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This inquiry engaged sixth-grade students, in an ethnically and culturally diverse middle school that does not have Ethnic Studies curriculum, in content that intentionally centered inequality and issues of race and racism reflected in the students lived realities, with a goal of inviting students' critical thinking/consciousness and potential agency about these issues. Students engaged in content weekly during an after-school club over two semesters. The first semester was executed as a book club, while the second semester introduced topics via various sources such as video clips and newspaper articles. Students shared their experiences with other members and worked to make meaning of their stories. This inquiry reveals students' racialized experiences, and also examines the process of student's development of critical consciousness.

FOSTERING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND AGENCY THROUGH ETHNIC
STUDIES: AN EXPLORATION WITH SIXTH-GRADERS

by

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To my nephew, Kyree.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, research in education has suggested that Ethnic Studies (ES) programs and courses, which seek to affirm student identities, draws from their funds of knowledge, and builds students' critical intellectualism and agency (Cammarota, 2015), can have huge positive impact on student outcomes. For example, Dee and Penner (2017) found that ES programs in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) led to large and statistically significant improvements in ninth-grade GPA, attendance, and credit completion. In addition, Cabrera et al. (2014) examined the Mexican-American Studies (MAS) program in Tucson, Arizona and found that the students who participated in the program had increased likelihood to graduate high school and pass all three exit exams (reading, writing, and math). Furthermore, ES programs are theorized to promote self-esteem, ethnic identity development, school engagement and connectedness, critical thinking skills and civic responsibility among students (Cabrera et al., 2014; de los Rios, 2013; de los Rios et al., 2014). Despite the positive impact on student outcomes, ES programs have not always been met with enthusiasm or support. In fact, the public, including policymakers and legislators, have been resistant to the expansion and implementation of ES programs in educational spaces, labeling such programs as “promoting the overthrow of the U.S. government”, “promoting resentment toward a race

or class of people”, and “advocating ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals” (Arizona HB 2281, 2010). This opposition to ES programs has rightfully prompted critical discussion and debate among students, educators, parents, legislators, school districts, and scholars. In spite of, and in some instances, as a result of debate and discussion, a growing number of school districts in the United States have expanded or are beginning to expand and implement ES curricula in their high schools (Ceasar, 2015; Clark, 2015; Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter, 2011).

Since racial and ethnic inequalities continue to persist in society and across all levels of education and student outcomes, specifically regarding access, engagement and well-being of students of color (Paris & Alim, 2017), it is of paramount importance to address the issues and work towards effective solutions. Therefore, it is critical to continue exploring and implementing ES programs in efforts to prepare students to challenge systemic inequalities and to promote critical social engagement for the next generation of students (Gay, 2010). The current inquiry seeks to provide this opportunity by inviting sixth-grade English Language Arts students in a diverse urban middle school to experience and consider such critical consciousness and engagement (agency). To accomplish this goal, students were invited to participate in an Ethnic Studies Book Club, designed for their grade level, before/after school, and to discuss the issues presented in the book club and consider possible ways that they (we) can address areas of inequality or lack of inclusion, in their own lives (inside and/or outside of school). I expected this experience to encourage students’ critical consciousness and agency. Through interpretive inquiry, my goal was to let students tell their stories of the impact of the ES

book club. I had hoped this exploration would serve as one step in the lives of these students, be an informative contribution to this field of study, and that ultimately ES programs might be crafted to advance pluralistic education.

Positionality

It is important to practice reflexivity by reflecting on how my own subjectivities or personal views, perspectives and emotions, and positionality (Glesne, 2016), contributed to and impacted this research inquiry. According to Bettez (2015), “our positionalities—how we see ourselves, how we are perceived by others, and our experiences—influence how we approach knowledge, what we know, and what we believe we know” (p. 935). Reflexivity is an important aspect of interpretative inquiry as it “exposes the exercise of power throughout the entire research process” (Hesse-Biber & Piaterlli, 2012, p. 495), and allows us to navigate ethical dilemmas such as incongruent interpretations, conflicting desires about what should be shared, intercultural (mis)interpretations, rapport issues, etc. (Bettez, 2015). Additionally, the process of reflexivity holds researchers accountable to their participants (Hesse-Biber & Piaterlli, 2012) and promotes trustworthiness.

I recognize that my positionalities have great influence on how and why I conducted this inquiry. I am an African-American woman who had little exposure to diverse accounts of history and knowledge production. I approach this work from a belief that public education should seek to provide a foundation for self-discovery and actualization in a way that also promotes respect for self, others, and the larger world. Self-actualization in combination with respect and understanding of others are crucial

components to revitalize and sustain our culturally diverse and progressive society.

Though culturally rich, people in our society, particularly in our schools, generally do not make sufficient effort to learn about or interact with people across ethnic and cultural differences. Misunderstanding and/or rejection of difference has plagued our society with injustice and oppression.

My experiences in educational spaces, along with my innate compassion for others, has drawn me to approach the world through a critical theory lens, particularly critical race theory. My belief that social, political, cultural, economic structures work to dehumanize and oppress groups of people is immensely supported through critical theory. As cited in Glesne (2016), “*critical* refers to the detecting and unmasking of beliefs and practices that limit human freedom, justice, and democracy” (p. 10). Critical race theory emphasizes the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism while opposing and eliminating other forms of discrimination and oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I often find myself drawn to work that highlights and honors *standpoint epistemologies*, or forms of knowledge positioned in the experiences and values of groups that are traditionally oppressed or excluded (Glesne, 2016). My aim to use this research inquiry to critique and transform educational practice, as well as to aid in the liberation of people, are closely aligned with the goals of critical theory (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

In short, my identity as an African-American woman, my desire to challenge and dismantle oppressive systems, and my convictions about the role of education in maintaining structural hierarchies and influencing social consciousness, or “the

framework people use to make sense of the world, to understand their culture, know what to believe in and then act on that belief” (Brock, 2005, p. 9), has guided my decision to engage young students in critical discussions regarding race and racism.

The context for the current study is provided in the following chapters. First, we investigate the historical significance and debate of Ethnic Studies, and then we discuss the essential nature of ES. We then define Ethnic Studies and detail some of the common variations and praxis. A review of current models is drawn on to examine their theoretical moorings and their impact, to construct an Ethnic Studies club experience appropriate for 6th grade students.

CHAPTER II

ETHNIC STUDIES: THE HISTORY AND DEBATE

Ethnic Studies, first identified as “Third World Studies”, can trace its roots back to the push for multicultural education during the civil rights movement of the late 1960’s (de los Rios, Lopez, & Morrell, 2014; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). Groups of people who had been historically marginalized by systemic inequalities based on race, ethnicity, language, culture, and other categories of difference challenged discriminatory practices in public institutions (including educational establishments), and demanded curricula that was more representative of the United States population and less dominated by Euro-American histories, perspectives, and experiences (Banks, 2012; Jay, 2003; Sleeter, 2011). Although Ethnic Studies can be formally traced back to the civil rights movements, some argue that the concept of Ethnic Studies has a longer history dating back to Freedom Schools, Afrocentric public schools, tribal schools and Black Independent schools, and builds on the revolutionary work of scholars like W.E.B Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson (Dee & Penner, 2017; de los Rios et al., 2014; Sleeter 2011).

In 1968, the longest student strike in U.S. History, lasting 5 months, was led by the Black Student Union and a coalition of other student groups known as the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) on the campus of San Francisco State University. The

TWLF demanded inclusion, access, democracy, representation, and new academic units supporting multicultural and antiracist curricula for both postsecondary and K-12 education (de los Rios et al., 2014; Sleeter, 2011; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). Institutions such as the School of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University and the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley were established as a result of the student strikes (Dee & Penner, 2017; de los Rios et al., 2014; Sleeter, 2011).

During this same time period, public high school students also noticed the exclusion of their histories, perspectives, and experiences in curricula. As early as 1968, students at Berkeley High School in Northern California were demanding an African American Studies department, which has now been a part of that school's curriculum for more than 45 years. As of 1968, students attending Garfield, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Wilson high schools protested the schools' lack of curriculum dealing with Chicana/o history, language, and culture (de los Rios et al., 2014). Because of curriculum concerns, during the 1970's and 80's, publishers of K-12 textbooks began to address the most glaring omissions and stereotypes of non-white groups. However, national efforts drastically subsided as national concerns shifted towards standards and accountability (Sleeter, 2011).

Despite the growing interest in ES courses, and its close alignment with culturally relevant pedagogy, the expansion and implementation of modern ES programs in public schools has been difficult (Banks, 2012; Dee and Penner, 2017; Sleeter, 2011). Since the 1990's, neo-conservative and assimilationist scholars frequently characterize ES

programs as divisive, nonacademic, and detrimental to students of color because they are substituting courses that promote the development of ethnic pride in place of the development of mainstream attitudes, academic knowledge and skills (Arizona HB 2281, 2010; Banks, 2012; Chavez, 2010; Dee & Penner, 2017; Liu, 2012; Sleeter, 2011). Critics maintain that school diversity initiatives weaken national identity, and they argue that educators should develop student's identities as Americans, rather than their ethnic identities. For example, Proposition 203 "English for the Children" passed in 2003, virtually outlawed bilingual education in Arizona schools. English Language Learners (ELL) were forced into English only classes despite research that consistently showed the effectiveness of bilingual education for ELLs (Cammarota & Aguilera, 2012). Tom Horne, the Arizona State Superintendent of Public Instruction established Structured English Immersion (SEI) programs that committed ELL students to four-hour blocks of English coursework per day. This forced cultural assimilation upon ELL students through a process similar to that experienced by Native Americans and immigrants with the purpose of Americanizing them (Cammarota & Aguilera, 2012).

Moreover, the Tucson, Arizona school board was considered in violation of a state attrition law that prevented the teaching of Mexican-American studies programs. The house bill was amended to prohibit courses that 1) promote the overthrow of the United States Government, 2) promote resentment toward a race or class of people, 3) designed primarily for pupils of one ethnic group, and 4) advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals (Arizona HB 2281, 2010). In contrast, de los Rios (2013) argues that the dismantling of the MAS program is "an assault on

humanity as it advocates for the colonial restriction of historical memory, the perspectives we make available to our students, and indigenous approaches to teaching and learning” (p. 3). Due to the threat of losing state funding, the program was subsequently eliminated. Critics relate the efforts to develop students’ ethnic identities to ‘identity politics’, which assumes that such practices are reproducing an inverted racism by making a particular ethnic group superior to whites (Banks, 2012; Grosfoguel, 2012; Liu, 2012). In fact, Superintendent Tom Horne is quoted to have said, “the race you are born into is irrelevant” (Liu, 2012).

Banks (2012) conceptualizes cultural identity, national identity, and global identity as highly interconnected, complex, changing, and contextual. It is difficult to develop a national identity if the nation-state does not reflect and incorporate important aspects of the ethnic and community culture. Additionally, Banks (2012) argues against the fear of identity groups. Identity groups can both obstruct the realization of democratic values as well as facilitate their realization. Identity groups may try to impose their values on individuals but they may also enhance individual freedom by helping individuals to attain goals that are consistent with democratic values and that can be achieved only through group action. Furthermore, identity groups do not only describe marginalized groups. The Arizona ban on ethnic studies implicitly assumes that whites are not a race or ethnic group subject to the terms of the ban.

Although the expansion and implementation of Ethnic Studies programs has been met with criticism, many school districts, particularly in California, have begun to adopt Ethnic Studies curricula and some have added an Ethnic Studies course as a high school

graduation requirement (Dee & Penner, 2017). In direct contrast to Arizona's criminalization of ethnic studies in Arizona, the San Francisco Unified School District's Board of Education unanimously adopted a resolution to support ethnic studies in their schools (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). They have recently considered increasing access to a pilot Ethnic Studies course and possibly designating it a graduation requirement (Dee & Penner, 2017). After initially vetoing a bill requiring all California high schools to offer Ethnic Studies courses, Governor Jerry Brown of California signed a bill in September of 2016 mandating the development of a model Ethnic Studies program for California's public schools to utilize in creating their own programs (Dee & Penner, 2017; Wang, 2016). The Texas State Board of Education approved legislation leaving it up to school districts to offer Mexican American studies, or not. Along with Mexican American studies, the state board also put out a call for textbooks for African American, Asian American and Native American studies (Isensee, 2014). The fight for Ethnic Studies continues across districts as communities become more empowered to advocate for themselves.

CHAPTER III

THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF ETHNIC STUDIES

ES programs, as described above, provide opportunities to fully understand the nature of our diverse and progressive society and the impact of ethnicity on the culture and communities that embody the United States. The curriculum demands that both educators and students re-conceptualize their worldview. This requires the unlearning of facts and interpretations that have been created by individuals who strongly identified with mainstream culture and ignored or justified the discrimination and racism experienced by persons of color (Banks, 2006). The unlearning and new learning that occurs in ES programs often involve intellectual and emotional confrontations with previously held world views (Banks, 2006), which often lead to the development of critical consciousness and agency.

Ethnic studies teach students about the complex and interconnected role of ethnicity and culture in the United States. History has shown that ethnicity is an integral and prominent part of the North American social order (i.e., politics, social relationships, marriage, values, history, etc.). In fact, politicians are often advantaged by their group memberships when running for office. For instance, John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, received overwhelming support from Catholic voters in the 1960 presidential election (Banks, 2006), and in 2008, Barack Obama's campaign brought out large numbers of African-American voters to the polls (National Exit Polls, 2008). Furthermore, for

complex reasons, primary social relationships in the United States are typically confined within ethnic communities (Banks, 2006). For example, throughout U.S. history, it has been typical for Jewish-Americans to marry other Jews and Catholics to marry other Catholics (Banks, 2006). Religious practices, club membership, neighborhood and/or school makeup, disease prognosis, among other aspects of North American life are typically categorized and impacted by ethnic group membership.

Moreover, events throughout U.S. history often reinforce and intensify ethnic identification and allegiance (Banks, 2006). For instance, the 1992 LA Riots after the acquittal of four white officers in the beating of Rodney King evoked solidarity among African Americans. More recently events such as the fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2017 brought up concerns about Native American rights and The Black Lives Matter movement was a response to police brutality. Events such as these usually occur when dominant groups make obvious decisions that severely disadvantage groups of color. These types of ethnic conflict often occur as a result of the deeply rooted institutional racism and discrimination throughout the history of the United States. As a result, ethnic groups generally seek to build group cohesion which strengthens their ethnic identity, awareness of inequity, and empowerment to act. Aspects of American life such as ethnic identification and allegiance are becoming increasingly resistant to change and eradication (Banks, 2006).

Efforts to acculturate and assimilate ethnically “minoritized” (Harper, 2013) groups have managed to produce a narrative of cultural and linguistic assault, which continues to have devastating effects on the access, achievement, and well-being of

students of color in public schools (Paris & Alim, 2017). In fact, the academic performance gap between students of color (and multilingual students), and white, English speaking students continues to grow (McFarland et al., 2017; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017), with students of color, on average, performing lower as measured by standardized testing, dropout rates, enrollment in honors, advanced placement, and “gifted” courses, and admission to colleges, graduate and professional programs (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Held constant, evidence suggest that middle-class AA students do not achieve at the same level as their white counterparts (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Thus, class and gender, alone, do not explain the educational achievement differences apparent between whites and students of color.

Paris and Alim (2017) maintain that we should explore the outcomes of students of color through a different lens. They argue that measuring ourselves and the students in our community against White-middle class norms and ways of knowing are detrimental to our educational achievement. Ethnic studies aim to liberate students and educators from the white gaze by engaging them in new and recovered cultural forms of teaching and learning (Paris & Alim, 2017). Rather than measuring how closely students of color perform White middle-class norms, ES programs provide a pedagogy that explores, honors, extends, and challenges cultural practices and investments.

Despite our propensity to conceptualize ethnicity only in terms of ethnic minority groups, we must remember that all Americans are members of ethnic groups, and that ethnic divisions and conflict also exist among Americans of European decent (Banks, 2006). For instance, Italian-Americans Ethnic enclaves continue to exist and within each

generation they begin to seek more identification (Banks, 2006). When designing curriculum, it is important to expand our definition and understanding of ethnic groups. In fact, ethnic groups are defined as cultural groups that share a common set of values, behavior patterns and culture traits, and a sense of group identification and peoplehood (Banks, 2006). By expanding our conceptualization of ethnicity to include all ethnic groups, privileged or not, we help students to fully understand the important similarities and differences in the past and present experiences of ethnic groups which constitute America, and grasp the complexity of ethnicity in American society (Banks, 2006).

Additionally, ES programs are spaces where re-humanization is cultivated and where curriculum and pedagogy affirm, fully, who students are as human beings (de los Rios, 2013). Carter G. Woodson's most notable publication, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, identified the school's role in structuring inequality and demotivating African-American students:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples.

CHAPTER IV

DERIVATION OF THE ETHNIC STUDIES CURRICULA

Throughout literature, there are clear variations in how scholars refer to and define Ethnic Studies curricula. Some scholars have addressed ES more broadly as *critical* multicultural education (Jay, 2003; Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997), while others have referred to ethnic studies as “cultural studies,” “emancipatory education,” “Black studies,” “Chicana/o studies,” or “Mexican-American Studies” (Cabrera et al., 2014; de los Rios et al., 2014; Nouri & Sajjadi, 2014). What all notable variations of ethnic studies have in common is their orientation towards developing students who have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function in an ethnically and racially diverse world (Banks, 2006). Taken as a whole, ethnic studies, according to Dee and Penner (2017), refers to “interdisciplinary programs of study that focus on the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities with a particular emphasis on historical struggles and social movements” (p. 128). Ethnic Studies begins with the assumption that race and racism have been and will continue to be strong social and cultural forces in American society (Dee & Penner, 2017; de los Rios et al., 2014). To synthesize past and current research regarding the educational orientation toward centering the experiences of ethnically minoritized groups of people, this paper will use the term Ethnic Studies to encompass all derivations.

The key purpose of ES is to challenge the dominant discourse and paradigms of traditional academic discipline through interdisciplinary scholarship (Cabrera et al., 2014). ES grew from a desire to counterbalance both inaccuracies and the predominance of Euro-American perspectives that underlie mainstream curricula (Banks, 2012; Sleeter, 2011). The achievement of such ends in educational institutions typically requires a deep understanding and acknowledgement of critical race theory, critical or “culturally relevant” pedagogies, and comprehensive curriculum reform.

Critical Race Theory

While “multicultural education” is generally the umbrella term for pluralistic education (Jay, 2003), some researchers and educators believe that ES and multicultural education are completely different from one another (NAME, 2017). Multicultural education has been conceptualized as a reform movement designed to effect change in the “school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and other social-class groupings will experience educational equality” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Despite its goals and 30-plus year history as a research field and practice, multicultural education has failed to make significant and sustained impact on education (Jay, 2003). While ES typically offers a critique of the status quo, the multicultural education paradigm attempts to be everything for everyone and consequently becomes nothing for anyone, allowing the status quo to prevail (Jay, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In fact, Jay (2003) argues that multicultural education still operates within racialized and sexualized spaces, and rather than creating radically new paradigms that ensure justice, multicultural education programs end up getting sucked back into the

same hegemonic systems they were created to work against. In other words, multicultural education programs are generally reduced to trivial examples of culture such as eating ethnic or cultural foods, singing songs or dancing, celebrating ethnic holidays, and reading folktales (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), which perpetuates stereotypes, impedes student understanding of the role of ethnic issues and events in the development of our nation and the ways in which histories and cultures of diverse groups are bound, and neglects to empower students to challenge dominant power structures (Banks, 1988). More specifically, traditional multicultural paradigm ensures the hegemonic system of the *White gaze*, or the reliance on the acceptance by or standards of white America (Paris & Alim, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Historically, despite best intentions, multicultural education (1) typically does not challenge students to social and political action (2) continues to marginalize racial and ethnic groups (3) ignores competing or contrasting perspectives of groups, and (4) never interrogates difference, presuming that all difference is analogous and equivalent (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Ethnic studies programs intentionally address the areas where multicultural education, in its traditional implementation, falls short. Ethnic studies emphasis on race as a significant factor in determining inequity and marginalization in the United States strongly correlates to critical race theory (CRT) (Jay, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical Race Theory in education can be defined as a set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seek to identify, analyze, and transform structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of education that maintain the marginal position and subordination of specific racial and ethnic student groups (Jay, 2003; Solórzano & Yosso,

2000). CRT challenges educators and students to ask questions such as: “What role do schools, school processes, and school structure play in the maintenance of racial, ethnic, and gender subordination?” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000, p.42).

Specifically, Ladson- Billings and Tate (1995) argue that CRT in education assume that the inequalities that exist between the schooling experiences of white middle-class students and those of poor African-American and Latino students are a predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be absent. While some might argue that poor children, regardless of race, do worse in school, and that the high proportion of African-American poor contributes to their dismal school performance, it is important to consider that the cause of their poverty in conjunction with the condition of their schools and schooling is institutional and structural racism. Furthermore, Carter G. Woodson used race as a theoretical lens to identify the school’s role in structuring inequality and demotivating African-American students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In his publication, *The Mis-education of the Negro*, Woodson (1933) writes:

No systematic effort toward change has been possible, for, taught the same economics, history, philosophy, literature, and religions which have established the present code of morals, the Negro’s mind has been brought under the control of the oppressor...When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions...He will find his “proper place” and stay in it...His education makes it necessary (p. xiii).

Schools can thus be sites of sociocultural reproduction, often reproducing through job training, power structures, and what counts as knowledge (Jay, 2003). Woodson explains that modern education typically works out to benefit the needs of the oppressor,

as Negroes, who are educated under an established code of morals, accept the status of being inferior. Persons of color are less likely to question and challenge the norms because they have no other frame of reference. Essentially, the “educated negro” begins to perpetuate negative ideologies about his or her own race. CRT allows students to examine, critique, and transform from a different reference point.

Additionally, in his publication, *The Soul of Black Folk*, W.E.B Du Bois, another intellectual marginalized by the mainstream academic community, centralizes race in his examination of the experiences of African Americans. Du Bois argues that persons of color have a “double consciousness” or “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (1994, p.2). Not only do persons of color know themselves as the “other”, but they also come to see themselves as Whites see them, the “inferior other”. According to Du Bois, persons of color are “born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in the American world- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (1994, p.2). Second-sight is when the person of color understands that the status of inferior other is threatening to the self-concept of all persons of color. Because persons of color have this “second sight”, they have heightened awareness and insight to American society and their stories are an essential component to American history.

CRT takes the traditional paradigm of multicultural education which offers no radical change (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) a step further by replacing mainstream knowledge with “transformative knowledge” (Banks, 1988). Transformative knowledge:

threatens those dominant groups in our society who have a vested interest in the perpetuation of the mainstream academic knowledge that supports the maintenance of dominant structures, long-present inequities, and the current power arrangements in the United States that often serve to subordinate racial minorities (Jay, 2003, p. 5).

Critical race theorists assert that transformative knowledge is what empowers traditionally marginalized groups, which is useful in deconstructing oppressive power relations. It is not only important to identify and analyze aspects of education that maintain power relations, but we also must transform them (Jay, 2003).

Pedagogies

To maximize student outcomes, it is important that ES programs practice a pedagogy that is consistent with the ES goals of raising critical consciousness, or recognizing and challenging racialized discourse and paradigms. *Critical pedagogy* (CP), often referred to as “liberatory pedagogy” or “emancipatory pedagogy” engages students in humane and problem-posing dialogue to name and ultimately transform oppressive social and structural conditions within schools and the larger society (Freire, 2000). CP can be demonstrated through praxis that requires students to move through a cycle of (1) critical reflection on a situation; (2) plan of action to change the situation; (3) implementation of the plan; and (4) evaluation of the outcome (Cammarota, 2015). Freire believed that education is essential for experiencing freedom, and that it is political in nature because it offers students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life, and empowering forms of political agency (Giroux, 2011). Thus, CP connects education to the lived experiences of youth (de los Rios et al., 2014). It holds that education is not to prepare students for the world of labor but to help students become aware of the forces

that have ruled their lives and shaped their consciousness and develop the agency to engage critically with the world (Freire, 2000).

Critical pedagogy of race, as it relates to Ethnic Studies, is an educational praxis used to provide students with tools for identifying, reflecting on, critiquing, and acting against systemic racism and other forms of oppression (Dee & Penner, 2017; de los Rios et al., 2014; Jay, 2003; Nouri & Sajjadi, 2014). CP was born out of Paulo Freire's passion to "help students develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, connect knowledge to power and agency, and learn to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for justice and democracy" (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2011, p. 152). CP aims to develop strong readers and writers who can draw upon their literacy skills and concern for justice to facilitate change (de los Rios et al., 2014; Giroux, 2011). For example, students who participated in the Community Cultural Treasures Project at Roosevelt High School in Los Angeles California, published a book of biographies, poems, narratives, and interviews that challenged racists perceptions of their neighborhood and shared their work with community members (de los Rios et al., 2014).

"Culturally relevant pedagogy" (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995), another area developed in multicultural education literature, maintains that instructional practices are substantially more effective when differentiated to align with the distinctive cultural priors that individual students experience outside of school (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Dee & Penner, 2017). CRP does more than fit school culture to student culture; it also seeks to use student culture as a basis for classroom practice and enhance and affirm *cultural competence, academic development, and sociopolitical awareness* (Brown-Jeffy

& Cooper, 2011; Dee & Penner, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). Although widely accepted and practiced, implementations of CRP have not always fully represented the domains set by Ladson-Billings (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In particular, Ladson-Billings explains that in many ways “culturally relevant pedagogy” has been reduced to practices such as simply “adding some books about people of color, having a classroom Kwanzaa celebration, or posting ‘diverse’ images” (p.82).

Furthermore, many implementations of CRP have ignored the fluidity of culture (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012). That is to say that little scholarship regarding CRP has emphasized considering global identities that are emerging in the arts, literature, music, sports, and media. To address this, Paris (2012) offers the term “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (CSP) which seeks to sustain linguistic, literate, and cultural competencies of communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence. CSP understands that cultural ways of being as people and communities of color are not pathological, which allows us to see the fallacy of being that continue to dominate notions of educational achievement (Paris & Alim, 2017). McCarty and Lee (2014) present “culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy” (CSR) when supporting Indigenous youth. Quality ethnic studies programs utilize a classroom structure in which teachers promote engagement by structuring collaborative, equitable, reciprocal relationships between themselves and students; scaffolding student learning, and drawing on students as a source of knowledge (Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter, 2011; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). CRP has the potential to bridge language and cultural gaps – and therefore the academic gaps - between minoritized students, and mainstream, white,

English speaking students. It is clear to see how critical and “culturally relevant” pedagogies’ emphasis on culture, questioning and challenging, academic development, and sociopolitical awareness are in line with the overall goal of Ethnic Studies.

Curriculum Reform

Despite the tendency of people to equate “Americanness” with “Whiteness”, the United States is comprised of many different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups (Jay, 2003; Lipsitz, 1995). According to the US Census, in the year 2016, people of color made up approximately 40% of the population. Moreover, in the fall of 2014, for the first time, students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools who were of color represented the majority in our nation’s public schools (McFarland et al., 2017). In spite of the massive demographic changes in the United States, school curricula have persistently excluded the perspectives and histories of non-white ethnic groups.

This pattern of “race-neutrality” permeates US curricula, schooling, and education policy. Schools operate under the assumption that the process of becoming educated is a race-neutral or color-blind experience (de los Rios et al., 2014). However, since the beginning of schooling, curricula have served as a tool for acculturation and a depository of white supremacist ideals and values (de los Rios et al., 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017). Urrieta (2009) refers to the idea of teaching a dominant discourse as “whitestream” in order to decenter whiteness as dominant and to highlight the value of non-whitestream cultural capital. For instance, many textbook narratives offer clean, noncontroversial, oversimplified views of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by denying him his humanity and excluding his weaknesses and struggles, and by failing to make

connections to the civil rights movement and existing problems of discrimination, poverty, and global conflict (Alridge, 2007; Hughes, 2007). More specifically, Texas Board of Education often has debate over history standards such as: the removal of Harriet Tubman from the list of good citizens, minimizing the incarceration of Japanese American during WWII, and removing United Farm Worker labor leader, Dolores Huerta (de los Rios et al., 2014). These subtle but noticeable decisions are examples of how “white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular” (as cited in Lipsitz, 1995). Decisions such as these often have detrimental consequences. To illustrate this point, in *A Different Mirror*, Ronald Takaki states:

What happens, to borrow the words of Adrienne Rich, when someone with the authority of a teacher describes our society, and you are not in it? Such an experience can be disorienting- a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. America does not belong to one race or one group (Takaki, 1993, p. 16).

It is important that students are provided with different mirrors to not only see themselves in the narrative, but also to see positive images of themselves (ESN, 2016; Urrieta, 2009), which has typically been absent and/or rare in public school curricula. In fact, Epstein (2009) found that African-American students “learned to distrust the historical knowledge taught in school and turned to family and community members for their education.” That goes to say that distorted views of history can also lead to the academic disengagement of students of color. Stories of marginalized groups can begin the necessary cognitive conflict to jar dysconscious racism (Ladson- Billings & Tate, 1995).

Since the 1960's there have been many failed attempts to integrate ethnic content into curriculum. Whites continue to appear in the widest variety of roles, dominating story lines, and lists of accomplishments (Banks, 2012; Hughes, 2007; Liu, 2012). African Americans, the next most represented racial group, appear in a more limited range of roles, and usually receive a sketchy account historically, being featured mainly in relationship to slavery. Asian American and Latinos appear mainly with no history or contemporary ethnic experience. Native Americans appear mainly in the past and immigration is represented as a distinct historical period, rather than ongoing (Hughes, 2007).

While having added content that was previously absent, such as the depiction of racial violence enacted upon African Americans during slavery, texts say little to nothing about race relations, racism, racial issues, or systematic oppression (Hughes, 2007). Curricula continue to disconnect racism of the past from racism today, and frame perpetrators of racism as a few bad individuals rather than a system of oppression, and challenges to racism as actions of heroic individuals rather than organized struggle (Hughes, 2007; Sleeter, 2011). When textbook authors bury the history of American racism within a larger narrative of inevitable American progress, students perceive race relations as a linear trajectory of improvement rather than a messy and continual struggle over power (Hughes, 2007). Additionally, curricula tend to disconnect immigration experiences from colonization. The experiences of those marginalized by systematic inequalities are consistently added in a 'contribution fashion' to the predominately Euro-American narrative (Dee & Penner, 2017; Hughes, 2007). Their experiences are rarely, if

ever, centralized. And when they are, it is usually during designated times such as Black History month or Cinco de Mayo (Sleeter, 2011).

In his article entitled, “Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform,” Banks (1988) identifies and critiques the popular approaches to curriculum reform that are described above. The basic addition of ethnic heroes into the curriculum as *The Contributions Approach*. This approach often results in the trivialization of ethnic cultures, study of strange and exotic characteristics, and reinforcement of stereotypes and misconceptions. *The Ethnic Additive Approach* is the addition of content, concepts, themes, and perspectives to the curriculum. Banks argues that this approach fails to help students view society from diverse cultural and ethnic perspectives and to understand the ways in which such cultures and histories are inextricably bound. Students view ethnic issues and events as an addition to the main story of our nation. This approach tends to ignore important concepts and issues related to the victimization and oppression of ethnic groups and their struggles against racism and for power. Students develop a “false consciousness” or way of thinking that prevents a person from perceiving the true nature of their social or economic situation (Eyerman, 1981; Freire, 2000).

The Transformation Approach is the infusion of various perspectives, frames of reference, and content from various groups that will extend students' understandings of the nature, development, and complexity of US society. Scholarship by and about minoritized ethnic groups is used as academic content, which challenges the distorted and contradicting accounts of “whitestream” American history and progress (Banks, 2012; de los Rios et al., 2014; Sleeter, 2011). Although the Transformation Approach provides

various perspectives and frames of reference, the approach does not challenge students to make a commitment to change. Banks (1988) advocates for *The Decision-Making and Social Action Approach*, which includes all components of the transformation approach but requires students to make decisions and to take actions related to what is studied. This approach challenges students' thinking and decision-making skills, empowers them, and helps them acquire a sense of political efficacy.

In contrast to “whitestream” curricula, ES curricula very intentionally includes historically marginalized communities and students in a multicultural American curriculum and narrative (Sleeter, 2011). It seeks to affirm and include multiple voices, perspectives, and artifacts within the corpus of sanctioned knowledge (de los Rios et al., 2014). Ethnic Studies is thought to provide students with opportunities to receive quality education that is relevant and directly connected to the marginalized experiences that embody today's educational culture. These experiences are connected through community involvement, advocacy, organizing and activism (Camarota & Aguilera, 2012; de los Rios et al., 2014; Sleeter, 2011; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). Curricula that expose students to multiple historical viewpoints, that position youth as agents of change, and that appeal to young people's sense of fairness and equality tends to increase academic achievement (de los Rios et al., 2014). In addition, research indicates that student academic achievement is significantly increased when students can delve into curriculum about their own ethnicity and others (Sleeter, 2011).

CHAPTER V
KEY MODELS OF ETHNIC STUDIES CURRICULA

As the debate regarding implementing ES curriculum in public schools continue, it is helpful to examine official ES programs that already exist. This section will explore key elements of several existing programs in K-12 public schools.

California School Districts

Beginning in 2016, a statewide initiative in California began to expand the teaching of ES (AB 2016, 2016). School districts are heavily encouraged to offer standards based ES curriculum, guided by the core values of equity, inclusiveness, and universally high expectations. So far, ES courses have been implemented in the state of California's largest school districts in cities such as El Rancho, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, San Diego, Sacramento, Montebello, Coachella Valley, etc.

Pomona High School offers ES curriculum that allows students to explore the lived experiences of Chicana/o young people and other people of color and connect them to larger historical trajectories through a framework of Chicana/o Border Pedagogy, an amalgamation of critical and feminist pedagogy with Chicana/o understandings of the borderlands (de los Rios et al., 2014). Students read novels and studied material that focused on issues regarding the history of immigration as a global phenomenon, wage discrimination, agricultural labor, etc. (de los Rios, 2013). Through critical dialogue and position taking, the curriculum permitted students to analyze their own hybrid identities,

acknowledge the complex identities of others, and examine the socially and constructed identities of their communities. Students were also provided with multiple opportunities to cultivate civic engagement and critical literacies. For example, Chicana/o students partnered with Pomona Day Laborers, a separate marginalized community, to organize a community procession (modeled after a relevant religious ritual) that sought to promote awareness around current state and federal policies affecting immigrants, especially undocumented students. In addition, de los Rios worked to develop the academic competencies of reading, writing, critical analysis, public speaking, media literacy, and critical language awareness (de los Rios et al., 2014). For instance, students wrote letters to local council members, developed academic position papers, involve local businesses, created songs of justice and peace, and spoke publicly at community forums advocating for immigration reform (de los Rios, 2013). Towards the end of the course, students who participated had better understanding of their hybrid identities and were able to unravel the ways in which present day colonialism has affected their lives, gained a stronger ability to establish and engage in decolonizing discourses, and developed a greater social responsibility towards their community (de los Rios et al., 2014).

The San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) designed an ES course to give high school students an introduction to the experiences of ethnic communities that are rarely represented in textbooks and school curricula overall. This ES curriculum design stresses the use of CRP to engage with students who had previously felt marginalized by the traditional curriculum. The course encouraged students to explore their individual identities as well as their family and community history. Students were

engaged in activities that bridged their academic, home, and community environment (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). Units focus on themes of social justice, discrimination, stereotypes, and social movements from US history spanning the late 18th century until recently. The curriculum focused on multiple histories and perspectives of various racial and ethnic groups such as the genocide of American Indians in California, portrayals of various ethnic groups in the media, community resistance in historical Chinese and Latino neighborhoods, labor organizing, etc. (Dee & Penner, 2017). Additionally, students were required to design and implement service-learning projects that would impact their communities. Dee and Penner (2017) found that when implementing a culturally relevant pedagogy in the Ethnic Studies courses in the San Francisco Unified School District, ninth graders had increased student attendance (i.e., reduced unexcused absences), increased grade point average and credits earned.

In 2013, tenth-grade Chicana/o-Latino/a students in a World History class at Roosevelt High School were engaged in a community grounded Ethnic Studies project. The class partnered with community arts leaders who had historically transformed the local neighborhood into a culturally rich hub (de los Rios et al., 2014). Students learned to identify community-based cultural assets and generate empowering community knowledge that offered a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant discourse. Ethnic Studies pedagogy has numerous benefits for students such as an increase in academic confidence in writing, identity development, and critical literacies. For example, Students published a book consisting of biographies of community members, poems, narratives, and in-depth interviews of people who promoted the preservation of culture and ethnic

wealth in their neighborhood, that all challenged misconceptions of their neighborhood. The project gave students multiple opportunities to see their communities through an asset lens by exposing them to existing cultural capital. De los Rios et al. (2014) reports that one of the most positive outcomes of the project was connecting the students to resources, spaces, and people.

Tucson, Arizona Mexican-American Studies

In 2002, the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) in Tucson, Arizona became the first k-12 school district with a full ES program consisting of multiple courses. Faced with addressing the achievement gap, the school district decided to focus on the lived experiences of the students by teaching Mexican-American studies. Language arts and social studies courses were from a Mexican-American perspective and were very strongly aligned to high academic state standards and counted as core graduation requirements. Within the ES program was a youth participatory action research program (YPAR) called the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) which began as a collaboration between the University of Arizona and high school teachers in the department. This program involved a critique of traditional forms of curricula where minority experiences and voices were noticeably absent (Cabrera et al., 2014) as well as issues concerning race and economics (Sleeter, 2011). It celebrated racial/ethnic difference and positive identity development and challenged students to examine, critique, and fight systemic oppression (Cammarota & Romero, 2009). In particular, a combination of critical consciousness, self-reflection, and engaging in anti-oppressive, collective action, curriculum is based on a model of “critically compassionate intellectualism” (Cammarota & Romero, 2009), where:

- 1) Curriculum that is culturally and historically relevant to students, centered on social justice issues, is aligned with state standards but designed through Chicano intellectual knowledge, and is academically rigorous
- 2) Pedagogy in which students develop critical thinking and critical consciousness, creating rather than consuming knowledge, and is socially transformative
- 3) Authentic caring where teachers exhibit deep respect, understanding, and appreciation for students and families, and is centered on the development of an academic identity that does not conflict with student identity

When controlling for several factors like race, socioeconomic status, prior academic achievement, there was a consistent positive and significant relationship between taking Mexican-American Studies and student achievement (writing, reading, mathematics, AIMS test) (Cabrera et al., 2014; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). Researchers concluded that students were changing their relationship with school and finding themselves to be academically oriented people. While one class was important, taking multiple classes increased the likelihood of positive outcomes. These students had the highest graduation rates in their district despite having the lowest academic achievement their freshman year (Cabrera et al., 2014).

Essential Elements of Models

Pomona and Roosevelt high schools both heavily incorporated the pressing issues of the immediate communities in which the students were involved in. Students are more likely to engage when the content is relevant to them. That is to say, if a student sees the

relevance of a subject like science to his or her community he may be able to see him/herself as a scientist. ES programs should reflect the culture and orientation of the students it's serving and center equality. Additionally, these programs strongly engaged students in the development of academic competencies. Therefore, there were both social and cognitive gains. The MAS program very thoughtfully celebrated ethnic solidarity while meeting state standards. The program achieved huge gains with the lowest achieving group of students. An essential element of the SFUSD model is that the curriculum incorporated elements of histories and political struggles from multiple race/ethnic groups, many of which are not traditionally represented in US social studies content (Dee & Penner, 2017; SFUSD, 2012) Banks (2006) claims that school whose ethnic studies programs focus on one specific ethnic group, and that ethnic group being typically present or dominant in the local school population, is a result of the narrow conceptualization of ethnic studies. He argues that such narrow conceptualization rarely helps students to develop scientific generalizations about the similarities and differences of ethnic groups or to understand why ethnicity is so integral to our social system (Banks, 2006).

After examining various models of ES programs, it is clear that programs with the most significant outcomes very intentionally center inequality and issues of race and racism, reflect students' lived realities, and have high academic standards (ESN, 2016). These models have worked to create a strong positive connection between students' personal identities and academic identities. These programs have been carefully structured and then institutionalized, starting with pilot programs and then scaling up.

CHAPTER VI
THE CURRENT STUDY:
ENGAGING IN ETHNIC STUDIES CONTENT WITH SIXTH-GRADERS IN AN
AFTER-SCHOOL CLUB

While research increasingly asserts that modern ES programs are beneficial and necessary for all students, evidence of their effects on student outcomes in middle grades (and sooner) is relatively limited. The majority of reliable research concerning modern ES programs draws from samples of high school and college students despite evidence showing that students inquire about issues of race and ethnicity in early childhood (Paris & Alim, 2017). The purpose of the current study was to engage sixth-grade students, in an ethnically and culturally diverse middle school that does not have Ethnic Studies curriculum, in content that intentionally centers inequality and issues of race and racism reflected in the students lived realities, with a goal of inviting students' critical thinking/consciousness and potential agency about these issues. In order to achieve this goal, I designed an extracurricular club, appropriate for sixth-grade students, that combined methods from Banks (1988) multicultural curriculum reform, giving special attention to the Decision-Making and Social Action approach, with critical pedagogy. I drew from a synthesis of Ethnic Studies Principles (See Table 1) to form the basis for the selection of my strategies. Strategies were planned to support each dimension identified in Table 1.

Table 1. Ethnic Studies Principles

Ethnic Studies Principles	
<i>Critical (Socio-political) Consciousness and Agency</i>	
1. <u>Affirm Student Identities</u>	
Banks (2006); Cabrera et al. (2014); Camangian (2010); Ladson-Billings (2014); Sleeter (2011); Urrieta (2009)	<p>Students explore their own identity (what matters to them about how they are known or related to at school) and how their identity is or is not honored or included at school.</p> <p>Students explore ways they might want to feel more honored / included at school.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">What is the impact of their identity being / not being included at school? What might students do / want to do about such experiences?</p>
2. <u>Awareness of Power</u>	
Cammarota (2016); de los Rios (2013); Hughes (2007); Jay (2003); Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2015)	<p>Students will explore narratives from the perspectives of members of their own ethnic and cultural groups. These narratives will center inequality, equity, and issues of race and racism that are relevant to their everyday lives in their communities and in school (e.g., identity bias, sexuality, ableism, religious affiliation). Particularly, students will reflect on their own experiences/perspectives (as well as experiences/perspectives that are similar to theirs) and examine the causes of such experiences/perspectives.</p> <p>Students will construct their own knowledge as well as analyze the construction of knowledge through critical group dialogue.</p>
3. <u>Advocate for Self and Others</u>	
Banks (2006); de los Rios et al. (2014); Cabrera et al. (2014); Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2015); Urrieta (2009)	<p>Students will interrogate difference and give attention to competing or contrasting perspectives. Each activity will require students to reflect on how a concept impacts their own lives and think about/commit to ways they can become either an ally, advocate or activist on behalf of themselves and others. Students will be encouraged to explore ways they can share their knowledge with others in their school and communities.</p>
<i>Academic Development</i>	
4. <u>Improve Student Outcomes</u>	
Banks (2006); Dee & Penner (2017); de los Rios et al. (2013); Freire (2000); Hughes (2007); Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2015)	<p>Students express feelings of empowerment to take action, particularly against bullying.</p> <p>Students describe ability to consider other perspectives and viewpoints.</p> <p>Students feel represented and included.</p>
<i>Pedagogy</i>	
5. <u>CRP and CP</u>	
Dee & Penner (2017); de los Rios (2013); Freire, (2000); Ladson-Billings (2014); Paris & Alim (2017); Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2015)	<p>Listen to what matters to students. Validate and honor their lived experiences.</p> <p>Give them an opportunity to share and engage in conversations about their perspectives and experiences.</p>

This investigation was initially designed and implemented as an Ethnic Studies book club during the fall semester of 2017. However, after the semester-long pilot, I realized that the studies' methodology needed refinement. Students were beginning to become less engaged in the content, which was evidenced by the decline in book club attendance and reading. In the following sections, I summarize the book club curriculum and its implementation and how I moved forward.

Book Club Design and Curriculum

The book club curriculum loosely modeled ES curriculum that was implemented by the San Francisco Unified School District. During the summer, prior to beginning the research inquiry, Ms. Johnson, the sixth-grade teacher who I collaborated with, and I worked out details in the curriculum (i.e., activities and assignments, books and content, structure, and pace) to develop a developmentally and age appropriate book club. In agreement with the SFUSD ES curriculum, we agreed that the curriculum would focus on these major themes: identity, race and discrimination, systems of power, and political action. We chose to explore these themes through books that would allow students to examine factors contributing to identity development, portrayals of various ethnic groups in the media and school, the impact the master narrative has on the experiences of oppressed people, ways in which power is maintained, connections between current and historical events, what it means to be human, and how people have acted historically. We had planned to read *Bronx Masquerade*, *The Giver*, *Esperanza Rising*, and *I am Malala*, however, due to time constraints and shift in design, we only read *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes and *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. We believed that these books were grade

level appropriate, engaging, and representative of minoritized groups. The books were funded by FMS' Parent-Teacher Association (PTA).

Bronx Masquerade is a fiction that explores the visible and invisible identities and insecurities of 18 different characters, ranging from “popular” to “nerdy,” at a high school in the Bronx. Specifically, while studying the Harlem Renaissance, students share poems with their classmates that expose aspects of their inner selves during “Open Mike Fridays”. *The Giver* is a science fiction novel that follows the life of a 12-year-old boy, Jonas, who lives in what initially seems to be a utopian society. The society has denied its members many freedoms to assure security and conformity, which the book refers to as “sameness.” Eventually Jonas is awakened with the truth about his society and decides that he must be the agent of change.

During our first book club meeting, I facilitated the groups' development of community commitments. Community commitments were established to create a space for honest answers. Students agreed on the commitments unanimously and were held accountable to them throughout the semester. The book club operated similarly to students' ELA class in that they were given 10 minutes at the start of each meeting to respond to a writing prompt that was related to the reading. After voluntarily sharing writing responses, I gave them an opportunity to share anything about their day or week. We then moved to our discussion and activity for that day. Here is an overview of how we engaged in material:

1. *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes: This book was used primarily to explore identity formation. We used this book to explore the meanings of words like

race, ethnicity, identity, stereotypes, bias, discrimination, prejudice, social expectations and preconceived judgements. As a group, we created a character chart that allowed us to organize characters by their characteristics such as their ethnicity, family background, societal issue, and their future goals. While (and after) completing the character chart, students were given the opportunity to think about and discuss these questions: How do we define our various identities? How do we perceive ourselves and how do others perceive us? What factors contribute to these perceptions? How does identity affect our relationships? Who is the “in-crowd” and who is the other? Students also participated in a Four Corners Identity activity that required students to respond independently to statements related to the topic of identity by moving to a corner in the room labeled “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree” and then discuss. An example of a statement was, “Most of my values and beliefs stem from what my family has taught me to be important.” These discussions prompted students to think broadly about groups of people who share identities. Similar to the book, I asked students to creatively express who they are and how they would like to be seen by other book club members. Students were given the opportunity to present what they created.

2. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry: This book was intended to guide our discussions about systems and power and introduce students to the concepts of oppression, resistance and liberation, and hegemony. In addition to a responding to a

writing prompt, students participated in a Four Corners activity that required them to respond independently to statements related to the topic of identity by moving to a corner in the room labeled “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree” and then discuss. Students responded to and discussed statements like: (1) In a perfect society everyone is equal, and (2) It is better to remain ignorant about some aspects of life. As a group, we created a t-chart to compare and contrast our community with Jonas’s. Students then engaged in a discussion to respond to questions like: How can societal rules help or hurt us? How can society balance individualism with responsibility to community? Does our society have any aspects of utopias? How do personal choices impact society? How does society impact personal choices? We later made changes to the club’s design, which required us to abandon this book, therefore, we were not able to meet all of our intended goals.

Students were required to read a portion of a book each week prior to attending the book club meeting. Students developed reading goals as a group to determine how much they should read each week. Sometimes the reading was accompanied by a set of questions that students were responsible for answering. Towards the end of the semester, students were not allowed to participate in book club if they had not read and answered their questions. This rule was implemented shortly after starting the second book in response to students showing up unprepared.

I assisted Ms. Johnson, in her classroom, every Monday and Wednesday during the fall semester, and additional days when my schedule permitted. I also attended the

school's open house day to meet parents of students and to establish myself as a trusted presence in the classroom. About one month into the fall semester, I invited the students to participate in an hour-long weekly book club. Initially, I announced that the first ten students to return their book club permission slip, signed by their parents, would be given priority membership in the book club. However, over 30 students eagerly returned their permission slips the following day, and I felt it would be a disservice to limit access from the students who wanted to participate. Initially, book club was divided into two separate groups: a 7am Monday group and a 3:10pm Wednesday group. Snacks were provided. Due to the need to start on time and students arriving late on Monday mornings and/or oversleeping, I combined the two groups and we met on Wednesdays right after school from 3:10pm to 4:10pm. Students relied on the late bus or their parents to take them home. Unfortunately, all 30 students did not commit to book club. On average, approximately 10 students attended each book club meeting. These students represented various cultural and ethnic backgrounds such as, African-American, Asian-American, Arab, Middle Eastern, Vietnamese-American, Mexican and Venezuelan.

Again, as the semester progressed, the book club was met with challenges that resulted in fewer students attending meetings and reading the book. This prompted me to meet with the students to gather feedback on how the book club could be improved.

Moving Forward: A Refined Curriculum Design

In realizing the challenges of the initial curriculum design, I intended to be more cognizant of students' needs and interests, while simultaneously seeking to foster critical consciousness and agency. With this goal in mind, I considered student input from our

feedback discussion, their writing assignments, and our book club discussions to revamp the ES curriculum. Additionally, I worked to narrow my focus and scale down the intricacy of information I will share with students. Successful implementation of an ethnic studies curriculum like that of the LAUSD required much more planning, resources, and occurrences of club meetings each week than I had anticipated. Simply put, I tried to cover too much complex information in a short period of time. We had also lost the intense focus on student perspectives (their culture, identity, agency, voice, and goals) in the first iteration of the club (with the strict focus on literature and homework preparation). It is also possible that this strict focus was not developmentally appropriate for 6th grade students exploring their lived experiences from an ethnic studies perspective for the first time. I examined the principles of Ethnic Studies more closely, and with the needs and perspectives of my sixth-grade students in mind, I distilled those core principles to provide a framework for this study to more intentionally:

1. Center the personal experiences of students in the club.
2. Examine how identities and experiences are reciprocally connected (how and why their identities matter at school).
3. Explore how issues of culture, power, oppression affect them, as they are manifested at school.
4. Empower students to act as agents of social change regarding an issue that is important to them.

To conduct the current investigation, I used the spring semester to further our exploration of identities, a crucial component of ES and a hot topic for students. Students

often expressed that they were trying to figure out who they were and how they were perceived by others. Some of them conveyed frustration regarding how they were perceived and what people expected of them. Many of the expectations and perceptions imposed on them were based on biases and stereotypes. For example, Sarafina, an Asian-American student often described feeling pressured to be “smart” and “tutor others” just because of her Asian identity. As mentioned in my review of the literature, identity exploration is an important component of Ethnic Studies because it clarifies who we are as individuals and how we fit into society, as well as gives students opportunities to confront and challenge stereotypes and biases, which can work to dismantle systems of power and oppression. More specifically, these sixth-grade students were given opportunities to recognize how they are affected by stereotypes and biases, and to think about what they can do about it.

Perhaps one of their most obvious and immediate experience with power and oppression is school bullying, a concern repeatedly raised by book club members. In fact, during our feedback discussion, students expressed concerns about bullying, admitting that they had either witnessed or been a victim of bullying at some point in their lives. Moreover, students expressed displeasure with how teachers handled bullying at their school, and admitted to a fear of speaking out against it. I believed a further exploration of identity was beneficial to students as they dealt with their concerns regarding bullying. Centering identity exploration, especially as it related to school bullying, in an ES context, encouraged critical dialogue among students, which helped to facilitate critical consciousness and agency. This is to say, I wanted students to feel validated and

accepted in their identities, develop a capacity to understand difference and bias, and build upon their skills to challenge beliefs held by themselves and others. This type of critical consciousness could potentially lead to agency, empowering them to form allies with others and take action for what is right, in this case, against bullying at their school. Because these types of conversations can elicit opposing ideas and emotional responses, we (the students and I) reviewed the community commitments (expectations and accountability standards) we developed during the fall semester and made appropriate adjustments during our first meeting.

Additionally, I decided to discontinue reading books, instead, I incorporated a variety of resources that included spoken word pieces, short films, video clips, and news articles to contribute to and draw upon our (the students and I) funds of knowledge. Students were no longer required to independently read or complete activities outside of our meetings. Rather, all reading and activities were completed during our time together. I intended for these changes to strengthen our endeavor to construct knowledge together. Furthermore, I chose content that I believed would affirm and validate the perspectives of the cultural groups represented by students. Specifically, I exposed students to an experience or perspective of individual(s) and allowed them to discuss their reactions and feelings, how (if they did) relate, things that stood out or that was new to them, and how it may or may not impact them in their lives. The topics I chose were related to identity and to the experiences students had shared throughout the fall semester. These topics included ableism, stereotypes, racism, discrimination, and power. Here are a few examples of the activities:

1. Experiences with Race and Racism: Adapted from the Anti-Defamation League, this activity, designed for grade levels 5-7, was used to provide an opportunity for students to learn about the language of bias and racism, explore a range of stories (through video and written pieces) of young people's first encounters with race and racism and reflect on their own early experiences through a writing assignment. First, students were asked to review the meanings of terms bias, prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Second, students watched a 4-minute video, titled, *Being 12: 'People Think I'm Supposed to Talk Ghetto, Whatever That Is'*. In this video, twelve-year olds share their ideas and experiences about race, ethnicity, and racism. Students were instructed to jot down ideas, words, and/or phrases that stick out to them while watching the video. After watching the video students were given the opportunity to share their reactions to the video. Next, as a group, students read, *First Encounters with Racism*, an article appearing in *The New York Times* in 2017. The article consisted of four short stories where US teens reflect on their first experience with racism. Students then shared their reactions and feelings and discussed questions like: *In any of these situations, how could someone have acted as an ally? What specific ways can you act as an ally to support students whom have been targeted because of racism or an aspect of their identity? How did each person's encounter with racism change them?* Lastly, students reflected on their own experiences with race and racism and expressed their emotional responses to them.

2. “The Present” and Living with a Disability: Adapted from the Anti-Defamation League, this activity, designed for grade levels 2-6, was used to provide an opportunity for students to watch and reflect upon an animated short film, learn more about people with disabilities and identify ways they can be allies and the actions they can take to challenge ableism. First, we watched *The Present* video, a 3-minute film about a boy whose mom gifts him with a puppy. Initially the boy rejects the puppy after realizing it has a physical disability. It is later revealed that the boy, too, is living with a physical disability. After watching the video, students shared their reactions and feelings toward the video and engaged in conversation based on discussion questions. We defined the word “disability” and named examples of disabilities. I also explained that sometimes people with disabilities are not provided with what they are needed and discuss the term “ableism”. I had students share examples of ableism that they had personally experienced or observed/witnessed. I had students think about how their school and community was or was not accessible, safe, and welcoming for people with disabilities.
3. Identity-Based Bullying: This activity required students to identify important aspects of identity, define bullying and identity-based bullying, understand the connection between identity and bullying, and explore how to deal with identity-based bullying. First, we engaged in a warm-up activity which required students to sit in a circle around one student who stood in the middle and made a statement that may or may not have described the students in the group. The goal of the

activity was for the students to discover some similarities and differences they shared with one another. After the activity, we discussed the meaning and categories of the word “identity” and students were given the opportunity to discuss the aspects of their identity that are important to them. Afterwards we discussed what bullying means to the students, emphasized the differences between name-calling and teasing. Students shared examples of bullying and made connections between bullying and identity. Students were encouraged to share their experiences with identity-based bullying including what happened, how they felt about it, and what they did or wanted to do about it. In a small group, students began to brainstorm actions or solutions to bullying. The students’ consistent interest and concern over bullying caused me to anticipate the possibility that this topic may serve as a gateway to their agency at school (e.g., addressing bullying at their school).

4. Labels: Students read “The Bear That Wasn’t” by Frank Taslin. Through discussion, students explored how labels (given to ourselves or by others) can influence how we, and others, are perceived in society. Students paired this story with a nonfiction text from an Educational Psychology blog entitled, *The Dangers of Labeling Others*. After reading and discussing both texts, students compared the two readings in a Socratic Seminar. Prior to the seminar, students worked with partners to develop “higher order thinking questions” (Blooms Taxonomy) to promote discussion during the seminar. Following the discussions, students created an identity chart for the bear and for themselves to compare and contrast.

Research Questions

One overarching research questions guided this inquiry, with four undergirding sub-questions:

- (1) How does participating in an afterschool, ethnic studies club influence a small group of sixth-grade students' development of critical consciousness?
 - a. What lessons/insights regarding critical consciousness do students report or exhibit?
 - b. What changes (if any) do students report/exhibit regarding their identity as it relates to issues of critical consciousness?
 - c. What evidence is there of student agency and/or social action during/as a result of addressing issues of critical consciousness in club (student reports of action/plans; observations of student actions at school)?
 - d. What challenges do students report resulting from examining issues of critical consciousness?

CHAPTER VII

METHODS

Participant Selection

For the purpose of anonymity, the middle school where this inquiry took place was referred to as Friendly Middle School (FMS). The school district is situated in a large metropolitan area in North Carolina, serving approximately 71,747 students. The total district population includes students from diverse backgrounds which include: American Indian - 0.42%, Asian - 6.25%, Black - 40.62%, Hispanic -15.15%, Multi-Racial - 4.01%, Pacific Islander - 0.15%, White - 33.4%. Within this community, 105 languages/dialects are spoken. 10,733 (includes pre-K) receive Special Education Services. 13,792 are Advanced Learners. The poverty rate for students in this district is 65.1%.

FMS is a Title 1 school located in a quiet suburb of the city surrounded by single family homes as well as apartment complexes scattered throughout the existing neighborhoods. FMS' diverse population of 716 students, hosts grades 6-8 and includes: Asian-4%, African American-49%, Hispanic-20%, White-20% and Other/Mixed-5%. Students are representative of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The staff racial breakdown is 38% African American, 53% White, 6% Hispanic, 3% multi-racial. 64% of the students who attend FMS are eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch based on parents' gross annual income. In addition, 19% of enrolled students are identified as SWD (Students with Disabilities), and 6% are identified as LEP (Limited English Proficiency).

Participants involved in this inquiry were the same students from Ms. Johnson's sixth-grade English Language Arts Classrooms at FMS. Ms. Johnson taught 4 classes of 22-35 students in each class. Participation in the spring semester ES club was open to students who returned their permission slips during the fall semester.

It is important to note that the Ethnic Studies club was in addition to other school-wide education initiatives, some of which are new to the teaching staff. FMS was accountable to eight initiatives including: American Reading Company (ARC) curriculum, The Leader in Me: 7 Habits, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS), Positivity Project, Kindness Challenge, student led conferences, 8th grade ELA focus groups, and PACE/IMT. Additionally, Ms. Johnson actively practiced "culturally relevant" pedagogy in all four of her classrooms and engaged students in activities and assignments that were culturally sustaining. I expected that knowledge gained from these initiatives would carry over into our conversations.

Permissions

We received approval from the International Review Board to conduct research on Human Subjects since we collected data from students. We also obtained a letter of support from the principal of the school as well as approval from the school district to conduct research in the classroom. Consent forms were obtained during the 2017-2018 school year from parents to allow students to participate in this study.

Data Collection

Interviews. Students participated in semi structured one on one interviews at the end of the semester to explore their perceptions and attitudes towards their experience in

the book club. The interviews were no longer than 45 minutes. These interviews were audio recorded with the interviewee's permission and immediately transcribed for thorough analysis. The questions asked during the interview were:

- (1) What lessons did you learn during the Ethnic Studies club?
 - a. As you think back on your experiences in the Ethnic Studies club, what resonates most with you? (follow-up: What were any [if any] "aha" moments for you?)
 - b. What, if anything, have you learned or realized about the role differences between people plays in your school or community? (follow-up: What reactions to difference do you see? What changes [if any] would you like to see in how difference is handled?)
 - c. What, if anything, have you learned or realized about who has power at your school or community? (follow-up: How is power used? How would you like to see power used differently?)
 - d. How do you think the club has impacted your ability to think about things from (culturally) different perspectives?
- (2) How did participation in the Ethnic Studies club affect your (ethnic) identity?
 - a. After participating in the Ethnic Studies club, what have you learned about things that affect your identity?
 - b. What have you learned about the value of staying true to yourself?
 - c. What strategies have you learned to help you stay true to yourself?

- (3) How did the Ethnic Studies club help you decide how to make a difference in your school or community?
- a. What are some things you can do / have done to make a difference in your school or community?
 - b. After participating in the ES club, what changes (if any) would you like to see happen in your school or community?
 - c. What role can you play in facilitating these changes? (follow up: Are there specific actions you can take?)
 - d. Have you made any plans to take action against or for any issues that concern you? If so, what?
- (4) In what ways was participation in the Ethnic Studies club a challenge for you?
- a. What topic was most challenging for you to understand or deal with?
 - b. How did you deal with those challenges?
- (5) How are this semester's club meetings similar to or different from last semester's?
- a. How did differences affect you?

Observations ad Field Notes. Each time I was at the school, I considered myself to be in the field as a researcher. I took notes and coded them for data collection.

Club Meetings and Activities. Students engaged in critical discussions with one another and myself during club meetings regarding a variety of topics discussed above. Each club meeting was an hour long and occurred one day a week during the weeks that late buses were available for students to have a ride home. I also collected written activities from students as measurement of their stories of critical consciousness and

attitudes towards agency. The majority of club meetings during the first and second semester were audio recorded, and selectively transcribed. I jotted down as much as I could remember of the meetings that were not recorded.

Data Analysis

The primary goal of the research questions in this inquiry was to explore the influence of the ES club on student critical consciousness and agency. My corpus of data includes field notes from my time in the ELA classroom, observations from a few of those visits, audio recordings of and/or reflective notes from each club session, writing responses collected from students, and audio recorded student interviews. Occasionally, I either did not have my recording device or it had malfunctioned. When this occurred, I would immediately jot down what I had remembered from the session. Prior to conducting interviews, I reviewed all data previously collected and wrote down questions and ideas to follow up on.

The analysis of this data was both thematic and narrative in nature. Two phases of data collection were analyzed and compared. I understand data analysis as a “process of separating aggregated texts (oral, written, or visual) into smaller segments of meaning for close consideration, reflection and interpretation” (Ellingson, 2011, p. 595). I began data analysis through the process of sorting. Originally, I had organized data by genre (i.e., field notes, club meeting transcripts and reflection notes, and student writing responses). As suggested by Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (2006), I reread and listened to everything I had. With pen and paper, I would listen to the audio recordings and jot down brief notes and impressions. I underlined and highlighted things that stuck out to me on each piece

of data and reorganized everything into new stacks that represented possible themes, recurring topics or repeated ideas. Initially I began to code data, however, the emergent patterns and themes were so obvious, that it seemed unnecessary. For example, it became clear to me that emotion and the perception of others was deeply present in our discussions and interviews. Student demeanors changed during conversations and they often named the emotions there were feeling. It was also clear that students had come to understand racism in different ways during our discussion.

By sorting data into piles that illustrated recurring topics and repeated ideas, I could examine if and how my research questions were answered, and determine whether my data sources were appropriate. Additionally, I was able to use the piles to make connections among different data sources, a process referred to as “triangulation.” Triangulation is the process of verification using multiple sources of information to validate, cross-check, and challenge evidence (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006). Gathering data using different instruments with participants presents data more effectively and reflect the reality of the data collection. Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (2006), argue that triangulation offers “texture, depth, and credibility to the study” (p. 144). I was able to find evidence of my themes throughout my piles from different sources of data, as well as from multiple student perspectives. Through this process, I was able to connect my data closely within the frame of my research questions. Data was represented by use of direct quotes from students and narrative texts.

CHAPTER VIII

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In the following sections, I provide an exploration of thematic categories that emerged out of my analysis of data from my work with the students in the Ethnic Studies club. Data was collected in two rounds, the first semester and the second semester of the 2017-2018 school year. The first semester of data collection was conducted in the beginning of the school year and throughout the fall of 2017. Data collection involved one student interview, observations and field notes, nine book club meetings (audiotaped) and student written assignments. Data unveiled overlapping and interconnected themes, which seem to represent three categories: 1) Perceptions of Identity, 2) Understandings and Misunderstandings of Racism, and 3) Perceptions of Exclusion and Desires to be Included. After an analysis of round 1 data, I move to discuss pedagogical forces that worked to constrain the facilitation of a sophisticated development of critical consciousness, and discuss pedagogical approaches that worked to disrupt these forces.

Next, I examine round 2 of data collected during the spring of 2018. This round of data collection involved five student interviews, observations and field notes, and five book club meetings. My analysis of this round of data emphasized two major themes: 1) Intimate Experiences with Race, Racism, and Discrimination and 2) Ally, Advocate or Agent. In discussing each theme, direct quotations from students are included to provide texture and richness and assist in illustrating major themes. As discussed earlier in the

methods section, each student was given a pseudonym and quotes are coded under this name. I conclude with a discussion of my findings in relation to my research questions, implications for future research, and the limitations of this study.

First Semester of Data Collection

Perceptions of Identity

I feel sad about my life. If I ever get a chance to [be] someone else, I will. –Abdul

Ethnic Studies aim to affirm student identities by providing opportunities to explore what matters to students about how they are known or related to at school. Students frequently participated in activities and discourse that required them to examine how they perceive themselves, how they are perceived by others, factors that influence who they are, and how their identities impact their relationships with others. As students explored their identities, I found that they were still trying to understand what was important about who they are and how to express it.

Upon asking students to describe themselves, the majority of them described and introduced themselves in terms of what they enjoyed. For instance, Shana wrote, “I love to cook and paint...I love to dance and sing”, while Natasha similarly wrote, “I like to dance, play basketball, wrestle. I’m heavy handed.” When I asked Sarafina to tell me something about herself, she responded with, “a little fact about me is, I want to be a singer one day.” It seemed difficult for students to describe who they were outside of these parameters.

To my surprise, when asked to tell the group about themselves, no student who was born in the United States, described themselves within a racial or ethnic context. In fact, none of the students were familiar with the word ethnicity and they struggled to understand how it was different from what they had known about race (i.e., it categorizes people by the color of their skin). They would often ask, “what is ethnicity?”, almost always having trouble pronouncing the word. Even after explaining the cultural components of ethnicity such as language, common ancestry, origin, and traditions, students still demonstrated difficulty understanding the concept during later club meetings. During an activity, for instance, Josh explained that he did not know where he was from. After answering a few questions, he shared that he considers himself to be African-American, and although he really didn’t know what it meant, he felt it was important to him. When asked what is the most salient identity you have, Kevin, almost always refusing to subscribe to a label, responded, “happy.”

Although most students described themselves in terms of what they liked or didn’t like, their perceptions of how others saw them were primarily related to how they were perceived relationally and intellectually. For example, Atalia wrote, “I think people think I’m funny, sarcastic. By the end of the year, I don’t think it will change.” Kevin added a few more descriptors when he wrote, “I think people right now describe me as funny, and kind, also honest. I don’t think people will think different.” Similarly, Sarafina wrote, “I think people would describe me as smart, kind, and funny girl who can be a little serious sometimes. I’m fine with the way I am right now.” These students maintained that they were perceived accurately and positively by their peers, therefore, they had no

expectations for these perceptions to change. Additionally, students seemed to place a lot of value on being perceived as funny. Like the others, Deja shared, “I think people describe me as funny or weird. I would like if they describe me as nice and helpful but still funny.” It is possible that being funny gives students some type of leverage during school. Perhaps I was among a group of kids who were well liked because they were funny or maybe this group of students were projecting their perceptions of themselves onto others.

Despite writing that she was fine with how things are right now, Sarafina joined Aliyah during our large group discussion to explain the disadvantages of being perceived as smart. Both girls explained that the being considered smart elicited unwarranted dependency from classmates. Rather than do their work on their own, classmates relied on Aliyah and Sarafina to do it for them. One on occasion, Aliyah explained that although she had done all the group work alone, her other two group members used her work and received higher grades than her. Both Aliyah and Sarafina explained that this dependency negatively affected their relationships with their classmates because being labeled as the person with all the answers was burdensome. Like Sarafina and Aliyah, Kayla wrote:

I think other people think that I’m smart because I get high scores on quizzes and tests most of the time. People think I’m the one who understands situations that they have. I would like to be described as a loyal friend by the end of the school year.

Kayla also emphasized and valued qualities that would improve her relationships with others. No one wrote or expressed wanting to be perceived in ways that could potentially disrupt their friendships.

Like others, Alexander wrote that he believed people would like him because he was kind. However, he explained that he is often misperceived because “they know that I am disabled and they think I can’t do anything, but I can.” In this moment, I felt especially empowered by Alexander who was always high spirited, confident in his abilities, and open about his challenges. The openness and self-acceptance he exhibited was unlike any of the other members in the club. Although most of the students shared that they agreed with how they were perceived by others, during a “four corners” activity, many of them moved to the “strongly agree” corner when I read the statement, “My true identity is not the same as what others might perceive it to be.”

In fact, some of these same students later disclosed parts of their identity that contributed to a negative self-concept. For instance, in response to a writing assignment, Deja wrote,

I don’t really like the way my face looks and I feel like nobody will like me when I get older. I feel like people want to be my friend just because I am smart and I will give them things.

Also related to her physical appearance and the perception of others, Sarafina described disliking her body size and feeling judged because of it. She said, “that’s like kind of been a struggle for me because um you know I’m more of like a bigger girl, so people often choose me last while we’re doing sports.” Both Sarafina and Deja appeared to be

well-liked and insightful girls, however, there was an obvious mismatch in how they wanted to be perceived and how they really felt. On the other hand, Abdul, was a very quiet student, and although he didn't say much, he attended every meeting during the fall semester. He was very pleasant and always respectful. Despite my perceptions of him, Abdul disclosed information in his writing which included, "I feel sad about my life. If I ever get a chance to [be] someone else, I will." I'd like to note that these writings came later during the semester after students had been specifically asked to share a part of themselves that was unknown to many. Perhaps they had become more comfortable sharing this type of information with me. In spite of disclosing this information to me, students never brought up these issues during our large group discussions. This further illustrates students' focus on maintaining an acceptable image among their peers.

Though students seemed to value what was important among their peer group, most of them agreed that parts of their identity, their values and beliefs, stemmed from what their family had taught them to be important. The only students who did not necessarily agree were students who described having bicultural identities. In particular, Sarafina explained that her parents are Vietnamese-American and have beliefs that she doesn't always agree with. In my one-on-one interview with her, Sarafina described one conflict with her parents:

He [dad] talks about the um Asian-American stereotype on how people think we're stupid and how that we're not good enough, and how we're not full Asian or full American people don't like us. My dad talked about that with us before. Um and he himself has stereotyped people before. And I've tried to like tell him that "no people aren't all the same" but he still has the same opinion. And same as my mom.

Like Sarafina, Atalia reported that her Guatemalan mother has traditional values that Atalia describes as the “old times” and adds, “life is different now than when my mother grew up, so she doesn’t always have the same belief system.” Comparably, Kevin, who has a Christian mother and Muslim father, explained that although his dad usually has good advice, Kevin doesn’t always agree with him. These students were adamant about allowing their identities to be shaped by their own experiences without the input from their parents. They all agreed that belief systems vary throughout locations and generations.

Students agreed that an important component of identity is self-expression, which can be demonstrated by the type and style of clothing one wears and their interest in music. While most students were in strong disagreement that you can usually figure out a person’s identity by looking at their appearance, one student agreed while another was unsure. In particular, Josh explained that he had initially presumed Sarafina to be Chinese when she is in fact Vietnamese. However, upon meeting his cousins for the first time, he assumed they were Jamaican and he was right. Similarly, Atalia explained that no one knows that she is Hispanic by looking at her. Josh explained that sometimes appearance can tell us things about a person, while other times, they can misinform us. On the other hand, Kevin explained that the freedom of self-expression can help one to draw appropriate conclusions. He said, “my teachers and my friends think that I am a nice, friendly, funny, and smart person and I am. My brother gets in trouble a lot and he is not honest. He sags his pants and he listens to a lot of rap music. I don’t sag my pants. I dress

like this (looks down at his SMOD required clothing).” These examples are indicative of how students constantly make connections to their experiences and larger ideas.

For instance, one day I had students take a few minutes to respond to a few questions: 1) What are some stereotypes or preconceived judgments you have had about a group of people? 2) Why did you have these beliefs? 3) What are ways you can challenge your beliefs? Student responses showed that while some stereotypes were about religion and gender, most were concerning assumptions about racial groups. In particular, Kayla, a Vietnamese-American wrote, “I thought African Americans were all gangsters because most of the people I saw were wearing street style dressing.” Students described having these beliefs because of what they were exposed to. For example, Sarafina wrote, “So I later learned that it [most Asians are smart] wasn’t true and I lived up to those expectations, so I thought it proved that.” Similarly, Natasha, an African-American student who admitted assuming that someone from a different race was rude or racist, wrote, “I think that because the way that they act. Like when someone is White and you just say “hi” to them, some people get mad when all you said was “hi”. Students explained making these connections based on what they had been exposed to and changing these beliefs once they were exposed to something that contradicted their beliefs.

Student perceptions of identity demonstrated that the exploration of identity is complex and it is difficult at their age (sixth-grade) to sort out what is truly important to them versus what they believe is important. Their ways of being are heavily under the scrutiny of their peers and themselves. Due to the overwhelming amount of self and

received judgment, it was difficult to examine enough positive experiences for them to develop a sense of empowerment.

Understandings and Misunderstandings of Racism

Everyone living in the hood is not bad, they just can't afford to live somewhere else...It's their fault cause they didn't make the right decisions in life. – Natasha

Ethnic Studies begins with the assumption that race and racism have been and will continue to be strong social and cultural forces in American society (de los Rios et al., 2014); therefore, it was important that I center issues of race during our meetings together. As emphasized by critical pedagogy, I tried to remain cognizant of how I exercised my power and authority over the students. I was cautious to not over saturate them with my perceptions about what counts as racism and what doesn't. Instead, I attempted to ask them critical questions that would allow them to affirm or challenge their beliefs and model how to engage in critical conversations. By doing this, I could center students as the primary source of knowledge construction and learn how they understood and experienced racism.

During the first week after receiving *Bronx Masquerade*, a novel we explored together, students came to me during class and in the hallway to tell me that they believed the book was “filled with racism.” I remember being hesitantly asked, “Are we supposed to read books like this?” and when asked why, the student would say “because it's racist”. Or when I asked about opinions of the book, I would get remarks like, “I like the book. I don't like the racism part.” I assumed this indicated that students did not typically discuss issues of race and racism as openly as the book, in school. Or at least that it was a

topic that they had preferred to avoid. I encouraged students to continue reading and assured them that they would be given the opportunity to voice their concerns during our next book club meeting.

During the next meeting, I learned that students were particularly referring to comments made by the African-American character, Tyrone. For instance, one of his comments read:

White folk! Who they think they kidding? They might as well go blow smoke up somebody else's you-know-what, cause a Black man's got no chance in this country. I be lucky if I make it to twenty-one with all these fools running round with AK-47's (p. 8).

In these comments, Tyrone is expressing his thoughts after being told by his white teachers that he needs to plan for his future. In addition to these comments, all the comments in the book that students perceived as racist had blatantly called attention to a person's racial identity, regardless of context. Quite naturally, perceptions of racism initiated a critical dialogue among myself and students regarding what they perceived racism to mean and whether Tyrone's comments declared him as racist.

In general, students related racism to comments about a person's skin color, intent to do harm or cause offense, and critique of one's culture. For example, Kevin said, "To me racism is if you're talking about someone else's color." Lily similarly said, "judging somebody by their color or skin tone. Basically, judging them from the features of where they're from." Aliyah added a bit more nuance noting how tone and intent mattered, "I feel like it's the way you say it. Because sometimes you can just be talking in general, and sometimes you can be trying to be hurtful." Their comments were representative of

most of the students, indicating varied understandings of racism (i.e., commenting on skin color, making a judgement based on skin color, intending to be hurtful), all which were used to support or reject claims that Tyrone's comments were racist. For instance, Lily considered Tyrone's comments to be racist because they represented false judgement, arguing that a black man does have a chance in this country. She rationalized this when she explained, "so a lot of people think that racism is judging people by their culture, but if somebody comes up and tells me I'm African or I'm Moroccan, I'm not going to take that as offensive because it's like where I'm from. If you say that somebody is black, you're just calling them what they are." Rather than interrupt the natural flow of our conversations to challenge student beliefs and perspectives, I often jotted down notes with the intent to come back to ideas and statements. Fortunately, in many instances, students were likely to address earlier comments without my scaffolding.

After much interrogation and debate regarding the context of the text, students began to develop an understanding of why Tyrone made his comments. India boldly proclaimed, "but he's black. It doesn't make any sense...but he's black so it's not being racist. He's talking about himself." I would ask questions like, "What is he trying to say here?" "What is he trying to express?" "Why do you think he feels this way?" to help expand their thinking. Abdul reasoned that Tyrone had "no chance with the Whites," while Sarafina added, "In his head, he thinks that people favor whites over blacks more because you know racism is still around. You can look at Donald Trump." Additionally, Kevin, who reflects on Tyrone's environment, stated, "I actually do remember in the book. I think he was talking about his dad got shot and blasted away and didn't make it to

30 or 31.” The combination of statements like these supported students in their understanding of seeing Tyrone’s statements as more of a testament to his reality rather than racism towards Black men.

During our discussions, I found that students were less likely to connect encounters and experiences to racism if the racialization of such experience or encounter was less apparent or less threatening. In particular, when asked to give modern-day examples of racism, students continually referred to major historical events such as the Holocaust, slavery, and segregation during the Civil Rights Movement. After much grilling, the only present-day (occurring during their lifetime) example of racism provided was the Charleston, South Carolina church mass shooting involving the murder of nine African-American men and women by a white-supremacist. Although students were less likely to identify nuanced examples of racism, through dialogue, they made meaningful connections to racial injustice that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. For instance, during one meeting when discussing why the family of the Puerto Rican character, Raul, discouraged him from a career in painting for fear that he would not make money, Kevin said:

I have a question. Leonardo Da Vinci is from Italy, right? (referring to another student mentioning him as a famous painter) Raul is a Mexican artist, right? Puerto Rican, I’m sorry. I think that’s also one reason why. Think about it. He’s a Puerto Rican and he wants to be an artist. I don’t think there’s many Puerto Rican artists in the world. Maybe that’s one reason why.

Here, Kevin explains that lack of representation of famous Puerto Rican artists may be a reason why Raul’s family is against him becoming a career painter. I then asked Kevin if

the lack of Puerto Rican artists would make it easier or harder for Raul, to which he responded:

To tell you the truth, I think it's going to be harder because he's in this school with lots of black kids and a few whites, I know that. And he wants to be an artist and everyone else wants to be a basketball player or whatever they want to be. And in America, if you want to be an artist, not everyone would accept you unless they see you have super great work. But they'll only accept the color [ethnicity] they need.

Aside from concern that a career as a painter might not be as lucrative as other careers, Kevin emphasizes Raul's minority status both in school and in our larger US society to explain Raul's plight. When asked if the students felt race or ethnicity played a part in the kinds of jobs and opportunities people received, everyone said "yes", while David added, "only because of people's opinions and the way the world is working right now." David goes on to explain that currently people have preconceived opinions about certain people based on who they are. Although meaningful connections were made regarding Raul's dilemma, none of the students used the words race or racism. Additionally, in my interview with Sarafina, a Vietnamese-American student, who aspires to be a famous singer and who was not present in the book club meeting when we discussed Raul, also commented on the lack of representation of certain groups of people in successful positions. She stated:

Can you show me an Asian or a Mexican that has like been famous for a good amount of time and they've won awards and they've been extremely successful? Someone that has been out there and they are Asian and Mexican because I can't find one.

Sarafina did not directly connect this lack of representation to racism, instead, she related this to the unfairness of having an outcast group and an in-group. Although this is racism at its core, when asked if she felt it was due to racism she replied, “no, they’re just not appreciated as much, so they’re not as common.” I found this to be interesting considering that she had previously justified Tyrone’s comments about not having a chance in this country by arguing “people favor whites over blacks more because you know racism is still around.” Additionally, Lily spoke on lack of representation from a different angle. One day, she eagerly got the groups attention with the talking stick and shared with us:

So, I was in like Friendly Center. So, I was like in the park, I was sitting down, my mom was going to buy us ice cream and this woman, she came up to me, she was like, “where are you from?” I told her I was from Morocco, it’s in Africa, she was like “why aren’t you black?” and I just got up and left.

Lily, who identifies as Middle Eastern or Arab, explained that she felt this was indeed an act of racism because “the lady assumed that all Africans are black....”

These conversations are not only representative of how students perceive racial injustice, but they also give insight to how these students were unaware of the role of racism in creating these dynamics in our culture. For instance, when describing Tyrone’s environment, Natasha related by sharing:

So, when I was little, me, my mom, my dad and my brother, we were like all growing up in the hood and there was this little girl and she was only like four years old and she got shot.

I later went back to ask Natasha what she meant by “hood”, so that I could confirm that I was accurate in my understanding of what the “hood” meant to her. Natasha explained that the “hood” was a “bad neighborhood where people sell drugs”. When asked what type of people typically live in the hood, she said, “Black people. Sometimes you see White people in the hood because they want to be like black people and start selling drugs or they are cops.” When she described what she felt was not considered the hood she said, “no drugs, sorry but no hoes, rich neighborhoods, good jobs, Caucasians.” I then asked her, “Is everyone living in the hood bad?” to which she responded, “Everyone living in the hood is not bad, they just can’t afford to live somewhere else...It’s their fault cause they didn’t make the right decisions in life.” Although Natasha believed that not all people who lived in the hood were bad and that she had only seen “rich black neighborhoods” on t.v., she insisted that a person who lives in the hood as a result of their own fault.

Other students who shared similar stories maintained this same opinion, acknowledging and in some ways validating classism, and not recognizing its relation to the economics of racism. This mindset connects to what Marxists refer to as a “false consciousness”, or an inability to recognize inequality, oppression, and exploitation in a capitalist society because of the prevalence within it of views that naturalize and legitimize the existence of social class (“false consciousness” 2018). Students had believed this dominant theory that people had achieved upward mobility exclusively because of their work ethic.

Despite varied understandings of racism, everyone's conceptions were accompanied by negative feelings and emotions. For instance, Kevin said, "the bad part is all the racism. – It angered me... How they treated each other." Shana went on to add, "most people say that racism is bad because of what happened in the past like Hitler and with slaves, and so, it's offensive." I noticed that our conversations about race and racism were sometimes difficult for students. This was evidenced by the decline in student energy levels during our conversations, students feeling the need to "lighten the mood" by telling a random joke, and lowering the tone of their voices. Despite the emotions provoked by these conversations, students did not have concrete ideas about how to challenge these issues other than to "be nice to people" and "treat people equally".

As students revealed their understandings and misunderstandings of racism through the sharing of stories and engagement in debate, I absorbed valuable messages about how they experienced and perceived racism. Particularly, "students of color experience racism; ethnic studies does not introduce them to that concept" (Sleeter, 2011, p. 9). Students openly and willingly shared stories regarding racism without my needing to pry. Students were aware of individual forms of racism that occurred within interpersonal relationships. They could easily identify a racial prejudice or discrimination that was flagrant. I learned that although experiences with racism were current and normal for them, they rarely discussed them in school, and many of them did not share their experiences with anyone. In contrast to identifying individual and blatant forms of racism, systemic racism, as expected, was more difficult for them to identify and understand. In fact, students were more likely to blame victims of systemic racism for

their circumstances. These findings were useful in that they allowed me to gauge where students were in their development of critical consciousness.

Perceptions of Exclusion and Desires to be Included

They hide who they are because they don't want to feel like they're worthless.
– Kevin

Bronx Masquerade required us to consider how aspects of our identity can make us feel like outsiders, as many of the characters in the book felt. Students shared stories about times when they did not feel as though they fit in. Most of these stories were related to school experiences with their peers, and these stories were described through a deficit lens, where students viewed themselves as lacking what was needed to be part of a group.

Some students connected the feeling of not fitting in to experiences when they were explicitly rejected by a group of their peers. For instance, Aliyah wrote:

A time I did not fit in was when I was in 3rd grade and I was bullied and had no friends. People said that I didn't belong and I would just go home to cry...Reasons I was bullied was because I was short, had glasses and hairy eyebrows.

Comparatively, Natasha wrote:

The time I felt like I didn't fit in was last year because people were making fun of me and there was a whole lot of drama. Even this year, I feel like I don't belong because sometimes somebody's always making fun of me, or my friends just hang out and I'm the 3rd wheel [person in company of a couple]. So that makes me feel kinda upset because I didn't do anything for that person to call me names.

There were several instances during book club when students would mention being bullied or knowing someone who had been bullied. When we expanded on this topic of exclusion in our book club meeting, I found that most students' experiences related to bullying were connected to ideas about their personal appearance. In fact, when asked about the specific things they were made fun of for, students indicated that their peers made comments about their acne, height, body size and image, and a few students even discussed being called "African" because of their darker skin complexion.

Other students described experiences that were not necessarily blatant rejections from the group, however, they experienced some sense of exclusion resulting in self-censorship. Kevin wrote:

When I was five I watched Team Umizoomi. I loved it but my friends didn't. We had to watch the show in class and I knew the whole song and my friends just booed it. So, I booed too and got in trouble. The next day we had to watch it again, but this time I was in this [other] group of kids and I sang the song and my friends did not hear me or see me.

I found Kevin's writing response to be particularly interesting. A couple of weeks prior, when asked why he thought students would put on a masquerade (referring to the title of the book), he responded, "They hide who they are because they don't want to feel like they're worthless." When students were asked if they believed they could be their complete selves in school, all except one student responded, "yes". However, data reveals a pattern of students hiding parts of themselves to avoid being excluded, or seen as different. When Kevin initially booed the show with his friends, despite enjoying it, he was acting in ways to maintain acceptance. Another example of this was revealed in

Jada's comment, "Sometimes I act shy here because I'm new to this school. I'm scared that people won't like who I really am." Again, students are actively making mental notes of reasons they would be excluded by their peers. To avoid this, they sometimes suppress parts of themselves, rather than confront their peers, which none of the students spoke to or wrote about.

But what happens when they can't hide an aspect of their identity? Here, Lily explained:

the one time I did not feel like I fit in was when the first time I came to America [United States] and I was five. I did not know how to speak English and everyone did and I felt like an outcast. But when I went to school, I learned how to speak English, and here I am today.

Lily, along with other members in the book club whose native language is not English or who have a non-U.S. cultural background, often feel compelled, for various reasons, to learn English or aspects of the American culture which allows them to feel included. Schools are typically the sites for such acculturation and assimilation (Paris & Alim, 2017). This is often at the expense of sustaining their own culture. In fact, a few of the bicultural students in the club related that they all had experienced some degree of conflict between their native culture and US culture.

In addition to a cultural identity that could not be hidden, Alexander, spoke candidly about his identity as a person with a physical disability. In response to a story I shared about my personal experience in middle school, Alexander said:

I get the thing when they make fun of you because that happens to me a lot. People always...that's what I hate. I know they want to know about me. All the

time they say, “What happened to your legs? You have an accident?” Sometimes I say, “Can you please go away because I don’t want to say something bad to hurt your feelings.” In school, when I was 8, people look and say, “he cannot do nothing.” I was about to fight. (shakes head)

Alexander describes the salience of his identity as a person living with a disability and how it influences his encounters with other people. He expresses frustration when people ask him imposing questions and explains that they act like they’ve never seen a person with a disability. Alexander’s frustration evolves into anger when people assume that he is incapable of doing things. He later writes, “It’s hard being a 6th grader because it’s hard for me to move from place to place.” People’s assumptions about his abilities coupled with his difficulty moving through the crowded classroom and small halls have sometimes left him feeling excluded.

Students shared experiences of exclusion that were restricted to earlier years in their life. The negative emotions they ascribed to these experiences at the time they occurred seem to have become insignificant as all students insisted, “that’s just the way life is,” “you aren’t supposed to let what people say hurt you” and “I really don’t care what people think”. As a matter of fact, during our discussion of a female character, Sheila, who felt disconnected from her Italian identity and wanted to fit in with her African-American classmates, Natasha explained,

Just because you’re not black doesn’t mean you have to act like a black person. You can act like yourself and not anybody else. Because basically everybody was made differently. Nobody was meant to be made the same. So, it’s like he’s [Sheila’s classmate] trying to say, ‘don’t follow other people because other people have their own personality. You can’t have their personality.’

Then Shana followed up with, “I think you have to think of it like this, if everyone was the same, the world would be so boring.” I have clear memories of debating with students about whether it is as easy as they imply to not care what people think. They would counter my argument with statements like, “I can just switch schools” or “I come to school to learn, I don’t care about making friends.”

Despite maintaining this attitude during our conversations, there was evidence to contradict these beliefs. For instance, one day Kevin said:

Raul is still following his dreams. I’m telling you the truth right now, it would be pretty hard for me to keep on pushing like he is to do a dream if my brother or some other kids, or maybe even were telling me “you shouldn’t paint.” I think that’s pretty hard to keep in. And I would actually try to maybe quit. And do the things that everyone else does. If someone kept saying it, saying it, I would actually start believing it, believing it. Till I finally break.

Like his Team Umizoomi story, Kevin described the pressure he’d feel to change his interests if they were not approved by the people he encountered. Additionally, only one of the students seemed to feel free enough to share his response to a writing prompt that required students to think about and reveal their personal insecurities. I interpreted this as an overall mismatch in how they really feel compared to how they think they should feel. Somehow the students have come to believe that if they ignore their feelings they eventually go away, or perhaps not caring represents some form of strength. Furthermore, these contradictions provide evidence to the self-censorship discussed above that students often participate in. I realized that the level of vulnerability and transparency demonstrated by students was heavily dependent on who was present during the club

meeting. It was evident that certain students dictated the climate and depth of our conversations.

Considering contradicting emotional reactions regarding exclusion, students could identify advantages and disadvantages of being part of a group. In opposition to being in a group over being alone, Atalia professed, “As our wise teachers teachers say, ‘you gotta be a leader, not a follower,’” insinuating that being part of group requires one to follow. Kayla added context when she said,

Sometimes it can be good to join a group if it’s something that will help the community. But also, the Ku Klux Klan is a group that tries to kill all black people, and so sometimes it’s better to be alone than part of a group, just depending.

In agreement, Deja said, “you learn something that you didn’t already know from other people in your group.” To me, this insight was partly indicative of students’ rationale as they navigated different spaces within their school and community and assigned meaning to their experiences.

Interpretations of exclusion were thought about a bit differently when we discussed it more broadly. During a book club meeting, students were asked, “Who is the ‘in-crowd’ and who is the other in this book? In our larger society? Who usually gets left out” Below are some of their responses which actually sparked a conversation among themselves:

1. “in the book, the whites are the out-crowd because they are less ethnic and there are fewer of them than the black students” – Deja

2. “in the real-world usually blacks are the out-crowd and whites are the in-crowd” - Josh
3. “actually, Hispanics and Latinos are the out-group because they get talked about the most.”- Kevin
4. “they [Hispanics] especially get talked about in politics with Trump being president.” - Atalia

My analysis of this conversation is that the students’ perception of exclusion as it related to groups seemed to have more obvious links to race and racism than their perceptions of their own experiences of exclusion. They immediately grouped people by race instead of other reasons that people in the book or our society may feel like outcast or like they are excluded (e.g., popularity, interests, habits). I had hoped that these powerful examples of exclusion would be useful for helping students understand how systems of dominance, visibly and discretely, work to oppress and exclude people. I especially tried to help students make these connections when discussing issues relating to classism. For example, during our discussion of the victimization of people of color, Lily shared:

So, in my country, I live in Morocco, and basically...so I live in Casablanca. There’s like a rich part of Casablanca and a poor part of Casablanca. I had an uncle, he lived in like the poor part of it and people lived in these really really really small houses like as big as my room and like they, if somebody wants to like buy the house and you’re living in it, and they are a higher class than you, they can...In Morocco, if you don’t have any money, you live on the streets.

All students agreed that this, being bought out of the house you live in, was wrong and unfair. However, they maintained that people of lower class had chosen their path.

It is important to point out that majority of the stories of exclusion told were related to earlier years, which indicate that these experiences happen early in childhood, and students are clearly able to recognize them. Moreover, past experiences can be perceived as less threatening than current experiences in front of peers, which is particularly relevant considering the dynamic of the group members. It is evident that despite attitudes regarding the importance of a person being accepted for his or her true self, students were into maintaining or gaining social capital, or the goodwill others have towards us (Alder & Kwon, 2002) at the risk of their own beliefs, values, and interest.

Being Responsive to Pedagogical Challenges

Overall, the first semester of data collection was important as it gave me much insight regarding where the students were in their development of critical consciousness, or their “ability to perceive social, political, and economic oppression and to take action against oppressive elements of society” (Freire, 1973, p. 29). Students struggled to make meaningful connections between their experiences and the experiences of groups of people in our larger society, which in my opinion made it difficult for them to see themselves as agents of change. I attribute some of these issues to a few pedagogical forces that made it more difficult for students to engage in the praxis of critical consciousness.

In particular, I found that the content did not always directly reflect students’ lived experiences very well. Students reported that they were more interested in *Bronx Masquerade* because it was real and they could relate to the characters, unlike Jonas from *The Giver*. For example, referring to the characters in *Bronx Masquerade*, Kevin said, “I

could feel what they're feeling.” Similarly, to describe the differences in the two novels, Aliyah said, “different perspectives you could relate more...it's not really how we live.” Aliyah struggled to make sense of the events in *The Giver* because it did not directly reflect her way of living. I gathered that students needed more concrete illustrations if they were to make meaningful connections.

Ethnic studies maintains that it is important for student lived experiences to be affirmed and validated. The best way to do that was to put their personal experiences at the forefront of our conversations. I decided to do this by sharing counter-narratives, or the experiences of minoritized youth growing up in the United States. I found that directly and concretely centering students lived experiences impacted their development of critical consciousness. We stopped reading books and instead watched short videos and read short articles and then discussed them as a group. Pedagogical changes following the first semester proved to be more relatable and engaging for students during the second semester.

During the second semester, the spring of 2018, there were fewer students in attendance and less club meetings due to time constraints, inclement weather and early release days that resulted in the cancelation of after school activities, and the adjustment period after the school relocated to a brand-new building. In total, the club met together five times, one of which was a scheduled peer mediation interest meeting. In addition to club meetings, data involved five one on one interviews with students (one student declined to participate in an interview), and field notes. Two themes emerged from the

second round of data analysis: (1) Intimate Experiences with Race, Racism, and Discrimination, and (2) Ally, Advocate, or Agent.

Second Semester of Data Collection

Intimate Experiences with Race, Racism, and Discrimination

He was telling me at home because we are brothers and we do brother secrets. He only tells me and... He would never get, when they would play tag or something he would never get tagged because no one wanted to touch him at all... Yeah and he said this girl said he was spider head [because of black hair]- Kevin

During the second semester, students displayed a deeper level of vulnerability than they had ever done by sharing experiences they had perceived to be hurtful. Regardless to being born in the United States or another country, students described experiences where they had been treated like a foreigner. For instance, Aliyah shared her experience:

Well my dad's not fully Mexican because he was born here, but his parents are. Since I look like him, because he looks like a Mexican, I'm automatically seen as a Mexican. But I was born here. I am a US Citizen. And my mom isn't Mexican. She was born in Venezuela, as Alexander's parents are. And so automatically everyone is always like, "why don't you go back to Mexico or something" And I'm like "I'm not from Mexico. I'm from here." And they also say that to my mom. Cause sometimes people make statements but they don't really care what they are saying. So, it just hurts us.

This experience was representative of many of the students, as they all agreed that people commonly assume that if you speak Spanish or look Hispanic that you are from Mexico, despite there being various other Spanish-speaking countries. Not only do they assume you are from Mexico, but they assume you have no right to be in the U.S. The sharing of

this experience, among many others during the second semester, proved to be a bonding moment for students as most of them had never shared these types of experiences or the emotions that result from them with anyone, and the students who had shared had only shared with a close friend or sibling.

In frustration regarding these experiences, Alexander explained:

Like if you do that, it's not fair. I'm not trying to be (he doesn't want to be rude), if you do that to an American, you'd be like (looks regretful) like why did I do this? You have to regret doing that because if you do it, you get in a lot of trouble. But when they do it, they feel like they're kings and strong.

Alexander explains that he along with others who share in these experiences have a conditioned response of regret when they make remarks regarding a person and their culture, fearing that they could get in trouble. However, Americans, which he often interchanges with "Whites," have no remorse for their statements and actions, often feeling sovereign. I found it interesting that even in his emotionally charged frustration, Alexander was still careful as to not be offensive or demeaning. He always said, "treat people how you want to be treated," and I never witnessed him act in ways inconsistent of this message. These experiences are not just isolated to students of Hispanic backgrounds. For instance, Kevin shared a time when he was treated differently because of his African-American identity. He explained:

Well, I remember when I had to move because people would discriminate me. I moved to North Carolina. I used to live in Virginia. And just saying, there were a lot of White kids in this one class. My only friend was Anthony...He was my only friend because me and him were the only brown kids in the class...I just saw him and I saw everyone else. I was like (makes a face). I didn't really understand what that was until people started picking... we were always the last picks...I never

knew what racism was or what democracy was but they would always do the “I’ll pick her or I’ll pick him” and whenever I would think they were gonna pick me, I was like (looks extremely excited) YAAAY!!!! but it was like this (demonstrates pointing and being passed over) you. I was like (expresses a let down).

Kevin explained that he had automatically felt more similar to Anthony when he noticed they had similar skin color. Both he and Anthony had experienced being picked last by their White classmates to be a part of team activities. Kevin reported that he and Anthony were currently pen pals. I wondered if he and Anthony ever talked about their shared experience together. Not only do students experience feeling like the other, but they also experience the effects of being perceived as the inferior other. It was heartbreaking to watch Kevin use his small body and big eyes to express his feelings as he reflected on this memory. He told the story in a way that made me feel like it wasn’t his last experience of discrimination. It was as if it had almost become normal to him.

As I process Kevin’s story, I am reminded of a story he had told earlier during the meeting, right after watching the *Being 12* video. In response to being asked if any of the students had experienced prejudice or discrimination, Kevin, one of the first to volunteer, shared a story about his brother. Here is an excerpt from the conversation:

Kevin: I remember, this is actually my little brother because we went to school together once. He actually got judged mostly because it’s weird but almost his whole class was filled with kids with brown hair, just full brown. He was the only kid with black hair in the whole room. It was very weird. His teacher even had brown hair. I was like, “wow,” because I tutored him once because he didn’t know how to do math, so I got to go to his class. And help him and I saw all the brown hair.

Me: So, do you think he was discriminated against?

Kevin: Yeah, because he was telling me at home because we are brothers and we do brother secrets. He only tells me and... He would never get, when they would play tag or something he would never get tagged because no one wanted to touch him at all... Yeah and he said this girl said he was spider head [referring to his black hair].

This is not only another example of discrimination experienced by school aged children, it is also very similar to the discrimination Kevin describes experiencing at his Virginia school. I recognize that it is highly likely that this experience happened to both Kevin and his brother, as these experiences are common among students. However, I wonder if in initially sharing the experience, Kevin felt more comfortable attributing the experience to that of his brother, perhaps because it would be easier to deal with the emotions of it, or maybe because he wasn't quite ready to expose himself in that way in front of his classmates. I do not add this to undermine his character or discredit his experience, instead, I believe this story has implications regardless to who it did or did not happen to. Both stories speak to feeling excluded and possessing an inferior identity

Students described a few lost opportunities they had to share parts of their culture with others at school. For example, Alexander explains:

In elementary school, I was like eating the same thing that I ate like um I can't remember but it was a Venezuelan food but I was like okay. Everybody was like, "what the heck is that?" I was like "As you can see that's food and I don't care what you say. As you can see it's something that people in my culture eat." And they keep looking and I'm like (shakes head) and I throw it away, I didn't keep eating... I'm not gonna explain it. Because I don't do that to like American people. I don't stare at their food like "what the heck is that?" Yeah, like treat people like you want to be treated.

Alexander explained that even after moving to another table students still harassed him about what he was eating. When asked how he felt about it, Alexander responded, “I was like whatever. But if they keep doing it again, I’m gonna tell the prin...I’m gonna do something about it. If I cannot eat in peace or something.” Alexander was not willing to explain what he was eating as he didn’t feel the questions were genuine. He felt the students were being judgmental and treating him rudely. Similarly, Kevin described a lost opportunity to teach his classmates about an important aspect of his culture. He shared:

Okay, so sorry but I remember when it was the first day of school in first grade. I was like “yeahhhh!!!” (excited) cause I was so excited because this class, I had really nice teachers. We didn’t see the classmates yet. I was so excited to bring a food because they said, “bring a food from your culture or something” I brung deer and goat. Um with a side of these very large, I call them large raisins. I forgot the name of them. They’re really huge and I love them. They are one of my most delicious fruits to me. Um and I brought them all to class. And we would all get to try all the food and no one ate any of mine. (looks sadly) Not one.
whispers not just one little tiny piece.

Kevin was excited to share some of his favorite foods from his culture with his classmates and he felt rejected when no one bothered to try out his dish. I realize that what may seem to be a minor incident becomes part of a collection of embedded memories that are hurtful and coupled with feelings of inferiority, rejection, otherness, and what Kevin explained during the fall semester, worthlessness. To explain the reasoning behind these experiences, Atalia said,

I mean like for me it would be okay if you asked. But not if you keep asking. Or if I tell you what it’s made out of and you’re like “ew” and you haven’t tried it... I

mean sometimes we can understand because they don't really know it. They haven't really seen it before.

All students identified school as a primary reason people did not know about cultures other than their own. For instance, Alexander said, "I think it's some teachers from school like schools are like "we are not gonna teach about this." So, and so and so are black. Because this school's white. We aren't going to teach in that culture." Not only did Alexander speak to not learning about other cultures in school, but he also brings up the point that some students, particularly minoritized students, don't always have opportunities to learn about their own cultures. When asked if he thought it would be helpful if we learned about other cultures in school, he said, "Yeah cause we get to learn about people, their culture, what they like, what they don't like, what are their beliefs or something." Atalia added,

Sometimes you know how sometimes there's just American History classes or whatever? Well if people knew about different cultures they would understand why some people would act like that...And the most of another culture I've learned is Mexico...

Outside of school, students are exposed to the attitudes of the public in the media. Kevin explained that he perceives that the public isn't accepting of the increase in movies that have a predominantly black cast and steered toward predominantly black audiences. Both he and Atalia refer to the newly released film, "Black Panther". Kevin explained that the trailers and clips on YouTube were full of hurtful comments. One he particularly mentioned was, "Black people shouldn't even be on tv." Messages like these are particularly harmful and disheartening to a group of students who are in the process of

developing their self-concept and exploring where they fit in the world, some of who have expressed being in careers that would require them to be on screen. He also said,

You know that you see these black people movies. Some of these movies inspire lots of black kids and people to go. But some people are just like, “Why are they making more black people movies?” The only reason why they’re making them is because they want more black people to believe in themselves.

Kevin explained that black people are not always represented positively in the media, and especially on tv shows. He appreciated shows that did not perpetuate the idea of the “inferior other” and he had received messages that he had a responsibility to prove the world wrong. He said:

Um like my mom would always say um you need to get good grades. “First reason is that you’re in AG. And you’re a little black boy who needs to prove to the world that black people can be smart.” And she’s always comparing myself to other black kids who are acting like they’re tough and stuff. And she’s like “you can’t just be like them because they look like you. You need to be greater than that.”

Because I had a few of my own implications for his mother’s statements in that moment, I asked Kevin a series of questions to which he ultimately explained that his mom did not want him to do stereotypical things that would cause one to make false assumptions about him. When asked if he felt any pressure to do well because of this, he responded, “no, it makes me feel special. She sees something in me.”

Ally, Advocate, or Agent

If anyone's being bullied due to race or stuff like that, I'll stand up. – Aliyah

In just a few short meetings, the spring semester revealed intimate experiences and emotional responses from students. We would get so invested in our conversations that we'd lose track of time. I found myself checking in with student emotions much more often than I did during the first semester. After watching a video of 12-year-olds' experiences with racism, students described the movie as sad and said that it described them. I specifically remember Kevin said, "To me, it isn't sad. It was very true and that's what makes it sad." Ethnic studies presumes that awareness of social injustice, particularly regarding racism, usually elicits an emotional response that encourages students to act against or for a cause.

Many of the stories that students shared during our time together were related to identity-based bullying, and they often expressed a heavy concern regarding bullying in their school. During the fall semester students reported that they didn't care about what people thought of them, and they also had no solutions to the bullying issue they perceived at their school. However, during the spring semester, I found that students became a bit more honest with themselves about their experiences and began to elaborate more on why they had not made any changes. For instance, Kevin stated:

So, with the thing you were talking, that you just gotta say that it doesn't matter what you look like. Whenever someone says that, it still hurts because um you're saying it because you don't have a problem maybe and you don't know how it feels for me to maybe have bucked teeth or something.

I then asked students how they should respond to bullying. Aliyah suggested “Tell an adult,” and Josh argued, “I’ll probably fight,” while Sarafina suggested, “you can have a respectful conversation with them.” Sarafina followed up by saying,

I don’t want to say I’d threaten them, but I’d threaten them. Not like violently but like if you don’t want to talk to me, I can take this to the teacher and then we can handle it at the principal’s office, or you can not get in trouble and end this with me.

Which led to this exchange:

Kevin: There’s another thing, whenever you tell the teacher

Josh: They call you a snitch

Kevin: Exactly and they keep going and going and going and then when you tell again that’s when they start being more annoying and teasing

Josh: They’ll do it worse

Kevin: And if you tell the principal and they come out of the principal’s office, they tell everyone to ignore you. Like if we were gonna ignore you, I’ll tell Deja to not talk to you and she listens to me, you won’t have anyone to talk to.

Everyone in the group agreed that this is what takes place when seeking help from an adult. Students had finally disclosed why they believed teachers were not helping the bullying problem at their school.

By giving students more opportunities to share, being transparent with them, and establishing a safe climate for vulnerability, I was finally able to recognize that they had started using our time together to unload. In fact, although both Alexander and Kevin described a special bond with their brothers, with whom they shared the secrets, none of

the students reported sharing these experiences with any adults. For instance, Aliyah explained:

I usually talk to my best friends. And really because they both encounter things like this. Because Carly's Mexican. She knows what it's like to be judged and she also knows what it's like to be like me because she's been around me when that happens. And Anna and same as Kayla, she's called Chinese, and Japanese, but they're actually Vietnamese.

Similarly, Kevin said:

...in our household, I don't talk to my parents about it because I think they will be overwhelmed and then like "oh my gosh, you should get out that school, oh my gosh you shouldn't be around these people, or oh my gosh you shouldn't be here." I don't want that to happen because I really like this school. And someone just says something wrong, and I told my mom about it, we just automatically move and I don't want that to happen. So, um my brother, my cousin, and my other brother. Um we're best friends and we do this thing called the "boy bond" and we only only tell each other secrets or anything that really hurts our feelings.

During this meeting, all students, Aliyah, Alexander, Kevin, Atalia, Deja, and Kayla admitted that they don't always talk about these things. They viewed our time together as a "safe place" that is "helpful" because we "can get things off our chest." It was extremely powerful for students to feel connected to the club as a safe place. For instance, Kevin stated,

But, um, but if no one does [tell the secrets of the club], then I, I really do trust the club because everyone is saying all these stuff, all this stuff, and they're just saying it freely. So, I think they also know that they'll never tell anyone about this stuff.

In my one on one interview with Alexander, he explained that he did not know anyone prior to starting the club, and since starting, he has met some great friends, naming Kevin as one of his best friend. Alexander also explained, “they think that I’m normal...they don’t see me as a disability.” This statement bears witness to our intense desire to be seen as fully human. These insights coupled with the drastic changes in our conversations evidenced the positive impact of the pedagogical changes that were made prior to the start of the semester.

I assumed that opportunities to share and reflect on experiences with other people would give students a sense of empowerment to a sense of agency. However, students were not convinced that they had any power. They articulated power as being held by adults over students to “make students do what they’re supposed to do.” I would argue that students were conditioned to believe that they couldn’t inspire any changes because all the examples before them, particularly in their school, had failed.

After contextualizing power on a smaller scale, such as having the power to keep eating your food or exercising the power to be kind to someone, students appeared to have a better understanding of how power is exercised. When asked to give examples of how power is used in their school, students were more likely to identify negatives uses of power. For instance, in my one-on-one interview, Alexander, who was adamant that students cannot possess power at all, said that students use their power “on other kids by roasting [picking, bullying] them.” He added that he wanted to see the students in his school use their power for good by “being nice and being thankful.” Atalia described power being used at school by “people that have a lot of friends.” She believed that

people with a lot of friends have more power because they “have their friends to back them up,” attributing power to group size. One point she made that I felt was interesting and useful as she moves forward is that she believed allies can create power, in their own right, and that power can be used “for good and bad.” Like Atalia, Kevin attributed strength in numbers to power. He explained,

Sometimes it’s not even the teachers that have power. There are some kids that are really popular and they go snap and someone will do something really wrong and they’re just going to do it because they’re popular, and maybe they’re gonna be friends and stuff.” When asked how he would like to see power used differently in his school he said, “if someone has power, and you have, you can stop someone from maybe bullying...you should at least tell them to stop.

Students were slowly beginning to transition from simply being allies to being advocates for one another. In fact, Aliyah said, “If anyone’s being bullied due to race or stuff like that, I’ll stand up.” These are some of the same students who did not think they could do anything about bullying, and who believed that telling the teacher was the only possible solution and doing that had failed them in the past. Although students had begun to realize that they, too, possessed power, they had not fully realized that small actions can potentially lead to large results. For instance, a few times Alexander expressed that he was happy we discussed race during the club because he knew that so many people were judged by their race. When asked what he could do about it, he responded, “I think nothing because I could tell them something, but I can’t change ... sometimes nobody can ... like people can’t change.” He did not believe that he could make a huge impact on the culture of racism and discrimination. I then asked him if he could just help someone think differently what would he do, and he explained that he would make a video game

club/group that was inviting of people from various cultures and ethnicities. Alexander envisioned his club to be a safe place for all people to interact with one another while sharing a common passion. This was a huge transition and milestone for his sense of agency.

Other students also revealed ways in which they had begun to continue their development of agency. For instance, Kevin explained that although his participation in the Ethnic Studies club had been met with stigma, it was an example of agency. When asked what things he can do to make a difference in his school, he responded, “Um, going to this club, basically. Lots of boys were saying that if you went to his club, you're a girl.” Additionally, in another effort to take action against bullying, Kevin attended a peer mediation meeting to learn how to become a certified peer mediator for the county. Similarly, Aliyah joined a second after school club that worked to directly address the bullying problem at school. In her desire to change the culture of identity-based bullying at her school, she said, “I can now talk about it [racism, discrimination, bullying] to other people. I can start to talk about it with anyone who asks me how to deal with it.” Additionally, Atalia reported that she would begin to hold people accountable to the lessons learned in book club and remind them to be cautious of what they say. Moreover, all students reported an interest in seeing people in their school be more accepting to differences and learning about different groups of people.

The development of agency requires students to engage in a process. I have learned that simply giving students the opportunity to share does not automatically elicit empowerment. These students began the school year believing that they could do

absolutely nothing about the problems they faced and ended the semester with ideas about how they can make a change. As allies, students experienced similar plights, as advocates they gained the courage to stand up for one another, and as agents, they believed that they could do something about it.

CHAPTER IX

DISCUSSION

At least five major conclusions can be drawn from the preceding analysis. First, regarding my overarching research question, data suggest that the Ethnic Studies club did, in part, influence sixth-graders' development of critical consciousness. I relate their development of critical consciousness to W.E. B. Du Bois' theoretical concepts discussed in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1996), where he coins the term "double consciousness." To reiterate, double consciousness represents a conflicting duality where persons of color attempt to move forward in society as the racial other, but then realize that their contributions will always be marred as secondary status. While students were exposed to various school-wide initiatives as well as the practice of culturally relevant pedagogy by their ELA teacher, they had not shown much evidence of possessing double consciousness.

In fact, at the start of the club, students were unable, or at least not willing, to interrogate their own personal experiences with racism and discrimination. They were more likely to identify and examine broad historical accounts of racism, including those occurring in different countries, than the present everyday manifestations. Students attributed more nuanced examples of racism as an individual issue rather than systemic. They did not recognize that they had bought in to ideologies taught by the dominant "White" class to maintain a culture of power, or the subordination of people of color.

This false consciousness, for instance, was demonstrated during the first semester when students debated the implications of Tyrone's comments and when David explained, "I think it'll be hard in the beginning, but after he [Raul] starts getting exposure, and people start seeing what he can do, I think he's going to have a great time with it [painting professionally], and a lot of people will love his work." These illustrations are indicative of the ideology we often sell our children, "hard work pays off" insinuating that people who have not experienced economic and social success have not worked hard, and therefore are not deserving. This is further implied when students expressed that people live in the hood solely as a result of their own volition. Students struggled to identify the pressure imposed by the racial dominance and how this dominance constrains people of color.

As a person has more encounters with the world, their awareness of double consciousness is raised. I do not mean that students did not possess double consciousness before the ES club, instead, I argue that they showed little evidence of it as they had not been willing to truly engage in discussion or writing activities about their experiences. They would not admit they had any racialized experiences, so it was difficult for them to make sense of how such experiences had affected them, and therefore, it was difficult for them to understand how they could act as agents. Cammarota (2015) reports that the first stage in the praxis of developing critical consciousness is reflection. To effectively reflect on these topics, students had to: (1) regard the club as a safe space to reveal themselves and share their deepest secrets, which involved gaining the trust of me and the club members as well as abandoning their social masquerade, (2) feel connected to the topic at

hand, which required me to directly relate the content to their lived experiences and (3) understand the information in which they were being asked to reflect on, which required me to eliminate the abstract connections they were supposed to make and discuss concrete experiences. They did not walk into the ES club ready and willing to reflect on their own experiences. They had to be prepared by first breaking down a few barriers, requiring them to exert themselves in a way that they had not previously done.

The type of critical reflection required in the development of critical consciousness manifested in a particular way. First, students identified real life instances in which the dominant culture had imposed its dominance on them. For instance, Alexander shared his experience bringing his cultural food to school and Aliyah shared being told to “go back to Mexico” despite being American. Students thought about when and where these experiences had occurred, what they did during these experiences, what others did, what they felt during the experience and how they had perceived others to feel. Second, students analyzed and interpreted the “why?” of these experiences. They thought about and discussed why these experiences had occurred, if there were other visible or invisible contributing factors, why they reacted the way they did, and what they wish they had done. Students reflected on their experiences and concluded that some of their racialized encounters were because students do not learn about other cultures in school. After thinking about the cause of these experiences, students were then able to think about how to move forward and what to do in the future. This was demonstrated by comments like Alexanders, “But if they keep doing it again, I’m gonna tell the prin...I’m gonna do something about it. If I cannot eat in peace or something.”

Through the process of critical reflection, students activated and drew upon their double consciousness to understand the culture of power, particularly White power. Although students were aware of what is perceived as the “other status” which is also treated as inferior, they were just beginning to see how this different and inferior status would impact the rest of their lives and people like them. During this intimate process of reflection, students transitioned from simply experiencing racism and discrimination to being able to think about the emotions provoked by these experiences, why these experiences happen, and how their own roles in the facilitation of change. For instance, in a one on one interview, Atalia explained that the club taught her “how different it [people’s story] is from other peoples' because they know some people grew up like, with a lot of money or some middle class, whatever...And I learned how it could impact people.” DuBois refers to this change in perspective as “second sight,” which is the ability to gaze into the injustices of racial dominance. Students began to have a better understanding of the oppression of people of color as they started realizing the impact of the small experiences on their lives.

Second, the current findings suggest that the Ethnic Studies club, through the praxis of critical consciousness, helped students understand how powerful knowledge is for generating change. Aliyah stated that the club had taught her that “everyone has a story,” which helped her admire ways in which she was similar and different, and also motivated her to learn more about people and their experiences. She, along with other students, began to attribute value to learning. For instance, Atalia explains that differences among people and cultures provide learning opportunities and develops

communication skills which allows people to engage in conversations. Students have a deeper awareness that the world and people in the world are capable of being known and understood. This insight or “second sight” gives us the necessary advantage of understanding the dominant’s use of power to oppress people of color, and then challenge the power.

Third, by the end of the club, students expressed the value of remaining true to themselves. Students’ perceptions of identity were closely related to how they wanted their peers to perceive them. Some days, depending on who was present, it was very difficult to get students to stay on topic or to practice a necessary degree of openness. It was also difficult for students to connect how things in the world related to or influenced who they were and how they thought. Engagement in critical consciousness, allowed students to examine ways in which they had abandoned their own values and interests to assimilate into the mainstream culture. Although a couple of students admitted that they were still trying to figure out who they were, the club reassured them that their differences were valuable even in environments that were accepting of them. For instance, Aliyah who had experienced identity-based bullying, stated, “I feel good in my own skin...it’s better to be yourself than to be anyone else.” And although students admitted that they will continue to struggle with staying true to themselves, they now understand why staying true to themselves might be important. During one meeting, Kevin said,

The thing I’ve always wanted to change would be my confidence. Cause if I was being that much bullied or something like that, to tell the truth, I would just stop doing that thing at school and just do it at home.

However, in my one on one interview with him, Kevin explained that the club had been a space where he could open up more and when asked if he felt it had helped him to embrace who he is, he responded, “yes definitely.” He then finished by saying,

Because if you don't know who you are, you will be a person who's just gonna try to fit in. You never want to be a person who wants to just fit in because they want to be, um, popular, they want to be noticed, they want to be a pers- a real person...that's not who you should be...be yourself.

Kevin explains that rather than searching to find ones' humanity through the acceptance of others, one should instead, be themselves. Additionally, issues of critical consciousness allowed students to move away from blaming themselves for their negative experiences to seeing these experiences as part of a broader system of power.

Fourth, students have increased capacities to make choices including rejecting what others say about them. At the start of this study, it was my goal to place a heavy emphasis on Banks (1988) Decision Making and Social Action approach to curriculum reform. I wanted to empower students to act as social agents of change by developing a project to address an issue in their community. After working with these students for almost a full school year, I believe that my vision of student agency, based on what I had read from previous research, was not guided with my student's personal needs and interests in mind. A project of that type would not serve them well right now. Truthfully, students do not need to protest or engage in a major activity to activate their critical consciousness or to address issues that concern their communities. I witnessed my students' development of critical consciousness and agency manifest itself in an authentic and personal way. Opportunities to critically reflect and share their experiences with one

another was important in that they validated their lived experiences and worked to affirm their identities. For instance, “I’ve learned about how many people are the same- have gone through the same thing.” For Kevin, and the other students, identifying common oppressive experiences was hugely important for their self-concept and it resulted in a bond among each other that otherwise may not have occurred.

Fifth, when examining issues of critical consciousness, students generally found communication to be the most challenging. For instance, Atalia described not really knowing what to say. Particularly she said,

my experiences were gonna be different...and it won’t really be as bad...It’s not like you can compare the two sometimes... But I know that some people get called names and then I’ll just be like, "Well, people will have told my mom."

Atalia did not want to minimize her experiences, but she struggled sharing them for fear that they weren’t as critical as the stories and experiences of others. In my opinion, however, Atalia’s real challenge was knowing how to support people who were having trouble. Kevin felt that being able to freely say what he wanted to share without it leaving the room was the most challenging. However, when certain students were not present and the members were fewer, he was able to overcome the challenge. He actually told me, “because there are some students.... that I couldn’t trust with my secrets.” Similarly, Alexander reported that expressing himself in terms of his race, personality, and life was a challenge. However, he and Kevin overcame the difficulty when the club felt safe.

Ethnic studies attempt to give students the tools to navigate racially hostile systems, tools that many students of color acquire outside of schools, in their

communities. Demanding an immediate and simple solution to issues of critical consciousness, trivializes the complexities of issues of race and racism as well as the experiences of the students who suffer. It is important to note that critical consciousness is not developed over night. This research inquiry details a long process. It was full of mistakes, setbacks, personal doubt, and critical reflection and interrogation. I came to deeply appreciate Martin's (2009) characterization of our current educational research climate as a "solution on demand environment" where-in the scale of the problems we are taking on are minimized and project efforts are held to inappropriate expectations such that a singular project should be able to produce revolutionary impacts. Indeed, "deliberate change is laborious and involves the patient layering of practices and long term visioning within the focal activity system and a life course of collective learning" (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016, p. 189). My genuine love for and desire to understand how to best support these students as they encounter the world overpowered every obstacle. If this Ethnic Studies club gave the students anything, I would argue that it empowered them to interrogate their experiences and use their voices to share their experiences with others. These are both forms of action that none of them had previously felt were important or safe to do.

Implications

As I think about how to move forward, I am reminded that although these issues are structural in nature, they are also contextual. Rather than assume what students should know, it is important to get to know them, listen to them, and understand their needs and interests. This inquiry shows that students are more likely to engage authentically when

what matters to them is centered and when they feel safe and connected. As we continue to think about how to engage students academically, sustain a positive self-concept, and create agents of social change, it is important that we take more interests in students' lived experiences outside of school. After conducting this inquiry, I am interested in learning how incorporating Ethnic Studies content in classrooms impact the school culture at large. How does this content impact students' social interactions? How does this content impact how students engage and challenge in classes where the content is not taught?

Limitations

This inquiry had several important limitations. First, club meeting participation continued to decline throughout the school year, with about twenty students showing up for initial meetings to an average of six students during later meetings. Also, other obligations like mandatory study hall and sports practices/games and issues with transportation students were inconsistent in their attendance. For instance, although numerical attendance was the same, the actual students in attendance may have varied. Additionally, the school relocated to a brand-new building which required students to get acclimated with a new space. Where the old building was smaller and different teams were mixed up and on the same hall, the new building offered much more privacy between teams and space for students.

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