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Exploring Critical Hope and Agency Through Photovoice

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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Abstract

There have been multiple studies including youth in participatory action research, and specifically photovoice projects (Wang, 2006). However, little research has been done connecting youth participatory action research to students' hope and sense of agency. There is also a lack of existing studies that assess young students' critical awareness of how social power operates in our culture and in their lives (Christens, Byrd, Peterson, & Lardier, 2018).

Photovoice methodology provided eight of my fourth- and fifth-grade students in northern California – most of whom live in a predominantly Latinx neighborhood in socioeconomically disadvantaged circumstances, situated within a predominantly white and affluent county – with the opportunity to engage in critical analyses of perceived injustices and their relation to power structures. I conducted a convergent mixed methods study involving the collection, analysis, and interpretation of both qualitative and quantitative data.

This study focused on student responses to two question series presented in survey and interview format. It also focused on student experience participating in a photovoice project. To this end, the questions were formed based on the following central questions: (1) How do students perceive structures of power? (2) How do students' perceptions of power impact their agency and hope? (3) How does photovoice methodology impact students' agency and hope?

The findings show how students believe that whether or not an individual's voice is perceived as valued plays a significant role in whether or not this individual feels critical hopefulness and a sense of agency. Findings also indicate that students distinguish the fairness of specific situations in part through relation to associated considerations of access, dirtiness, and brokenness. Finally, this study showed photovoice as an example of reflective methodology to newly engage students in learning.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Preface

At fourteen years old, I lost my first love to suicide. For a myriad of reasons, I suppressed this grief for a full year before coming to terms with the reality of its impact on my well-being. I struggled with healthy coping mechanisms, and in many ways felt silenced by this loss. Stumbling from what I thought was my dream college for undergraduate studies to one that was closer to home, I was fortunate enough to connect with Dr. Matthew E. Davis and Dr. Elizabeth Miller. They are co-founders of Pseads, an education nonprofit. They partnered with a class I was in to alter the final project, making it a creative and reflective endeavor. Little did I know, their work with this project — and the relationships we formed — would go on to reshape my entire outlook on education and life itself.

The overarching goal of the project for this class was to articulate, via one's preferred creative outlet, what the history of the universe meant to the student. I initially felt lost by the open-ended nature of the directions. After some meditation on the topic, though, I became mesmerized by the way in which my grief transformed the trajectory of my life, as well as the way in which I understood my relationship to the universe. With the guidance of Matt and Elizabeth, this project unearthed a reflective process of creation that cultivated my awareness and ownership over a seemingly wholly negative experience: the suicide of my first love. Utilizing Matt and Elizabeth's perspective, I wrote and produced a short video production articulating my journey of re-learning to love life and employ gratitude as a means of reclaiming stability and happiness.

I shared this video with my class, which was a monumental step in my healing process. Then, per the suggestion and support of Matt and Elizabeth, I shared it at events with a few hundred people in the audience. At last, I was no longer suppressing my grief and the

complicated emotions I felt surrounding my experience, all because of a final project for a general education college course.

Participating in this project empowered me to share my voice, thus validating my overwhelming and troublesome emotions, whilst providing an avenue through which I could also value the positives it gifted me. The loose, creative boundaries I was given did wonders for my ability to make the work meaningful. Rather than feeling constrained by written language, I could meld multiple mediums to convey my thoughts. Never before had my education affected me in such a deep way outside of the classroom walls.

My sense of agency benefitted tenfold and I finally felt hopeful about my future. As I moved forward through my undergraduate education and obtained my multiple subject teaching credential, my experience with this project never left the back of my mind. In my day-to-day classroom experience, after seeing the trauma my students faced, I constantly asked myself, "How can I foster this type of experience in my *own* classroom environment, in order to make education a healing journey for my students, as Matt and Elizabeth did for me?" This inquiry led me to graduate school, and then to this study.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I began student teaching at Forest Elementary School in the fall of 2017. I would arrive approximately thirty minutes before the first bell rang in the morning, which was the exact time that one yellow school bus would pull up and take a long line of students from this neighborhood to a school about one mile away. Seconds later, another bus would park in its place and drop off another long line of students, who would run excitedly up the front steps of Forest School. There was something strikingly different about the two groups of students, however, and this difference immediately piqued my interest: the students leaving their neighborhood to go to another school were all white, and the students arriving to Forest from a different neighborhood were all Latinx.

I silently wondered what this bus swap meant in the greater scope of the school district for months. *Do the other teachers notice this, too? Does anyone else think this is a sign of something really problematic?* By November of 2017, I finally felt comfortable enough with the teachers at Forest to ask them in the staff room if they also saw this bus situation. "Oh yeah, our school district is segregated," one of the veteran teachers admitted. "It's pretty messed up. We think the white parents don't want their kids coming to school here with all the language learners," another teacher hypothesized.

I walked away from that conversation feeling even more confused than I had before. If this stark separation was common knowledge, I could not fathom how it was still going on without intervention. Furthermore, I wanted to know if the students at Forest were aware of how they were being removed from the kids who lived in their school's neighborhood. And, if they were aware, I wanted to know if it affected their perceptions of themselves. Did it make them feel more or less hopeful about their community's future? Did it make them feel empowered about making changes in their community, or did it render them helpless? After my year of

student teaching and one year as a fifth-grade teacher at the same site, I went into the 2019-2020 school year without any answers or insight about my students' perceptions.

I read several studies that took place in similar environments in attempts to answer my questions. I found that there is a lack of existing studies that assess young students' critical awareness of how social power operates (Christens, Byrd, & Peterson, 2018). Furthermore, there is also limited research on the roles that hope and agency play in schools (Dixson, Worrell, & Mello, 2017). These factors seemed especially pertinent given the demographics of Forest School. Latinx students are too often depicted and described (in academic discourses and popular rhetoric) through the lens of deficits (Monzo, 2016). The discourse of Latinx students' education has been characterized by crisis talk, which emphasizes quantitative indicators of educational failure (Fernandez, 2002). Monzo (2016) notes how this discourse can lead youth to internal oppression, which is a "social process of domination implicated in maintaining white supremacy within capitalism" (p. 148).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research study, therefore, was to illuminate how students perceive structures of power, as well as how this perception impacts their sense of agency and hope. It also explored if photovoice methodology, a type of participatory action research, impacts students' sense of agency and hope. It is important to note that this study is not an analysis of photovoice methodology, but instead uses photovoice as a lens to look at the value of integrating visual narratives in an elementary education setting.

A review of literature revealed the intersection of several frameworks – critical pedagogy, Critical Race Theory, and Latinx Critical Theory – as they pertain to empowering

student voices. These frameworks provide insight into how educational experiences can be structured to elicit reflection and fight against internal oppression.

Overview of the Research Design

This study, involving eight Latinx fourth- and fifth-grade students, utilized a convergent mixed methods approach with an emphasis on qualitative data. This data came from observations and the photovoice project. Interviews were conducted in-person with all student participants and included open-ended questions. The photovoice project took the form of photographs that represented a visual ethnography of the participants. The purpose of the qualitative data was to illuminate students' perceptions of power, as well as the effect of these perceptions on their hope and agency. The quantitative data came from pre- and post-photovoice surveys designed to determine whether participation in photovoice research affects elementary school students' feelings of hope and agency.

The research site was a public elementary school in northern California. As the researcher, I acknowledge a possible bias given that I have worked at this site for three years; therefore, I maintained relationships with the student participants for a prolonged period of time. Furthermore, I was also their homeroom teacher at the time of this study.

Significance of the Study: Findings

Findings from this research study indicate that students believe that whether or not an individual's voice is perceived as valued plays a significant role in whether or not said individual feels critical hopefulness and a sense of agency. Findings also indicate that students distinguish the fairness of specific situations in part through relation to associated considerations of access, dirtiness, and brokenness. The data shows that students' perceptions of power structures differ in regard to who possesses the most power, how they came into power, and how that power can be

lost. Specific student participants struggled with engagement and motivation prior to becoming involved with the this photovoice project. Throughout and after the project, however, they showed significantly more dedication to their learning and became more active participants in classroom discussions.

This study also showed that photovoice is not just effective at increasing students' hope and agency, but that it is specifically effective in examining the potential for reflective experiences to newly engage students in learning. The methodology demonstrated a truth beyond photovoice itself, as it points to the fact that reflective experiences are very important for deepening student learning.

Significance of the Study: Implications

The unexpected theme in the research findings, compared to the literature review, was the importance of internal change as a result of the student participants feeling that their voices were being valued. The photovoice studies addressed in the literature review focused more on the importance of the tangible community changes as a result of the methodology, whereas this study revealed the propensity for this methodology to initiate significant and critical transformations within the participants.

This project addressed the gap in the literature regarding youth's perceptions of power by revealing what factors contribute to such analyses, as well as how youth determine whether one's journey to gaining and maintaining power is just, and why. It then showed how these personal perspectives are related to hope and agency. This study also highlighted the importance of valuing youth's voices while creating the conditions for greater equity in relation to perceived authority and expertise when engaging youth in critical dialogue about their communities. It is

important for the adult leader of this group to be a facilitator who helps structure conversations but does not dominate with opinion or judgment.

These findings suggest that classroom teachers should consider further empowering their students via embedded reflective practice opportunities. At a school level, teachers should be supported to attend professional development surrounding the implementation of participatory action research and the promotion of student voice and narratives. Lastly, students would benefit greatly if all teachers' pre-service training had a deeper focus on culturally responsive pedagogy, thus ensuring that the experiences and identities of students of color are not silenced. Pre-service teachers could also benefit from being trained in facilitating dialogic classroom structures, therefore drawing out student voice and shifting the learning environment, in addition to engaging students in critical conversations, no matter the students' age or English language abilities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review seeks to understand elementary school students' comprehension of the sources and nature of power in educational settings, as well as how this affects their sense of agency. Currently, there is a lack of existing studies that assess young students' critical awareness of how social power operates (Christens, Byrd, & Peterson, 2018). Furthermore, there is also limited research on the roles that hope and agency play in schools (Dixson, Worrell, & Mello, 2017).

Such factors are particularly important to consider regarding the well-being and achievement of Latinx students, who are too often depicted and described (in academic discourses and popular rhetoric) through the lens of deficits (Monzo, 2016). The discourse of Latinx students' education has been characterized by crisis talk, which emphasizes quantitative indicators of educational failure (Fernandez, 2002). Monzo (2016) notes how this discourse can lead youth to internal oppression, which is a "social process of domination implicated in maintaining white supremacy within capitalism" (p. 148). Research has found, however, that developing counternarratives can protect Latinx families from deficit framing and internalized oppression, which can be achieved via participatory action research projects, such as photovoice (Monzo, 2016).

In the following review of literature, I will discuss three main themes. First, I will discuss racism and power in education through three progressive theoretical frameworks: Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, critical race theory (CRT), and Latinx critical theory (LCT). Second, I define and explore the importance of a sense of agency and hope in students' lives. Third, I consider the research design of participatory action research (PAR) as it pertains to students. I begin by describing the elements of a specific type of PAR — photovoice — and then discuss how the

transformative nature of PAR and photovoice address power structures, agency, and hope. Lastly, I describe tangible outcomes of photovoice research. In short, this literature review explores theoretical frameworks that illuminate racism and power structures in education, the importance of a sense of agency and hope, and how PAR design address racism and power structures through cultivating a sense of agency.

Racism and Power in Education

There are several existing theoretical frameworks that address racism and power in education — three of which will be examined in this review of literature. I begin with critical pedagogy, which explores the liberation of all individuals through education. Next, critical race theory (CRT) is discussed, as it elucidates the role social categories play in people's everyday lives. Latinx critical theory (LCT), which specifically examines the social and legal positioning of Latinx individuals, is also discussed in relation to CRT. These frameworks situate the importance of agency and hope in the sphere of education, as well as show how involving stakeholders in community change is both a transformative and effective practice for all individuals involved.

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is most widely credited to the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who inspired "popular education" in the 1950s and early 1960s. At this time, his "educational initiatives were directly connected to larger movements struggling for social change" (Tarlau, 2014, p. 370). A military coup took place in Brazil in 1964, thus cutting Freire's initiatives short, and leading to his sixteen-year exile. This is substantial evidence that his ideas threatened the power of the Brazilian elite (Tarlau, 2014). It was during this time that Freire wrote his first book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

Critical pedagogy is rooted in the belief that education is a key factor in cultivating a society that is democratic, just, and free (Shih, 2018). It focuses on how making individuals — particularly those of a low socioeconomic status — more critical and autonomous can support their liberation (Shih, 2018). Freire believes that "education is the practice of freedom" with the aim of empowerment (Shih, 2018, p. 66). As such, according to Shih (2018), Freire contends that teaching and learning should be dialogic and anti-dialectic, as this eliminates the possibility of teachers oppressing student voice with their authority.

Connected to student voice is their autonomy and freedom. Freire's theory is concerned with emancipatory education that frees individuals from silence and the belief that their futures are connected to God, destiny, and luck, thus cultivating their agency. One main facet of critical pedagogy is critical consciousness, as Freire believes that "if people's interpretation of the living situation is only based on supernatural power…their actions will not be able to transform external reality" (Shih, 2018, p. 66). He also believes that critical dialogue allows communities to name their own experience and its causes, which then allows them to accomplish social change (Peabody, 2013). According to Freire (1970), "in this process, the old, paternalistic teacher-student relationship is overcome" (p. 32).

Critical pedagogy also addresses education because it explores the tension between freedom and authority, and questions how both can be simultaneously respected. While Freire sees education as the practice of freedom, he also contends that there needs to be limits to such freedom so that the concept of freedom does not become misconstrued as indulgent immorality, and adhering to authority when appropriate can provide a structure in which freedom is properly obtained (Shih, 2018).

In general, the current setup of American public schools does not embody Freire's critical pedagogy. Our societal structures are formed to maintain white superiority, and the racial segregation of schools is one symptom of this structure (Kohli, Pizzaro, & Nevarez, 2017). In order to address these systems of inequity and bias, some researchers have suggested developing students' racial literacy through examining the effects of structural racism on institutions and people, in addition to highlighting the resistance and resilience of K-12 students of color (Kohli et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the de facto silence surrounding race is not only not in line with critical pedagogy, but it also "maintains and legitimizes racism, thus constructing hostile racial climates for students of colors" (Kohli et al., 2017, p. 189). When students are presented with information about racial violence against people of color and their resistance that is detached from larger structural and institutional factors, they are usually prevented from critically comprehending how systemic mechanisms of racism are the cause of racial inequality (Kohli et al., 2017).

Christens and others (2018) documents how individuals with higher levels of privilege often have a lowered awareness of how social power operates given a lack of experience with situations that force them to reflect on this. Aligned with Freire's point about how the oppressed have to liberate the oppressor, this conclusion suggests that critical pedagogy is pertinent not only in education settings involving students of color or students of a low socioeconomic status, but also for white students and students who come from a higher socio-economic background.

Critical race theory. CRT emerged in the mid-1990s, when Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) wrote their first essay about it in *Teachers College Record.* Since then, it has inspired hundreds of presentations and an annual conference hosted by the Critical Race Studies in Education Association (Leonardo, 2013). CRT acknowledges how social categories — such as

race, gender, and class — have tangible effects on real humans, rather than simply existing as social constructs (Fernandez, 2002). Its overarching goal is understanding oppressive aspects of society so that a group can move toward transformation (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). There are five main tenants of CRT in education: "(a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective" (Fernandez, 2002, p. 47; Monzo, 2016; Solarzano & Bernal, 2001).

Solorzano and Bernal (2001) state that CRT challenges the dominant discourse about race and racism by elucidating their impact on the subordination of people of color in various contexts, including schools. In addition, CRT operates from the central belief that firsthand experiential knowledge is crucial for comprehending racial subordination within the realm of education (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

CRT maintains the viewpoint that students of color, whose lives are often the subject of educational research (but they do not have a say in said research), should no longer be silenced in academic discourse. This research does not include students' perspectives to a substantial degree and only focuses on dominant school discourse, and like Freire, Fernandez (2002) believes that it is impossible to create a complete picture of the education system and content that students of color – as well students facing oppression or poverty – engage with.

CRT is one framework through which researchers can study the impact of social categories on educational performance. Levy, Heissel, Richeson, and Adam (2016) found that the psychological stress associated with being a minority, combined with the biological response created by that stress, are key factors that contribute to the achievement gap. The two main identified stressors are perceived discrimination and stereotype threats. Other stressors include

awareness of racial prejudice, and shock, fear, and mourning as a response to racially motivated violence (Levy et al., 2016).

Perceived discrimination is the observation or anticipation of being treated poorly because of one's race (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). In a study done by Fisher, Wallace, and Fenton (2000), they found that black and Latinx youth between 13-19 years old are more likely to identify themselves as being victims of institutional discrimination than their Asian and non-Hispanic white counterparts. These experiences "are related to greater socioemotional difficulties, such as increased anger, depressive symptoms, and conduct problems" (Levy et al., 2016, p. 457). Stereotype threats are defined as the stress of wanting to succeed to overcome negative expectations of a specific race (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). If teachers promote these racial stereotypes, students of color — specifically Latinx students — are likely to become concerned about conforming to them, which can hurt their academic performance (Levy et al., 2016).

When individuals psychologically and biologically react to these stressors, their motivation, attention, memory, and executive functioning can be implicated in a detrimental way (Levy et al., 2016). All of these outcomes are associated with academic achievement. This supports CRT's stance that social categories have tangible effects on people, especially people of color.

Latinx critical theory. LCT came out of Critical Legal Studies, which "challenges the notion of 'hegemony' by drawing attention to how the dominant culture perpetuates ideas and uses language to maintain power and control, and to keep certain populations marginalized" (Mancilla, 2018, p. 72). According to Fernandez (2002), LCT specifically examines the social and legal positioning of Latinx people in the United States, with the goal of supporting them through constructed social and legal conditions. It incorporates four main functions: "(a) the

production of knowledge, (b) the advancement of transformation, (c) the expansion and connection of struggle(s), and (d) the cultivation of community and coalition" (Fernandez, 2002, p. 47). LCT focuses on aspects of identity that often go ignored by other critical theorists, like language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality. Thus, it takes into account the multidimensional aspects of Latinx identities (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

LCT attempts to "link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community" (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 312). It maintains a commitment to social justice via empowering an underrepresented minority group. LCT has a research agenda that supports eliminating racism, sexism, and poverty, along with empowering underrepresented minority groups (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). In this way, it is seen as complementary and supplementary to CRT.

The centrality of experiential knowledge is highlighted in LCT. It validates the personal experiences of students of color, and maintains that these experiences are "legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education" (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 314). Thus, LCT supports the following methods: storytelling, family history accounts, biographies, scenarios, parables, testimonies, chronicles, and narratives.

This theoretical framework is especially relevant to an education setting given that classrooms are where knowledge is constructed, organized, produced, and distributed (Fernandez, 2002). Research has found that one of the biggest barriers to Latinx students' success is racism founded upon their intellectual inferiority, often in the form of low teacher expectations and racial stereotypes (Cammarota, 2006). Additional research has found that "discussions on Latinx education…have often been characterized by 'crisis talk,' emphasizing

quantitative indicators of educational failure" (Fernandez, 2002, p. 45). This reality is directly related to Latinx students being depicted and described (in academic discourses and popular rhetoric) through a lens of deficits, which can lead youth to internal oppression (Monzo, 2016).

The Importance of a Sense of Agency and Hope

The factors addressed through critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and Latinx critical theory are related to individuals' sense of agency and hope. It is important to define these terms in order to understand specifically what this represents, as well as why they are important in young students' lives.

Definitions of agency. Possessing a sense of agency means feeling as though one is in the driver's seat when it comes to their own actions and the associated consequences. It requires the "confidence and skills to act on one's behalf" (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 316). While difficult to assess, one's sense of agency can be measured either implicitly or explicitly. Implicit measures "assess a correlate of voluntary action and infer something about the agentic experience on the basis of this" (Moore, 2016, p. 2). Contrarily, explicit measures ask a person to self-report the level of the sense of agency as it relates to an experience (Moore, 2016).

Two main theories have been used to explore the sense of agency. The first theory, the comparator model, was developed by Frith (2005). It proposes that our actions begin with intentions, which then alters the desired state of our motor system, thus producing a movement and sensory feedback. If the motor system detects a mismatch from the feedback, an updated motor command is issued (Frith, 2005). The second theory, the theory of apparent mental causation, was developed by Wegner and Wheatley (1999). It operates from the opposite viewpoint compared to Frith's theory, because it downplays the contribution of the motor system. Instead, this theory suggests that when we make an action voluntarily, it was actually

caused by an unconscious causal pathway. Most importantly, Wegner and Wheatley's theory (1999) posits that the feeling humans possess that leads them to believe their intentions caused their actions is erroneous, because the unconscious pathways are truly responsible.

Definitions of hope. Hope is "one's perceived ability to execute envisioned paths to future goals" (Dixson et al., 2017, p. 55). In order for one's perception to be accurately classified as hope, it must be a relatively stable personality disposition. Hope is a cognitive-motivational construct that includes how individuals choose goals, plan to accomplish their goals, what their motivation for accomplishing the goals is, and their belief in their ability to accomplish the goals (Snyder, 2002).

There are two main components of hope: pathways and agency. Pathways refers to "one's perceived ability to envision routes to one's goals" (Dixson et al., 2017, p. 56). It depends on whether or not a person can create a roadmap toward a better future for themselves. Agency is the second part of this process, which requires an individual to possess the belief that they are capable of accomplishing their envisioned goal route (Snyder, 2002).

Critical hopefulness, first introduced by Freire, is defined as the "learned hopefulness about one's own ability to participate in and lead community change efforts" (Christens et al., 2018, p. 1649). This encompasses one's hope and agency but takes them one step further by its assessment of how an individual believes that social power operates. Critical hopefulness is positively associated with higher levels of civic engagement, psychological sense of community, and social justice orientation (Christens et al., 2018).

Importance of agency. Agency has a large effect on an individual's health and well-being. For instance, it is linked to healthy aging, because there is often a reduced feeling of control caused by oncoming physical impairment (Moore, 2016). Therefore, if an individual

possesses agency, there is less of a chance they will be negatively impacted by the physical impairment; it is more likely that they will be able to envision a roadmap to a better quality of life, and then believe they are capable of following that roadmap. This concept is a central facet of Freire's problem-posing approach, as he poses that the oppressed must be empowered to know that they are capable of finding and acting on a solution (Freire, 1970). Beyond health concerns, it is relevant in an educational setting because students who have a strong sense of agency are usually more motivated and persistent (Dixson et al., 2017). Adelabu (2008) also found that students with higher agency earn better grades.

Furthermore, agency also has a large effect on an individual's perception of responsibility and free will. The responsibility construct is closely related to the structure of U.S. education, because it means that "people can be held accountable for what they do, which in turn allows behavior to be legitimately managed through punishment or reward" (Moore, 2016, p. 7). Responsibility is then linked with free will, because it only makes sense to hold an individual accountable for their actions if they are freely in control of them (Moore, 2016). In order for a person to make a choice, there needs to be some sort of appetite or desire present, as well as emotional regulation (McCaslin, 2009).

Freire's critical pedagogy addresses the importance of agency as it aims to free the oppressed through empowering them to liberate themselves. Without possessing agency, communities can fall into a culture of silence where individuals are dehumanized (Shih, 2018). Agency thus becomes a tool for emancipation, allowing people to view the world they live in with critical vision.

Building on Freire's beliefs, the role of agency in education is also crucial because when teachers make their students dependent on them, the situation becomes enforced stultification

(Rancière, 1987). This arises when teachers conceal knowledge from the students, making them believe that they can only obtain and comprehend it by relying on the more experienced teacher. A stultifying master thus produces a circle of powerlessness in which inequality is perpetuated by pedagogy that nurtures superiority, rather than intelligence (Rancière, 1987).

In such a circumstance, those with less intelligence or power cannot be freed — instead, they are stuck in the "circle of power" in which they are oppressed. Breaking this circle requires emancipatory educators, who strengthen students' confidence in their ability to learn independently, and universal teaching, which promotes the equal intelligence of all people by announcing that economically disadvantaged individuals can achieve what the rich can (Rancière, 1987). Educators who hold this viewpoint and instruct in this way support their students' agency, therefore allowing them to overcome the circle of existing power.

Importance of hope. Critical hopefulness is correlated with youth civic engagement, which has been associated with increases in educational and vocational achievements, avoidance of risk behaviors, and mental well-being. In addition, youth who possess such leadership control perceptions have stronger attachments to their neighborhoods, less frequent drug and alcohol use, and higher levels of participation in their school and community contexts (Christens et al., 2018).

Freire contends that critical hopefulness is necessary because "naive hope without analysis is a recipe for disillusion and cynical pessimism" (Weiler, 2003, p. 34). It enables individuals to understand the future not as a product of some higher power's will; rather, the future will be made by human effort and struggle. Critical hope thus produces a vision in which a more just society is truly possible (Weiler, 2003). It is the root of strategic and progressive change.

Hope can be a useful indicator to determine a student's academic and psychological risk, as well as possible interventions. A student's ability to achieve the goals they set for themselves is greatly influenced by their level of hope (Snyder, 2002). Studies on students' levels of hope found that future-oriented students often earn higher grades (Adelabu, 2008). Additionally, academic hope is said to be the strongest predictor of grade-point average, semesters enrolled in college, and academic performance (Gallagher, Marques, & Lopez, 2017). As such, hope is an integral component of closing the achievement gap (Dixson et al., 2017).

A sense of hope is particularly pertinent for Latinx students, noting the particular situation of undocumented individuals. Chang, Torrez, Ferguson, and Sagar (2017) believe that critical hope can serve as a coping mechanism and act of defiance. If a student believes in themselves, therefore allowing them to achieve to the greatest degree and move toward becoming a top student, they become more eligible for scholarships. Such eligibility also increases the possibility of them becoming a legal citizen (Chang et al., 2017). One student in Chang et al.'s (2017) study stated that her sense of hope allowed to her to continue taking risks, and these risks were what led her to receive scholarships and enroll in college.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) can create conditions that promote social justice and empowerment by enabling researchers to give all stakeholders a voice throughout a study (Dworksi-Riggs & Langout, 2010). Photovoice is one example of PAR methodology, and it is informed by Freire's problem-posing and co-learning frameworks, which fall under his critical pedagogy (Sahay, Thatcher, Nunez, & Lightfoot, 2016). It is also informed by feminist theory (Peabody, 2013).

History of photovoice. Photovoice was developed in the 1990s by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris. Wang was a professor at the University of Michigan School of Public Health, and Burris was a research associate at University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Their intention was for photovoice to be "a public health tool for working with communities to ground emerging issues in the communities' own definitions of their concerns" (Peabody, 2013, p. 252). It was first used in the Women's Reproductive Health and Development program in China. Two of the most well-known projects involving youth are the Flint Photovoice project, which acquired funding for community violence prevention, and the Youth Empowerment Strategies! (YES!) program, which led to petition drives, a playground clean-up, and the formation of a "Kidpatrol" at recess (Wang, 2006).

Elements of photovoice. The three main goals of photovoice methodology are recording a community's strengths and concerns, promoting critical dialogue through photograph discussion, and reaching policymakers (Wang, 2006). This methodology posits that "images teach, pictures can influence policy, and community people ought to participate in creating and defining the images that shape healthful public policy" (Wang, 2006, p. 148). Photovoice methods are based on the belief that people are the experts on their own lives (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004). This methodology is said to contribute to a community's health and well-being (Wang, 2006).

According to Wang (2006) and Rose, Shdiamah, Tablan, and Sharpe (2016), there is a nine-step methodology that photovoice studies should follow. The first step involves selecting and recruiting a target audience of policymakers or community leaders who have the political power to make the participants' ideas come to life. Examples of these leaders include city council members, other politicians, journalists, physicians, administrators, researchers,

businesspeople, and community leaders — dependent upon the purpose of a given research study. Next, the researcher must recruit participants. Wang (2006) suggests limiting the participants to seven to ten individuals "to allow for practical ease and in-depth discussion" (p. 149). These first two steps are interchangeable in order.

Step three includes teaching the participants about the methodology and exploring the connections between cameras, power, and ethics. Explored topics should include acceptable ways to approach someone to take their photograph, whether photographed human-subjects must give consent, what circumstances individuals may not want to be photographed during, and who photographs may be given to, as well as the implications these photographs might have (Wang, 2006). The following step requires the researcher to obtain informed consent through a written form. It is the responsibility of the researcher to make clear the participants' vulnerability, significance of the research, potential risks and benefits of participating, and the voluntary nature of participating (Wang, 2006).

One way to approach step five is to ask the group to pose initial themes for the photographs that will be taken by the participants. These themes often have the intention of enhancing community health and advancing social work (Peabody, 2013; Wang, 2006). Alternately, the researcher may pose a specific theme, but then facilitate a conversation with the participants about ways in which these themes can be portrayed through image (Rose et al., 2016; Wang, 2006). In the sixth step, cameras are distributed. In the seventh step, participants are given time to actually take the photos.

Step eight starts with participants choosing one or two photographs they took to analyze. It also involves the participants and researcher meeting to the discuss the chosen photographs through the *SHOWeD* method:

S	What do you **S**ee here?
H	What's really **H**appening here?
O	How does this relate to **O**ur lives?
We	**W**hy does this situation, concern, or strength **e**xist?
D	What can we **D**o about it?

Table 1 Expanded SHOWeD acronym

After answering these questions as a group for each photograph, all members work together to codify the issues, themes, and/or theories that emerged. Wang (2006) suggests focusing on issues because "photovoice is well-suited to action-oriented analysis that creates practical guidelines" (p. 152).

In the last step of the photovoice process, the researcher and participants collaborate to create a format through which they can present their photos and stories with the previously identified audience. According to Wang (2006), previously utilized formats include Powerpoint slideshows and photo exhibits. In conclusion, including youth in photovoice projects supports the foundational belief that youth are competent, active citizens who should have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives (Peabody, 2013; Wang, 2006;). Because photovoice methodology posits that youth are competent and active community members, they are thus granted a voice to help enhance their community's well-being.

Addressing power structures and agency. Many PAR studies maintain the overarching goal of analyzing existing power structures as they pertain to other environments, such as intervention planning in school environments (Dworksi-Riggs & Langout, 2010). Examples of

analyzed structures include school policy's role in decision-making; the intersection of time, scheduling, and power; and social norms.

In particular, photovoice's foundation in Freire's critical pedagogy gives it the intention of shifting the power relation between participants and researchers (Sahay et al., 2016). This is made possible because photographs elicit individuals' perspectives while providing a group process that generates new knowledge. Just like critical pedagogy, the problem-posing nature of photovoice "repudiates the traditional banking method of education and seeks to elicit the knowledge and expertise within individuals in the effort to transform historical/social realities" (Sahay et al., 2016, p. 48).

Additionally, photovoice invokes a reflective nature that allows for critical consciousness to progress (Wang, 2006). This allows participants to examine existing power structures and their effects. Photovoice is aligned with Rancière's (1987) claim that students must be able to talk about everything they learn — "to say what [they] see, what [they] think about it, what [they] make of it" (p. 20). In this way, photovoice can enable individuals to become intellectually emancipated, escape the circle of powerlessness, and become agents of change.

Tangible outcomes. With the financial support of the DeKalb County Board of Health and Kenneth Cole Foundation, the Photovoice Youth Empowerment Program in DeKalb County explored community health issues and concerns. The participants included African American and refugee high school students. Their primary audience was the Clarkston Boards of Health and Education, Clarkston officials, law enforcement officers, and the local business community. The participants reported many benefits of their experience, including increased self-confidence, learning computer skills, and how to work with people who are different from them (Wang, 2006).

The Town Criers Photovoice project in Alameda County focused on the Acquired Immune Deficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic among African Americans. The participants were black and Latinx youth who knew someone infected with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) or AIDS. They had a broad intended audience of mainstream and ethnic media and used the California Wellness Foundation as their funding source. One outcome was that Town Criers raised the media prominence of the AIDS epidemic within communities of color (Wang, 2006).

The Flint Photovoice project in Michigan, funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, had the goal of identifying "assets and issues [that were] exerting the greatest impact on individual and community health and well-being" (Wang, 2006, p. 153). Many different participant groups took photographs: youth participants in the National Institute for Drug Abuse-supported Flint Adolescent Study, active youth community leaders, adult community leaders, adult neighborhood activists, and local policymakers. The intended audience was policymakers and community leaders. This project was instrumental in acquiring funding for area violence prevention (Wang, 2006).

Oakland, California's Youth Empowerment Strategies! (YES!) program was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and was concerned with issues that could be targeted for social action. Photographs were taken and analyzed by fifth graders who were enrolled in public Title I elementary schools that served low-income communities. The results were directed toward school principals, teachers, and after-school program coordinators. YES! led to petition drives, a playground clean-up, and the formation of a "Kidpatrol" at recess (Wang, 2006).

The Baltimore Youth Photovoice project was centered around community assets and deficits. It was comprised of adolescents who were involved in an after-school teen center. It was

funded both by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Johns Hopkins University Center for Adolescent Health. Their intended audience was policy makers, researchers, and community leaders. It reportedly strengthened parent-child relationships (Wang, 2006).

In a broader sense, all successful youth photovoice projects have led to healthy youth-adult partnerships where both parties gain positives. Youth benefit by participating in the policy design and critique process, whereas adults benefit by recognizing the skills of young people (Wang, 2006). Specifically, participating adults are shown young people's capacity to contribute to the creation of policies and the establishment of needs-based programs. It is important to note, however, that involving youth in the photovoice process can require additional encouragement overcoming systemic and internalized oppression, given that youth have been inhibited by personal or family crises related to parents, health, housing, and substance use (Stevenson, 2002).

The findings from the literature indicate that there is existing research that chronicles problematic power struggles in education, as well as racism in education against people of color. There are also widely accepted definitions of agency and hope, in addition to studies that have been done to explore their importance in the lives of different groups of people. Furthermore, many past photovoice projects have included youth and people of color in education settings.

One major weakness in the literature is the lack of information about the perceptions of youth (namely youth of color) — specifically regarding their understandings of systemic inequity. There is also little literature linking such awareness with their sense of agency and critical hopefulness. As such, there is currently a lack of existing studies that assess young students' critical awareness of how social power operates (Christen et al., 2018). Moreover, there is also limited research on the roles hope and agency play in schools (Dixson et al., 2017). The

purpose of this research study, therefore, is to illuminate how students perceive structures of power, as well as how this perception impacts their sense of agency and hope. This study also explores if photovoice methodology impacts students' sense of agency and hope.

Chapter 3: Methods

There have been multiple studies including youth in participatory action research, and specifically photovoice projects (Wang, 2006). However, little research has been done connecting youth participatory action research to feelings of hope and agency. Furthermore, there is a lack of existing studies that assess young students' critical awareness of how social power operates (Christens, Byrd, Peterson, & Lardier, 2018). There is also limited research on the roles hope and agency play in schools (Dixon, Worrell, & Mello, 2017). These gaps are particularly pertinent to Latinx students, given that dominant discourse often presents them through a deficit lens, which can lead to internal oppression (Monzo, 2016). Thus, more data is needed to better understand how young students' understandings of systemic inequities and power influence their hope and sense of agency, as well as how photovoice methodology influences their hope and sense of agency. I designed the following methods with the belief that the student participants' voices should be the direct authority and primary source of data on the subject of students' hope, agency, and experience participating in photovoice.

Research Questions

This study focused on student responses to two question series, presented in survey and interview format for breadth of substantive data. It also focused on student experience participating in a photovoice project. To this end, the questions were formed based on the following central questions:

- How do students perceive structures of power?
- How do students' perceptions of power impact their agency and hope?
- How does photovoice methodology impact students' agency and hope?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

To research elementary school students' understandings of structural power and how it impacts their sense of agency and hope, I conducted a convergent mixed methods study with transformative and pragmatic worldviews. A mixed methods approach was chosen to develop more complete understandings of changes needed for a marginalized group and evaluate both the processes and outcomes of a program — specifically photovoice research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This methodology involves the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data, as well as the analysis and interpretation of both types of data. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it focuses on the meaning the participants hold about issues regarding power structures. It also enabled the provision of a holistic account of the issue under study by reporting multiple perspectives and identifying multiple factors involved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A quantitative approach was also appropriate because the surveys provided a numerical description of the trends in participants' perception of hope and agency.

I collected qualitative data via interviews and a photovoice project. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, involving open-ended questions designed to "elicit views and opinions from the participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 187). Photovoice, providing audiovisual qualitative data, took the form of photographs that represented a visual ethnography of the participants. The qualitative research was conducted in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time. The collected quantitative data came from pre-photovoice and post-photovoice surveys. The purpose of the quantitative data was to determine whether participation in photovoice research affects elementary school students' feelings of hope and agency.

The qualitative portion of this study followed the transformative philosophical worldview, which focuses on the needs of groups and individuals in our society that may be marginalized

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It stems from the belief that research inquiry should be intertwined with politics in order to confront social oppression. Creswell (2018) states that "transformative worldview research contains an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life" (p. 9). This research is intended to promote the importance of student voice in the change-making process, in addition to increasing students' sense of agency and hope through the inclusion of their voices. A transformative worldview values participants' voices in the research process, thus allowing them to improve their own lives. In this study, participants had an opportunity to change their own lives by examining how their understanding of power influences their sense of agency and hope.

The quantitative portion of this study, when considered in conjunction with the qualitative portion, followed the pragmatic worldview. This worldview "arises out of actions, situations, and consequences rather than antecedent conditions" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 10). In this way, pragmatism focuses on what works and possible solutions, instead of specific methodology. This study is concerned with ideas and programs that increase students' sense of agency and hope, and pragmatism supports finding such solutions.

This project explored two main topics: how students' understandings of structural power are related to their sense of agency and hope, and how photovoice projects influence students' agency and hope. There is a lack of existing assessments of young students' critical awareness of how social power operates (Christen, Byrd, & Peterson, 2018). According to Dixon, Worrell, and Mello (2017), there is also limited research on the roles hope and agency play in schools. The implemented qualitative methods — interviews and photovoice — address students' understanding of power and the roles of hope and agency. The majority of photovoice projects

are conducted with adults or older students, rather than young people, which is another gap in the research (Wang, 2006). The quantitative method of surveys addresses this gap by measuring the impact of participation in photovoice projects on young students, specifically in terms of their sense of agency and hope.

Research Design

  Research site and entry into the field. This research was conducted at an elementary school in northern California, which will be referred to as Forest Elementary School. This site was purposefully selected because I have been working at the school for the last three years. Thus, I had pre-existing relationships with the student participants as their primary classroom instructor. Of the 23 students who were invited to participate, eight students participated. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the school name and participant names.

  Forest Elementary School is not a neighborhood school because it has no attendance boundary lines — instead, students whose neighborhood schools were full were placed at this site. Additionally, the district the school is in operates on the premise of school choice, meaning parents can choose to send their children to any school site that has room, so some of the students were enrolled there based on the parents' choice. The school serves a total of 110 students ranging in grades from transitional kindergarten to fifth grade, including one Special Day Class for third through fifth grade special education students. In all, there are four African American students, one American Indian student, two Asian students, nine white students, and 94 Latinx students. A total of 69 students are classified as English Language Learners, and 12 students are in homeless situations.

  Participants and sampling procedure. Fourth and fifth grade students at Forest Elementary School were recruited for participation in the study. Their ages ranged from nine to

eleven years old, meaning that they were all minors. This sample of students included multiple genders, and Asian, African American, Latinx, and mixed-race participants. Student participants were solicited through direct invitation after a brief presentation I gave about the study's purpose and methodology during regular class time. Students then had to fill out an assent form and get a consent form signed by their parents. As such, the study relied on a convenience population sample based on the number of students who chose to volunteer to participate and received consent from their parents.

These fourth and fifth grade students were purposefully selected as I teach a fourth/fifth grade combination class and have observed many conversations between these students about what is fair versus unfair. The purpose of recruiting students is to comprehend their understandings of systemic inequities and their perceptions of their personal sense of agency. This type of sample was desirable and purposefully chosen given that all of the participants were students of color who are deeply affected by systemic inequity, particularly in the realm of education. This sample allowed me to "[best] understand the problem and the research question[s]" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 185).

At Forest Elementary School, students in my homeroom class were verbally asked to participate in the photovoice project and surveys after watching an introductory presentation. Interested students took home a consent form to be signed by a parent/guardian. The consent form outlined the study's purpose, provided methodology and risk information, and detailed how data would be collected and protected. Students who returned the consent form then signed an assent form with me. The students who returned the consent form and signed the assent form then participated in the photovoice project and pre- and post-surveys. At the conclusion of the

post-survey, these participants were then verbally invited to complete an interview with me at a preferred time.

Methods. Prior to the photovoice project beginning, the eight participants' parents provided verbal consent then written consent. The students provided written assent. They saw a brief description of the study and purpose. On the first day of the photovoice project, the researcher distributed a pre-photovoice survey for the participants to fill out. See Appendix B for the survey questions, which were answered on a scale of 1-10. The purpose of the pre-survey questions was to create a baseline for the participants' levels of hope and agency prior to participating in a photovoice project.

After the participants completed the pre-surveys, I taught them about the aspects of photovoice methodology. The participants explored the connections between cameras, power, and ethics. On the next day of the project, I asked the participants to pose initial themes for the photographs they wanted to take, as well as ways in which these themes could be portrayed through images. After, I distributed cameras to the participants in need of them and reviewed how to take photographs. The participants were then given time — a two-week time frame — to actually take the photographs that represented the decided-upon themes.

After the participants took their photographs, the group met to discuss them and identify the emerging themes through the *SHOWeD* method. *SHOWeD* represents the following questions:

- What do you **S**ee here?
- What is really **H**appening here?
- How does this relate to **O**ur lives?
- **W**hy does this condition **e**xist?

- What can we **D**o about it?

The next step was for the participants to work together with me in order to create a format through which they could present their photos and stories to our school district's superintendent and our principal. They used Google Slides and integrated some of the photographs with titles and captions. After completing the presentation, I distributed the post-photovoice survey for the participants to fill out. This survey contained the same questions as the pre-survey, and when I compared the differences in responses, the resulting data addressed two of the study's research questions: *How does photovoice methodology impact students' hope? And how does photovoice methodology impact students' sense of agency?*

Following the post-photovoice survey, I conducted interviews with all eight student participants who assented (along with their parents' consent) to participate. The interview questions (see Appendix C) were designed to address the following two research questions: *How do students' understandings of systemic inequities and power influence their hope? And how do students' understandings of systemic inequities and power influence their sense of agency?* The interview questions achieved this goal by asking the participants to reflect on their opinions about the fairness of power structures, who possesses the most power in specific contexts, and what influences their hopefulness. The last two questions were designed to address the research question about how photovoice methodology impacts students' hope and agency. One of the interview questions specifically asks the participants this, and one asks them what they learned about power from the photovoice project.

Data analysis. Using a convergent mixed methods design, the qualitative and quantitative data was gathered concurrently. Qualitative data analysis methods were used to analyze the photovoice and interview discussions. All photovoice meetings and interviews were

audio recorded and completely transcribed by me. I wrote analytic memos directly after the group discussions to capture data about the interactions. Such memos "facilitate [analytic] thinking [about data], stimulating analytic insights" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). The quantitative data from the student surveys was inputted into a spreadsheet document, in addition to a written document with pie charts.

The transcribed photovoice discussions, transcribed interviews, and survey data were open coded by hand by identifying both expected and unexpected codes in the data. The initial coding process was begun inductively with segmenting the text data by identifying key words and phrases. These segments were then labeled with expected codes generated from the literature review, as well as unexpected codes that arose in the discussions and interviews. I looked for significant statements from participants to develop a description of their experiences, and to examine any commonalities among them. The quantitative data was also open coded initially. Concept mapping was utilized for further explanation of the data by organizing the codes into categories, with the goal of searching for connections or gaps in the data. Themes emerged through the analysis of the concept map and written reflections on the findings.

After concept mapping, the qualitative and quantitative codes were indexed using spreadsheets to organize the data and expedite the pattern searching. Further patterns were found to merge the quantitative data into the qualitative data, thus allowing an integrated data interpretation through a data analysis matrix (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I wrote descriptions of the characteristics and contexts of the themes identified to clarify their connection to the research questions. Then, all the data was analyzed through focused coding.

Validity. I am the classroom teacher of the student participants. This may have influenced data collection because I had a personal investment in wanting the photovoice project

to positively affect my students' lives. Reactivity is also important to consider, because my role as their teacher influenced the environment that the data was collected in. Another bias was that I wanted my students to connect their understandings of systemic inequities with action in order to increase their hope for their futures and sense of agency. I am aware of my bias and wanted to keep my objectives for the research clear to ensure a valid study. Therefore, I implemented several strategies to address these validity threats.

For one, I conducted repeated observations to check and confirm what was seen and inferred. This is important because it provides more complete data about certain situations (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, it is my third year working at the site of research, so I have maintained intensive, long-term involvement with the student participants. My involvement allowed me to develop an in-depth understanding about my participants' experiences and increased their trust in me (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) also state that strong participant/researcher relationships can lead to more accurate and valid findings.

Qualitative data was collected through observations during the photovoice process, as well as audiotaped and transcribed interviews with student participants. In addition, quantitative data was collected through surveys, given at both the beginning and end of the photovoice project. This triangulation of data sources increased the validity of the study because I analyzed data to look for themes that emerged from many sources. This "reduces the risk of chance associations and of systemic biases due to a specific method, and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 128). I utilized rich data through my long-term involvement and intensive interviews. I wrote verbatim transcripts of the interviews and detailed, descriptive notes on my observations, thus providing a full picture of what was going on (Maxwell, 2013).

During the data analysis process, I was cognizant of searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases to ensure that my bias of wanting photovoice to improve my students' lives did not go unaddressed. I rigorously examined all data to "assess whether it [was] more plausible to retain or modify the conclusion, being aware of all the pressures to ignore data that [did] not fit [my] conclusions" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 127). Lastly, I also used respondent validation to solicit feedback about my conclusions from the participants. This ruled out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what the participants said in the photovoice discussions and interviews (Maxwell, 2013).

Chapter 4: Findings

This project sought to discover how students perceive structures of power, how this perception impacts their sense of agency and hope, and as such, influences their confidence and engagement in learning. Additionally, this study explored the impact of photovoice methodology on students' sense of agency and critical hopefulness. After concluding this project and analyzing observation notes from the photovoice meetings, student interview responses, and survey data, I found that all participants agreed with the importance of feeling that their voices were being valued in relation to their agency and hope. Additionally, I found that students analyze the equity of a circumstance based on their perceptions of power structures, which differs on an individual basis due to life experiences. These analyses then affect students' critical hopefulness and agency, as students who perceived individual community members as possessing more power than singular leaders felt better about their futures and making changes in their lives.

Several overarching themes emerged through close examination of the data. First, I discovered the theme and importance of valuing individuals' voices within contexts of critical hope and agency. The second theme arose from commonalities in factors associated with equity and seem to represent fairness as they relate to power structures. A major concern on the students' minds was the impending closure of Forest School. Beyond this closure, all of the students' photographs represent themes of either differences in access or dirty, broken spaces. Moreover, students' beliefs regarding fairness are affected by their perceptions of power structures. Structures of inequity were described by students through who has the most power in any given environment, how this power was acquired and maintained, and what actions can lead to a loss of power. The third theme aggregated these "perceptions of power."

Valuing Voice

In addition to dissecting the parameters of fairness and illuminating understandings of power structures, the student participants drew attention to another important consideration of photovoice projects: attaching value to student voice. After presenting their findings, the eight of them stood proudly in front of the concluding slide of their photovoice presentation, ready to take on the discussion portion of the morning. Both the principal and the deputy superintendent engaged with the presenters, but only about their last finding—their belief that all students in the district should have access to bilingual education, no matter if they were native English or Spanish speakers.

As the researcher, I felt frustrated that the only finding discussed was the least controversial finding. For context, both the principal and deputy superintendent are bilingual Latinx individuals who are in the process of proposing a second dual-immersion school for the district. As such, they fully supported the students' suggestion. The other findings — about how their school lacked access to a librarian and thus free books, and suffered from unfixed broken fences, and about how their voices were not included in the impending school closure decision — went altogether unaddressed by both the principal and the deputy superintendent.

During the subsequent interviews, only one of the students brought this up. "I really wish we could have talked about more than just the English/Spanish thing after the presentation," Jazmin stated. When prompted about why, she explained that she wished she could have heard what the principal and deputy superintendent thought about their other ideas, too.

Otherwise, the students had more to say about the quality of the audience's listening — both in positive and negative respects. In some regards, many of the students expressed gratitude that any district personnel showed up to hear them speak. Beyond her frustration about the

limited post-discussion, Jazmin added that it gave her hope "thinking about all the important people who came in to watch our presentation." She said that she was surprised they actually wanted to hear what they had to say, and their presence made her feel like they "actually care." Jazmin expanded on how the fact that they asked *any* questions made her think they wanted to know more about their thoughts: "they seemed convinced by some things we said, so maybe they'll fix some of it," she began. "When Tomas was saying what we found, Dr. Garcia took a picture of it, so maybe she wanted to show it to other people to see what their thoughts were."

Other students shared similar sentiments: "I could tell they cared about us because they were paying attention and listening to us talk about fair and unfair things;" "It felt great to have them listening to me because they cared and they offered their time to come here;" "Some of them were really busy but they put it on their calendar and the took the time to say, 'I'mma do this,' because they care."

Celina even said that their presence made her feel less sad about the school's closure because their opinions were being heard, and the "powerful adults" had questions for them. When asked to illuminate how she knew whether or not this audience cared, she recalled, "when Isabela, after the project presentation, asked if anyone had questions, Dr. Garcia said she did, and she agreed with what we said." She said this made her feel excited because maybe some things in the district would change because of what they shared. This finding highlights the importance of adult validation for elementary-aged students, especially when it comes to increasing their hope and agency. The deputy superintendent's agreement led Celina to feel hopeful that changes could be made, and that she was an acting agent in those changes.

The students who did feel that their voices were being valued showed increases in their amounts of hope and agency on the photovoice surveys. Jazmin's hope for herself and her

community remained at a 10 from the pre- to the post-survey, and her belief in her ability to create change on district and community levels rose by twenty and thirty percent, respectively. Leo's hope for his community's future increased by four points, which he said was due to adults in the community caring about the problems they found.

Not all students' perceptions, however, were as positive. On his pre-photovoice survey, Cesar rated himself an "8" for principals, the school board, and the superintendent valuing his voice. On his post-photovoice survey, though, he rated himself a "3." When asked to explain this decrease, he said, "I think it went down because when the audience was listening, they didn't really listen to me with their eyes." He said this made him feel sad because "they weren't paying attention and what we were saying is important. And the principal came late and that made me feel sad because he didn't hear most of the presentation."

Another student deeply affected by the principal's late arrival was Adriana. Her perception of her voice being valued by her school's teachers and principal dropped by five points by the end of the project. She said that the late arrival made her feel like he did not care enough to see the whole presentation, and she wondered why he did not explain why he was late. While these feelings did not appear to alter her critical hopefulness as per the survey results, they did alter her sense of agency. Her sense of agency in school, district, and community matters dropped eight, five, and seven points respectively. When prompted about these significant decreases, Adriana responded, "How can I make change if the adults won't come to listen to everything I say when I talk about my research?"

Factors of Fairness

Throughout the seven photovoice meetings, all themes regarding equity – or fairness, as the student participants called it – drawn out from the students came from a local scope. It is

critical to note that this local focus may be due to the students' lack of experience with photography and lack of awareness of how to represent themes in an abstract way. In short, students may have felt limited by only being able to take literally interpreted photographs of realities directly in front of them.

School closure. A main theme that surfaced during the photovoice analysis meetings and presentation was the impending closure of Forest School. It was initially sparked by Isabela's photograph of Mar Vista (see figure 1), the school approximately four blocks away from Forest, that many Forest students will attend once it closes down. After a two-year remodeling process, Mar Vista reopened the same month the photovoice research took place. Isabela also took a photograph of the front of Forest School. During the analysis process, Jazmin noted how what was really happening in the photo was that Mar Vista was just remodeled to create more classrooms, whereas her school was simultaneously being shut down due to not having enough students in the district. She saw Mar Vista's reopening and Forest's closing in direct conversation with each other.

Figure 1 Mar Vista Elementary School. Used with permission from Isabela

Jazmin also expressed frustration that instead of increasing the size of Forest and keeping it open, the district instead chose to remodel the Mar Vista site. Pilar then stated that she wished that the district invited students to the school closure meetings held the previous fall. The girls' conversation spoke to the group's consensus that student voice was not honored in the closure process, and there was an overall lack of clarity about why Mar Vista was made bigger at the same time they were told that their school was closing due to low enrollment numbers district-wide. "This school is like my home, and it's not fair that they're closing it," Leo said. He added, "It's where I came to school when I first immigrated here [from Guatemala]."

Access. Another dominant theme from the project was the equity of who has access to resources. Celina took photographs of Forest's library (see figure 2), which has remained closed since August due to the district's inability to hire a librarian this school year. Jazmin and Adriana took photographs of English and Spanish books (see figures 3 and 4) to represent differing bilingual literacy trends across the district's school sites. Jazmin also took photographs juxtaposing prices of the same food items at different grocery stores in the county (see figures 5 and 6).

Celina's library photographs and the consequent discussions were presented to the stakeholder audience, as the students felt that it revealed a great injustice in the school community – the inability to access free books with ease. Jazmin reminded the group that "some kids don't have books that they can read on their own, and some kids don't have money to buy them or parents at home who can take them to a library in the town." The fact that students at all of the other schools within the same district had access to an on-site library produced a lot of frustration within the group. At first, none of the students could come up with a theory as to why

they went to the one school sans access. Finally, Isabela pondered, "Maybe it's because Forest School is closing soon, and the district just doesn't care enough to hire someone for one year?"

Isabela's comment shows how some fourth- and fifth-grade students have the perceptive ability to link perceived injustices with power structures. Isabela specifically noted that their situation was a result of the school district's inaction, and that their inaction could be tied to their decision to close the school. This inaction was another point of contention among the students during their problem-solving inquiry. Pilar and Leo suggested putting up signs around the town to let the community know Forest was trying to hire a librarian, as well as talking to people they know to see if they are interested.

Figure 2 Forest School's library. Used with permission from Celina

This viewpoint did not sit well with Celina, who stated that hiring a librarian should be a job for adults, not for kids. Jazmin agreed, saying, "It's because students are going to school to learn, and they should not have to worry about if they have a librarian or a book or not. So the adults at the school district should try finding [a librarian] because it's not the students' jobs to find people to work there!" In this situation, at least two of the students showed awareness of the relationship between hierarchical power and responsibilities. They believed that those who they

viewed to have the power — the school district personnel — should thus also take on the responsibility of action.

In the case of Jazmin and Adriana's photos of English and Spanish books, the girls sought to represent the differing language knowledge and abilities within the school district. Students at some schools, they claimed, only speak Spanish, and students at other schools speak both Spanish and English. The group agreed that this was unfair because "the English students will never have the chance to learn Spanish." This made me realize that I was initially looking at their photographs through a deficit lens, as I had maintained the stance that it was unfair to the native Spanish speakers who may be missing out on experiencing native English-speaking models. The students, on the contrary, saw the Spanish-speaking students as being the most privileged, however, due to being on the track to become bilingual.
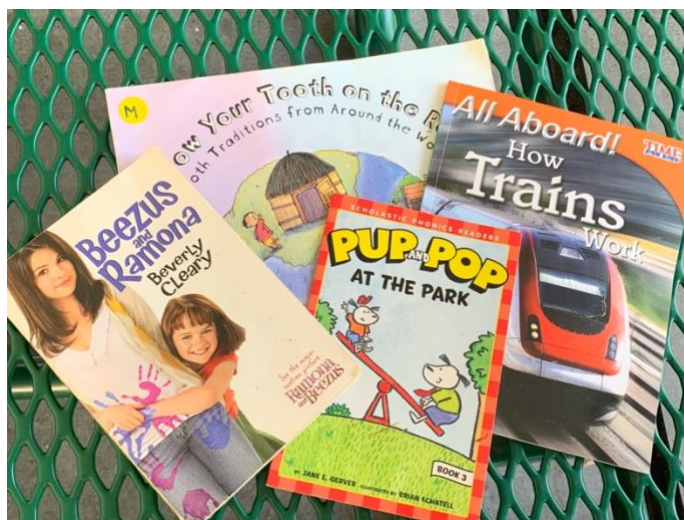
Figure 3 Books in English. Used with permission from Jazmin

These photographs also offered an opportunity for the students to discuss the power structures that created this language circumstance in the first place. Jazmin said that students' families who are new to the United States might get confused by the process of signing up for a school, if they do not know how to speak English or if they do not know how to read or write at

all in Spanish. The four students in the group who immigrated to the United States themselves

nodded in agreement, and two vocalized that they thought their parents just did what the school

district told them to do. Looking at language trends at different school sites within the district

highlighted how the students were aware of the situation, believed it was unfair due to

inequitable access opportunities, and possessed theories as to what power structure prevented

fairness from occurring.

Figure 4 Books in Spanish. Used with permission from Adriana

The final photographs related to this theme of access were taken by Jazmin and showed

varying food prices at different grocery stores. Pilar described the unfairness of this reality as

coming from the fact that people usually shop at the grocery store closest to them, and they

might not know that they are paying more money for something. Cesar added on that if a person

does not have enough money to own a car, then they will not be able to easily go to the store

with the cheapest options.

Figure 5 Less expensive Cheerios. Used with permission from Jazmin

The students expressed frustration with the chain corporations who control these prices — the underlying power structure creating this injustice — and wanted to resolve it somehow. While most of the students suggested making signs or complaining to the manager, Jazmin asked, "If we boycott them, would that be too much?"


Figure 6 More expensive Cheerios. Used with permission from Jazmin

Dirty and broken. The final common thread encompassing half of the students'
photographs centered around community and school spaces being dirty or broken. Pilar took a
photo of a dirty and broken outdoor retaining wall area; Adriana took photos of a broken, littered
vent outside of her apartment building; Leo took a photo of a broken fence at Forest (see figure
7); and Tomas took two photos of trash around Forest's campus (see figures 8 and 9).

Leo's imagery of the broken fence not only became a key part of the stakeholder
presentation, but it also showed up in six out of eight of the students' interviews. Much of the
conversation focused on the lack of safety that accompanies a broken fence — students noted
how other Forest students could get *out*, just like "bad people" could get *in*. There were many
theories about why the fence had not yet been fixed even though it was broken five months prior
to this conversation. Some students thought the school might not have enough money or that no
adults on campus had been told yet, but Jazmin believed that because "Forest School isn't gonna
be here next year, the adults probably think 'why fix it' if they just have to take the fence down
at the end of the year." This is another example, along with the students' reasoning for not hiring
a librarian, that touches upon unfairness existing at Forest School due to the impending closure.
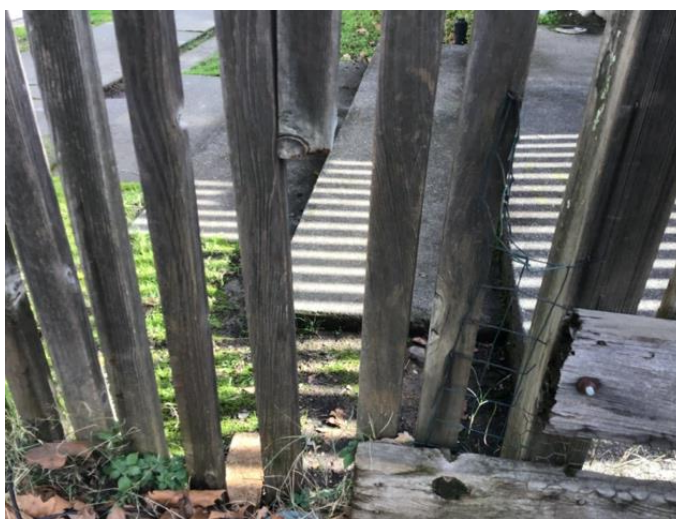
Figure 7 Broken fence at Forest School. Used with permission from Leo

The conversation surrounding Tomas' photos of trash on the school's blacktop and boys' bathroom floor took a turn in this direction, too. Tomas, Cesar, and Jazmin all believed that the situation existed because students weren't taking care of the trash. While Celina agreed with them, she also mentioned how Forest's custodian quit in October and the school district never hired another full-time person. The district did not post the job listing for underlying political reasons, therefore explaining why no one new was hired. Instead, the district negotiated for a part-time custodial substitute to work at Forest for the remainder of the year, which was not as reliable or stable as a full-time unionized custodian. The students, however, did not know this information about the job posting. Even though Celina was not made privy to this information, she was still perceptive of the power structure that made it more difficult for fairness to be achieved in this context.

Figure 8 Trash on the blacktop of Forest School. Used with permission from Tomas

In the interview with Tomas after the photovoice presentation was through, he spoke a lot about why participating in the project first caused his amount of hope to drop, then rise again. He said that at the start, he had a lot of hope for his community. Over the course of the photo

analyses, seeing so many dirty places and broken things at his school and in his community led him to feel hopeless. This is reflected in his survey data, in which his amount of hope for his community dropped by nine points over the course of participating. "It felt a lot better again though after we talked about the pictures," he concluded, "'cause then I saw that a lot of kids care about the problems and the dirty stuff and so maybe we can all get together and do something about it." Tomas' critical hopefulness journey speaks to the importance of the analysis process in regard to providing a structure for students to have a constructive and proactive experience around injustices. Had the students just shared their photos without going through the photovoice SHOWeD questioning process, it is possible that survey data would primarily show decreased hope among the participants.

Figure 9 Trash in the bathroom of Forest School. Used with permission from Tomas

Perceptions of Power

The participating students had differing perceptions of how power was given and taken — as well as the associated fairness — dependent on the circumstances. Seven out of eight

students believed that it was fair that some people gained power, but not all. The variables that affected their beliefs included the avenue through which power was obtained, and the perceived justness of the actions taken by said powerful individuals.

Power to the people. A prevailing theme among the majority of student participants was the belief that power is held by one specific individual in any given location. Six students stated that they perceive Mr. Lopez, Forest's principal, to have the most power at Forest School. On a school-district level, all eight students stated that the district's superintendent has the most power. Seven students felt that President Donald Trump has the most power in the country. One student in particular — Celina — believed so strongly in the power of these individuals that she said, "Without a principal or a president, we are nothing."

Adriana and Pilar were the two students who believed that Mr. Lopez does not possess the most power at Forest School. Adriana stated that students are the most powerful in this particular environment because they have the energy to keep working on changes. Pilar shared a similar belief, saying that they have the ability to help one another to accomplish their desired changes. Pilar was also the only student who disagreed with the statement that President Trump has the most power in the country: "All the people have the power," she said, "because if they wanna make a change, they can boycott, they can protest. And since there's a lot of people, they just have to vote or get together to make something different."

These two students who perceived power to be in the hands of affected individuals, rather than a singular individual in a leadership role, indicated significantly higher levels of hope at both the beginning and end of the photovoice project compared to the other participants. Adriana's hope on all levels started at an average of 10 and ended at an average of 9.67. Pilar's hope started at an average of 9.67 and ended at an average of 9.83. At the end of the project,

these two students had the highest indication of hope levels, suggesting a possible correlation between maintaining hope for the future and perceiving students and citizens as having the most power, instead of singular leaders.

Working hard or hardly working? Another common theme in terms of the students' perceptions of power was that individuals have to work hard to come into power, and that this work ethic must be sustained in order to keep power. To begin, Pilar's definition of power included the terms *confidence, kindness,* and *hard-working.* All students' explanations of gaining and maintaining power were centered around similar tenets. Students brainstormed possible supporting factors for first coming into power: studying a lot, getting a good education, and investing a lot of energy into one's job. Not a single student believed that it was easy to get power, but every student agreed that power can easily be taken away in the event of misacting — whether that be by not completing their work, doing work that is not in line with what they initially promised, or being rude to others.

While students did not note other key factors to coming into power, such as wealth or familial ties, their answers did indicate some awareness of how power can be acquired. Their commentary about losing power also spoke to some awareness about structures in place to hold people in power accountable for their action and inaction.

Trump. In contrast to the local focus of the students' photovoice photographs, participants broadened their scope of concerning injustices to a more national level in the interview portion of the study. Six of the eight students brought up President Donald Trump's actions against undocumented immigrants. In Pilar's interview, she said it was unfair how Donald Trump has power, because "he wanted to separate the children, and he separated them, but some families are sad because they didn't see their kids." Cesar echoed this sentiment,

stating that it's unfair that Trump has power because "he wants all immigrants to go back to their home country." All participants belong to a group of people historically targeted by President Trump's immigration policies, and it is likely that this is a topic that is addressed frequently at home.

The majority of the students commented on the unfairness of his presidency, but only one of the students — Isabela — articulated any power structures or decisions that played a role in the election process or in American politics as a whole. Isabela theorized that during the election, perhaps President Trump told lies to earn votes from the American public. The other students' commentary was focused on his actions and beliefs, but not how he came to power or how he has since maintained it. This theme suggests that students have a better understanding of power structures on a local level when compared to a national level.

Conclusion

Findings from this research study indicate that students believe that whether or not an individual's voice is perceived as valued plays a significant role in whether or not said individual feels critical hopefulness and a sense of agency. Findings also indicate that students distinguish the fairness of specific situations in relation to associated considerations of access, dirtiness, and brokenness. The data shows that students' perceptions of power structures differ in regard to who possesses the most power, how they came into power, and how said power can be lost. Specific student participants – Adriana, Cesar, and Tomas – all struggled with engagement and motivation prior to becoming involved with the this photovoice project. Throughout and after the project, they showed significantly more dedication to their learning and became more active participants in classroom discussions. Additionally, this study showed that photovoice is not just effective at increasing students' hope agency, but that it is specifically effective in examining the

potential for reflective experiences to newly engage learning. The methodology demonstrated a truth beyond photovoice itself, as it points to the fact that reflective experiences are very important for deepening student learning.

The first research question *was how do students perceive structures of power?* The results from this study indicate that the majority of students view adults in leadership roles as having the most power. However, a smaller number of students view affected community members as being more powerful. This less-common viewpoint is correlated with higher levels of critical hopefulness, as it suggests that individuals are more deeply in control of changes in their lives. The second research question was as follows: *How do students' perceptions of power impact their agency and hope?* The data suggest that increasing awareness of injustices surrounding power structures is associated with a decreased feeling of agency or hope. This decrease, though, can be remedied by providing youth with coaching to help them engage in problem-solving strategies.

These strategies are then linked to the third research question, *how does photovoice methodology impacts students' agency and hope?* Photovoice provided an environment in which students not only acknowledged and learned about perceived injustices in their communities – it also provided structure through which they could brainstorm action plans to achieve desired justice. This photovoice project offered the student participants a forum of powerful adults within their school community who gave their time to engage with the students' presentation about the justice-related findings. Photovoice changed the students' engagement through this reflective experience in which non-native English speakers were encouraged to critically communicate in a less constrained manner, through imagery. As such, photovoice was effective

at increasing students' agency and hope due to its wraparound approach of expanding both

awareness and self-advocacy skills while removing traditional language constraints.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings from this study document the importance of students feeling that their voices are being valued when it comes to the impact on their hope and agency. Additionally, findings show how students analyze the fairness of any given circumstance based on their perceptions of power structures, which differs per person due to varied life experiences. Finally, findings also show that these power analyses then affect students' critical hopefulness and sense of agency, because students who perceived greater power within community members than singular leaders all felt better about their futures and their capacity to create change within their own lives.

In the following discussion, I outline the consistencies between critical pedagogy, Critical Race Theory, Latinx Critical Theory, and the participatory action research conducted for this study. This discussion will also show consistencies between prior research and this study in regard to motivation, increased agency, and critical dialogue. It will also, however, discuss key differences between the literature review and findings – namely the importance of tangible change, youth perceptions of power, and the significance of valuing youth voices. The discussion will then suggest what other teachers can learn from this study, what policies can be implemented based on the findings, and possible contributions toward social change. This discussion will conclude with the study's limitations and directions for future research.

In many ways, the findings from this study were consistent with the frameworks in the literature review. The nature of participatory action research – photovoice, specifically – is in line with the three explored theoretical frameworks. Freire's critical pedagogy posits that learning should be dialogic so that authority figures do not oppress student voice (Shih, 2018). Asking students to take an active role in the research and generate their own themes and

solutions gives them the opportunity to share their ideas and personal narratives. Because student participants analyzed what they believed to be the cause of their identified injustices and then collaborated to create solutions, their critical consciousness was promoted, which is a central tenet of critical pedagogy (Peabody, 2013). Lastly, the photo analyses and stakeholder presentation asked the participants to explore the tension between authority and freedom (Shih, 2018). They questioned how the stakeholders gained and maintained their power, as well as the implications this power had on the injustices they observed in their school community.

In addition to critical pedagogy, this study was aligned to Critical Race Theory. By promoting the voices of youths of color, photovoice allowed the student participants to challenge dominant ideology about this often-silenced group (Fernandez, 2002). The study was also consistent with Latinx Critical Theory because it highlighted the centrality of experiential knowledge (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Student participants were not asked to research information about their communities – instead, they were asked to share personal observations and perspectives, which were treated as valid data. As such, their storytelling, testimonials, and narratives were valued (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Furthermore, the solution-based format of the photovoice analysis process moved the group away from crisis talk, in which discussion about the education of Latinx students focuses solely on failures (Fernandez, 2002).

A main purpose of photovoice methodology is to record the strengths and concerns of a community, as well as to promote critical dialogue through photo discussions (Wang, 2006). The student participants achieved this by photographing places and circumstances they either felt were fair or unfair. The analysis process allowed them to then engage in structured, goal-oriented discussions about the conditions that caused their identified fair and unfair situations, as well as the concrete steps they could take to promote or address them, respectively.

Beyond similarities between the study and frameworks, there were also similarities between the study's findings and the conclusions of the literature review. For one, the findings show that student participants feeling an increased sense of agency did feel inspired to be motivated and persistent (Dixson et al., 2017). An example of this occurring was the transformation of Tomas, who was much less engaged with and connected to his education prior to this study. Throughout the photovoice analysis process, the student participants were enabled to understand their futures as being altered by human effort and struggle, rather than as a product of some higher power's will (Weiler, 2003). The process revealed how specific actions they take can affect the realities in which they live, which is heavily tied to a sense of agency.

Implications for the Literature

The unexpected theme in the research findings was the importance of internal change as a result of the student participants feeling that their voices were being valued. The photovoice studies addressed in the literature review focused more on the importance of the tangible community changes as a result of the methodology: raising media prominence of the AIDS epidemic; acquiring funding for violence prevention programs; and starting playground clean-ups and "KidPatrol" (Wang, 2006). In the literature, there were only brief mentions of participants' internal transformations, such as learning how to work with people from different backgrounds and strengthened parent-child relationships (Wang, 2006). In my study, however, there were no tangible changes within the community as a result of the student participants' findings – but there was still significant, and critical, transformations within them. Their critical hopefulness and senses of agency increased, as did their motivation and engagement in learning.

This study illuminated youth perceptions of power, which was a gap in the existing literature. It revealed which student participants see lone individuals as being the most powerful

versus which student participants see community members as being the most powerful. It also revealed what perceptions and understandings lead to such an interpretation of power. Furthermore, this study showed how youth determine whether one's journey to gaining and maintain power is just, and why. It then showed how these personal perspectives are related to hope and agency.

To conclude, this study highlighted the importance of valuing youth's voices while removing any authoritative experts when engaging youth in critical dialogue about their communities. It is important for the adult leader of this group to be a facilitator who helps structure conversations but does not dominate with opinion or judgment. If this foundation is honored, and all youth's personal lived experiences and perceptions are treated as legitimate data, their critical hopefulness and senses of agency can increase.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Teachers. The results of this study provide teachers with the opportunity to consider the propensity to further engage and empower their students via reflective practice. It also invites teachers to consider ways in which they can include their students in critical dialogue about injustice within their communities in order to promote youth feeling like agents of change within their own lives. It raises the question of how teachers can incorporate the tenets of participatory action research and the creative freedom of artistic *and* analytic methodology (such as photovoice) in their day-to-day teaching practices, so that all students can benefit from this reflective inquiry process.

Schools. At a school level, teachers should be supported to attend professional development surrounding the implementation of participatory action research and the promotion of student voice and narratives. If teachers lack the educational background and knowledge to

facilitate dialogic learning in their classrooms, it would be unfair to expect them to integrate such practices. Additionally, schools could support projects of this nature by providing funding for necessary resources, like cameras for photovoice methodology.

Educational policies. Students would benefit greatly if all teachers' pre-service training had a deeper focus on culturally responsive pedagogy, thus ensuring that the experiences and identities of students of color are not silenced. Pre-service teachers should also be trained in facilitating dialogic classroom structures, therefore drawing out student voice and shifting the learning environment so that teachers do not oppress student voice with their authority (Freire, 1970). It is also important to train pre-service teachers in engaging students in critical conversations, no matter the students' age or English language abilities. This allows communities – specifically communities of color – to name their own experiences and their perceived causes of injustice, therefore allowing them to accomplish social change (Peabody, 2013).

Lastly, pre-service teachers would benefit from facilitating a mini-participatory action research project with the students in their student-teaching placements in order to practice these strategies in a controlled environment where they can receive supportive feedback before working with their own students in the future. As such, it is imperative that the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) institutes such changes in their credentialing requirements.

Contributions to social change. This study contributed to social change by creating conditions in which the value of student voice, specifically Latinx student voice, was promoted. This gave the students the space to share their own narratives and beliefs about local injustices, and then to address them with critical stakeholders in their educational community. The findings from this study have the ability to shift the nature of teacher-student relationships, as well as to

empower young students of color to view themselves as agents of change, and thus positively affect not only their own futures, but also the future of their family and community.

Limitations of the Study

One major limitation of this study was the amount of time available to conduct research. The entirety of the student-led project had to be completed within less than a two-month window, and because it involved only one-third of my class, all components of the study had to take place during non-instructional blocks. This means that student participants had to give up time on the weekend to take photographs, lunch recess time to participate in the analysis process, and either morning or after-care program recess time to be interviewed. It is possible that the findings would have been different if the study was incorporated into standards-based instruction, or if other students in the class were present during the analyses.

Moreover, this time limitation made it so that students had to choose only their favorite one or two photographs to analyze as a group, rather than all photographs, to ensure that at least one of every student's photographs were analyzed before the stakeholder presentation. This limited the quantity of qualitative data we had to work with when creating a presentation for our stakeholder audience.

Another critical limitation was that there was the consideration of a limited perspective. All student participants identify as Latinx, and all participants are native Spanish speakers. The language component inspired me to change how I worded certain questions and prompts, and it also created barriers for students who struggle with spoken English, given that it appeared they felt frustrated by an inability to fully communicate their thoughts. The students live within a two-mile radius of one another and were enrolled in my homeroom class. This means that they all come from the same town and school community. Another key factor is that all student

participants' families are categorized as socioeconomically disadvantaged. These important similarities between participants can lead to a limited perspective, and it would be fascinating to know if the findings would differ if there were students from different demographic and social backgrounds included in the photovoice process. The findings are also specific to the research site, given that Forest Elementary School is set to permanently close in June 2020. The impending closure caused a lot of frustration and sadness for all student participants.

My own bias and positionality are also remarkably pertinent. For one, due to my own education, I believe in the power of reflection to create transformative experiences in schools. This belief, along with my personal love for photography, guided the design of this participatory action project. I also have a long-standing relationship with the participants as their homeroom teacher. While they all knew there were no grades attached to this project and that the quality of their involvement would not alter my perceptions of them, the findings could have been different if there were a less-familiar researcher conducting the study.

Directions for Future Research

In future research, it would be remarkably helpful to conduct a longitudinal study to see how student participants do over time in regard to the internal changes they experienced during and immediately after participating. In a longitudinal study, it would be interesting to see how many of the student participants attend college compared to their peers who did not participate in the study, as one potential indicator of success. It could also be useful to incorporate parents, teachers, school administrators, and school district personnel in photovoice methodology to highlight different strengths and challenges within a community. The variation in voices and demographics could inspire different findings than those from this study. Additionally, the new gaps in the literature include exploring the specific importance of reflective experiences for

students when considering their critical hopefulness and sense of agency. In light of this, additional participatory action projects with reflective frameworks should be conducted with students from varying demographics. Another direction for future research includes focusing on incorporating the tenets of participatory action research into an educator's everyday classroom practices as part of a longitudinal study, rather than smaller projects with set durations and limited numbers of participants, to compare how this deeper synthesis impacts students' critical hopefulness and sense of agency.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

**DOMINICAN
UNIVERSITY
of CALIFORNIA**

12/9/2019

Jenae Casalnuovo
50 Acacia Ave.
San Rafael, CA 94901

Dear Jenae,

On behalf of the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants, I am pleased to approve your proposal entitled **Exploring Critical Hope and Agency Through Photovoice** (IRBPHP IRB Application #10817).

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort. Sincerely,
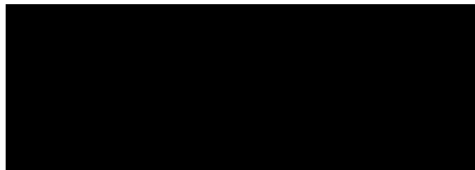
Randall Hall, Ph.D. Chair, IRBPHP

Cc: Matthew E. Davis

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants

Office of Academic Affairs • 50 Acacia Avenue, San Rafael, California 95901-2298 • 415-257-1310 *www.dominican.edu*

Appendix B: Pre- and Post-Photovoice Survey

Answered on a scale of 1-10 (1 means strongly disagree, 10 means strongly agree)

1. I feel hopeful about my future.

2. I feel hopeful about my family's future.

3. I feel hopeful about my community's future.

4. If I had an idea to change something at my school, the teachers and principal would value my voice.

5. If I had an idea to change something in my school district, the principals, superintendent, and school board would value my voice.

6. If I had an idea to change something in my community, law enforcement and government officials would value my voice.

7. If I had an idea to change something at my school, I would know what steps to take to put it in place.

8. If I had an idea to change something in my school district, I would know what steps to take to put it in place.

9. If I had an idea to change something in my community, I would know what steps to take to put it in place.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word *power*?

2. Do you think power and your sense that you can make a difference in your world are related?

3. Who do you think has the most power in our school? School district? Community? Country?

4. How do you think these people gained their power?

5. Do you think power can easily be given or taken away?

6. Do you think it is fair, how power is given in our world? Why or why not?

7. What influences how hopeful you feel about your future?

8. How would you describe your time at school? What have been your best experiences at school, and what at school helps you feel hopeful?

9. How did the photovoice experience affect your sense of agency or level of hope?

10. What did you learn about power by doing the photovoice project? Are there new actions you would like to take, or you see are important in your school, community, or world after doing this project?