understanding dis/connectedness had to do with education and classroom practices. Tara (2014, reflection paper) related the process of forming a connection to what is possible in the classroom and mentions that “students need to feel a sense of togetherness in the classroom and within their communities. Creating and building these connections would be impossible without...vulnerability.” As we began to establish the understanding that cultivating connectedness means investing in relationships and co-creating a community, Dave (2015, reflection paper) wrote that “when we are able to communicate with each other, and build on that connection, and find ways to eliminate or at least reduce disconnection then we can build relationships that will promote and enable learning to take place.”

The new vocabulary of connectedness and the dis/connectedness discourses were soon to be revisited in the second unit titled “To be an Educator,” which introduced the students to critical pedagogy philosophy and praxis<sup>8</sup>. The connection between the two units helped to entrench the idea that a sense of connectedness is necessary for meaningful learning, that it requires vulnerability and the ability to embrace uncertainty, and that meaningful education requires participation and engagement. Those concepts resonate with critical pedagogy principles. Tara (2014, reflection paper) writes that,

through compassion, vulnerability, and critical thinking students can become more connected to their new knowledge. By sharing experiences, ideas, thoughts, and reflections, students can become more involved in their classrooms and their communities by understanding different points of view and developing compassion for those around them.

After introducing the students to critical thinking and analysis, and critical pedagogy guiding principles, students began to realize the connection between the first two units. Elliott (2014, reflection paper) writes,

It seems logical to discuss the topics we have covered so far in the beginning of our course since I believe those are the foundation of a safe and encouraging classroom that is full of understanding and commitment. These topics are passion, community, and trust which [are] at the core of our class discussions thus far.

The idea of building trust and a community of learners also resonated with Heather (2014, reflection paper) who states that,

Building stronger relationships and teaching a profound understanding of community and contribution, is a significant part of perseverance in education.

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<sup>8</sup> The unit followed the critical pedagogy guidelines as presented in Chapter Three.

Most importantly, human connection is vital to the development of the ‘complete’ child. Education must purposely strive to meet all of the academic, but also emotional, needs of the child. Human connection will optimize the educational environment and experience and thus, a student’s individual capability. Moreover, this enables teachers to help create a deep sense of belonging and self-worth in every child.

The students also looked at the ways the school system perpetuates disconnectedness. For some of them, discussing dis/connectedness was an opportunity to take a broader look at society, to critique the school system, and reflect on what happens within the classrooms.

Mel (2014, reflection paper) writes,

Community and connectedness are two constructs that are regularly overlooked in our daily lives. Society as a whole has unfortunately evolved into an environment where alienation is the stratus-quo, and connection is an abstract concept that is seemingly unheard of. This personal disassociation has become a conditioned response in our culture, and sadly, it is a mindset that is learned in the classroom from an early age. This disconnectedness is encouraged by those in positions of authority throughout a student’s educational journey, which has subsequently made the very idea of connection in community a novel concept to many people. The result has been that innumerable amount of people have been deprived of the human connection that is quite necessary for our mental health and wellbeing, without having a choice in the matter.

Mai (2015, reflection paper) explains that schools are

so focused on teaching for the tests that all students do is memorize and spit back information they don’t even know why they need to learn in the first place. There’s no time for critical thinking or analysis and creativity.

Later in her writing, Mai shared how frustrating it was for her to attend high school because she did not feel a connection. Already in her first reflection paper, Mai linked her

understanding of the importance of practicing connectedness within the classroom. She writes that students feel disconnected because

they don't see the value of what they're learning and how it connects to their lives...we need connection to thrive intellectually. I don't think it's because students don't want to learn or just aren't performing up to standards...they don't see the real life connection of knowing some scientific equation to real life situation...our teachings should have a purpose and meaning to students, but instead we force them to memorize facts for the purpose of standardized tests only.

The first two units of CFE-300 gave Mai the vocabulary and tools to draw her own road map to investigate the school system through a dis/connectedness prism, to name the components of the apparent disconnect, and to begin her own journey to critique that disconnect, aware of the fact that she will soon join the system as a teacher herself. Like Mai, Mel (2014, reflection paper) also wondered about the ways disconnectedness is practiced in the classroom and how it affects the students' mental and emotional states. She writes,

From a very early age students are encouraged to keep their hands to themselves, to sit quietly and do their work, and they are not given many opportunities to interact with one another during the learning process. From the very beginning teachers seems to encourage distance among students rather than connection between students. Students are alienated from each other, from the material that they are learning, and from the teacher as well. I feel that this disconnectedness is a big part of why it is easy for students to ridicule and judge one another. I now wonder whether or not I would have developed such a high level of anxiety had I experienced compassionate communities in my classrooms. It makes me sad to feel like all of the grief that I experienced over the years could have possibly been alleviated or minimized, had the education system placed a higher emphasis on compassion and connection rather than emphasizing achievement and creating an environment of competition.

The investigation of dis/connectedness and how it related to the school system and the classroom in particular, continued throughout the semester. We revisited the connectedness vocabulary time and again. Concurrently, the critical pedagogy guiding principles were not only taught, but were discussed and practiced. In the next subsection I detail what it was like and how the students responded to the pedagogy.

**Theme #2: Connectedness can be Taught, Learned, Modeled, and Practiced; it is a Process That Must Traverse a Path of Disruption of Power and Understanding Identity**

In individualistic societies, people value independence and self-reliance (Triandis, 2001), while societies that are more collectivist emphasize interdependence, cooperation, and cultivation of communities. “The social fabric of community,” writes Block (2008), “is formed from an expanding shared sense of belonging [and] shaped by idea that only when we are connected and care for the well-being of the whole that a civil and democratic society is created” (p. 9). When it comes to our classrooms, the wish to humanize the educational processes has a lot to do with fostering a sense of community, where educators share their power with the students, model ways to share that power, and model ways to co-create an inclusive community. This is also where students invest in relationships and realize their responsibility for others’ well-being.

In other words, transformative educators ought to model a pedagogy that goes against authoritarian hierarchies, an engaged pedagogy that “requires investigation [and] is thus much more a pedagogy of question than a pedagogy of answer” (Macedo, 2006, p. 102). This is a stance that resonates with Walker’s “confused richness” (ASCD, 1980, p. 81). Questioning authority and power structure in itself has the potential to disrupt

authoritarianism and power structures in a given society or an institution. Critical pedagogy introduces us with “problem-posing education, which breaks with the vertical patterns characteristics of banking education” (Freire, 2010, p. 80), and as such, the educator is not the only knower in the classroom.

For me, modeling an engaged pedagogy was a synonym for modeling an inclusive community that first and foremost is a compassionate, caring, and loving one. Investigation into power, oppression, and social injustices and inequities – when done collectively – goes against authoritarianism and the banking system. In this subsection, I analyze the students’ responses (both in writing and in interviews) to the pedagogical strategies I employed each semester, namely disrupting power and empowerment. Those strategies called for tactics to be incorporated in the classroom setting, the classroom activities, and in the way the discussions were carried. The strategies and the tactics reflect the assertion that connectedness can be taught, learned, modeled, and practiced.

In the CFE-300 course, disrupting power was done in several ways. First, my various identity markers and positionality were to some extent a disruption: an international student with an accent and a foreign-sounding name, who is an Israeli, Jewish, and biracial woman. I taught the course in a country in which “whiteness constructs itself as the ‘normal’” (Shome, 1998, p. 119), where my *otherness* was often under scrutiny. I wanted the students to see that a person with an accent, a non-native English speaker, can also be the knower. I wanted them to know that, even though my English proficiency was not perfect, I could still communicate well and be understood. It was also about providing the students with a first-hand experience of working with an

immigrant, giving them the opportunity to unlearn biases we hold against immigrants and other people who do not look or sound like us.

At the same time, I recognized that I was the authority in the class: I was the instructor. I wrote the syllabus, decided on the curriculum, and graded the assignments. One way I shared my power was by letting the students at the beginning of each semester suggest changes in the syllabus (although no cohort ever took on that invitation) and to suggest readings or videos to share with the class (which they rarely did, and only by emailing me links to readings and videos that they thought I would be interested in).

Sharing power with the students was also done explaining my decision-making process about how and why I built the syllabus the way I did, the reasoning of the readings/videos, and so on. As an educator of educators, I believe that pre-service educator preparation should not only include how to write lesson plans, but also an ongoing conversation about inclusive pedagogy and curriculum. Those discussions oftentimes focused on creative ways to incorporate social justice issues in the classroom, how to enhance critical thinking and analysis among students, and how to emphasize the importance of representation, inclusion, equity, and diversity among colleagues, parents/caregivers, and the communities the school serves.

Another way to address power in the CFE-300 course took place in the third unit “Identity,” where we discussed power by mapping out the social/cultural hierarchy and broke down the components of power, oppression, and privilege (see Figures 5-6). In the next units, we revisited power/oppression/privilege from different identity perspectives (i.e., social class, dis/abilities, ethnicity, immigration, gender, race, sexuality, and

religion). This investigation of identity makeup began by first asking students to examine their own identity makeup and understand how the identity markers function within their own lives. Like the dis/connectedness discussions in the beginning of the semester, students were asked to reflect on themselves, which opened up spaces to relate to others by understanding oneself first. The activity of discussing one's identity make-up was not only educational, but yet another opportunity for the students to deepen their relationship by learning about each other.

Figure 5. Identities and Hierarchy. Fall 2015

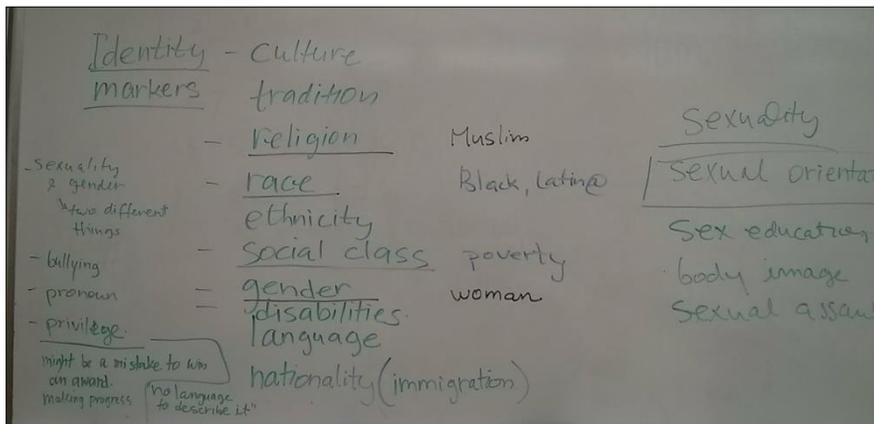
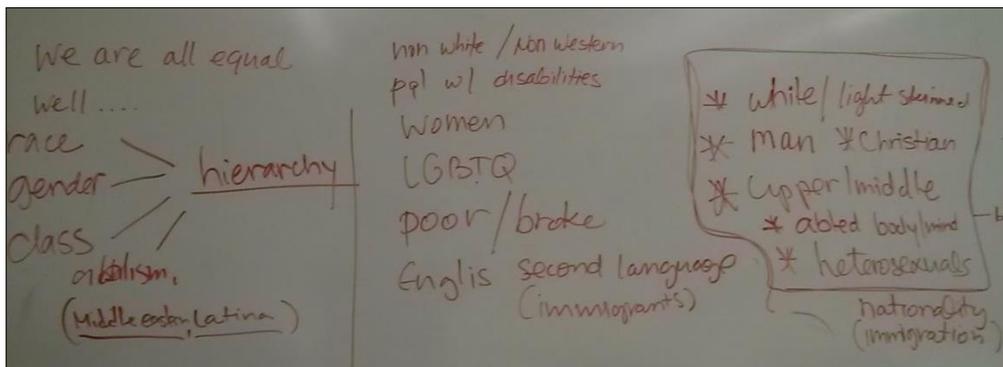


Figure 6. Identities and Hierarchy. Fall 2015



As a critical pedagogue, I have been constantly aware of the fact that most of the students I encountered were culturally, socially, economically and/or politically marginalized, neglected and underfunded. Kincheloe (2008) reminds us that the “cultural backgrounds of African Americans, Native Americans, poor Appalachians, and Latino students are often deemed by middle-class, white schools to inferior to those of the dominant culture” (p. 15). Kincheloe goes on and explains that those students “come to realize that success in schools may come only with a rejection of their ethnic and/or class backgrounds and the cultural forms of knowledge that accompany them” (p. 15). One’s rejection of their roots, culture, and heritage can be seen and/or experienced as a disconnect, which might even lead to shame and low self-esteem.

Developing the CFE-300 pedagogy and curriculum was done while thinking about students who carry marginalized identity markers – those who took the course, and the k-12 students who the CFE-300 students will work with in the near future. Almost all the CFE-300 students carried at least one marginalized identity marker, whether they were women, African-America/Black, Latinx, LGBTQ, Muslim, international students who speak English as a second or third language, had a disability, or came from a low socioeconomic class. Those identity markers were further discussed and analyzed throughout the semester – not as something that other people have or deal with, but as an opportunity to engage with self-exploration and locating ourselves in the social and cultural hierarchies.

CFE-300 was not a theoretical course where we discussed utopian ideals, but rather a course that provided multiple opportunities to explore the meaning of

dis/connectiveness within ourselves, the communities we belong to, and the kind of connectiveness we would like to experience in our personal and professional lives. Combining investigation of power while unfolding social justice issues throughout a dis/connectiveness prism provided some profound moments in the classroom across semesters. Addressing power called for a proactive approach from me as the course's instructor to facilitate efforts to establish a sense of community and belonging while thinking about power – that in itself was empowering for many of the CFE-300 students. That approach necessitated the destabilization of the traditional classroom setting in a number of ways. We sat in circles and/or in groups of four to five students every class. The students worked in couples, trios, and small groups. Group work was emphasized, while the make-up of the groups changed every week to allow the students to get to work with everyone in their class. Additionally, every class started with a five minute check-in, and I often checked-in during the classes to ask if the students needed a break. Another aspect of sharing power in an untraditional way was letting students vote. Usually they voted about what we did next in the class (e.g., activity or watching a movie) or about changing the deadline for an assignment. Those opportunities were always spontaneous – I never prepared for them and for me it was an opportunity for a teachable moment, to demonstrate the organic process of teaching rooted in carefully listening to students' needs.

Students appreciated the opportunity to cast their vote, as well as they welcomed the untraditional classroom setting that allowed them to connect and participate in an engaged, emerging community. Students also realized the benefits of such untraditional

setting. Michelle (2017, interview), who took the course in 2014, found the “Human Domino” game we played in the first week of the semester to be a bonding opportunity for the students, a bond that last for years. She says,

So, you know, they called out “I have two little sisters,” “my favorite color is purple”, “my favorite color is green.” They called out stuff to see how many people come and hold their hands and so... um... it got deeper in the...the more that we did, the more things that people said...it got deeper and it came to “I got bullied in high school”...and I remember I connected with Lee, who was bullied, and then that’s when I jumped up and I could--I felt comfortable in that--in that moment to say “yeah, I was too.” And then we figured out later that we were both vegetarians. So things like that... it expands and grows. So from that first activity to know, wow, me and that girl from completely opposite sides of Greensboro that come in this class... have this bond that we never would have thought about if we didn’t open up in your class... that built a very strong bond when you figure out when you let that wall down and you let people in that aren’t going to hurt you later in life.

Every semester the game was followed by an animated classroom discussion about how we can take many courses with the same students and never know if they have a twin sibling or they are a fan of Doctor Who. The game was the very first opportunity for students to connect and get to know each other on a personal level. It also allowed students to only share what they were comfortable with at that very early point in the semester. It was the very first step we made to foster a sense of community. Ella (2014, reflection paper) described what it felt like to be part of a community in the class. She writes,

On the first day of class I walked in to a circle which is a very unusual set up for the classroom especially in college. I was looking for the routine desks in five rows where students are almost touching but still too afraid to open up, say hello and introduce themselves... [sitting in a circle and sharing] immediately gave us all a connection no matter what race, gender, or ethnicity we belong to because

we were all vulnerable. We took a chance and opened up to new people not knowing what the response would be. However, everyone was so respectful and it seemed that we were all talking the first steps to forming a community.

One of the steps to form a community was to work in small groups, which was a big part of the course. Many of the activities were done in different sizes of groups to ensure that students got to work in different groups each time and eventually get a chance to work with everyone in their class. Group work typically included giving the students enough time to sit together, to have a conversation, and to produce something. Usually the groups wrote their conversation notes on the whiteboards to share them with the rest of the class. Oftentimes I asked the groups to switch boards and to see if they wanted to add anything to the other groups' work (see Figures 7-10). Once everything was written on the boards, the groups presented their work, and led a classroom discussion. On other occasions, the students created art together: representations of articles we read and analyzed in the classroom, or a group art creation. Working in groups provided them with many opportunities to get to know each other, to exchange ideas and opinions, and to get more personal attention from classmates. For the shy students in the course, it offered an opportunity to speak in those small groups, where they felt more comfortable to do so. Anne (2016, interview) says that,

When you're in a group, you tend to learn more because people contribute so you learn a lot more and then people learn about you too. So I learned a lot about the people around me and then they learned about me, so I thought that was cool.

Lily (2016, interview), a social work student, appreciated the opportunity to sit down and talk with future teachers so she can better understand their professional

perspectives since she intended to become a school social worker. She found the CFE-300 course's setting different from other classes and ascribed it to the tactics employed throughout the semester, notably working in small groups. She says,

I think the fact that we had small group, and we were able to sit in circles, and you really wanted to know what we thought and definitely appreciated that... I was really interested to know... what [future teachers'] worldview was, and where they were coming from.

For Rose (2016, interview) working in small groups made her feel more included.

She explains that,

I'm kind of a socially awkward person. I do not blend well in groups of people that I don't know, but I had no problem coming into the [CFE-300] class and being totally me and sharing my thoughts and my really liberal thoughts that a lot of people don't hold the same, you know, craziness that I've been brought up in, but I felt like I could still share it even though it might not be what everybody else believed.

Figure 7. Deconstructing Sexism. Fall 2014

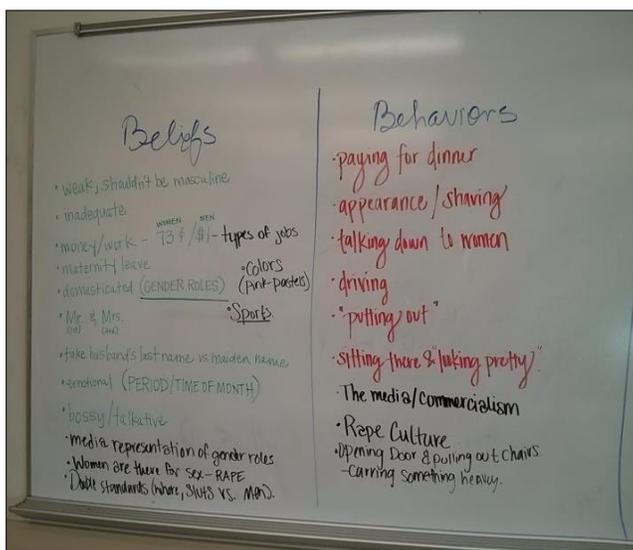


Figure 8. Deconstructing Sexism. Fall 2014

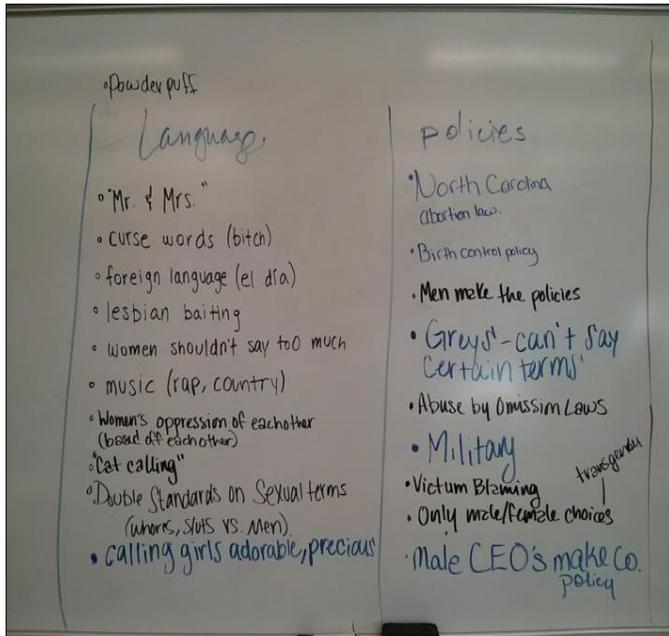


Figure 9. Creative Representation of Articles. Spring 2016

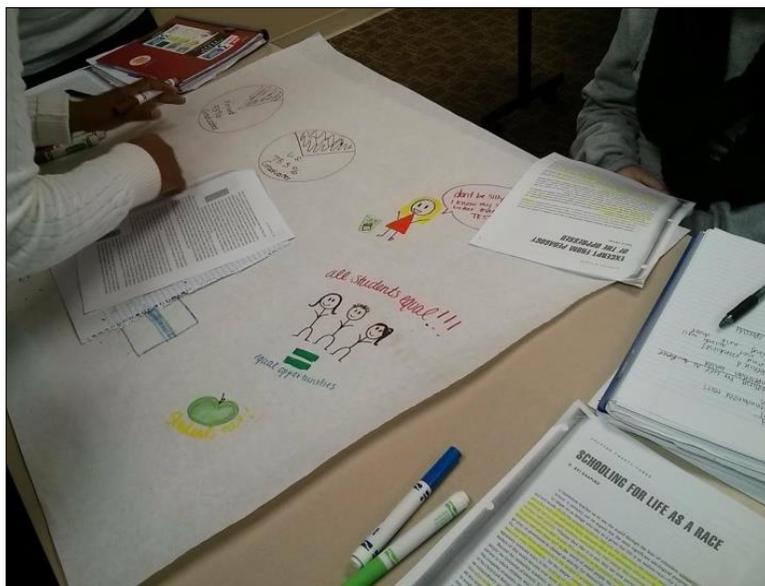


Figure 10. Creative Representation of Articles. Spring 2016



I planned and facilitated other activities (some weekly) in the CFE-300 course that helped me to foster a sense of community in the classroom. One of them was dedicating the first five minutes of each class to get into pairs, greet each other, and ask about their day (or weekend). Those five minutes, titled “How you doin’?” were scheduled in the class agenda each class, and became an important component of the course. Students mentioned it both in their writing and in the interviews. Drew (2016, interview) says,

it grounds you more, coming into the class and you feel more comfortable... and settled. You are not rushing into the classroom and just sit there...it changes your frame of mind going from like, ‘well, I have this busy day, I can tell you how it went and then now I can like...relax and listen and focus,’ ummm... and nowadays it’s so stressful I just wish I had that ‘cause, I mean my professors know how I’m doing generally... but they don’t really ask you very often.

Other students linked the “How you doin’?” and other periodically check-ups with the students (such as when to take a break, when we need a couple of silent minutes to just sit and let things to sink in) with establishing a sense of community and support. Willow (2016, interview) found the weekly check-in important. Surrounded by people who listened to what she had to say and not just hearing her made her feel that she was a part of a community,

a place where what you think is really listened by others...you have a sense of community where they support you with what you’re doing or if you have something going on in your personal life, like something that you have, you could talk about it because I know at the beginning of all your classes we always talk to our neighbors, ask them how their weekend was, so even little things like that helped... I liked listening. I really liked listening to other people. I liked listening to what they have to say.

Modeling sharing, even when one shared a little bit about themselves (such as a hobby or favorite musician in the “Human Domino” game, or how their morning/weekend was in the “How you doin’?” segment), made the act of sharing contagious and opened up additional spaces to find similarities. Sharing helped to build the foundations of connectedness and when students started to engage in discussions, those foundations strengthened. Mai (2014, reflection paper) mentioned the “How you doin’?” to discuss relationships in the classroom. She writes,

The ‘how are you doing’ talk that we do at the beginning of class I found to be great... It’s a moment for me to learn what events are important to my students, and for them to know that I value them and their opinions.

Lindsey (2015, reflection paper) mentioned that investing in relationships and being comfortable with each other were key to fostering community. She writes that,

I've come to realize that many of our class discussions are set up in a way that fosters communication among the group, and has inevitably made us all form a small community. As we become more comfortable with each other we have been able to speak out of mind, become invested in topics and show our passion, without feeling judged...it's important for us to be able to hear others' opinions, and be able to listen to different viewpoints in order to help us grow as people.

Later in the same paper, Lindsey (2015) connected the untraditional classroom setting to the sense of connection and community. She writes,

[CFE-300] is the only class that we sit in a circle, and from the moment you enter, somebody is asking you about your day. It's my only class that isn't test based, and is the only class that people take the time to know each other, and put an effort into making friendships...the only class where everyone is comfortable speaking out loud, and having a dialogue with the teacher comfortably. I think this feeling of comfort and confidence is due to the connection we formed in the first two weeks of class.

In interviews I conducted with eleven students who took CFE-300, they were asked if they felt part of a community in the class. All but one responded with a yes, and later they elaborated what that community meant for them (or what was lacking in their experience to feel part of a community). Michelle (2016, interview) says that

I felt like over time the class began to grow a bond with each other and it was a small community... It's funny that it was in 2014 'cause I still keep in touch with majority of the class from 2014 and now it's 2017. So it was a really-really good, tight community that we had in that class that has continued throughout my years here at UNC-Greensboro.

When asked if she felt part of a community, Grace (2016, interview) mentioned the diverse nature of her class to demonstrate how the differences between the students did not get in the way of experiencing the classroom as a safe space. She says,

I feel... through the lessons... we were all very different people, and it was good to see how different people approach those kind of issues... sometimes, you know, that can be difficult... topics that people usually have different opinions on, But I think, uh, the way you did the activities and the way we learned things – it was. It did become like a safe place in a community, where you could talk about stuff, you know, without feeling... you were being attacked for your opinion.

Grace's statement demonstrates my assertion that the first step of creating optimal conditions for the students to invest in relationships among themselves was to help them to listen to each other in respectful ways, regardless of the differences in their stances and opinions on topics. Later in the interview, Grace explained that being able to have a long classroom discussion about poverty was a defining moment for her. In the fifth unit "Social Class," we watched the movie Rich Hill (2014), a documentary that evoked a lot of feelings for Grace (even though the interview took place more than a year after she took the CFE-300 course). She became emotional when she talked about the movie. "In different classrooms," explains Grace in the interview, "you don't always have that opportunity to be able to talk things through". She adds,

[you] kind of work it out with the people around you... we all came in with, you know, different standpoints, but I think the fact that it was a place where it was okay to talk through how you're feeling, and talk through, um, what you saw things... and you weren't... you know, no one was angry, and no one jumped on anyone's throat. That's when I realized it was a place where you could really... talk, and it would be okay.

Rhonda (2016, interview), who took the class in 2014, did not have a strong memory of a sense of community in the classroom. “I don’t know that there was necessarily a culture of a classroom that made me go ‘wow, like we’re together!’” she reflected on her experience. She did, however, make a connection with one of the classmates who she had another course with that semester. But otherwise, she explains, “I didn’t necessarily feel un-included but I can’t necessarily say that I felt connected.” Rhonda was homeschooled for several years and she felt that public education failed her. After reading the unit’s assigned articles, she wrote: “I think back to the stress, the eating disorders, the sleepless nights, and realize that this isn’t the way the ‘real world’ has to be. Education doesn’t have to be a synonym for oppression or depression” (Rhonda, 2014, reflection paper).

When asked what can be improved in the CFE-300 course, Rhonda (2016, interview) mentioned that relationship building should be emphasized more. She explains:

I loved all the things that we did, but... I never really got to know the people in the class at all. And it might have just been me and I just didn’t want to get to know anybody in the class, but I never... and I think if we had done more getting to know you activities in the beginning, or--that might have been different because I’ve seen it done, um, where we have a great culture in classrooms.

Heather (2016, interview), who took CFE-300 with Rhonda, had a different viewpoint on the culture of the class. In her interview she says,

I felt I was part of a community... From memory, I can say that I began to feel included and noticed from the very beginning. In comparison to the other three

courses I completed that semester, I felt the most involved, appreciated, and accepted, in [CFE-300].

She later added that,

the relationships I developed during [CFE-300] were stronger than other relationships developed in other courses... students in my [CFE-300] would wave, or stop and speak to one another, when seeing each other outside of the classroom. I began to eat lunch with one of my new peers from [CFE-300]. The people that I was closest with at UNCG were all from [CFE-300].

Those two brief statements by Heather made me think about what was lacking in the way I facilitated inclusion in that semester, where Rhonda and Heather had very different experiences when it came to feeling part of a community in our class. What comes to mind is Rhonda's identity make-up (she is African-American, conservative, middle-class), and in her class, there was a majority of White students (nine out of eleven). The only other non-White student was Asian.

However, it is worth mentioning that in her final course paper, Rhonda (2015, final paper) wrote that "I've felt connected to everyone in this course as I listen to them struggle through the same issues that I am." She grappled with many of the concepts the course introduced her with – from rethinking institutionalized racism, to finding ways to accept non-heterosexuals. She felt frustrated, angry, and sad to learn about "the many injustices... victims of sexism, ableism, racism [and] classism," but she also felt "hopeful in this class that we can actually do something" (Rhonda, 2015, final paper). Knowing her and her journey as an educator and a great thinker (she wrote fantastic papers), I think that, in a way, Rhonda used the space of the CFE-300 to reconcile with some personal

issues – which she did through her writing and with her contributions to the classroom discussions. In one of the first paragraphs in her final paper she says,

I was prepared for a mediocre class that wouldn't challenge me, wouldn't change my mindset and wouldn't cause me to question anything I had been taught. I was convinced that I didn't need this class. Boy, was I wrong.

The concepts of connectedness and community stayed with Rhonda. She is currently a public school teacher that keeps looking for ways to keep her students grounded, connected, respectful, and accepting. She needed to get out to the “real world” and to put to rest the many things she learned in her undergraduate coursework.

Going back to the students' accounts of feeling part of a community in CFE-300, Drew (2016, interview) said that “our community was definitely there. I was surprised by the community just because we had one boy and then the rest were girls... I feel like he felt included too.” Later in the interview, Drew mentioned that what made her feel part of a community were the discussions in the classroom. Discussing controversial topics such as same-sex parenting (which usually brings a lot of disagreement and heated debates) in the course felt more like

a discussion where you could respect each other...we were able to talk about [same-sex parenting] and like respect each other. It's more of a community than like just a group 'cause like we were together in talking about it rather than individual points just being mean.

The ability to discuss issues with respect was mentioned by many of the students, both in their writing and in the interviews. Respect was associated with listening and refraining from interrupting classmates during a class discussion. Listening with respect

meant listening to understand rather than to respond. Modeling listening, like modeling other desired practices, went hand in hand with explaining to the students why those practices are vital in education, in the school system, and in life in general. Asking the students not to raise hands while others talked was one way to remind them that when they raise hands they think about what they want to say instead of listening to what others were saying. Everything I asked the students to do in the class – from actively listening to not using cell phones, tablets or laptops during classroom discussion – were accompanied with explanations. Everything was open to debate and questioning, and modeling always came with an invitation to practice.

When it came to sharing experiences, I shared a lot about my life, both personally and professionally. By sharing experiences and allowing myself to express emotions, I modeled vulnerability and a different way of relating with the students, one that was based on trust. I allowed myself to express a wide range of emotions and that it is okay to do so in the classroom, thus making the case for how it enhances bonding among us, as humans, before everything else we are. For example, the way I introduced myself in the first class of each semester helped me to frame, to some extent, what the course is about. In my “introduction spiel,” I emphasized my otherness and the power structure that is embedded in the American society. I did so by breaking down my identity into components (Zilonka, 2015).

I share where I come from, my parents’ cultural backgrounds, my native language, my nationality, and my international student status in the United States. I tell the students that studies show many of them are not going to give me much credit because of all the identity markers I carry with me. I then add that I hope they will prove the research wrong. Therefore, a challenge has been set and the

students have a semester-long opportunity to wrestle with their own prejudices that they might not have known they held against me and people that sound or look like me. (p. 71)

That spiel, I learned later, did not go unnoted. For example, Drew (2016)

mentions in her interview that,

you set the tone...you said something about how if somebody looked at you, you felt that based on what you looked like and where you came from you're not as creditable as what a white male would be in our culture, or our society, and I feel like you kinda set the tone by saying your differences and how proud you were and you kind of celebrate that throughout to like teach us about the different units and I think that kinda brought us out in like recognizing our own differences and then we were able to talk about it.

When asked about what she thought about the spiel, Drew responds,

I thought it was different. I had never heard somebody blatantly say things about themselves like that. Like I could imagine you feeling that way but like saying it to a class that you don't know, that's like a whole different level of being comfortable with yourself. I wouldn't go and the that talk about my own privilege and stuff to someone that I didn't know and I feel like...in a small class like that you say on the first day kinda shocked us into what you expected from us in the class [laughing].

Talking about myself, sharing experiences, and expressing emotions were vital practices that made the course meaningful. I was constantly reminded of Greene (1995) about the importance of "keeping the pain awake" (Buber, 1957, p. 116 as quoted in Greene, 1995, p. 113) and telling stories that capture our identities. My own narratives functioned as living curriculum (Schubert, 1986) and resonated within other narratives I assigned the students to read or watch (most notably, short stories and essays by Toni Morrison, Gloria Anzaldúa, and James Baldwin, just to name a few, alongside

documentaries and *TED* talks that emphasized local and global perspectives of identity). Most importantly, it resonated with many of the students' own narratives.

Sharing narratives created a classroom atmosphere that made us feel close to each other. I remember defining moments, such as in February 2014. I stayed late in the office to grade papers, and it was almost 9 PM when I was ready to go home, and realized I didn't bring a warm hat. I took my red scarf and put it around my head. I walked home and unlike before, no one greeted me on the street, and only when I got home I thought maybe it was because I was wearing my scarf like a hijab. That same night, the news reported that three Muslim students in Durham, NC, Shaddy Barakat, his wife, Yusor Mohammad, and her sister, Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, were murdered by their White supremacist neighbor, Craig Stephen Hicks. I read about the murder and looked at the faces of the three young students. Razan was wearing a red hijab in the photo. My heart was heavy and I knew I need to address that horrible hate crime in the coming class. I shared with the students the story about my walk home the night before. With teary eyes, I told them about the three bright students who were murdered. When I talked, there was such a silence in the classroom, one could hear a pin drop. One of the students, Miles, then whispered, "Revital, do you want a hug?"

I can think about each course and its defining moment(s) – where I knew we were a community that we cared about the well-being of each other, and celebrating each other's achievements. Each moment always involved a personal narrative, respect, active listening, and the expression of emotions and feelings. Sharing personal stories humanized the classroom and encouraged the students to consider others' perspectives

(rooted in identity and power structures within society) and sometimes even to share something of their own, or at the very least to express emotions that we usually do not allow ourselves to express in “professional” spaces. Narrative-telling can be a powerful tool to prompt classroom dialogues (Greene, 1995; Insana, Mardones, Welsh, & Johnston-Parsons, 2014). Narratives also help to practice vulnerability (the teller) and compassion (the listeners). Those practices did not come easy to students because they were not used to it. Michelle (2017, interview) linked expressing emotions in the class with the trust and vulnerability she exercised. She says,

I felt like I could express emotions [in CFE-300]. Uh, I didn't feel any type of hold back... I cried a couple of times in class and then I was okay. I wasn't like, you know, most people don't want to cry in front of their peers... they don't want any of their peers to see them “weak.” But I could let that wall down with that class. No other class could I do that with, still in my senior year I can't do that even though I've been with some of the [CFE-300 students]. So I'm thankful for that connection, that bond that I can let down my wall and be Michelle in that class, and I don't have to put up a front, or...be fake in an kind of way. I can just be me. Same thing with my papers. In my reflection papers that was real, it's how I felt, it's how I understood things. And, you know, I didn't get judged.

Anne (2016, interview) also mentioned that she did not feel judged by her classmates. She says,

I learned that I can open up and tell people that I don't completely know personal things about myself and they're not judging me or anything like that, which I think is important to disclose things to people that you don't really know that well... it made me feel welcomed and good about myself that someone is not gonna sit there and, like, look me up and down because of the way I feel or my beliefs or something like that.

Feeling that the class was judgment-free and a safe space to share and express opinions/emotions was a reoccurring theme within all the interviews. Anika (interview, 2016) mentioned in her interview that she loved the class because

Honestly, how we were all able to be so open in the class and speak our minds and not be afraid of, you know, what we had to say. I just loved how open you let us be...versus other classes where there are things we're not allowed to talk about and are forbidden. This was a class where you can just come and express ourselves and say anything.

Anika credits the safe space atmosphere in the class to the ability to talk about anything. She linked the ability to do so with a sense of community – which gradually grew. She says,

we all kind of talked and cooperated with each other, but throughout the semester I felt the more we started sharing our personal stories we were able to, um, I guess, listen and feel for others. Then I started to notice...“I guess we are starting to form into a community,” and I guess towards the end it felt like a community. And I know there were some students who didn't participate, like... myself. I was really shy to open myself out there but that didn't make me... feel excluded from the class as a whole.

Dory (2016, interview) also felt the class was a safe space to talk and share, and she believes it had to do with the fact that some of the power structures and dynamics were broken down. She says,

I feel that in our class it kind of broke down some of the power structure that are within student communities. In the class there is usually one student who talks all the time and sometimes it's okay to be quiet, but, like, everybody kind of wanted to talk because it was allowing a safe space where we could talk about our experiences. Some of that power dynamics was, like, broken down and we felt a little more comfortable to say things. [CFE-300] presented me with an example of what dialogue can be like.

Rose (2016, interview), mentioned that feeling comfortable sharing stories and expressing emotions were what made her feel we fostered a sense of community in the class. She explains that,

It wasn't just a class... we were comfortable enough to share life experiences [and] to share opinions that might... you know... in a normal class setting you would not share your opinions or certain things 'cause you're just not comfortable with those people. We shared our feelings, I mean, it was like down and dirty. We were talking about rape culture. Nobody talks about rape culture, which is sad.

The ability to discuss difficult/heavy/controversial topics was practiced each week. However, we did not talk about rape culture until the 12<sup>th</sup> week of the semester. Topics such as rape culture, mass incarceration, White supremacy, and sexuality were introduced later in the semester to allow the students enough time to build relationships and feel safe to discuss such topics. Grace (2016, interview) found those practices “different.” She says,

It was really different, and at first, I'm... I am a creature of habits, so having a classroom like that... it was kind of different for me, but I... I think it planted the seeds for being comfortable with each other... that's the connection that you don't always get, especially in college... it was good that it built a bridge to where we could be comfortable, expressing our opinions... to be able to talk about all those different topics that aren't easy. I think that if we went right into it without building those bridges first and closing the gaps between us as people, if we went straight into talking about how we felt about all those different things that people have strong opinions about, I don't think it would have went well. I think the way we did the activities and the way we had... sit together, and interact together, really helped to make it easier to talk about those things.

The pedagogy itself was new to the students. Willow (2016, interview) reflected on her overall experience in the course. She says,

You were never teaching. You were never lecturing to us information, you know what I mean? it was more “so, I’m gonna give you these sources” kind of thing, “we’re gonna watch these videos, we’re gonna read these articles, and we’re gonna talk about them”... we’ll read, we’ll watch, and then we all have our feelings that we would discuss what we thoughts about it, and then from there we’ll kind of have a formulated idea of what that it. It was like everything was curated by us as a class, like everyone, you and everyone in the class... I liked it... kind of like how it’s not your typical lecture class which is something that I really enjoyed about the class.

Establishing a sense of connectedness, community, and belonging makes teaching social justice issues easier. Once we start to feel invested in the relationships we foster within the classroom, discussions on “uncomfortable” topics became a bit easier. Students were willing to listen to each other patiently, respectfully, and compassionately. They were willing to be challenged, to explore different perspectives, and even to question their own beliefs and opinions.

Dory (2016, interview) mentions that the students in the class “were allowed to talk about things that classrooms usually don’t talk about.” Sitting with students who were racially oppressed, made Dory (who is White), to become more empathetic. Being able to discuss race and racism deepened the sense of connectedness in the class. She explains,

I’m sitting here with these people who have [been racially oppressed] and so it reminds me to, like, take a sit and listen to what they have to say... and I feel they had to get kind of vulnerable to explain those things in a classroom setting which is not typical... that kind of opens up the door for connection, I think.

Later in the interview, Dory mentioned that in the CFE-300 course she developed the ability to address social justice issues. She says,

There was a lot of--for me at least--learning about racial differences and being aware. We watched one video<sup>9</sup> and I think about it all the time, and it was a black man explaining, when people say “well, can we all just be Americans?” what it--what you’re really saying is--I hear people say stuff like that, like “aren’t we all just Americans?” and I’m like, “no.” It’s okay to have differences. Stop trying to erase our differences... that makes us who we are, and just accept them. So that was my first opportunity--your class was like my first opportunity--to learn how to talk about that and how that kind of dialogue works.

Lily (2016, interview) was challenged by the course’s curriculum, which made her to rethink American culture and power structures. She says,

because of the reading materials that we had and the discussions we had every week, were...were very various, um, different scenarios about different cultures, about the importance of not just sort of like token multiculturalism, but like real multiculturalism [that speaks to] privilege, power differences... sexism, racism, homophobia, capitalism. When you start to apply some critical thinking to these topics, you begin to see what other people -- how other people in other groups [live] and what their experiences are like, and I think that once you kind of open your mind up to that kind of thinking, there is really no going back, so I, um, think that this was a good introduction and a good exposure for all of us to realize that these things are not just theoretical frameworks, these aren’t just concepts, that these are real things, and yeah, sure, it made me question if there were – not if – but it made me question when I would be able to use my privilege as a white person... it definitely made me stop and think and question stuff that I have hadn’t been questioning.

Similar to Lily, Willow (2016, interview) found the “Dis/abilities and Ableism” unit an eye-opener experience. She says,

The ability-disability unit, that was something that I never thought about before...and we had that speaker, um, I mean, she was--she did a really great job, and I was like, “oh, my God, this is something I never thought about before.” And I would have like to think that I’m someone who I-I think I’m pretty open minded, I think I’m pretty smart, like I know all the things that are going on, like

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<sup>9</sup> Dory referred to an excerpt from the documentary “The color of fear” (1994).

what's wrong in our culture. But that... like I was shocked that there was something I never thought about before.

For Michelle (2017, interview), the discussion about stereotypes was challenging.

She says,

I'm a stereotype. When my Afro is out and I have hairy armpits or something, I'm a stereotype... it's a lot, and we talked about stereotypes for a while and it was... I guess it wasn't... like, I felt a distance from the class but it was more a distance from the society... in this class I was free to say I'm a feminist, you know, you couldn't say that, normally, because people would be, like, you fit this stereotype of a feminist... you're a man hater, this, that, and the other. But in this class it wasn't, it was deeper. It was a connection towards my-my-me being a woman and my rights more so than anything.

Michelle (2017, interview) was also challenged by the myth of color-blindness – a topic discussed each semester. She says,

I didn't get that because for the longest time, you know, I would be happy when somebody was, like "I don't see color, you're my friend." Um, you know, my mom would even say, "oh, I'm color-blind, I love everybody." And then when we went into class and it was, like, that's part of somebody. You're supposed to see somebody's color. When I walk towards you, I want you to see me as Black, and love me because of that, including the other traits. That-that's something that has really stuck with me... I saw my color before but it's like I really saw it, I'm Black and I want you to see me as that.

In the students' final papers, many of them wrote excessively about the knowledge gaps they discovered they had. The course, which addressed social justice issues through deconstructing mechanisms of oppression, brought to the front many narratives of *otherness*. In their writing, the students continued to reflect on and analyze

marginalized identity markers/categories while included their own identity make-up. For example, Ariel (2015, final paper) writes,

I am a white female; I have been placed in this category of being the advantaged. During my education I was exposed too little to marginalized groups we discussed. I knew very [little] about social issues around me. I understood that there are issues with race, power, gender inequality, and class. I knew that they were issues, but I do not think I truly understood it until this course. The issues brought out many emotions such as anger, sadness, disappointment, and shame.

Lisa (2015, final paper) connected many of the course's lessons into a paragraph that demonstrates the interconnectedness of social justice issues, oppression, and power, and did so by applying the new vocabulary she was introduced to throughout the semester. She writes,

Before this class I was aware of the discrimination towards people of color and other marginalized groups. I myself have been discriminated against because of my gender and my learning disability. With this being said, although I think I knew that people of power who held prejudices against certain groups of people had the ability to keep oppression going, I never made the connection that in order to oppress somebody you need to be in a position of power. Now that I know this I have become more aware of what stores I am purchasing items from, who is working in the stores I go into, and how marginalized groups are being treated around the world and in my community.

Later in her writing, Lisa gave an example of how the gender and sexism unit has challenged her. She writes that,

Before taking this class I had never thought about how I was being discriminated against just because I was a girl... I never thought about all the times I had received unwanted attention from men, how I had been touched or grabbed by a man in the club or the street... or even how I have to be more careful walking back from a party at night in order to detour mistreatment. One activity that made me realize the double standards we have placed on men and women was when we

broke off into groups and defined all the ways that women are oppressed... After looking at the board and seeing all the things we are taught to follow to fit into our gender identity, I was shocked.

Lisa's description of the Sexism Deconstruction activity (Figures 7-8)

demonstrates the foundations of *Pedagogy of Connectedness*: the students were introduced to a new vocabulary which they could connect to previous units, they explored definitions, terms, and practices in small groups, learned from each other, exchanged ideas, and later presented their portion on the whiteboard. Then, in the classroom, the discussion followed a path that the students chose. Each course had its own unique way of deconstructing sexism: Figures 11-14 (below) show the products of the same activity in a different semester (Spring 2015).

Figure 11. Deconstructing Sexism. Spring 2016

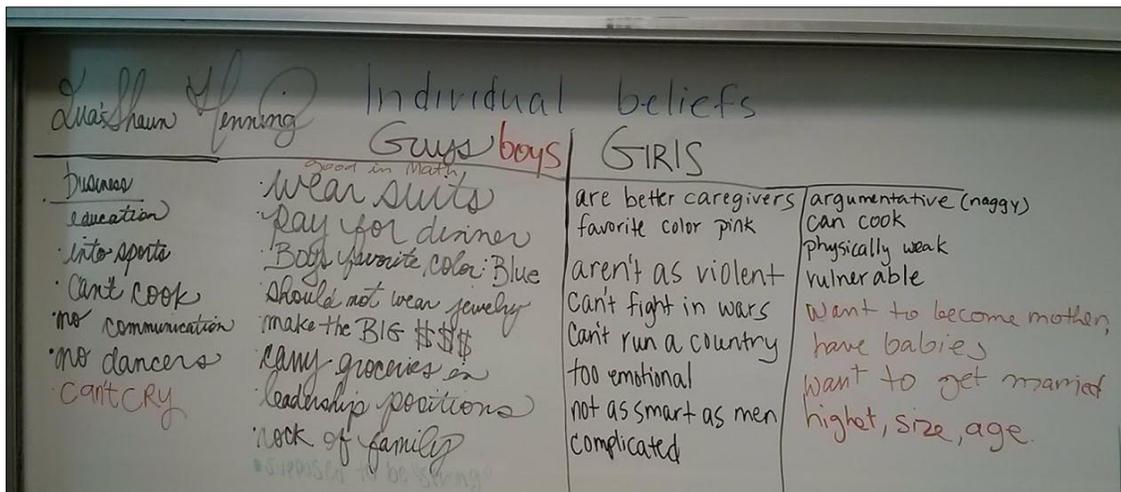


Figure 12. Deconstructing Sexism. Spring 2016

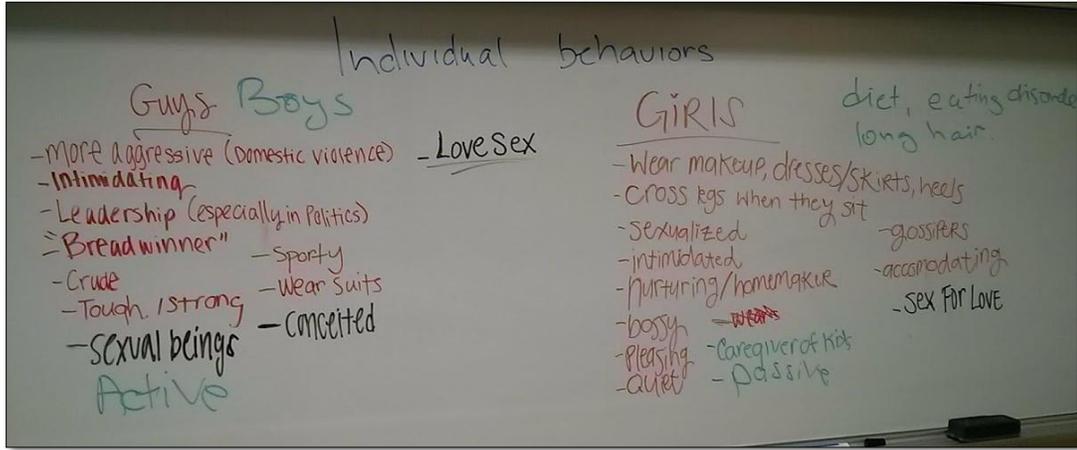


Figure 13. Deconstructing Sexism. Fall 2016

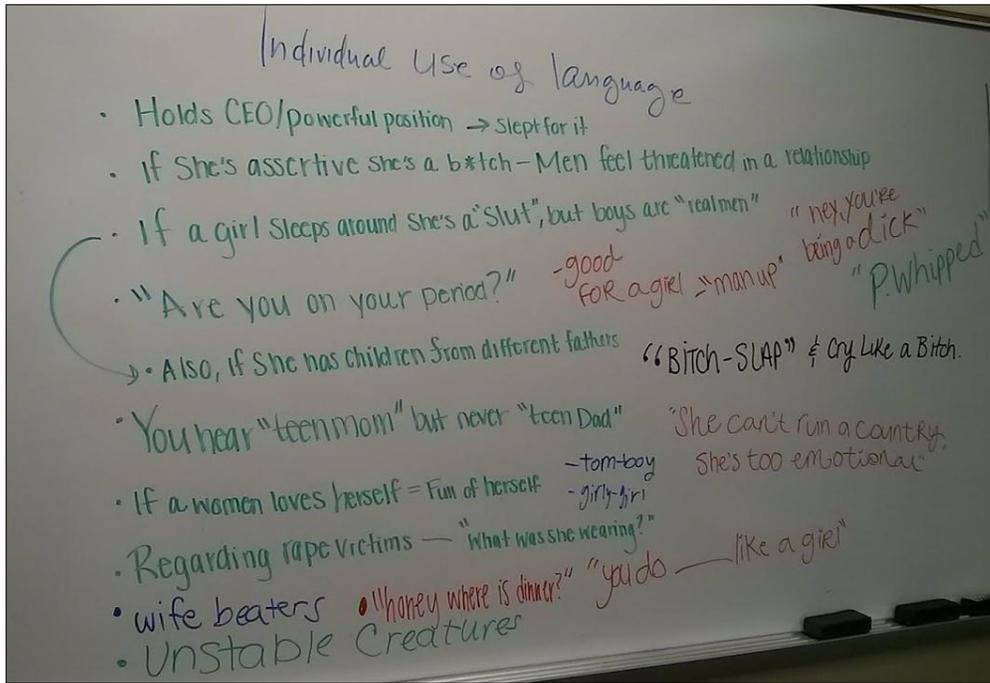
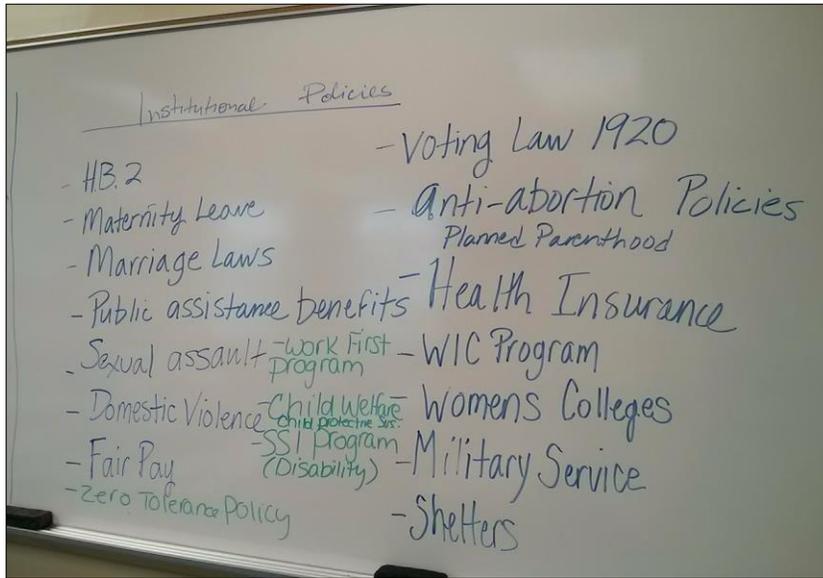


Figure 14. Deconstructing Sexism. Spring 2016



Each semester, after the students finished presenting their work in the “Gender and Sexism” unit, we engaged in a discussion about sexism: how it hurts both women and men, how it damages relationships, and how it relates to power and control. We also talked about feminism. The students watched Chimamnda Ngozi Adichi’s (2012) *TED* talk, *We Should all be Feminist*, and read bell hooks’ (2000) introduction to her book, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, and used them to understand what feminism is about (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Defining Feminism. Fall 2016



In other words, deconstruction of sexism was followed by the generation of new knowledge in order to combat myths about feminism and feminists, thus creating new possibilities of gender justice and equity. After that unit, many of the students embraced feminism and specifically were proud to add the identity of feminist to their identity make-up. I witnessed the work of the groups each semester and I know how that particular activity was an empowering experience for the students, regardless of gender. Following critical pedagogy guiding principles, combined with a pedagogy that emphasized connectedness, community, relationship, and belonging – the empowerment was a byproduct that kept our metaphorical house intact throughout the semester(s).

The students felt empowered because their histories and herstories (Carroll, 1976) mattered, because they felt heard and seen, and because their experiences and their own

existences was validated, week after week. Whether through the games we played, the “How you doin’?” weekly check-up, or by feeling represented in the curriculum, the students had a variety of ways to find connection in the class. The chapter books, the articles, the short stories, the documentary movies, the YouTube and *TED* talk videos – all of them told stories about people who came from diverse backgrounds. I cannot think of one student I had in the courses I taught that did not feel represented in the curriculum (even those who resisted some of the contents, which I will discuss later in this chapter). That, in itself, was an empowering experience for the students.

Facilitating empowerment was also about giving the students a toolbox to empower themselves. The pedagogy of the course gave the students opportunities to learn new vocabulary, practices, and concepts to grapple with for the duration of the semester. The students empowered themselves by taking those opportunities to learn more about their own histories and herstories, to deepen their understanding of themselves and the world around them, to take pride in their bilingual brains, their cultural heritage and traditions, and to embrace their identity make-up and their true-selves. In the next portion of the analysis I will pay attention to the aspect of sense of agency and voice in the CFE-300 course.

**Theme #3: Pedagogy of Connectedness Helps Students to Find/Strengthen Their Voice, and to Develop/Deepen a Sense of Agency**

There is a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.  
– Leonard Cohen, Anthem

The CFE-300 course's pedagogy was rooted in feminist inquiry which paid attention to "power and *how* knowledge is built" (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2007, p. 147, emphasis theirs). This study, in accordance to feminist research, demonstrates the intention of the course which was to take "people as active, knowing subjects" while recognizing that knowledge is "produced and mediated through lived experience and communicated through interaction in the form of face-to-face encounters" (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2007, p. 147). The efforts of modeling relationships, a sense of community and belonging allowed us to explore, collectively and individually, various topics while sitting in the discomfort of the reality. The course periodically opened up spaces for students to practice discomfort in the classroom, then at home they wrote reflection papers while considering things they learned in class from their classmates, and then came back the next week to continue discussing other social justice issues from different perspectives.

**Voice.** In that semester-long process(es), the students oftentimes either found their voice or enhanced a voice that was already there. Each week, the students felt safe and welcome to express any opinion or emotions they had, which assisted them to deepen their understanding while articulating their thoughts, freshly informed by others' perspectives. Finding one's voice (or enhancing an existing one) also overlapped with a process of developing and/or strengthening a sense of agency. Voice and agency were two intertwined themes that came up strongly in the students' final papers and interviews.

For their final writing assignment, I asked the students to address three questions: **(1)** what was challenging in the course? **(2)** what stood out in the course? and **(3)** given

the new knowledge(s) that we generated during the semester, what is your personal/professional commitment to social justice? In their writing, voice came up in two contexts. The first, finding their voice in the course; and second, what they intend to do with it.

**Sense of agency.** Although most of the students did not use the word ‘agency’ in their writing and/or in the interview, I was able to infer from their own words that they articulated a sense of agency based on Barker’s (2000) definition. He writes that the concept of agency “has commonly been associated with notions of freedom, free will, action, creativity, originality and the very possibility of change through the actions of free agents” (p. 182). Later he adds that “agency is the socially constructed capacity to act. Discourses enable action by providing subject position of agency” (p. 190-191), which, in the context of CFE-300 and the context of what the students achieved in particular, is a fitting definition that describes the students’ determination “to act and make a difference” (Barker, 2000, p. 381), as I show in this subsection.

In the case of the CFE-300 students, voice and sense of agency often overlapped and were discussed in their both writing and interviews. The students felt that their experiences and perspectives were validated throughout the semester. The curriculum, which emphasized narratives of marginalized identities of individuals and communities, also made them feel seen and heard (especially when it came to People of Color, LGBTQ, people with disabilities, poor people, and those who come from families of immigrants); it made them feel connected to the course. That sense of connectedness, combined with experiencing the classroom as a safe space, made them feel empowered to

share their own stories and to express emotions. Both pedagogy and curriculum anchored the idea that their lives mattered, their voices mattered. That, in itself, gave them some confidence to act upon their realized voice. When students described in their writing the things they intend to do in their personal and professional lives, I interpret their powerful visions and commitment to social justice as a sense of agency. I marked “agency” while coding, when students wrote “I want”, “I will”, “I plan”; or “I/we can,” like Kelly (2015), who writes in her final paper that,

Before this class I had this feeling that there was nothing we could really do about society, about government, about social justice. But now I know this is wrong. We can make a difference, even just voting makes a difference, it is important to know that you can make a difference in the world.

Other students were more detailed about the things they wanted to apply in their future classrooms as teachers themselves. Mel (2014, final paper) expressed her commitment to social justice while adapting the vocabulary she was introduced to during the semester. She writes that,

I want to be prepared to create a classroom environment that values inclusiveness and acceptance, not tolerance and abuse. I want my students to display acts of kindness and love. I want them to be naturally empathetic and identify with the struggles of others, and I don't want them to stand by and allow injustices to happen. I don't want them to be starved to contact or interaction as a lot of children are today, I don't want them to be disconnected from the injustices in our society because they don't directly affect them, but I want them to feel connected to each other in a way that social injustice affects every one of them.

Similar to Mel, Byron (2014, final paper), used the CFE-300 course's vocabulary and writes that “[as teachers], we can help shape individuals [to be] capable of thinking

critically about their world and commitment to just, compassionate, and democratic society.” Later he adds that “where I stand as an educator would be to encourage dialogue, exploring, and motivation that connects to prior knowledge.”

Tara (2015, final paper) also applied the vocabulary of connectedness. She says that,

I want to encourage others to care about social justice and raise awareness to the lack of it in our north American society. First and foremost, I plan to do this by being an advocate to social justice through my daily thoughts and actions. I can best advocate for fairness, love, and compassion through being fair, loving, and compassionate...[When encountering prejudice I can respond] in a manner that exhibits the importance of human connection, community, and whole-heartedness.

Riley (2016) linked her commitment to social justice to the vocabulary of connectedness. She writes,

I want for all my students to feel welcome in the classroom. I want them to know that they are important and they matter regardless of what activities they enjoy, their favorite color or what they want to be when they grow up.

Later, Riley articulates her responsibility around advocacy and ability. She writes that,

You might not be able to change the world, but you can change yourself and how you react and look at situations. You can become an advocate for yourself, and then others. As a community member I feel more responsible. I can take part in changing society. I have a voice and an able body, which allows me to speak and help others who cannot necessarily help themselves.

Rose (2014, final paper) chose to write about herself as a woman with White privilege who can use that privilege to help others. Due to her privilege, she writes,

I can use my voice and my ‘power’ to stand up against oppression of people whose voices may not otherwise be heard. This is part of education as well: becoming an activist for social change in the community, and educating people about the wrongness of oppression.

Ella (2014, final paper), a social work student, found her confidence to use her voice. She writes,

I now feel a new sense of confidence in being able to speak up about what I know and things that I know are not right, especially the mistreatment of other human beings no matter what race or cultural background they come from.

Miles (2015, final paper) was impacted by the story I told in class about walking home late at night while wearing my red scarf around my head. A couple of months later, in his final paper, he mentioned that while visiting a friend, he noticed a young Muslim girl who carried a heavy box. He approached her and offered help. He detailed the encounter and reflected about how rare it is to witness a “White person having connections to Middle Easterners... it was first to me as well.” For him, offering help to the Muslim girl stood out as an act of social justice, as well as signing online petitions to promote more justice, and becoming a tutor in a program that serves underserved grade school students. He states,

As a professional educator we have the ability to promote social justice like no other. We have the opportunity to plant a seed of social justice into our students that if effectively sowed will reap change all over the world. I have an opportunity to change the way things are done in the education system which can lead to greater goods...I have a social commitment and a duty as an educator to try to make my students not just better learners but better sons, daughters, husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers.

In her final paper, Mai (2015) described how the course changed her perspectives.

She states that,

Simple things like how to make a difference and how to educate others were difficult for me because I never thought much about it. When I saw social injustices occurring and being reported all I did was rant, feel angry and sad. I never really took the measures to actually make a difference. Now with this course I realize I know that I cannot eliminate every issue, but I can make a difference with my voice. Advocating for and bringing awareness to the issues is a great first step.

When addressing the question about her personal/professional commitment to social justice, Rhonda (2015, final paper) frequently used the word responsibility to describe her intentions. She writes,

It is my responsibility to voice my opinions on the issues of race, sexuality, poverty, disabilities, working conditions, the list goes on and on. It is my responsibility to join with others who are just as eager as I am to right the wrongs, or at least to do something to help make the world better for those who come after us. It is my responsibility to engage in discussions with others to look for solutions to such issues and to know that I am never alone.

As for her professional commitment as an educator, Rhonda adds that,

It is my responsibility to push my students to think critically, about the world around them, to realize they have the power to change things, and to give them the agency to do such things... There is a saying that simply states, "Children enter school as question marks, and leave as periods" (Neil Postman). My final commitment to social justice is to ensure that my students come in as one question mark and leave with at least three more.

Joy (2015) linked her social justice commitment to advocate for marginalized communities such as People of Color, and LGBTQ. That advocacy, she explained,

includes “signing petitions and voting against bills that may make their lives more difficult.” As an educator who is involved with the D/deaf community, she writes,

This class has shown me that there needs to be a change and that we can make it happen... My professional commitment is to educate people about disabilities and the actions connecting with them... I will fight for the rights of the Deaf community and especially of the LGBT deaf. I will advocate for the rights that they deserve and will make sure that everyone will treat them equally.

Describing what stood out for her in CFE-300, Dawn (2016, final paper)

mentioned voice – but from the children’s perspective. She writes that,

I have learned so much over the semester and the true meaning of being an educator. Even if I work with a younger group of children I know now that they have a voice too, and are capable of having an input in their educational growth...letting the students have a voice and listening to their thoughts would be another pedagogy that I would adopt. The students feel important if a higher authority figure wants to listen to what they have to say.

Gabby (2016) decided to dedicate her final paper to her little girl, and wrote it as it was a letter describing what she had learned in the CFE-300 course. After discussing the limitation of a single story (she referred to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi’s *TED* talk), she writes that,

[the single story] limits our perspectives of others and makes us treat others as less than human. We have to listen to all of the voices in the room, even the ones who speak differently than our own, and we have to be the voice for the ones who have been stifled. As I write that, I feel almost that that might have been the essence of the entire course: being the voice for those who have been stifled. Being the advocate for those that no one is standing for.

Anne (2016) expressed her wish to humanize the classroom by investing in the relationships with her future students and decompress the competitive atmosphere that characterizes the school system. She writes,

Children should know that not everything is going to go smoothly in their lives and that it is completely okay and that they should not strive to be something that is impossible. I will illustrate to them and give them examples about how I am not perfect and we all make mistakes in our lives. I think this really puts a lot of pressure off the children... I want students to see me as a human being that is not perfect and someone that they can come to if they have a problem. I want my students to understand that education is the practice of freedom... I want to impact on their lives as well as touch their hearts. Which means I want their freak flags to fly and embrace every ounce of creativity that they have within them because it does not always have to be about logic.

Last but not least, Temeka (2016) writes that her responsibility is to “empower the community... hold discussion forums, talk about topics in monthly staff meetings, and ask teachers how they integrate cultural differences in the classrooms,” and links her responsibility to a sense of hope. She writes,

I feel more responsible for our children’s future and feel deeply involved with making changes to enhance a better possibility among our youth. My vision stems from hope because without it there won’t be change and what better person to assist with these problems than me. I have the compassion and empathy for a better future for our kids. I can take action in joining groups that promote justice, advocate for equal women’s rights, and discuss issues in group sessions.

I would like to conclude this subsection by saying that what I have learned from the students’ statements regarding their commitment to social justice is that, simply put, voice accompanied with sense of agency generate the possibility of hope. The hope for a better life, a better future, a better community stems when people realize that they are

Aronowitz describe as “conditioned but not determined by their circumstances” (Freire, 1988, p. 12), as I mentioned in Chapter Three. Students engaged with critical reflection and analysis about the world they live in demonstrated it in classroom discussions and in writing. They used their voices time and again, learned new vocabulary, and practiced ways to connect – to their true-selves, to their emotions, and to others. The sense of hopefulness was linked to their capacity to imagine bright possibilities for themselves and for the communities they belong to. Their sense of agency is intertwined with what Freire (1998) calls “the radical nature of hope,” which he explains as “though I know that things can get worse, I also know that I am able to intervene to improve them” (p. 53). The students’ agency as I detail in this subsection, resonates with Freire’s assertion that “my destiny is not given but something that needs to be constructed and for which I must assume responsibility. I like being human because I am involved with others making history out of possibility” (p. 54). Hope is something that the students and I shared, even in the sad or angry moments we experienced in the classroom. I was constantly reminded by Thich Nhat Hanh’s quote, “There can be no lotus flower without the mud.”

Continuing with the colorful metaphor, I see the CFE-300 students as beautiful lotus flowers, whose hope made them bloom in their final papers. Reading their words have convinced me that for many of them the course was transformative. In the next and last subsection, I detail their transformation.

#### **Theme #4: Pedagogy of Connectedness Can Help Educators to Facilitate Transformation**

So let us reflect on what is truly of value in life, what gives meaning to our lives, and set our priorities on the basis of that. The purpose of our life needs to be

positive. We weren't born with the purpose of causing trouble, harming others. For our life to be of value, I think we must develop basic good human qualities—warmth, kindness, compassion. Then our life becomes meaningful and more peaceful-happier.

— Dalai Lama XIV, *The Art of Happiness*

The Dalai Lama's quote above is poignant because it resonates with the assertions that we are “wired” to connect (Brown, 2010), to live in communities, to share, and to care (Hrdy, 2009). The students – many of whom have dealt with depression, anxiety, fear of social isolation, and peer pressure – oftentimes found the pedagogy and curriculum of CFE-300 refreshing and relevant to their lives. Students are socialized to value individualism, meritocracy, competition, and other practices that deepen dividedness and separation. As they explored American social values and norms, they were also introduced with possibilities of meaningful learning, collaboration, compassion, empathy, love, connectedness, and community, and were provided with weekly opportunities to practice those possibilities.

When I contemplate on what do we talk about when we talk about transformative pedagogy, I go back to the “classic” critical pedagogy framework which offers critique of the “banking system” (Freire, 2010, p. 72) and a liberatory praxis where teachers help students to “‘problematize’ their reality, in order to critique it and discover new ways to both individually and collectively work to change their world” (Darder, 2002, p. 101). I then wonder about what exactly does it mean *to change the world*, and how can this general statement be broken into examples; notably, I also wonder about the difference between *change* and *transformation*. Perhaps little changes lead to transformation, or maybe change can be measured while transformation cannot. Thinking about the CFE-

300 course and the journey the students and I took every semester, I can definitely see changes: in their attitudes, their understanding, and in the knowledge that was added to their lives and informed their commitment to social justice.

For example, I think about competition. Hooks (2010) reminds us that “competition in the classroom diminishes everyone. It reduces learning to spectacle, requiring that some students be mere passive observers while other students dominate classroom discussion” (p. 57). As the course’s instructor, I paid attention to the increasing forces in the education system that perpetuate competitive behavior, which contributes to dividedness within the classroom and puts students against students. The pedagogical choices I made each semester encouraged the students to reconsider competition and its ramifications. By doing that, the students considered the meaning of community in their lives, and practiced ways to cultivate classroom practices that can promote collaboration and support, and lessen the pressure that is put on students “to win.”

Block (2008) writes that the key to creating transformative community “is to see the power in the small but important elements of being with others” (p. 10). The shift, he adds, “needs to be embodied in each invitation we make, each relationship we encounter, and each meeting we attend” (p. 10). It boils down to a very simple question, Block suggests: “How are we going to be when we gather together?” (p. 10). Thinking with Block (2008) over the last four years about what makes a community a welcoming, safe, and accepting space has led me to develop *Pedagogy of Connectedness*, as I “took risks and dared to break away from a stifling pedagogical vision that worked against wholeness” (Rendón, 2009, p. 111).

Changing the classroom setting by sitting in circles, emphasizing group work, and inviting students to share their opinions and express their emotions were actions that worked towards wholeness. In that sense, transformative pedagogy helped to facilitate education that was meaningful. CFE-300's pedagogy, supported by its curriculum, generated conditions in which students reconsidered their opinions and beliefs, and were equipped with tools to think critically, to consider others' perspectives, to create community, to invest in relationships, to listen, to critique their reality, to develop agency, and to strengthen their voices. Can all of those be considered as change or transformation?

Thinking about the difference between change and transformation, I also wonder what happens if I add the component of connectedness as I unfold the meaning of transformation. How transformation on the individual level looks like when the desired transformation is concerned with connectedness, community, belonging, and meaningful relationships? Does a radical shift in power structures mean investment in relationships and building inclusive, radical communities? Or, perhaps, relationships and communities are the first steps we ought to take in order to even begin talking about the need for a radical shift in power structure?

The data I gathered shows me that transformation is a process made of small and big changes and those changes are rooted in imagination and responsibility. Additionally, the changes I can witness in the data are irreversible. Students cannot un-know or un-see. The little changes in the things they have heard, seen, and learned in the classroom led to other changes, deepened their understanding of their world, and armed them with

knowledge and ways to take action in order to change the world. Thus, the process of transformation is interconnected with the process of always becoming (and in that context, becoming a social change agent). In Freire's (1998) words, "our unfinishedness" (p. 69).

It is clear to me that most of the students changed due to their participation in the CFE-300 course. They had a-ha! moments that are irreversible. A few of them were even "torpified," which is defined as that feeling one gets when they "face [an] undeniable gap in [their] education that [they] can no longer ignore" (Diller, 1998, p. 7). Diller (1998) describes the capacity to be torpified as the ability "to be awed, to be surprised, to be astonished, to be moved in a deeply moral, and ethical, or aesthetic, or epistemological, or ontological way" (p. 8). Those moments were defining ones and contributed to the students' capacity to imagine possibilities and realize responsibility.

Greene (2001) writes that imagination has multiple magical powers that "create orders, to provoke authentic vision, and to surprise...it becomes the very source of meaningfulness." She adds,

The linking of imagination to adventure and to opening spaces cannot but appeal to those of us interested in awakening the young to alternative possibilities in their lives. But, like ourselves, they have to keep relearning to look at the world. (p. 83)

Relearning to look at the world is important. However, it also important to relearn how to look at ourselves and how the sum of our lived experiences, identity markers, agency, and voice function within the communal, social, and political levels. Once students started to locate themselves within those structures, they also realized their

social responsibility to use what they have in order to change the world. In other words, long-term sustainable changes necessitate both intellectual (e.g., understanding the traumatizing reality and its causes) and emotional (e.g., love, empathy, compassion, and care for themselves and for others) capacities. Imagination instills in us hope. Hope leads to actions. Actions are rooted in a sense of responsibility. To quote Freire's (1998) words, "the proclamation of a world worthy of human habitation will be the instruments of change and transformation" (p. 115).

In their final papers, many of the students wrote about the course as a stepping-stone to changing one's perspectives, behavior, or attitude. Derrick (2016) writes,

When registering for this class, I would have never guessed that this course would be one of the elements that construct me; not only as an educator, but also as a man. I grasped a better understanding of concepts while also learning new perspectives; however most importantly, this course allowed me to learn about myself. I would never have predicted that a course regarding education would require me to reevaluate myself.

As a young Black man, Derrick paid extra attention to the intersection of gender and race. He later added in his paper that,

Education will be less bias [sic] when we deconstruct the idea of white privilege. Once we start expecting success from all races, rather than one. For instance, if a young black male succeeds it is more emphasized accomplishment because he 'goes against the norm'; a norm that portrays black males as unsuccessful, violent, and ignorant. I wonder how much these statistics will change if we stop expecting the bare minimum from minorities and expect greatness.

Drew (2016) wrote her final paper in the form of a letter to her new niece who was born during the semester. She explained to her how the course changed her perspectives and encouraged her to change her patterns of thoughts. She writes,

I had to face the stereotypes and prejudices I hold against certain people and places. From listening to experiences and opinions that are part of my peers' stories, I was able to reevaluate my perspectives... we need to train ourselves to become critical thinkers and strive to understand how life works. There is no such thing as failure within a community of learners, because education leads to freedom.

As a future teacher, Drew continued to make connections between the things she learned in the course while critiquing the social norms that keep us separated. She writes,

Our society cannot become connected community if people are fragmented into groups generated by divides in identities. Connection is important because it gives purpose and meaning to people's lives; however, this connection is only possible if individuals do not feel ashamed of their identity, but rather courageous to be whom they truly are and feel supported and accepted by their peers. In my future classroom, I will strive to build this connection by breaking away judgment that silences those who do not fit the norm. Diversity is beautiful, and this can only enhance human connection.

She concluded her letter by explaining that,

We need to unite in solidarity within our communities to make a connection that will support us all in our unique identities; furthermore, this ideal connection could potentially heal the pain many feel from the injustices our society inflicted upon them, developing a more caring place in the world.

Liz (2016) reflected in her final paper about the importance of the course. She writes,

This class made us stop and think about the things that we noticed, but may not have ever really put much thought into. It's why this class is so life changing, because it's just pointing out things we've already noticed. We see these problems everyday in our lives. This class made us think about these problems, and try to come up with solutions. Solutions [that] some of us may not come up on our own.

Dory (2014, reflection paper) was challenged by the gender and sexism unit, which changed her perspective about feminism. She writes,

I used to question the word feminism. Now I embrace it. I used to go through life oblivious to much of the racism and sexism around me, mostly attributing it to harmless humor. Now I am more aware and better prepared to make a difference in society. I think that I have always dreamt of being a part of something bigger, something that was going to reshape others, but now I know that I am a little bit closer to that being true...just being in this community has changed who I am. Learning about privilege and oppression has caused me to be more adamant about what I believe in and what my choices are and how to stand up for those choices.

Gloria (2014, final paper), a Latina student who has been dealing with racism and stereotypes, understood through the CFE-300 curriculum that pushing through racism does not work for her any more, particularly after she began to explore her identity markers. She writes,

I learned to look at how I interact with others and see that I can't just push all of these issues aside because they don't really come face to face with me in everyday life. The fact of the matter is that they have, I have been faced with all kinds of oppression but I learned to deal with it. I learned to push it under the rug because I thought that's what we are suppose to do... Though being a Latina is exotic and beautiful, there are so many odds against what I stand for. I am a woman, I am a minority, being just those two things... has set me up for failure. Where the odds say I will drop out of school and the others said that I will be pregnant before I graduate high school... Before, I didn't even have a personal opinion about social justice, now I want to take these views and shape them into a world where children find who they are.

Students experienced shifts in their opinions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding various topics and issues which led them to keep asking questions rather than providing answers. For instance, Sofia (2014, final paper) found the “Identity” unit most important for her growth as an educator. Similar to Gloria, she explored her bilingual Latina identity, and realized how important it was for her to explore her identity, an issue that she is convinced that educators need to “work on.” She writes,

I’ve heard teachers over the years make assumptions about students they’ve heard bad things about, and those students never had a chance to change the minds of those teachers because they wouldn’t give them one...It’s important for educators to get to know their students on a different level... to be able to know your students on a deeper level so they will now know how to teach them. What if all those “bad student” weren’t bad after all, they just needed someone to help them find their way?

One of the things that Sofia took from the CFE-300 course was an understanding of the difference between equality and equity. She intends to apply this understanding in her future classroom. She states,

I know we’re not equal but we’ve made it clear that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and with fairness, and this is something I will strive for my classroom. I know I will be able to accept my students for who they are by what I really want from my future classes is that my students are able to do the same within my classroom, outside of my classroom and even in the future when they are adults... I want my students to grow together as a community, I want the families of my students to be involved in their child’s education.

Kate (2015, final paper) was one of the students I identify as torpid. She took all in and went through a journey of exploration. She writes,

There were many things that stood out this semester which shifted and changed my perspectives. The first one is community and connection. I believe that I did not truly comprehend what community was until now. Before I thought just being in a class with others was a community but in order to be a community you must interact with those around to work towards common goals.

Later she described how her views on race and racism shifted. She states,

My view of race shifted also. I thought before that you should not talk about students of other race and culture. You should be colorblind within the classroom... I need to be able to learn my students and how they learn best... I must embrace my students' cultures and educate myself but also must educate my students on racism.

Lisa (2015, final paper) explained in her final paper that the course was “very interesting and eye opening.” She admitted ignorance, realized her privilege, talked to social justice issues that moved her, and committed to deepening her understanding of those issues. She writes,

Throughout the course I have been challenged, shocked, and compelled to make a difference in the way society has formed our way of thinking, and our actions towards other people, especially marginalized groups. Before taking the course I had never really understood what feminism was, I had never thought about the privilege I was inherently born with, being white, how society has played such a large role in how we think and act, or how important building a community is. I am pleased to say that although I do not know everything there is to know about these subjects, I know enough to make a difference, and plan on educating myself further so I can teach my students about them.

Later, Lisa elaborated on how the “Gender and Sexism” unit changed her perspectives.

She writes,

Before this unit I never knew what feminism was, and thought of it as a radical view that only women had, and by no means considered myself as a feminist. I had always heard negative connotations associated with feminism and instead of

taking the time to learn about it, decided I wanted no part in the movement. After this unit however I have learned the true meaning of feminism and that I myself am a feminist. I'm now proud to say it, and have actually begun talking about feminism with some of my friends who has the same misconceptions that I did about the movement, who are now proud feminists as well.

Laney (2015, final paper) found the reflection papers assignments challenging because she had to consider multiple perspectives and become “more familiar with marginalized groups and social issues,” which was not an easy task to take on.

As a child, I grew up believing that everyone was treated the same and it depended on how motivated you were to do well in school. But since this class, my perspectives have changed and I am starting to realize that if you are not white, heterosexual, middle-class Western male, you are going to be negatively labeled somehow by society.

Since Laney was early in the teacher education program and did not have a chance that semester to teach in a classroom, she explained that she can utilize the CFE-300 course's practices in her personal life throughout her “community, friends [and] family.” She writes,

Instead of judging someone by the color of their skin or their gender, I can treat them each fairly. Instead of conforming to what society has socialized me into believing, I can change the way I treat people by realizing they are a human being, just like me. I can value them as an individual the way they are, rather than decreasing their worth just because of their race, gender, etc.

Milles (2015, final paper) described the semester-long course as a journey. He says,

This was the first class that I have ever taken that actually forced me to think outside of the textbook. Having taken course that required me to strictly focus on

what was written, this class allowed and encouraged me to see things for what I have not seen before through other people's eyes which was very raw to me and it required me to take a different perspective on learning... It was a journey.

Miles elaborated in his final paper about the structural, institutionalized ignorance which the CFE-300 course addressed by investigating into various social justice issues. The process of the investigation torpified Miles in more than one way. At the beginning of the semester he did not understand why we "talked so much about how people of various backgrounds are oppressed... growing up we were not presented with any of this kind of information." Later he states,

In a way we were forced by our education system to not think about these things and we were taught to ignore social issues such as rape, oppression and discrimination, and to instead focus on what the course curriculum demanded of us. However, as I was continued to be exposed to how I and how others have been treated by society, my thoughts shifted from uneasiness to curiosity to later furiousness.

Similar to other CFE-300 students, Beth (2015, final paper) felt challenged throughout the semester. That challenge advanced a change in her views and beliefs which were rooted in her upbringing. She says,

When this class first started I never thought my views would change this much, but this class has challenged my beliefs and what I was taught as a child. I never thought that someone like myself could start a movement, but it is possible... I've never been a person to watch or read the news before, I never wanted to know what was going on around me. I just wanted to live in my own little world, and never grow up. [CFE-300] taught me that being aware is much better than not being aware, but once you are aware, do something about it... I have made progress over the semester... I never once questioned my government or the education system or even what I was taught... This class taught me to always question my beliefs, and what I am learning.

### **Analysis and Discussion: Conclusion**

I concluded this chapter with Beth's words, which capture her notions on the challenges she faced in the course, her sense of agency, responsibility, and growth. I specifically choose her words to conclude because, as the CFE-300's instructor, I continue to keep questioning my pedagogy while asking questions about education and meaningful learning. I strive to sharpen my tools and improve the ways I teach, engage with the students, and facilitate classroom discussions and activities that support student growth, all while they unfold social justice issues impacting both their professional and personal lives.

At the beginning of each semester, I told the students that CFE-300 is very much a journey that requires their active participation (i.e., thinking, writing, reading, reflecting, analyzing, and contributing to classroom discussions). I told them that we will look at the ways we think about race, gender, and social class, and how those identity markers determine students' success in the school system. Each semester I had a couple of students who shrugged their shoulders or rolled their eyes. A few students did not like my teaching style and were even a bit upset about the nontraditional classroom setting, the question posing, and the relentless investigation into various issues. They preferred to be passive students rather than active learners. Ideological resistance was present every semester. Some resisted the contents that related to racism, White privilege, and White supremacy. Others resisted the discussion on sex education and sexuality. Those who resisted did so by keeping silent when the "uncomfortable" topics arose, while others pushed back during classroom discussions, and others decided to express their discontent

in the reflection papers. Since I only included in this study the first and last reflection papers, I was not able to include many statements of resistance to the course's pedagogy and curriculum. It is also important to note that a few students constantly refused to dig deeper in those topics and issues throughout the semester, did not respond to prompt questions I provided them to consider in their writing, refused to read the assigned readings, and therefore earned low grades. Unfortunately, those students did not give their consent to participate in this study, so I could not include their data.

I was constantly reminded by critical, feminist, and transformative scholars that each student paves their own path. I cannot force any change upon their minds or hearts, and I can only challenge their ways of being, thinking, and acting by providing new perspectives on social justice issues. It is not my intention to convey in this chapter that the CFE-300 course was smooth and free of resistance to the ideas the course presented to the students. I do not believe that all the students came out of CFE-300 as social change agents who plan to radically change the education system. However, I have no doubt in that seeds have been planted in their minds and hearts, thus altering the ways the students think about some social justice issues.

I also keep thinking back to one of my Israeli professors, who taught my classmates and I that it is vital to learn the success stories in order to understand what worked well (I mentioned her in Chapter One). For me, this analysis chapter demonstrates my assertion that the CFE-300 course was a success story. The more I practiced a *Pedagogy of Connectedness*, the less I felt threatened by the students' resistance to the course's curriculum and pedagogy. I learned to embrace the resistance

and to remind myself that not everyone is ready or willing to be challenged. I understand this as I was initially resistant to uncomfortable course content both as an undergraduate and graduate student. When I was in my early 20s, as a privileged Israeli young woman I considered myself a liberal feminist. Becoming a social change agent was a process that took years of praxis. I have not arrived yet. I still learn, grow, and educate myself on social justice issues.

One of my intentions as the CFE-300's instructor was to imagine with the students the possibility of becoming social change agents. However, I never provided them a specific description of what that role entails. In the course's syllabus (Appendix B), I state that the goals of the course are

to create the conditions by which teachers and their students can work toward strengthening their communities and making the world a better place. Participants in the course will leave it with new knowledge(s) and a sense of belonging to a community of learners and world changers.

I wholeheartedly believe that the students and I achieved those goals. In the next chapter, I lay down the components of *Pedagogy of Connectedness* and conclude this study with recommendations for teacher education programs.

CHAPTER VI  
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Introduction to the Conclusion Chapter**

Researching the meaning of dis/connectedness and situating its discourses within critical pedagogy, as well as the five sections of the CFE-300 course I taught, was an incredible journey of learning and growth. The years I have spent on this study have been rewarding, difficult, exciting, and—at times—overwhelming.

Writing this dissertation brought both pain and joy into my life. Investigating the roots and the causes of disconnectedness and its many symptoms since 2010 has saddened me in ways I could not anticipate and ultimately left me wondering what it would take to repair the ubiquitous manifestations of violence. Like a whale in deep waters, I occasionally had to surface for oxygen and search for anchors to make sense of this journey. I had to take short breaks periodically only to find out that I was not the only whale on the block. Millions of people around the world gasp for air and search for anchors as they cultivate spaces of love, compassion, care, inclusion, and respect through social justice activism, the arts, and spiritual journeys. Just like me, they too believe that connectedness can be restored. In my dissertation, I situate that belief within the classroom. In this concluding chapter, I do three things. First, I summarize the five chapters and discuss the findings of the empirical portion of the study. I then lay down

the foundations of *Pedagogy of Connectedness* and its praxis. Lastly, I will make a few recommendations for schools of education preparing students to become educators.

### **Dis/connectedness: Crossing Paths**

I began this research project with the wish to understand disconnectedness and connectedness, their roots and causes, and the ways they manifest in individual, social, and political aspects. Additionally, I wanted to weave my understanding of dis/connectedness within the context of a classroom (the CFE-300 course specifically) as well as to articulate a pedagogy that is concerned with dis/connectedness and can be incorporated into social justice education scholarship.

When I started to structure my inquiry, I formulated four research questions:

- (1) How do we understand the meaning of dis/connectedness?
- (2) What are the individual and the social consequences of disconnectedness in American culture/society?
- (3) How and in what ways might a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* address disconnectedness in American society?
- (4) In what ways, if any, does a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* impact the CFE-300 students' notions of power relations, social justice, and identity?

I did not come to this dissertation project empty handed. As an international student who has been living in the U.S. since 2009, the accumulation of my experiences – both in the U.S. and back home in Israel – informed my scholarship interests and motivated me to deepen my understanding of what I have witnessed while living, learning, laboring, and

loving in the U.S. (as I detailed in Chapter One). It was not just the full double-rainbow experience or the way the father refrained from embracing his son in a parking lot when they said goodbye. It was far more than everyday anecdotes. What has struck me the most while living in the U.S are the heartbreaking stories about substance abuse (mostly alcohol, opioids, and crystal meth), extreme poverty and homelessness, and domestic and sexual violence (childhood and youth molestation in particular). In Chapter Two I described and analyzed some of the internal and external manifestations of violence which are partially fed by socio-economic, historical, and political processes in the U.S., carried by government institutions, religious institutions, and corporations whose power contributes to a culture of dehumanization, humiliation, and ultimately dividedness. Other manifestations of violence can be linked to social norms and values that put individualism, meritocracy, and competition on a pedestal. Those norms and values oftentimes cause incredible stress and anxiety as well as dehumanizing and exploiting others to gain power, money, and prestige. I assert that those processes result in even greater disconnectedness and rupture. Ultimately, they deepen individuals' and communities' sense of despair.

On the other hand, as I detailed in the last part of Chapter Two, efforts to repair what is broken do exist (both locally and globally) in forms of spiritual/religious practices and social justice activism. Individuals and communities who lead efforts to make the world a better place recognize the prevalent evidence of brokenness, dehumanization, violence, and despair. With imagination, determination, and sense of hope, millions of people volunteer and work in non-profit social justice organizations all around the world.

They protest, march, write letters to legislators and policy makers, lobby for marginalized, underrepresented, underfunded communities, donate money to social justice causes, and organize community-based projects and activities. With a wide-open heart, they move one mountain at a time. Despair and hope, just like disconnectedness and connectedness, cross paths always, everywhere.

When I was asked to teach the CFE-300 course, I wondered what would happen if I added discourses of connectedness, imagination, sense of social responsibility, and hope as a framework for a cultural foundations in education course. As a hopeful critical-feminist pedagogue, I wondered what might happen if I provided multiple perspectives and activities that emphasized the costs of disconnectedness and the rewards of investing in practices that advance connectedness (e.g., investing in relationships, co-creating communities, and cultivating spaces where students allow themselves to embrace vulnerability and practice love ethic).

I knew that the pedagogy I would employ in the CFE-300 course was going to be informed by Paulo Freire's work and as a feminist activist and emerging scholar, I knew that feminist epistemology was also going to be an essential backbone of the course. Already in 2014, I started to realize that I was actually paving a path to develop a praxis that was critical, radical, feminist, and transformative. Thus, with the CFE-300 course in mind, I used Chapter Three as an opportunity to look at the potential relationship between dis/connectedness and critical pedagogy, and wondered what it would mean to expend critical pedagogy while emphasizing discourses and praxis that are concerned with dis/connectedness. The literature I reviewed in Chapters Two and Three provided

theoretical perspectives of dis/connectedness and how those perspectives could be situated within the classroom by employing critical pedagogy's guiding principles and social justice education scholarship as platforms to advance sense of connectedness, community, and belonging.

The first part of Chapter Four (where I discussed the CFE-300 curriculum) and Chapter Five were dedicated to the practical implications of what “connectedness in education” meant to me and how it might function as a social critique of individualism. While being supported by the curriculum, the pedagogical strategies and tactics demonstrated how *Pedagogy of Connectedness* might help educators in the classroom. I assert that *Pedagogy of Connectedness* cannot be accomplished without a rich curriculum that includes readings, videos, and classroom activities. The curriculum provides opportunities to learn about social justice issues while focusing on community, identity, power structure, and the ways they are related to education (Figure 16). In this study I strived to theoretically define and empirically support the importance of *Pedagogy of Connectedness* which at its core exists a praxis that can help both educators and students develop agency and social responsibility.

### **CFE-300's Pedagogy of Connectedness**

My intentions in the empirical portion of this research project (research questions 3 and 4) were to articulate practices I employed in the CFE-300 course and to demonstrate how interjecting dis/connectedness discourses into a cultural foundations in education course can assist students to better understand dis/connectedness on individual,

social, and political levels. The deeper I dove, the messier it became: the individual, social, and political aspects oftentimes overlapped, informed, and fed one another.

As the CFE-300's course instructor, I aspired to teach social justice issues in education while equipping the students with tools to critically think and analyze power structures by providing multiple perspectives on identity. Interjecting dis/disconnectedness discourses into the course was done by providing the students with opportunities to invest in relationships, co-creating a sense of community, and cultivating a sense of belonging. Critical pedagogy's guiding principles benefited the students in different ways. First, they learned how to engage with complex concepts, such as power structures and the way socialization categorizes and assigns a value to people based on their identity makeup.

Secondly, according to the data, the curriculum spoke to all of the students. The course provided multiple entry points and each of the students had at least one "favorite" unit that they felt especially connected to. Some students had *ah-a!* moments from the very beginning of the semester, some had them later on. Some students understood ableism only when we discussed sexism. Others better understood linguistic oppression only when we discussed heterosexism. Each student chose their own pace to uncover mechanisms of systemic oppression. By allowing them to pave their own path to uncover and better understand the relationship between identity and power, the students did not feel that they had "to get it" right away in order to succeed on a midterm test. The students were required to write and were given a lot of freedom to construct their understanding of the course's contents. Whatever they brought to the classroom discussions and into their writing was validated, yet was subject to challenge by either me

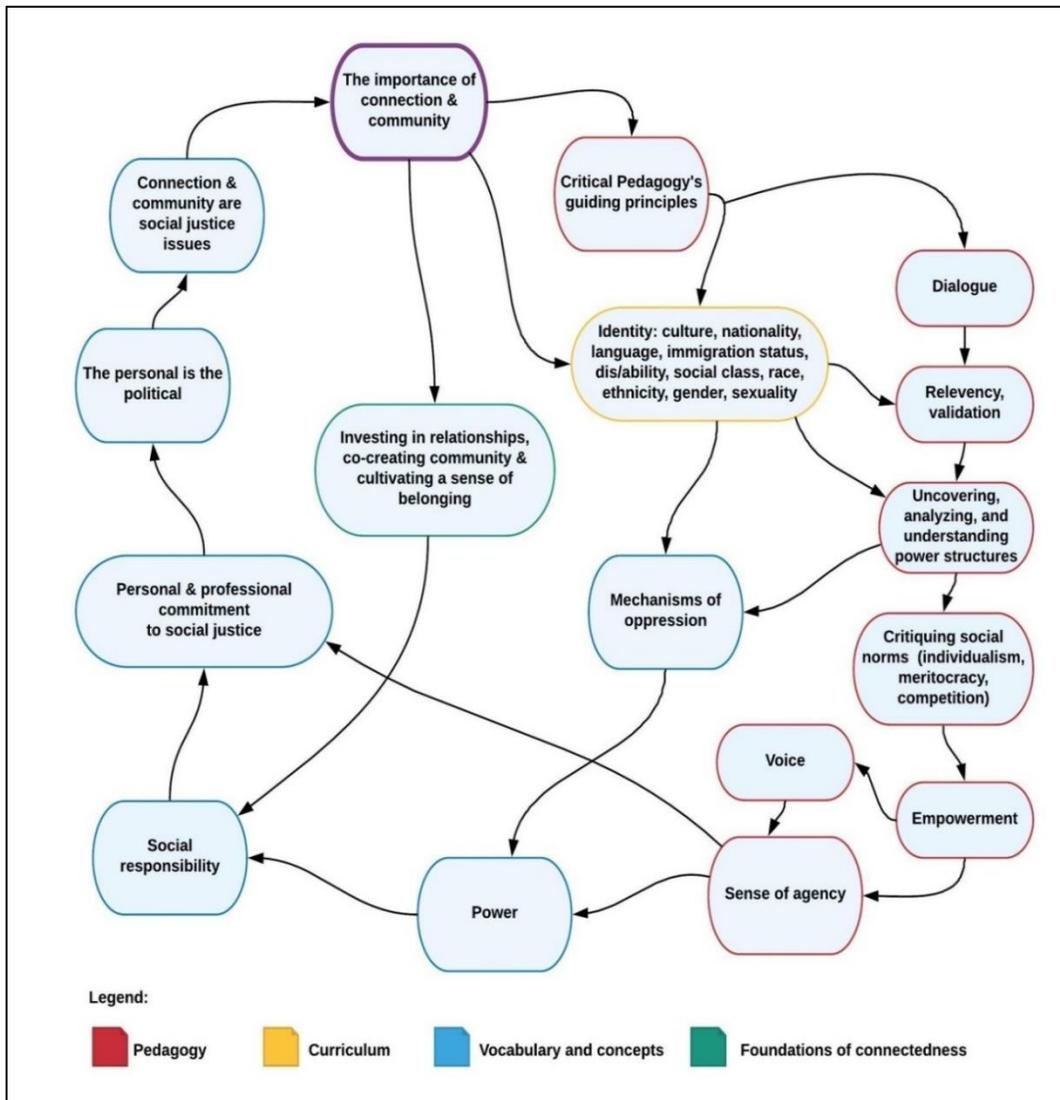
or their classmates. They were allowed to say or write “I don’t know” or “I need to give some more thought to this.” I was determined to meet students where they were at and to not force them to change their minds. I simply wanted them to keep their minds and hearts open, to think about what we investigated each week, and to connect the dots between the units.

Third, the students were provided with terminology and multiple perspectives that many students were never asked to consider before. For example, the “Dis/ability and Ableism” unit introduced the students to the term inclusion and the differences between the medical model and social model. Student with disabilities felt that their daily struggles were validated in the class. Students who did not have an impairment were oftentimes stunned to realize the struggles of those who dealt with the world while disabled. Students with family members or close friends with disabilities could better understand various aspects of ableism. The same happened when we discussed gender and sexism. When we deconstructed sexism (as I described in Chapter Five), students were amazed to realize the many layers of sexism in their lives, as well as the costs of sexism to women, men, and non-binary/non-conforming people.

Fourth, providing multiple perspectives on identity made the students feel represented and validated, thus appreciated and included. The curriculum was relevant to their lives and to the lives of those they loved and care about. Consequently, they felt empowered to participate in the classroom discussions, to share their personal stories in relation to the discussed issues, and to write fantastic, thoughtful reflection papers.

Overall, it contributed to the sense of connectedness they had with the course, the curriculum, and with themselves.

Figure 16. Teaching Cultural Foundations in Education Through the Dis/connectedness Prism



Interjecting dis/connectedness discourses while discussing identity provided a class setup for students to not only rethink and reconsider their own beliefs and opinions

on social justice issues and concepts/practices that are related to those issues (such as socialization, power, oppression, and discrimination), but also to do so with respect, care, compassion, empathy, and love. Because the students were provided with weekly opportunities to invest in relationships and to co-create a community, they started to care about social justice issues because they listened to each other, learned from each other, and paid attention to what students, guest speakers, and I said in the classroom. They developed friendships both in and out of the classroom, they respected each other, and cared for each other. Social justice issues became personal, not only political, detached problems that happen to other people.

Students were happy to come to class. Every week I arrived about 15-20 minutes early to set up the class, only to find many of the CFE-300 students already sitting together, engaged in conversation. In the classrooms where it was possible, the early students arranged the desks and chairs to form a circle without being asked. Arriving early to the classroom was yet another opportunity for me and the students to chat and strengthen our relationships. As one of the students once mentioned with a smile, “I need more than five minutes for ‘How you doin’”.

Lastly, the students were encouraged to rethink and practice vulnerability. That added a unique energy to the course. Many of the students accepted the invitation to be vulnerable for a few hours per week, both in the classroom and in their writing. For some of the students, it took several weeks to trust the process and allow themselves to shine with their true colors. Others were reserved in the classroom but felt free to express their opinions and thoughts in writing (a few students also decided to exchange emails with

me, almost weekly, to continue a dialogue about issues they cared about). Some began to actively participate in the classroom at large (not only in the small group discussions) around the middle of the semester, and some began very close to the end of the semester. The bottom line is that the students participated and practiced vulnerability in one way or another.

The power of vulnerability stunned me. I did not expect to witness its incredible impact every semester. What was truly wonderful was to retrospectively understand how vulnerability contributed to every aspect of the CFE-300 course. Students practiced vulnerability and dared to express emotions and share personal stories. Choosing vulnerability made them open up and consequently helped to create a safe space in the classroom that was rooted in love ethic (hooks, 2001).

### **The Unfinishedness of Unlearning and Constructing Reality**

In a 2016 Minnesota student survey consisting of almost 81,000 students in 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades, students self-reported gender identity, perceived gender expression, health status, and care utilization (Rider et al., 2018). Among the surveyed students, 2.7% (more than 2,100 students) of them identified as transgender or gender nonconforming. I was surprised to read that that many students nowadays identify as transgender or gender nonconforming. It got me thinking about how different it was when I was a student in the 80s and 90s. Back then I knew nothing about sex versus gender or what non-binary (or any of its synonyms) meant. Growing up in Israel, I never doubted the gender identities of family members, classmates, or neighbors. Later in my life I started to acquire a new, inclusive vocabulary that consisted of terms such as queer, gender fluidity, and cisgender.

For many years I internalized patriarchy and heterosexism while witnessing how those who do not abide by these social norms are subjected to oppression and discrimination. Like many others, I absorbed the norms and gender performance expectations, which become part of who I am, much like geological layers that consist of many things I do not believe in anymore. Nonetheless, I recognize that those norms are still with me, part of me. I recognize the “socio-geological layer” of sexism within me. Growing up, I never saw my father folding laundry or mopping the floor. I rarely saw him or other men in my extended family cook or clean. Reading books authored by feminist scholars and pursuing my academic degrees in progressive programs have been two major forces in my commitment and practice to unlearn prejudice and biases. Additionally, teaching the CFE-300 course has put me in a position where I taught others how to unlearn sexist, racist, classist, and ableist norms, thoughts, and behaviors every semester. Even after years of unlearning and teaching unlearning, I will be the first to admit that I have not arrived. There is always room for more.

There is a liberating element in admitting one’s prejudices and biases. For me, it means to understand that I am not exceptional and that I am a product of patriarchy and heterosexism, as well as a product of capitalism and racism. Nevertheless, this research has helped me to understand that I am also a product of the liberatory, loving communities I belong to. Additionally, they have been an important part of my transformative journey as a hopeful feminist, anti-racist activist-educator. Conducting this research made it clearer to me that unlearning prejudice, biases, bigotry, and hatred necessitates what connectedness offers: meaningful relationships and inclusive

communities that encourage and cultivate its members' growth and ability to imagine a better world. It also requires a lot of patience and compassion towards ourselves and others. Unlearning cannot be prescribed, scheduled, or forced. It can only be modeled, facilitated, and encouraged. Thus, transformation and unlearning are intertwined and rely on each other. We cannot change and be changed without unlearning sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and other systems of oppression. Transformation necessitates unlearning. Thus, unlearning takes place when one desires to change and be changed.

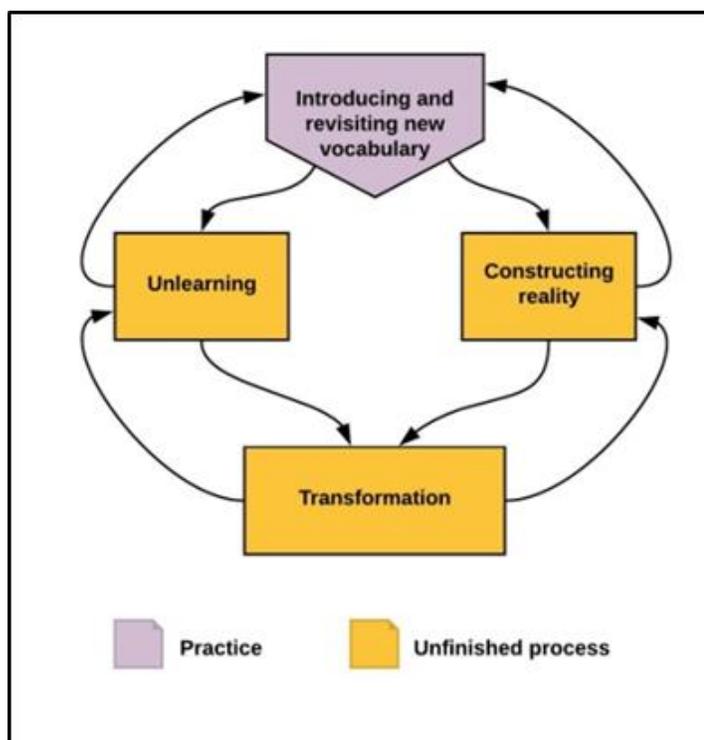
The process of unlearning is also intertwined with our power to imagine and construct a different reality (Figure 17). Freire (2010) writes that the oppressors “developed a series of methods precluding any presentation of the world as a problem and showing it rather as a fixed entity, as something given—something to which people, as mere spectators, must adapt” (p. 139). Accordingly, we are born into prescribed reality, powerless and agency-less. However, we are reminded by Greene (1995) that,

young persons have the capacity to construct multiple realities once they have begun to name their worlds. And that naming is a function of growing acquaintance with conceptual networks and symbol systems characteristic of the culture's way of making sense. The young can be empowered to view themselves as conscious, reflective namers and speakers if their particular standpoints are acknowledged, if interpretive dialogues are encouraged, if interrogation is kept alive. (p. 57)

Greene's assertion of young people's capacity to construct reality resonates with the work I have done with the CFE-300 students that was embedded in a vocabulary that reflected possibilities of social change. That vocabulary helped the students to name their world and to make sense of their experiences. The course's pedagogy opened up spaces

to cultivate dialogue that centered the students' ability to unlearn oppressive practices while constructing realities rooted in possibilities of liberation, love, care, compassion, and social responsibility. In Richard Shaull's words, students dealt "critically and creatively with reality and discover[ed] how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Freire, 2010, p. 34).

Figure 17. Unfinished Processes



Learning new vocabulary was essential to both unlearning and constructing reality processes. Learning new vocabulary helped to unlearn outdated, narrow terms. However, learning new terms and concepts was not enough. It was necessary to revisit the new vocabulary and explore it time and again throughout the various social justice issues and

multiple perspectives that were conveyed each semester. In the next section, I present the foundations of *Pedagogy of Connectedness* that are derived from the CFE-300 students' journey as well as my own.

### **Pedagogy of Connectedness: From Rupture to Wholeness**

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

— Antoine de Saint-Exupery

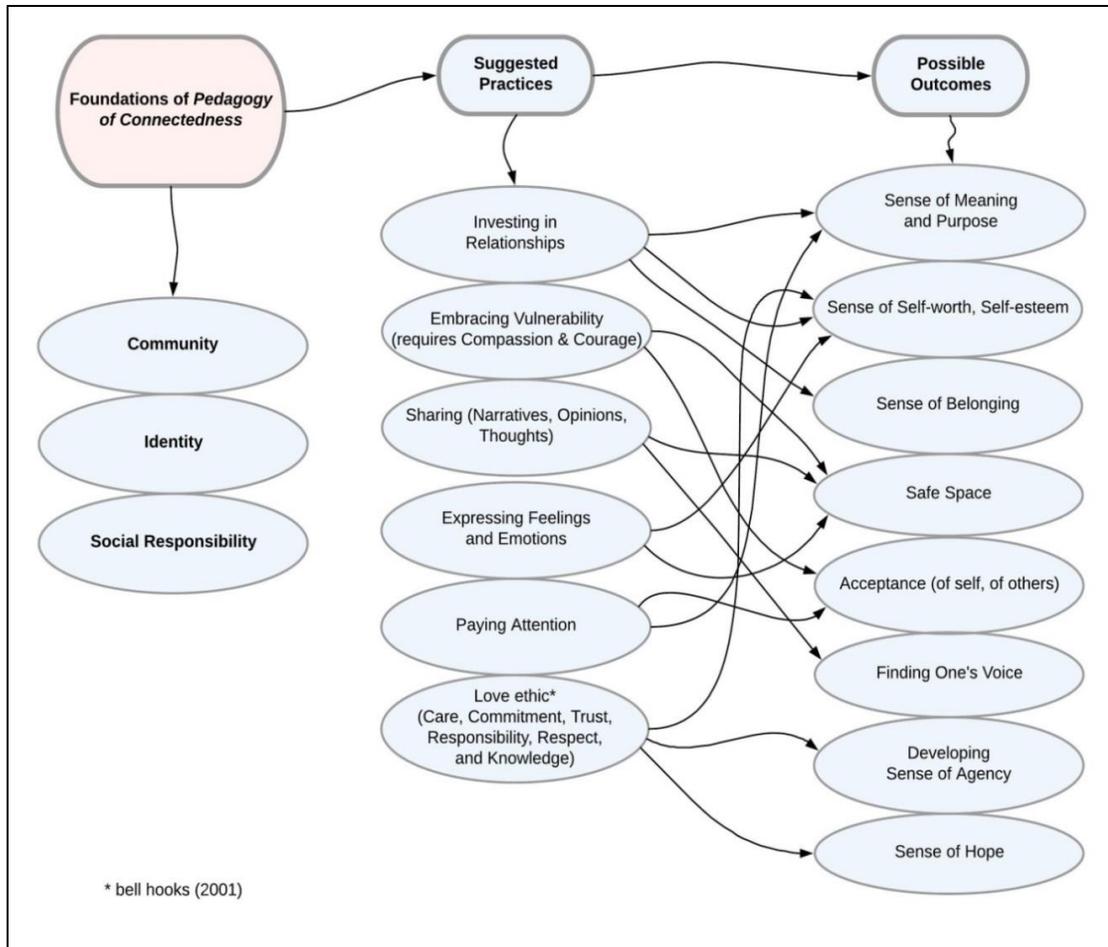
the greatest teacher will send you back to yourself.

– Nayyirah Waheed

When I was ready to create a model that depicted the foundations and the practices of the pedagogy I employed in the CFE-300 course, I began the process by mapping out the components that came up throughout my research – both theoretically and empirically. I assembled the concepts and vocabulary that were associated with dis/connectedness and situated them within critical classroom and social justice education scholarship.

I assert that **community, identity, and social responsibility** are the three pillars that *Pedagogy of Connectedness* firmly stands on. Emphasizing those three aspects of the pedagogy is done by employing various of suggested practices (as I described in Chapter Five) and curriculum (as I described in Chapter Four), which could lead to possible outcomes such as developing a sense of self-worth, belonging, voice, and agency (as I detail in Figure 18). The possible outcomes of the model are in accordance with the students' reflection papers and interviews.

Figure 18. Pedagogy of Connectedness – A Suggested Model



**Community.** Participating in a community benefits us in different ways. First and foremost, it gives us relationships with the rest of the community members. Those relationships can be cultivated and lead to meaningful relationships that are rooted in love, care, and compassion. Community also gives us a sense of belonging, a space where we can feel welcome and accepted for who we are, without the need to cover our true-selves in order to fit in.

*A Pedagogy of Connectedness* does not guarantee a community per se when it comes to students that gather three hours a week for a course that lasts a semester. However, it does open up spaces where students feel a sense of community for the duration of the semester, should they choose to participate in it. Given the students' testimonies on their experiences in the CFE-300 course, a sense of community was not only achieved in the space of that semester, but some of the students continued to stay in touch with each other and became close friends.

*A Pedagogy of Connectedness* emphasizes the continuing efforts to foster a community and cultivate it weekly. The suggested practices for that purpose are providing opportunities to invest in relationships, embracing vulnerability, sharing thoughts, opinions and personal stories, and expressing emotions.

**Identity.** The identity aspect is also essential to the applications of a *Pedagogy of Connectedness*. In the CFE-300 course in particular, identity was a key topic of discussion to address social justice issues in education. The students were introduced to multiple perspectives on identity and were challenged to rethink the ways they viewed, interpreted, and participated in the world.

Discussing and analyzing identity came after the students started to form relationships with each other. While learning about different identity markers/categories, students continued to be provided with opportunities to cultivate the emerging community. As students started to feel more comfortable with each other, they were willing to participate more, to share more. Students listened to their classmates' stories, comforted them when they were emotional, laughed, cried, and paid attention to each

other. The social justice issues they read about in the texts or watched in videos became more alive when students shared what it meant for them to grow up poor, what it means for them to encounter police officers while being Black, or what their grade school teachers' expected for them as Latinas. The collective efforts to investigate multiple perspectives of identity makeup were done with respect, compassion, empathy, and care due to the relationships the students cultivated with each other. The classroom became a safe space for the students to not only embrace vulnerability as a means to share their stories and to debate on issues that mattered to them, but also to question the myths they were taught to believe in since birth and to critique their reality (particularly in regard to deeply embedded social values such as individualism and meritocracy).

Employing critical pedagogy's guiding principles that stress uncovering, analyzing, and understanding power structures helped the students to deepen their understanding of how identity markers/categories are subjected to practices of oppression and discrimination. Cultivating relationships with students who carry undervalued, marginalized identity markers helped the students to begin dismantling the perpetual cycle of prejudice and biases they held against individuals and communities.

Investigations into what identity is was not an intellectual exercise, but rather became a process in which students learned the depth of the meaning of carrying various and multiple identity markers and later accepted and embraced them – their own identity markers and others'. The further and deeper the identity investigation continued, the community became more inclusive and accepting.

**Social responsibility.** As we deepened our understanding of community's role in a person's life, identity makeup, and power structures, the students realized their social responsibility. Although a few students had a sense of social responsibility from the very beginning of the semester, by the end of the semester they all had a strong sense of social responsibility (as I described in Chapter Five). Hannah Arendt (1968) writes that "[a]nyone who refuses to assume joint responsibility for the world should not have children and must not be allowed to take part in educating them" (p. 186). Arendt defines responsibility "in terms of political presence...[and] regarded political presence as requiring both acting and belonging" (Herzog, 2004, p. 39). Herzog explains that Arendt used presence for "making oneself present in the presence of others, [and] making others present in one's mind," and added that "opinions represent the others, while at the same time make the agent present to others" (p. 39).

Students arrived in the classroom with many opinions. Some were informed by experiences and/or anecdotal incidents that lacked contextual depth. The process of moving from uninformed or misinformed opinions to the ability to articulate informed, critical ones was possible due to the efforts to emphasize community as well as investigations into identity and power structures. In the context of the CFE-300 course, realizing a sense of social responsibility was interconnected with rethinking prejudice and biases, and forming informed, critical opinions that later led to critical thinking and analysis. The CFE-300 students' statements on their notions of responsibility in their final papers not only reflect that movement but their new commitment to be present in "the presence of others, [and] making others present in one's mind" (Herzog, 2004, p.

39). The CFE-300's students referred to their responsibility as acting agents who advocate for and understand this sense of service.

When I think about community, identity, and social responsibility as well as the ways they inform a *Pedagogy of Connectedness*, I think about them as essential components of a project of reimagining a world in which social justice is not an abstract ideal but rather a praxis in which reflects ongoing, multilayered efforts to construct reality. This reality is one where people dare to disrupt and transgress the personal and professional spaces they occupy in hopes of co-creating better, stronger, inclusive, radical communities that ensure each and every person is able to bloom where they were planted.

As I detailed throughout this dissertation, the goals of a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* are to ensure students gain a better, clearer understanding of who they are as well as the individuals and communities they live with, work with, and serve. As I think about the possibilities of adapting all or parts of a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* in different classrooms and courses than CFE-300, I believe that community, identity, and social responsibility should continue to function as key elements. For example, elementary school teachers can adopt the suggested practices that emphasize investment in relationships and fostering of community. Teachers should be encouraged to model ways of paying attention to the students' identities and make sure the curriculum represents the students, their cultures, traditions, and heritage.

Modeling love ethic, care, compassion, and inclusion can take place in any classroom, in all educational institutions, where ever educators want to ensure meaningful education praxis that is rooted in restoring a sense of connectedness.

Consequently, manifestations of violence (such as harassment, bullying, and physical/sexual abuse) in those institutions might be reduced. Restoring a sense of connectedness can lessen social isolation, anxiety, and depression among students. When students feel seen, heard, appreciated, and welcomed in their schools, colleges, and universities, they will invest in those spaces. Those efforts will flourish and increase in other non-academic spaces the students belong to.

A vision cannot last without a plan, thus strengthening educational spaces with praxis that emphasizes connectedness can help social justice warriors to not only envision a world free of suffering, but rather to mobilize students, educators, and administrators towards the creation of one.

### **Recommendations**

The work I have done with the CFE-300 students was meaningful, rewarding, and exciting. It also gave me firsthand experiences to realize the importance of centering community, identity, and social responsibility within social justice education scholarship. Saying that, I recognize that one foundations course is simply not enough. There were so many other topics and issues I wish I had time to include in the curriculum. For example, I wish the students and I had more time to discuss the impact of mainstream and social media on dis/connectedness and day-to-day politics. I would have loved to include more documentaries on the important role of the arts on the way we interpret and construct our reality. I wish I had more time to teach about critical and feminist pedagogies so they would have a better understanding of those praxes.

Due to the fact that the course was comprised of a weekly class that counted for three academic hours and lasted only 15-16 weeks, I struggled with prioritizing topics each semester. I did not have time to teach about human rights and children's rights, nor did I have time to go as deep as I wanted to when it came to racism, sexism, ableism, and classism. Although I know that the seeds of social change were planted, I wish I had the time to facilitate the efforts of cultivating the conditions in which those planted seeds hopefully would sprout.

The CFE-300 course was a radical space in which we uncovered, analyzed, and understood just the tip of the social justice issues iceberg. My first recommendation is to broaden the scope of courses such as CFE-300. I assert that a commitment to social justice in education cannot be fulfilled with only one or two foundations courses for pre-service teachers and social workers. The efforts as I described in Chapter Five should continue in other courses that center social justice issues or become part of other courses that prepare students to work at schools<sup>10</sup>.

My second recommendation is related to the first and is based on the experiences I had with the students. Many of them were hungry to know more, to deepen their understanding of social justice issues, especially when those issues were or had become personal. Colleges of Education should consider broadening the social justice scholarship curriculum and design more courses that specialize in particular social justice issues. Those courses can focus on the various aspects of identity (disability, gender, race, social

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<sup>10</sup> In my mind, I envision efforts to revolutionize teacher preparation programs and add "and Social Justice" to each and every course students take. Math Education and Social Justice. Special Education and Social Justice. Measurement and Assessment in Teaching and Social Justice, etc.

class, sexuality, etc.). I believe that all pre-service education and social work students should be familiar with critical disability, queer, feminist, and race theories, and that those courses should not only be part of specific departments. In other words, not only special education students should know about disabilities and not only students in African-American Studies should be familiar with critical race theory. Moreover, teacher preparation programs should offer a minor in social justice education if students complete 12 or 15 semester hours in courses that focus on social justice in education to better prepare them to be more well-rounded educators.

My third and last recommendation is concerned with the idea that foundations courses that center social justice issues should be offered to all students as part of their college education. In the end-of-semester evaluations, many of the students wrote that the course should be offered outside of the education and social work departments. A foundations course in general, and a *Pedagogy of Connectedness* in particular, can benefit students from all walks of life. Facilitating efforts to restore connectedness within our educational institutions should not be restricted only to teachers and social workers. Students who major in engineering, biology, history, and English literature can be benefited from such a course. All students can benefit from participating in the efforts to transform a society that is saturated with violence. That vital task should be a shared responsibility to carry out our plan of constructing a better, more just world.

## Epilogue

I come to comfort the afflicted  
and to afflict the comfortable  
– Evie Shockley

If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see.  
– James Baldwin

In Chapter Two I wrote that we know connectedness because we know disconnectedness. That statement stayed with me for the duration of writing this dissertation and reminded me that nothing exists in a vacuum. We know right-doing because we know wrongdoing, we know joy because we know pain, and we know hope because we know despair. My persistence to write *dis/connectedness* throughout the dissertation has become an essential component that underpinned my initial assertion that disconnectedness and connectedness are intertwined and inseparable.

I spent the last five years as a doctoral student in a progressive program that equipped me with a fantastic toolbox that broadened both my intellectual and emotional capacities, helped me to know myself better, and made the work on *Pedagogy of Connectedness* possible. My research project affirmed my notions on the need to articulate a pedagogy that speaks to students' minds and hearts in ways that can strengthen their own capacities to become agents of social change and restore connectedness. This was not only because it was the right thing to do, but also because they cared about the causes, and they understood that their well-being is interconnected

with others' well-being. Most importantly, their sense of agency and social responsibility became rooted in deep love and compassion for all people.

The last five years (and the last eighteen months of dissertation writing in particular) demonstrated to me the fundamental need to restore connectedness. In December 2017, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a report which revealed that for the first time since the early 1960s, life expectancy in the U.S. has declined for the second year in a row. According to the report, *Mortality in the United States, 2016* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017), the change was driven largely by an increasing death rate among younger Americans: the 25-34 age group's death rate increased by 10 percent between the years 2015-2016. Unintentional injuries – a category that includes drug overdoses – became the third leading cause of death in 2016 (after heart diseases and cancer), with an increased rate of 9.7%. Suicide remained the 10<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death among Americans, with an increase of 0.2%.

In the last couple of years, we have also witnessed the deadliest mass shooting incidents in the U.S. history. For example, 58 people killed and almost 500 injured at a music concert in Las Vegas, Nevada (October 1, 2017) and 49 killed and 50 injured at a night club in Orlando, Florida (June 12, 2016). Recent deadliest mass shootings also resulted in 25 people killed in a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas (November 5, 2017) and 17 people killed in a high school in Parkland, Florida (February 14, 2018).

The rising rates of deaths by overdose and mass shooting in recent years have become the new normal in this country. A reflection on conducting this research project and writing the dissertation cannot be complete without acknowledging the last decade's

divisive politics that have put this country on a distraught spiral. I wrote this dissertation in hopes to shed some light on the roots and causes of disconnectedness in the U.S.

Violence manifests itself beyond school bullying and domestic or sexual violence.

Violence is about power and power is about who makes the decisions. Thus, a discussion about disconnectedness in the U.S. cannot disregard political spaces where decisions by the few are being made for the many.

The U.S. has gone through a presidential campaign in which Donald Trump won the GOP's nomination and was later elected to the highest office in the country.

Consequently, the White House made immense efforts to advance policies that are rooted in xenophobia, such as the Muslim travel ban and a crusade against undocumented immigrants and sanctuary cities. In addition, the Trump administration, supported by the GOP, made extra efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act and proposed major cuts in 22 federal agencies, grant programs, and institutions, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, Housing and Urban Development, Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP), Head Start, and Medicaid. The proposed 2019 budget also includes an increase in the Pentagon's budget and financing a border between Mexico and the U.S.

Including the Trump administration and the ways the GOP supports the continuing efforts to eliminate the federal responsibility to its citizens and residents in the U.S. helps to connect the dots between the political, social, and individual aspects of disconnectedness. Those with power legislate, fund, and decide which federal agencies,

grant programs, and institutions will be eliminated. They recently executed a tax reform that benefits the wealthy and corporations (i.e., a reduction in tax rate from 35 percent to 20 percent; companies are allowed to deduct the full value of their investments for five years) and causes millions of Americans to lose their ACA-based health coverage. Although my background in economics comes from four years of editing a financial newspaper in Israel, I know enough to understand that the recent efforts put in the tax form (which raises the federal budget deficit by \$1.7 trillion over 10 years) and the proposed 2019 federal budget will immensely harm hundreds of millions of people in the U.S. alone. When I think of the many obstacles people are facing every day, I cannot ignore the ways that governmental institutions deepen this sense of despair.

However, even in the gloomiest days of 2016 and 2017 we witnessed incredible efforts led by individuals and communities who have been organizing movements and mobilizing millions of people to speak up and act. The Women's March in D.C. became the largest protest in the history (demonstrations were held in at many other locations in the U.S. and around the world), the #MeToo moment that evolved into a movement, the Indivisible Project, and other national and local grassroots, community-led social justice action groups, such as Black Lives Matter, Moral Mondays, Moms Demand Action, and the Standing Rock Sioux elder who protested the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) and attracted support and solidarity from activists all around the country.

Social justice activism echoes in my work as an activist-educator and an emerging scholar. Separating what is happening in the world from what is happening inside schools and classrooms is simply impossible. In the school where I currently work at as an

elementary teacher in Boise, Idaho, we had an intruder lockdown drill. For about 15 minutes, the 1<sup>st</sup> grade students and I sat quietly in the classroom, behind a locked door and in a darkened room. As I was sitting with them, comforting those who were scared, upset, or confused, I thought about the 19-year-old man who killed fourteen high school students and three faculty members in Parkland, Florida just a day before on Valentine's Day. We cannot talk about students, teachers, classrooms, or schools without talking about violence and politics. Conducting this research project affirmed to me the necessity of unapologetically adopting and embracing a political position on gun violence, rape culture, police brutality, exploitation of natural resources and people, and federal budget deficits. Those too have become part of my vocabulary of social change.

I learned to embrace my radical, political ideas and praxis in ways I never have done before. Interjecting dis/connectedness discourses in my teaching and research has strengthened every component of my identity and fiber of my being. I am completing this research project convinced that love is an action and loving someone means to tell them about the things they do not see or refuse to look at. Immersing myself in dis/connectedness discourses taught me how to navigate students' different levels of comfort by providing multiple entry-points in the curriculum and pedagogy. Centering dis/connectedness discourses within my scholarship and praxis energized me and made me hopeful. This research project is an intellectual, emotional, and a political one. It is both completed and uncompleted. In other words, I acknowledge its unfinishedness due to its transformative nature.

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## APPENDIX A

### CFE-300'S SYLLABUS

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

#### **Education Leadership and Cultural Foundation Department**

#### **[CFE-300] (section 1): Cultural Foundations of Education, Fall semester, 2016**

**Time:** Mondays. 4-6:50 PM | **Location:** School of Education Building, room 217

**Instructor:** Revital Zilonka ([r\\_zilonk@uncg.edu](mailto:r_zilonk@uncg.edu)) | **Office hours (SOEB 370):** by appointment.

**Course description:** Introduction to the ideological, ethical and cultural dimensions of schooling, as well as the competing visions of education used to engage students in relevant issues of school life.

**Overview:** In this course students are invited to participate in challenging discussions of what it means to be an educator. The course will feature reading, writing, art, movies, performance arts, and classroom activities, games and discussions regarding the vocation of teachers, social justice, dis/abilities, bilingual education, social class, poverty, sexuality, gender, race and community membership.

#### **Course Objectives:**

**History:** Analyze the historical and ideological dimensions that influenced the formation of schooling and continues to shape education within the U.S.

**Philosophy:** Evaluate philosophical perspectives and approaches to education to interrogate one's own commitments and practices as an educator.

**Sociology: Examine** ways in which power, privilege, and injustice operate implicitly and explicitly in schools and society.

**Reflexivity:** Practice purposeful reflection across topics and themes as it relates to critical social justice education.

**Goals of the course:** The goals of this course are to create the conditions by which teachers and their students can work toward strengthening their communities and making the world a better place. Participants in the course will leave it with new knowledge(s) and a sense of belonging to a community of learners and world changers.

**Course materials:** Materials include books, articles, book chapters, short stories, poems, movies and online videos/articles. Required readings and/or links for videos / online articles for each week are listed below in the semester timeline. Readings (in pdf format) will be placed on Google Drive and are organized by units.

**Required book:**

1. "Totto Chan –The Little Girl at the Window" ,by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi
2. "Just Mercy - a Story of Justice and Redemption", by Bryan Stevenson

**Note:** There are many used copies online (starts in \$0.01 on Amazon for Totto Chan, and \$7-10 for Stevenson's book).

**Required reading:** Introduction, chapters 3, 4, 8, 10 and 14. (Although I recommend to read the entire book).

**Course Assignments:**

(!) All assignments should be typed (12 point font, 1.5-2 spacing), printed and handed in the beginning of the class meeting that they are due. If you miss the class when an assignment is due, please email the assignment to the instructor no later than 2 PM of the due day. For all work, make sure you are able to clearly articulate and support your ideas and arguments with the course's materials and classroom's activities and discussions. Please see the resources listed at the end of the syllabus to help with these skills.

**(#1) Reflection essays:** During the semester (see the time-line for the course below) you will write reflective essays (4 pages minimum, not including cover and references) in which you discuss and analyze the readings/videos, incorporate in your writing your understanding of the studied materials, classroom activities and discussions. The reflection papers **MUST** show evidence that you read and/or watched the assigned readings and videos. No evidence of reading will result in losing 2/3 (two thirds) of the possible points. Prompt questions for every essay will be provided via email.

**15 points x 2 essays = 30 points possible.**

First reflection - connection, community and teaching units **due: 10/03**

Second reflection - social class and disabilities units **due 11/07**

**(#2) Interview and analysis assignment:** In this assignment you are required to find a person that you don't know anything about her/him, their culture/religion/native language, family/personal history, etc. You will conduct a minimum of 30 minutes

interview with that person, and then you will analyze the interview (use the 3rd and 4th units' readings/videos as references). Questions to reflect on in your analysis: what did you learn from the person you interviewed? what did stand out? what prejudices came up on your mind while interviewing/thinking about the interview? The interview should be recorded and transcribed. It's also recommended that you will take notes while conducting the interview. **30 points possible. Due: 10/24**

**(#3) Personal/Professional Reflective Statement/letter:** By the end of the semester, you are required to write your own personal/professional reflection about social justice education (7-8 pages), given all the new knowledge(s) that the course participants generated every week. The questions for this assignment are: what challenged you in the [CFE-300] course? What stood out? What did you learn about yourself? Given the new understanding you have by now about cultural foundations, identity, socialization, connection and community, what's your personal/professional reflection about social justice in education? More instructions and information about this assignment, if needed, will be provided later in the semester. **30 points possible. Due: 11/21**

**(#4) Attendance, Participation and Contribution in the classroom:** There is a **mandatory attendance to the first (August 22) and last (November 28) classes of the semester.** You are encouraged to participate in -and contribute to the course and be part of the discussions and classroom activities. See for more thoughts regarding attendance in the **classroom expectations section** in the syllabus. **10 points possible**

**Grading scale:** A+ 98-100 | A 95-97 | A- 90-94 | B+ 87-89 | B 84-86 | B- 80-83 | C+ 77-79 | C 74-76 | C- 70-73 | D 60-69 | F 0-59

### **Classroom Expectations**

**Attendance, participation and contribution in class:** Attendance is very important, not only as a requirement, but as a commitment to your classmates.

\* **One unexcused absence is all you get for the semester.** More than one unexcused absence will result in a loss of a letter grade (=10 points). **Absences should be communicated before class starts, via email.** Students are expected to make sure they do the readings/videos and other assignments even if they miss a class (or more, for that matter). You get one unexcused absence; second time you miss a class, you need to submit a brief summary of the readings/videos of that week within 3 days (by Thursday). If a reflection paper is due on the class you miss, you should email it to the instructor no later than 2 PM of that day (or send a hard copy with a classmate).

\* Please be in the classroom on time (4 PM), and don't leave before class ends (6:50 PM). Tendency to come late to class or leave early will affect your grade as well. Missing **more than 4 classes** during the semester will be resulted in an **F**. Actively participating

and contributing in the class are always welcome. It will benefit your classmates' and your own understanding. I expect you to take notes while reading the assigned readings. ***Please show up to the class with the assigned readings (hard copy or electronic copy) and notes. Bring a notebook and a pen/pencil every week in order to take notes and participate in writing activities during the class. Writing is essential in this course.***

\* You are expected to come every week with good notes on the readings/videos.

Technology in the classroom: No unauthorized usage of cellphones, smartphones, tablets and laptops during sessions (including texting, surfing and other unnecessary activities that are not related to the class). As a community of learners, we will listen to each other and we will not get interrupted by technology during classes.

Drinking/eating: You are welcome to drink and/or eat in the class. Bring your dinner or snacks. Just keep it thoughtful and respectful (no noisy wraps, e.g., chips).

Suggestions: You are more than welcome to recommend other readings, movies or leads on local community activities. As a community of learners, we share knowledge(s) and benefit from each other, all the time. You can do that also on the [CFE-300] Facebook group.

**You may find it helpful to join the [CFE-300] Facebook (closed group):**  
[www.facebook.com/groups/The\[CFE-300\]](http://www.facebook.com/groups/The[CFE-300])

**FYI: On average, for every in-class hour, you will be spending an hour at home (reading, watching videos and writing/preparing for the assignments)**

Students with Disabilities: If you have specific physical, psychiatric, emotional or learning disabilities that may require accommodations, please let me know **in the beginning of the semester**, so that we can coordinate our efforts.

**Suggested schedule for the Spring 2016 semester (subjected to changes)**

Read: chapters/articles/stories on a Shared folder on Google Drive (GD) or provided with a link. Watch: videos on TED.com or Youtube or other online resources such as Netflix.

Date	Topic	Reading/watching at home due for this class	Assignments
08/22 Mon.	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>Mandatory attendance</b>	

08/29	<b>UNIT #1 Community and Connection</b>	<p><u>Read</u>: Brené Brown (chapters on GD)</p> <p><u>Watch</u>: Brené Brown: The power of vulnerability  <a href="http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html">http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html</a></p> <p><u>Watch</u>: Brené Brown: Listening to shame  <a href="http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame.html">http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame.html</a></p>	<b>Start reading "Totto Chan"</b>
09/05 Mon.	<b>Labor Day</b>	- No Class -	<b>Extra credit opportunity (Labor Day)</b>
09/12 Mon.	<b>Community and connection</b>	<p><u>Read</u>: <u>Sociology in Education</u>, by Schwalbe (GD)</p> <p><u>Watch</u>: Ken Robinson: How schools kill creativity  <a href="http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html">http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html</a></p> <p><u>Watch</u>: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: "The danger of a single story" (<i>TED</i> Talk)  <a href="http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html">http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html</a></p>	
09/19 Mon.	<b>UNIT # 2 To be an educator</b>	<p><u>Read</u>: "Education is politics", by Ira Shor (GD)</p> <p><u>Read</u>: "Teaching: Introduction", by bell hooks. p. 1-3 (GD)</p> <p><u>Read</u>: "Critical Thinking", by bell hooks. p. 7-11 (GD)</p> <p><u>Read</u>: "Engaged pedagogy", by bell hooks (GD)</p>	<b>Due: Write a one page response to Shor's article. Bring a typed hard copy to class.</b>

09/26 Mon.	<b>To be an educator</b>	<u>Read:</u> "Excerpt from pedagogy of the oppressed", by Paulo Freire (GD) <u>Read:</u> "Schooling for a life as a race", by Svi Shapiro (GD) <u>Read:</u> "A+ for Finland", by Hancock (GD)	
10/03 Mon.	<b>UNIT #3 Cultural Identity &amp; Bilingual Education</b>	<u>Read:</u> "An Indian Father's Plea" (GD) <u>Read:</u> " I didn't know there are cities in Africa" (GD)	<b>Due: Reflection paper #1 Connection, community and To be an educator</b>
10/10 Mon.	<b>Cultural Identity &amp; Bilingual Education</b>	<u>Read:</u> "The girl who wouldn't sing", by Kit Yuen Quam (GD) <u>Read:</u> "Mother Tongue", by Amy Tan (GD) <u>Read:</u> "How to tame a wild tongue", by Gloria Anzaldua (GD)	
10/17 Mon.	<b>Fall Break</b>	- No Class -	<b>Finish reading "Toto Chan"</b> <b>Start reading "Just Mercy"</b>
10/24 Mon.	<b>Unit #4 Dis/abilities</b>	Bring "Totto Chan" to class <u>Read:</u> "Cathedral", Raymond Carver (GD)	<b>Due: Interview and analysis (identity + bilingual education units)</b>
10/31 Mon.	<b>UNIT # 5 Social class and the school system</b>	<u>Read:</u> "The Stolen Party", by Liliana Heker (on GD) <u>Read:</u> "Free Barbie", by Eve Ensler (GD)	

11/07 Mon.	<b>Unit #6 Whiteness, Race and Privilege</b>	<p><u>Read</u>: "White privilege", by Peggy McIntosh (GD)</p> <p><u>Read</u>: "Recitatif", by Toni Morrison (GD)</p> <p><u>Read</u>: "Sweet Potato Pie", by Eugenia Collier (GD)</p>	<b>Due: Reflection paper #2 (dis/abilities+ social class units)</b>
11/14 Mon.	<b>Whiteness, Race and Privilege</b>	<p><u>Watch</u>: Bryan Stevenson: We need to talk about an injustice  <a href="http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice.html">www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice.html</a></p> <p><b>Finish reading "Just Mercy" bring the book.</b></p>	
11/21 Mon.	<b>Unit #7 Gender and sexuality</b>	<p><u>Read</u>: "Feminism", by bell hooks (GD)</p> <p><u>Watch</u>: We should all be feminists  <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc</a></p> <p><u>Watch</u>: Gloria Steinem and bell hooks in a conversation  <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkzOFvfWRn4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkzOFvfWRn4</a></p>	
11/28 Mon.	<b>Art and education</b>	No readings. just art activities. bring crayons and sharpies.	<b>Due: Final Paper - please include units #6 and #7 in your papers :)</b>
12/5 Mon.	<b>Last class: connecting the dots</b>	<p>Wrapping up, evaluations, IRB, saying goodbye.</p> <p><b>Mandatory attendance</b></p>	<b>Bring snacks to class :)</b>

**Suggested Facebook pages with current event/topic discussions:**

[www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork](http://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork)  
[www.facebook.com/HumansOfIndia](http://www.facebook.com/HumansOfIndia)

[www.facebook.com/rethinkingschools](http://www.facebook.com/rethinkingschools)  
[www.facebook.com/humanrightscampaign](http://www.facebook.com/humanrightscampaign)  
[www.facebook.com/ButtonPoetry](http://www.facebook.com/ButtonPoetry)  
[www.facebook.com/sonofbaldwinfb](http://www.facebook.com/sonofbaldwinfb)  
[www.facebook.com/amightygirl](http://www.facebook.com/amightygirl)  
[www.facebook.com/pages/Amy-Poehlers-Smart-Girls](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Amy-Poehlers-Smart-Girls)  
[www.facebook.com/MissRepresentationCampaign](http://www.facebook.com/MissRepresentationCampaign)  
[www.facebook.com/weareultraviolet](http://www.facebook.com/weareultraviolet)  
[www.facebook.com/feministing](http://www.facebook.com/feministing)  
[www.facebook.com/pages/Bitch-Media/20954259668](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bitch-Media/20954259668)  
[www.facebook.com/WOMENSRIGHTSNEWS](http://www.facebook.com/WOMENSRIGHTSNEWS)  
[www.facebook.com/thehistoryproject](http://www.facebook.com/thehistoryproject)  
[www.facebook.com/nativeappropriations](http://www.facebook.com/nativeappropriations)  
[www.facebook.com/colorlines](http://www.facebook.com/colorlines)  
[www.facebook.com/TheEyesOfChildrenAroundTheWorld](http://www.facebook.com/TheEyesOfChildrenAroundTheWorld)  
[www.facebook.com/MillionHoodies](http://www.facebook.com/MillionHoodies)  
[www.facebook.com/TRAPTheRealArtofProtest](http://www.facebook.com/TRAPTheRealArtofProtest)  
[www.facebook.com/BrownGirlCollective](http://www.facebook.com/BrownGirlCollective)  
[www.facebook.com/forharriet](http://www.facebook.com/forharriet)

### **Suggested Facebook groups To Join**

[www.facebook.com/groups/BadAssTeachers](http://www.facebook.com/groups/BadAssTeachers)  
[www.facebook.com/groups/twbpep](http://www.facebook.com/groups/twbpep)

### **Last, but not least supportive resources:**

#### **Writing Center**

3211 Moore Humanitarian Research / 334-3125 [www.uncg.edu/eng/writingcenter](http://www.uncg.edu/eng/writingcenter)  
Prepare your papers for final submission with one-on-one help offered by a consultant. They will ask you a lot of questions about your assignment, what you want to accomplish in the paper, the work you have done on it so far, the due date, and your concerns about the work so far.

#### **Speaking Center**

3211 Moore Humanitarian Research / 256-1346 [www.uncg.edu/eng/writingcenter](http://www.uncg.edu/eng/writingcenter)  
Services are designed to help our speakers further develop their oral communication confidence and competence. Assistance is offered in the preparation and delivery of speeches, development of knowledge and skill in interpersonal communication, and group or team communication. The Speaking Center is located along with the Writing

Center in 3211 MHRA, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. MHRA is on the corner of Forest and Spring Garden, across the street from the Mossman Building.

### **Academic Integrity**

Integrity and ethical conduct are important to your success at UNCG and in later life. Academic integrity is based on five values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. As a member of the UNCG academic community, I expect you to know, understand, and uphold the Academic Integrity Policy. You should familiarize yourself with the Academic Integrity Policy by reading the material available at <http://academicintegrity.uncg.edu/>. The practice of academic integrity extends to all work for the course, including your service with a community partner. Every member of the class is expected to foster the spirit of academic honesty and respect at all times and to encourage that spirit among others.

**ANY INFRACTION OF THE ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY CAN RESULT IN AN AUTOMATIC "F" FOR THE COURSE (AT A MINIMUM).**

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

#### UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT (PAPERS)

Project Title: The Institution of Education: An Analysis a of Pre-service Teachers' Course  
Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor: Revital Zilonka, Dr. Kimberly Kapler Hewitt

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. w

Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

#### **What is the study about?**

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The study will entail the students' outcomes of the [CFE-300] course (reflection papers, writing assignments, classroom discussions, final assignment)

#### **Why are you asking me?**

You are being asked to be in this study since you are a student in the [CFE-300] course. You must be 18 years or older to participate.

**What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?**

I am not asking for your time, only your consent to analyze your reflection papers and final project/assignment that you've already submitted to me since the beginning of the semester. I will also analyze classroom discussions and activities we have been having since the beginning of the semester. If you have any question, you can contact me at [PHONE NO.].

**What are the risks to me?**

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Revital Zilonka, [r\\_zilonk@uncg.edu](mailto:r_zilonk@uncg.edu), tel. [PHONE NO.]; or Dr. Kimberly Kapler Hewitt, [kkhwitt@uncg.edu](mailto:kkh Witt@uncg.edu)

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?**

The benefits maybe an improvement of the [CFE-300] course for future students.

**Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

**How will you keep my information confidential?**

The collected data will be stored in a locked file cabinet. As soon as the research is completed, hard copies will be shred. Digital copies will be protected by password on my personal laptop only. There will be no identifying participants by name when data are disseminated, and confidential data collection procedures will be used. A master list of coded pseudonyms will be kept as a digital record on my personal laptop only, and will be protected by a password, separated from the data I collect for this research. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

**What if I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By signing this consent form/completing this survey/activity (used for an IRB-approved waiver of signature) you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Revital Zilonka.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO**  
**CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT (INTERVIEWS)**

Project Title: Connectedness in education in pre-service teachers and social workers preparation program

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor: Revital Zilonka (advisor: Dr. Svi Shapiro)

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

**What is the study about?**

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. This research project is part of data collection process and will be based upon individual interviews. The interview question will seek for interviewees' perspectives about the [CFE-300] pedagogy, community building, and realizing social responsibility, personally and professionally.

The question will be about your thoughts, perspectives and feelings in the [CFE-300], your sense of belonging and community, the relationships you've developed with your classmates and instructor, the activities, setting, curriculum in the [CFE-300]; if and how

were you challenged during the class; what did you take from the [CFE-300] and how you used in your life/work/internship/studies.

The purpose of this project is to collect the perspectives of undergraduate students in the [CFE-300] course taught by Revital Zilonka. The students who are invited to participate in this study have already given a consent to collect their artifacts from the [CFE-300] course (Spring 2014-Spring 2016).

**Why are you asking me?**

Because you participated in Revital Zilonka's [CFE-300] course, and have already given a consent to collect your artifacts (reflection papers, writing assignments, final paper).

**What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?**

If you agree, you will be asked to participate in 1-1.5 hours individual interview with Revital Zilonka. If you prefer to type your answers to the questions, you will be provided with the questions via email. The questions will ask you about your thought and perspectives about the [CFE-300] course, specifically in the context of connectedness, community building, and realizing responsibility as an individual (personally) and as an educator (professionally).

**Is there any audio/video recording?**

If you agree, the interview will be audio recorded. Since your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape (e.g., a professional transcriber), your confidentiality for things you might say on the tape can't be guaranteed, although the researcher (Revital Zilonka) will do her best to limit access to the audio files as described below.

**What are the risks to me?**

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Revital Zilonka (r\_zilonk@uncg.edu; [PHONE NO.]) or Dr. Svi Shapiro (hsshapir@uncg.edu).

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?**

The research project inquires pedagogical strategies to increase connectedness in the classrooms, foster strong communities and realizing social responsibility. As the researcher of this study, I (Revital Zilonka) plan to publish my findings based upon the information gathered. In the long term, the benefits maybe an improvement of pre-service teachers and social workers preparation programs.

**Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?**

Participating in this research will allow you to voice your thought, ideas and perspectives about your experience in the [CFE-300]. Your voice matters. Otherwise, there are no direct benefits to participating in this study.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

**How will you keep my information confidential?**

Digital copies of the interviews transcripts will be stored on the researcher (Revital Zilonka) personal laptop protected by password. Backups of the interviews audio files, will be stored on two locations: the researcher's laptop and office computer. There will be no identifying participants by name when data are disseminated, and confidential data collection procedures will be used. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

In case you decide to answer the interview questions via email, you should know that absolute confidentiality of data provided through the Internet cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access. Please be sure to close your browser when finished so no one will be able to see what you have been doing.

**What if I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study.

All of your questions concerning this study have been answered.

By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, in this study described to you by Revital Zilonka.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Did you feel part of a community in the class? If not, what was missing in the class to achieve a sense of belonging? If yes, when did you start to feel part of a community? What contributes to that in your opinion?

- 1) Can you tell me about the relationships you have developed in the course with other students? Have those relationships lasted after the semester ended?
- 2) How was it for you to sit in circle, to share, to express emotions, to play, to work in groups, etc.?
- 3) How your opinions and beliefs about the American culture and understanding power were challenged during the semester?
- 4) What did the discussions about dis/connection give you as a person and as an educator?
- 5) What do you think about power relations/structures in the classroom and outside of it now that you are interning/working as a teacher/social worker?
- 6) What did you take from the course that you use in your personal/professional life?
- 7) What did you dis/like about the class?