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## Fostering Students' Critical Consciousness as Decolonizing Practice Within an Ethnic Studies Framework

Fatima Hansia  
*Dominican University of California*

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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.

Fatima Hansia  
Candidate

Jennifer Lucko, PhD  
Program Chair

Katherine Lewis, PhD  
First Reader

Matthew E. Davis, PhD  
Second Reader

**Fostering Students' Critical Consciousness as Decolonizing Practice  
Within an Ethnic Studies Framework**

By

Fatima Hansia

A culminating thesis, submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2022

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## Abstract

This research explored how teachers were teaching critical consciousness as decolonizing pedagogy within Tolteka R. Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework (Cuauhtin, 2019b) at an alternative education high school. Critical consciousness—an expansive term developed by Paulo Freire in the 1960s—advocates for a problem-posing approach to education that includes essential elements of praxis (reflection and action), development of holistic humanity, critical examination of the processes of violence and power, and social-justice oriented self-empowerment among students that leads to actionable community change (Freire, 2005). Even though the conceptualization of Ethnic Studies as a theoretical framework is strong, there is a lack of existing studies that assess implementation of this theory related to real pedagogical practices in the classroom, including curricular content, lesson plans, daily activities, and rituals. This research used a qualitative approach to interview four teachers from an alternative education high school; teachers responded to the following central questions: (1) How do you envision the purpose of school? (2) How do you define decolonial pedagogy and the purpose of Ethnic Studies in high school? (3) How do you intentionally and purposefully incorporate decolonial pedagogy in your classroom through curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities or rituals? (4) Would you be able to share a story of a specific time when this occurred successfully in the classroom and/or a time you could have improved the situation? The findings from this research show that, although there is a lack of a universally shared conceptual and language framework of decolonial pedagogy, teachers nevertheless created and implemented a shared vision of decolonial pedagogy specific to the needs of the student population. Based on evidence, this specific decolonial pedagogy emphasized student empowerment and agency and sharing the power as a form of community-building.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“All we ever learned about was White people,” is a common phrase uttered by most students at my alternative education school. It is said begrudgingly, as a way to express the disconnect of the curriculum not reflecting their racially diverse backgrounds and experiences, especially considering that 99.5% of students are of color. However, beneath this statement, lies a hard semblance of truth as California state standards are arguably highly whitewashed. This important factor can be perceived in negatively widening the achievement gap, a measure stating that White students perform academically better than Students of Color. However, after centuries of colonialism—educational trauma, dehumanization, forced sociopolitical, cultural-historical, economic and moral constraints on communities of color in the United States—what pedagogical tool(s) can heal this education debt? (Cuahtin, 2019b).

Implementation of Ethnic Studies as an academic discipline is what Students of Color are *owed* to heal this education debt. Marginalized Students of Color can better achieve academic success in humanizing and critically conscious ways. Importantly, the rise of Ethnic Studies—as decolonizing pedagogy—attempts to reverse students’ feelings of disengagement and disempowerment through quality education that is “relevant and directly connected to the marginalized experiences of students of color” (Cuahtin, 2019b, p. 65). This quality education should also be culturally and community relevant and responsive and regenerating for all students, especially historically racialized Students of Color. As student populations in public schools in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse, it is important to build critical hope and social justice-oriented self-empowerment amongst students that leads to community change (Cuahtin, 2019b).

## Statement of Purpose

Ethnic Studies as a form of decolonizing pedagogy is firmly rooted in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2005) and the concept of critical consciousness. Using the classroom as a microcosm of society—specifically the relationship of the oppressor and oppressed—Freire advocated for a problem-posing approach to education that ultimately leads to the liberation of both student and teacher. By engaging students in critical thinking and a “quest for mutual humanization” (Freire, 2005, p. 75), the teacher and student co-create knowledge together in a reciprocal relationship. The oppressed—representing marginalized Students of Color—can now face reality with the development of critical consciousness to transcend their conditions as agents of change. Freire labels consciousness as an individual “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of society” (Govender, 2020, p. 209). At this point, students will have developed a strong awareness of their self and position in society, will be able to distinguish problems related to themselves and perhaps generate feelings to respond to those challenges.

Developed in the 1960's amidst global decolonization movements, Freirian concepts remain highly relevant today in the discussion of decolonial pedagogy. For instance, the cultivation of praxis (reflection and action), development of holistic humanity, the critical examination of the processes of violence and power and self-empowerment (Freire, 2005) are common denominators that encompass all theoretical definitions of Ethnic Studies frameworks. Decolonial and Critical Indigenous Studies, furthermore, are separate yet interdisciplinary fields of study that use overlapping concepts of the broader Ethnic Studies framework, particularly critical consciousness (Tintiangco-Cubales et al. 2015). These multidimensional definitions of the theoretical framework of Ethnic Studies lead me to focus on one particularly integrated and

interdisciplinary framework developed by Tolteka R. Cuauhtin (See Appendix C), which is firmly grounded in Freirian components.

Although the conceptualization of Ethnic Studies is solid, what remains to be explored is how Cuauhtin's theoretical framework of Ethnic Studies is implemented as classroom practice. There are little to no existing studies assessing implementation of this theory into practice—specifically the fostering of critical consciousness among students—related to real pedagogical practices in the classroom, including curricular content, lesson plans, daily activities, and rituals. This research project aims to understand how teachers are fostering critical consciousness as decolonizing pedagogy within a specific Ethnic Studies Framework. By understanding pedagogical actions, educators can co-design a shared vision for decolonial pedagogy that improves the lives of *all* students.

### **Overview of the Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to explore decolonial pedagogical practices implemented by teachers at a small alternative high school with a high population of racially marginalized students. As a First Generation Muslim Woman of Color, I strongly felt unrepresented, misrepresented, and alienated from the high school curriculum—similar to students at the school site—based on my experience as a former Student of Color in the California public school system. The whitewashed curriculum, for instance, did not personally allow me to develop critical consciousness and therefore attain authentic liberation as a racially marginalized student. These negotiated feelings consisted of anger, frustration, and alienation about how Students of Color still remained in oppressive shackles within the education system.

By examining teacher pedagogical practices, I examined how Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework guided and constructed specific pedagogical actions in the classroom such as

curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities, and rituals. Therefore, the one guiding central question in this study was,

*How were teachers at an alternative high school teaching critical consciousness as decolonizing practice within the lens of an Ethnic Studies Framework developed by Tolteka R. Cuauhtin?*

The research was conducted at a small alternative high school in an urban/suburban setting in Northern California. This school serves 73 students ranging in grades from 7th grade to 12th grade. There are 98% Latino students, 0.82% African-American students, 0.5% White students, 0.2% Asian students, and 0.2% biracial students. The majority of students came from disadvantaged backgrounds including, but not limited to: poverty, lower socioeconomic status, belonging in a racially marginalized group, and experience of trauma (K. Foster, personal communication, November 30, 2021). Other factors that contributed to students attending Milan's School include disciplinary issues, truancy, expulsion from traditional middle school or high school, and County Probation.

The participants in the study included the four subject-specific teachers (excluding myself) at the alternative education high school and they were purposefully selected because I have been the social studies teacher at the site since the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic school year. Moreover, half the teachers were female and self-identified as Latina while the other half were male and self-identified as White.

### **Significance of the Study**

It is of paramount significance that the research findings revealed concrete pedagogical actions teachers are implementing in the classroom to teach critical consciousness as decolonial

practice. Moreover, the findings bridged the gap between the theoretical conceptualization of decolonial pedagogy and the actual implementation of it in classrooms.

Through this research, three themes emerged. First, even though the teacher participants do not recognize all the traditional conceptual frameworks of Freirian decolonial pedagogy, my research indicated that the teachers collectively exhibit practices that in many ways symbolize a shared vision for serving and improving the lives of their student population in a way that could be appropriately described as decolonizing. The data revealed that critical consciousness, for example, remained a vital element of the teachers' perception along with other overlapping Freirian concepts.

The second and third themes from the research bring to life this shared vision for decolonial pedagogy as a collective set of pedagogical practices teachers are implementing in the classroom. For instance, the second theme focuses on pedagogy prioritizing student empowerment and agency, including interweaving counter-narratives of inclusivity and curriculum-building strategies that develop critical thinkers and center students' lived experiences by honoring their voice and choice.

Third, the teachers unanimously and clearly identified community-building as a significant decolonial practice. All teacher participants heavily emphasized sharing power in the classroom through ideals of collectivism based on social-emotional learning practices. One topic teachers primarily accentuated as the bedrock of social-emotional learning practices was relationship-building with students. Teachers explained that once this groundwork is established, they then use social-emotional learning that encourages students to "become the best versions of themselves."

This study advances the scholarly research on this topic by highlighting that teachers working within diverse school settings can construct a shared vision for decolonial pedagogy that best serves their respective student needs and interests. There is no blueprint for decolonial practices; one strategy is just as likely to be effective as it is to be ineffective, depending on school setting, administrative leadership, teacher professional development, demographics of students, etc. Since teachers do not necessarily have a shared conceptual or language framework of decolonial pedagogy, the inconsistency among definitions can make it challenging for what *constitutes* decolonial practices in the classroom.

As a result, teachers should be required to learn the theoretical conceptualization of decolonial pedagogy, such as Freire's problem-posing approach to education and concepts from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. With this strong conceptual framework, teachers at various schools can implement their shared vision of decolonial pedagogical practices in their classrooms related to curriculum-building, lesson planning, daily activities, rituals, and social-emotional learning skills. Therefore, teachers will enhance the learning environment for *all* students by way of implementing specific pedagogical strategies that allow for students' development of critical consciousness, self-empowerment, and ultimately, actionable social justice within their communities. It is important to note that, historically, racially marginalized students benefit immensely from teachers' implementation of decolonial practices (Cuauhtin, 2019a).

Moreover, there is much research and interest about decolonial pedagogy, especially within the past ten to fifteen years. However, the research needs to be brought into schools, districts, and the state-level so that teachers can easily implement it in their classroom. Most teachers do not have time to read through pages and pages of research, but it could be more accessible if summarized and promoted during staff meetings or department collaborations.

Furthermore, each school or district should tailor specific decolonial practices to better suit the needs of its student demographics so as to co-construct a shared vision to be used in classrooms.

This customized, shared vision for decolonial pedagogy directly contributes to social change because it automatically increases educational equity for *all* students, especially racially marginalized students who have historically been “left out” and do not see a reflection of their experiences in the whitewashed state curriculum. Decolonial practices that raise students’ critical consciousness also contribute to social change because they allow students to honor the humanity within themselves—and others—to critically evaluate global and local social justice issues. Through that process, students feel self-empowered to intervene in their own realities; in other words, they become active agents of change in their communities. Most importantly, decolonial pedagogy improves the lives of students and constantly interrupts and subverts the traditional education system and fights against oppressive systems.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review seeks to understand how teachers at an alternative high school are teaching critical consciousness as decolonizing practice within the lens of an Ethnic Studies Framework developed by Tolteka R. Cuauhtin. Critical consciousness—an expansive term developed by Paulo Freire during the global decolonization movements of the 1960’s—advocates for a problem-posing approach to education that includes essential elements of praxis (reflection and action), development of holistic humanity, critical examination of the processes of violence and power, and social-justice oriented self-empowerment among students that leads to actionable community change (Freire, 2005). Ultimately, this process is revolutionary for both educators and students because they become co-creators of their world in which they seek authentic liberation.

Since Ethnic Studies is a product of the decolonization movements that defined quality education as one that is “relevant and directly connected to the marginalized experiences of students of color” (Cuauhtin, 2019b, p. 65), its purpose today must remain the same—Ethnic Studies should be culturally and community relevant and responsive and regenerating for all students, especially historically racialized students of color (Cuauhtin, 2019b). Even though the conceptualization of Ethnic Studies as a theoretical framework is strong, there is a lack of existing studies that assess implementation of this theory—specifically the development of critical consciousness among students—related to real pedagogical practices in the classroom including curricular content, lesson plans, daily activities, and rituals.

This research sets out to understand how teachers at an alternative high school are fostering critical consciousness as a decolonizing practice within the lens of an Ethnic Studies Framework as developed by Tolteka R. Cuauhtin. The research will examine how teachers are

specifically implementing the concept of critical consciousness, as decolonial pedagogy within this specific Ethnic Studies Framework, in the classroom. This includes the development of curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities, and rituals. As student populations in public schools in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse, it is important to generate a sense of regeneration and rehumanization amongst Students of Color in order to build critical hope and social-justice oriented self-empowerment that leads to actionable community change (Cuauhtin, 2019b).

The first section of the review aims to provide readers with a thorough understanding of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, problem-posing approach to education and the concept of critical consciousness in the context of the history and development of Ethnic Studies as an academic discipline. After a solid understanding of Freire's pedagogy, this review will spotlight how critical consciousness has remained the foundational common denominator that reverberates in all theoretical definitions of the Ethnic Studies framework. Thus, the following section will dig into the broader Ethnic Studies frameworks rooted in Decolonial and Critical Indigenous Studies to better understand them as separate yet overlapping disciplines rooted in critical consciousness. I will also explain how Critical Race Theory is part-and-parcel of this broader Ethnic Studies framework because it examines the oppressive social structures that subordinates groups of people based on race and its intersections, and therefore, these theoretical frameworks work in concert to work toward the liberatory potential of schooling. To establish such a social justice project, Critical Race Theory challenges the normative cultural capital phenomena that favors and values privileged groups' knowledge, skills, and abilities and instead focuses on communal funds of knowledge labeled Community Cultural Wealth.

Next, I turn to a consideration of how the multidimensional definitions of the theoretical framework of Ethnic Studies—all rooted in Freire’s critical pedagogy as a decolonizing practice—lead me to spotlight the remaining review on examining one specific Ethnic Studies Framework instead. Since there is not a general consensus of a standardized Ethnic Studies Framework across multiple disciplines, I chose to focus on Tolteka R. Cuauhtin’s broad-based Ethnic Studies Framework grounded in interdisciplinary praxis as liberation for students. Specifically, this section of the review will explain the theoretical breakdown of Cuauhtin’s Framework. Established in 2019, this specific Ethnic Studies Framework is divided into four geohistorical macroscales framed within the lens of how holistic humans have experienced oppression. Through the development of critical consciousness, students are able to understand themselves and the world in relation to the four macroscales to bring about transformational change.

The review of existing literature will then shift its focus to the practical implementation of Tolteka Cuauhtin’s Ethnic Studies Framework as effective decolonizing pedagogy. First, this subsection will focus on the specific examples of teacher pedagogy in the classroom and how teachers are fostering critical consciousness through curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities and rituals. When students develop holistic humanity and critical consciousness at school, benefits include a sense of regeneration and rehumanization that fosters critical hope and a social-justice based action plan for change.

### **Oppression and Power in Education**

In his influential book published in 1968, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire discusses in-depth the “current oppressive society we live in, by using the classroom as a microcosm of society” (Govender, 2020, p. 208). The teacher symbolizes the oppressor while

students are perceived as the oppressed. As a prominent Brazilian educator himself, Freire critiques the traditional system of education and instead spearheads a liberatory form of education that is beneficial for both teachers and students. It's important to contextualize Freire's writings with the political and socioeconomic conditions occurring at that time. The decade of the 50's and 60's are largely symbolic of the small margin of victory of oppressed peoples—mostly communities of color—over their oppressors. The global decolonization movement, for instance, was in full swing with numerous countries in Asia and Africa declaring Independence from their centuries-long, European oppressors. Domestically, historically marginalized minorities in the United States demanded for and gained, up to an extent, equality and better living conditions for their communities during what is known as the Civil Rights Movement. It was under this particular historical backdrop that Freire emphatically constructed an emancipatory form of education, one that allowed the oppressed to recognize inequitable power relations in society, and most importantly, gain the tools to overcome their oppression and change the world for the better.

On a macroscale, these unequal power relations that Freire mentions are created and maintained through injustice, exploitation, and violence committed by the oppressors. And, through this brutal process, the oppressed are stripped of their humanization. Only through the rehumanization of them, can the oppressed liberate themselves as well as the oppressor. Freire regards this as the ultimate liberation. However, the process of rehumanization is complicated for the oppressed because the vision for liberation is essentially rooted in the oppressor's constructed image of them. Therefore, the oppressed are caught in a psychological conundrum, one in which they have difficulty not only detaching their sense of self but importantly the meaning of the world from that of the oppressors. This is dangerous because the oppressed are controlled, and

jailed psychologically, by thinking and believing that the world of the oppressors is superior and more valued than theirs. The oppressed, Freire (2005) declares, consequently “suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it” (p. 48). This craving of “authentic existence” is the rehumanization of the oppressed.

### ***The Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Authentic Liberation through Education***

This enigma naturally leads me to beg the question: what is the process for the oppressed to regain their humanity in order to liberate themselves, as well as the oppressors? And, what does liberation mean? Keeping in mind that Freire perceived the classroom as a microcosm of society, his answer to that question is the realm of education, specifically, the pedagogy of the oppressed.

Per this pedagogy of the oppressed, authentic liberation can be achieved through implementation of *problem-posing education* instead of the traditional *banking concept of education*. The latter form of education is a tool of the oppressor in which the teacher narrates and deposits information to the students as if they are objects. The classroom mirrors the political structure of contemporary society, with the teacher being the oppressor and the student being the oppressed (Govender, 2020, p. 209). Knowledge in this model, per Freire (2005), “is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 72). This prevailing system of education perpetuates societal oppression because students are taught to fit into the existing world, however inequitable it may be, instead of reimagining it. Pedagogical strategies of verbalistic lesson plans, rote memorization and reading requirements, for instance, benefit the oppressors because it stunts students’ creative power to critically think outside the box and regenerate possibilities of different realities.

On the other hand, the purpose of a problem-posing approach to education is the antithesis of the prevalent banking concept of education already discussed. The advocated model strives to achieve authentic liberation of the oppressed by, “transforming the structure so they (the oppressed) can become beings for themselves” (Freire, 2005, p. 74). A humanist, revolutionary educator, therefore, engages students in critical thinking, and a “quest for mutual humanization” (Freire, 2005, p. 75) in which there is a dialectical, reciprocal partnership with students. In this dynamic, nobody possesses ownership of knowledge. Rather, both the teacher and student co-create knowledge together. The oppressed can now face reality with the development of critical consciousness and dialogue to transcend their conditions. It is the oppressed who must lead the process of societal liberation and humanization of all since they have an understanding of the dominating mechanisms that the oppressors have used upon them. This conscientization of the oppressed comes about through the problem-solving dialogical education that Freire suggests (Govender, 2020). Freire labels consciousness—or *conscientização* in Portuguese—as an individual “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of society” (Govender, 2020, p. 209). At this point, students will have developed a strong awareness of their self and position in society, will be able to distinguish problems related to themselves and perhaps generate feelings to respond to those challenges. It is at this critical juncture that students—representative of the oppressed in society—must have fostered a critical consciousness that inspires them to be co-creators of their world in which they seek authentic liberation.

Per Freire (2005), “liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 79). Students begin adopting the concept of

humanization as conscious beings and prioritize the problems of human beings in their relations to the world through critical consciousness. Liberation of humankind unravels within two stages: “the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of the oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation” (p. 54). Only with this consciousness will students undergo a process of a “constant unveiling of reality and strive for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (p. 81). In other words, students begin to perceive their reality as one they can truly reimagine and transform. Humanization and critical consciousness, hence, are mutually inclusive of one another. Freire’s critical pedagogy is therefore revolutionary because it emphasizes the partnership of educators and students to seek rehumanization of their realities and a development of critical consciousness to critically reflect and act upon the injustices of the world.

### ***The Birth of Ethnic Studies as an Academic Discipline***

Fostering students’ critical consciousness to act upon injustices of the world, as a result of critical pedagogy, undoubtedly triggered the monumental push to establish a specific discipline within academia that particularly focused on this. The birth of Ethnic Studies, therefore, can be directly attributed to a simultaneous conjunction of Freire’s examination of oppressive structures in society, using the classroom as a microcosm, to the historical context of the 60’s. Ethnic Studies grew organically from the coinciding Civil Rights movement in the United States as well as decolonization movements globally during that time. Specifically, the Third World Liberation Front Coalition—birthed in progressive Bay Area universities like San Francisco State University and University of California, Berkeley—were inspired by Frantz

Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon, a post-colonialist author, examined the ways in which the oppressor dehumanized the oppressed via the harmful effects of colonialism, exploitation, and psychological trauma (Drabinski, 2019). Adopting Franz Fanon's liberatory process, the development of Ethnic Studies allowed for the freeing of the consciousness and a systemic critique of the traumatic history of colonial history.

Branched under this historical context, the purpose of Ethnic Studies in education was a radical and liberatory step forward in decolonizing the normative Whiteness of the system and instead provide a counter-narrative to this hegemonic Eurocentric curriculum (Chatmon, Watson, 2018; Cuauhtin, 2019b). Therefore, there was a systemic push to include curriculum and practices that represented the experiences of racialized minorities in the United States. According to Tintiango-Cubales, Kohli, Sacramento, Henning, Agarwal-Rangnath, and Sleeter, (2005),

It (Ethnic Studies) was guided by a strong self of decolonization and self-determination. Students and community members demanded the inclusion of histories and paradigms focused on issues of race, culture, power, and identity...Students demanded inclusion, access, democracy and autonomy for students and faculty of color as a step toward a decolonizing education. (p. 106-107)

According to Freire (2005), the leaders of the movement—Students and Faculty of Color—represented the oppressed who pursued authentic liberation via the problem-posing approach to education. This quest for authentic liberation directly culminated in the birth of Ethnic Studies. Initially, the educational purpose of Ethnic Studies was centered around three core principles: Access, Relevance, and Community (ARC). *Access* meant providing students of color with opportunities to receive quality education. Quality education, according to Ethnic Studies, is fundamentally *relevant* and connected to marginalized students of color. According to

Tintiango-Cubales, Kohli, Sacramento, Henning, Agarwal-Rangnath, and Sleeter, (2005), “To connect these experiences, Ethnic Studies’ purpose was to serve as a bridge from formal educational spaces to *community* involvement, advocacy, organizing and activism. Ultimately, students in Ethnic Studies leveraged their education toward the betterment of their communities” (p. 107). Ethnic Studies intertwines flawlessly with Freire’s idea of praxis, critical consciousness, and authentic liberation for the oppressed because the fundamental pillars of ARC prepare students with a sense of self-empowerment and critical hope to holistically engage with their education. In turn, this transformative education provides them with the tools to critically intervene in their realities to improve their respective conditions.

### **Conceptualization of the Ethnic Studies Framework Rooted in Freire’s Critical Pedagogy**

Although the initial conceptualization of an Ethnic Studies Framework was developed in the 60’s with the ARC methodology, a prevalent and standardized Ethnic Studies Framework is yet to be established at the university or high school level (Tintiango-Cubales et al. 2015). However, it is important to note that Freire’s critical pedagogy and the concept of critical consciousness has remained the foundational common denominator in all theoretical definitions of Ethnic Studies and how it is utilized within social justice contexts. For instance, separate yet overlapping academic disciplines rooted in examining power relations and ultimately transforming the world carry elements of Freire’s critical consciousness.

### ***The Importance of Postcolonial Studies and Critical Indigenous Studies***

Postcolonial Studies and Critical Indigenous Studies, for example, are interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks that Ethnic Studies activists have implemented as praxis-reflection and action upon the world to transform it. The struggle to incorporate Mexican American Studies (MAS), and Ethnic Studies in the Texas state curriculum, for instance, was a successful battle

undertaken by the Committee of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Tejas Foco (Valenzuela, 2019). These activists primarily relied on the ideological frameworks of Postcolonial Studies and Critical Indigenous Studies to deconstruct how activists can “side-step the colonial matrix of power” (Valenzuela, 2019, p. 198) by dismantling White hegemonic constructions of knowledge, truth, self, and nation. The racist Texas State Board of Education represents this massive colonized apparatus of knowledge.

Also, through these liberatory frameworks, activists can embrace and center Indigenous identities that reaffirm their “borderland” identities. Thus, activists decolonize the hegemonic notion of nation-state identities created by European aggressors in North America in the struggle to confront internalized oppression, and importantly, engage in action that incorporates a multicultural social studies curriculum. This social studies curriculum constitutes the inclusion of Mexican American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and the centering of Indigenous identities that “include knowledge systems, histories, traditions, and Indigenous cultural and language revitalization” (Valenzuela, 2019, p. 199). Taking into consideration Tejano and Tejana activists’ fight to include MAS and Ethnic Studies in the Texas state curriculum, this case illustrates a clear depiction of Freire’s larger critical pedagogy and development of critical consciousness in active play. These same activists adopted a unique *Chicana Mestiza consciousness* that “equipped them with the knowledge, skill sets, experiences, and intuition needed to disrupt ‘settler grammars’ that organize thought and institutionalize educational practices under a system of settler colonialism” (Valenzuela, 2019, p. 200). Through the strategic development and internalization of a particular consciousness, activists were able to achieve a semblance of Freire’s authentic liberation.

### *The Importance of Critical Race Theory*

Another interdisciplinary theoretical framework used to understand Ethnic Studies, rooted in Freire's critical consciousness, is Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT is an examination of oppressive social structures that subordinates groups of people based on race and racism and its intersections. Therefore, CRT is directly related to Freire's problem-posing approach to education since it is a "social justice project that works toward the liberatory potential of schooling" (Yosso\*, 2005, p. 74). CRT challenges the normative cultural capital phenomena that favors and *values* privileged groups' knowledge, skills, and abilities. Privileged groups are referred to as White communities who have benefited from over five hundred years of colonial legacy and violence at the expense of historically racialized Communities of Color. CRT, instead, strives to spotlight and uplift racialized communities' communal funds of knowledge. Per Yosso\* (2005), "These unique funds of knowledge comprise of Community Cultural Wealth (CCC): an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso\*, 2005, p. 77). There are six forms of CCC that are dynamic processes: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (Yosso\*, 2005).

Students of Color, therefore, particularly benefit from CRT and its principles because this theory compels them to critically evaluate their positioning within the framework of oppressive power structures. Other intersections of oppression may also allow students to holistically understand oppression from multiple angles. This includes, but is not limited to, the intersection of racism, sexism, transphobia, Islamophobia, etc. that may negatively impact certain individuals. Through the development of this critical consciousness—combined with the rehumanization of their knowledge, skills, and abilities within CCC—Students of Color practice

Freire's vision of praxis and authentic liberation. Moreover, CRT has evolved into a prominent branch characterizing an Ethnic Studies theoretical framework.

### **The Importance of Tolteka R. Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework**

The theoretical framework of Ethnic Studies, since its emergence in the 1960's, has gone through numerous revisions and manifestations depending on the academic discipline, context, and struggle it has been used for at a particular time. Decolonial Studies, Critical Indigenous Studies, and Critical Race Theory, for instance, have all invoked key tenets of an ambiguous Ethnic Studies Framework to delineate societal power relations, challenge White Supremacy, and ultimately work toward achieving some form of social justice in the past few decades. Although Freire's concept of critical consciousness is a powerful throughline amongst this vague yet multidimensional Ethnic Studies Framework sprinkled across varied disciplines, a single agreed-upon definition of a framework still does not exist (Cuauhtin, 2019b). Since there is no general consensus of the framework amongst scholars, educators, and activists, it therefore makes it difficult to discuss improving the system of decolonial pedagogy and practices in the classroom without rooting the conversation to an exact definition to fall back on for context. Furthermore, this gap in literature is naturally exacerbated by the fact that Ethnic Studies, as a common curriculum in California high schools, is still relatively new. It has only been in the last ten to fifteen years that the momentum to implement Ethnic Studies as core curriculum has picked up steam in the Bay Area and larger California. Moreover, taking into consideration that California's public schools are becoming increasingly diverse along with new legislation requiring high schoolers to graduate having taken at least one semester of Ethnic Studies by the academic year 2029-2030, it is even more imperative that a single Ethnic Studies Framework is established for continuity (Fensterwald, 2021).

Given this background and moving forward, I have chosen Tolteka R. Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework (ES-FW) as the distinguished framework to explore my research question. Cuauhtin synergizes the work of multiple scholars, activists, teachers, and community members in 2019 who have been implementing a broad-based approach to an ES-FW in California. Thus, a reason why I have chosen this particular framework over others, is due to the fact that it has been developed collectively with a strong bottom-up approach to education. As a result, this framework does not run the risk of being defined by outsiders, such as politicians and other corporate interests, that may have no real connection to the Ethnic Studies movement. Furthermore, Cuauhtin's framework establishes common language and curricular thinking around the core tenets, principles, and legacy of Ethnic Studies while refraining from dictating curriculum requirements. Instead, this framework focuses on how Ethnic Studies curricular programs respond to core ideas within the field. This is an attractive characteristic of the ES-FW because it does not dilute or detract from the fundamental doctrines of Freire's critical pedagogy, including the development of humanization and critical consciousness amongst students.

### ***The Structure of Tolteka R. Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework***

What is the big-picture framework of Ethnic Studies if it is used for liberation? Cuauhtin states that it must still be culturally and community relevant and responsive and regenerating for students. Ethnic Studies is the xdisciplinary, loving, and critical praxis of holistic humanity as educational and racial justice (Cuauhtin, 2019b). "It is from communities of color," Cuauhtin (2019b) declares, "and our intergenerational worldviews, memories, experiences, identities, narratives, and voices. It is the study of intersectional race, ethnicity, Indigeneity, colonialiality, hegemony, and a dignified world where many worlds fit (p. 68).

Specifically, the ES-FW (see Appendix C for the framework) is divided into *Four Geohistorical Macroscales of Ethnic Studies*, which are (1) Indigeneity/Roots; (2) Coloniality/Genocide/Dehumanization; (3) Hegemony/Normalization; and (4) Regeneration/Rehumanization/Social Justice/Decoloniality. Each of these macroscales are geohistorical, multidimensional, intersectional, socio political, and economic and, importantly, study how humans have experienced them individually and as members of a group. Holistic humanity refers to the “double helix” that inevitably interweaves through the study of each scale, and that is further broken down into multiple sub-concepts, are *humanity* and *criticality*. Humanity asks, *who are we as holistic human beings and communities?* Criticality, meanwhile, asks, *as critically conscious human beings, how do we understand ourselves and our world in relation to the four macroscales and help to bring about transformational change for the better?* Additionally, each scale and its subconcepts cannot be devoid of this criticality because they provide a natural checks-and-balances system to evaluate the superficiality of an Ethnic Studies program. It’s also significant to note that the foundational conceptualization of this ES-FW has strong roots in Freire’s critical pedagogy concerning how problem-posing education serves students’ authentic liberation.

Cuauhtin further explains the specific, positive impact of each macroscale on students’ learning and development of criticality (which is the same concept as Freire’s critical consciousness). The premise of the four macroscales/themes, therefore, is that: “a) all human beings have holistic ancestral pre-colonial roots to somewhere(s) upon our planet; b) for the holistic ancestral legacies of many students of color, colonization and/or forced diaspora attempted to dehumanize, eliminate memory of, and replace these roots with a *totalizing* Eurocentric colonial model of themselves; c) hegemony normalizes this process and

geohistorical amnesia, translating to a superficial historical literacy and decontextualized relationship to history today, negatively impacting human and academic identity; d) honest acknowledgement and study of this hxrstorical process is necessary, as a cause of Indigenous and human hxrstorical empowerment, solidarity, transformational resistance, regeneration, revitalization, restoration, critical educational expectations, humanization, liberation, social and ecological justice, for *holistic human beings and communities*" (Cuauhtin, 2019b, p. 75).

These Four Geohistorical Macroscales of Ethnic Studies do not necessarily have to be taught in a linear fashion but are meant to be dynamic and flowing to accommodate various interdisciplinary programs and courses. For instance, the second macroscale of Coloniality/Genocide/Dehumanization can flawlessly flow into the third macroscale of Hegemony/Normalization while the first macroscale of Indigeneity/Roots can be taught complementarily with the fourth macroscale of students decolonizing their minds via Regeneration.

Moreover, notions of race and ethnicity that comprise the centrality of People of Color, are broken down from their normative definitions to ones that are decolonial and expansive in nature. For instance, in Ethnic Studies, *race* is a (neo)colonial social construction. It is viewed as a "master category" based upon a Eurocentric biological fallacy that is central to inequitable power relations in society (Cuauhtin, 2019b). Moreover, *ethnicity* refers to many of the associated dimensions of identity that define who we are culturally such as personal, familial, communal, and societal experiences in local, regional, continental, and global contexts. The contexts include Indigeneities, migrations, diasporas, ancestries, homelands, nationalities, spiritual/religious traditions, and linguistic heritages (Cuauhtin, 2019b). Under this lens, identity is perceived as multidimensional and complex with the notion that most people do not fit neatly

into fixed categories. Thus, the ES-FW acknowledges the existence of borders, borderlands, hybridities, *nepantlas*, and double consciousness among other entities that may interweave as and within people's identities.

***The Benefits of Tolteka R. Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework and its Administrative Implementation within a School System***

In addition to understanding the theoretical bedrock of Cuauhtin's ES-FW, it's also imperative to recognize the purposes behind the rise of this specific framework. Primarily, it reframes the Achievement Gap—which holds an adverse deficiency-based thinking of Students of Color—by instead relabeling it as an Education Debt. It is not that Students of Color are essentially incapable of achieving academically similar or higher levels than privileged groups of students but rather their educational capacities have been restricted after centuries of educational trauma, dehumanization, forced sociopolitical, cultural-historical, economic and moral constraints. Cuauhtin's ES-FW, therefore, is what Students of Color are *owed* to heal this debt. Via this framework, Students of Color are able to achieve academic success in humanizing and critically conscious ways. Simultaneously, it compels Ethnic Studies programs to reevaluate and co-construct the school system to a place of belonging that is inclusive of all students' academic success.

The San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) can be viewed as a prime example of the ways in which an Ethnic Studies program is successfully and sustainably institutionalized within a broader school system. Twelve years after the implementation of the first Ethnic Studies course at SFUSD, authors Beckham and Concordia (2019) share lessons on how to successfully institutionalize the course by asking questions related to, how a district thinks about Ethnic Studies, how a course teaches content, and the ways in which it works for and with students

(Beckham, Concordia, 2019) A blueprint for implementing ES-FW doesn't exist; rather, the curriculum should be responsive to students in each program, the community in which they live, and respecting students as intellectuals and in the world-past, present, and future (Cuauhtin, 2019a).

For instance, Ethnic Studies (ES) is not and can never be “just another class” or requirement and local districts need to reframe its purpose so that ES addresses the needs of all students to become active participants in constructing a just society. Furthermore, ES should “avoid the allure of hard standardization and not being afraid of change,” (Beckham, Concordia 2019, p. 323) such as avoiding content-based coverage of groups and instead critically examining *isms* such as racism. The allure of inclusive multiculturalism should be avoided while understanding that administrators are essential to long-term expansion of Ethnic Studies. Moreover, generating meaningful data to evaluate the program's efficacy and commitment to the premise that Ethnic Studies teachers, White and non-White, have the commitment, long-term development, and desire for improvement are significant ingredients for success (Beckham, Concordia, 2019).

### **Decolonial Pedagogies Rooted in Tolteka R. Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework**

Undoubtedly, Cuauhtin's theoretical conceptualization of an ES-FW is exceedingly robust, substantial, and meaningful for Ethnic Studies programs across California and beyond. This naturally leads me to then question how the ES-FW translates this strong theoretical framework of macroscales and the double helix into effective pedagogical practices in the classroom. As a result, the ES-FW holistically integrates various decolonial pedagogies that connect this theory into practice that is culturally, community relevant, and responsive to students. It's also important to note that decolonial pedagogies are mutually inclusive with

Ethnic Studies pedagogy defined by the ES-FW and encompass a massive arena of classroom strategies, including curriculum development and implementation of lesson plans, daily activities, and rituals.

The definition of a decolonizing pedagogy is providing a material and psychological counter-narrative to the Eurocentric curriculum and offers authentic liberation for Students of Color (Cuauhtin, 2019b). An example of a decolonial pedagogy in the classroom consists of recognizing forms of oppression and ways to take meaningful action (Fernández, 2019). “It is vital that we occupy theorizing space,” Gloria Anzaldua states, “that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it” (Yosso\*, 2005, p. 69). With that being said, educators should critique the traditional framework of what constitutes capital value in our society that often deems Students of Color as essentially ‘disadvantaged’ due to their cultural backgrounds and class positions. A way to challenge this idea of capital value that silences Students of Color is via “reenvisioning the margins as places empowered by transformative resistance” (Yosso\*, 2005, p. 69). Decolonial pedagogy, therefore, also constitutes critiquing Capitalism and constructing critical, transnational solidarities and perspectives amongst communities as a form of resistance (Cuauhtin, 2019b).

Although all four macroscales of the ES-FW are complementary with decolonial classroom practices, I believe pedagogy specific to the fourth macroscale (Regeneration/Rehumanization/Social Justice/Decoloniality) represents the epitome of how students build humanization and criticality to eventually develop Freire’s critical consciousness.

### ***The Importance of CxRxPx as Decolonial Pedagogy***

A prominent decolonial pedagogy that strongly symbolizes this synergistic relationship with the fourth macroscale is culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy (CRP) reframed as

CxRxPx in Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies framework. Too often, CRP is relegated to the same category of Ethnic Studies, and even seen as one in the same, but it can be harmful to equate the two frameworks. Most school districts implementing CRP perform a limited version of the pedagogy which denies the importance of deep culture and instead focuses on surface culture. In order for CRP to be authentically defined to meet the diverse needs of students and "in the spirit of making connections with Ethnic Studies," scholars have added additional terms such as *community responsive pedagogy*, *historically responsive pedagogy*, and *culturally sustaining pedagogy* to "sustain dynamic cultural and linguistic discourses students come to the classroom with" (Cuauhtin, 2019a, p. 26).

The antidote to coloniality exists in reframing CRP as a formula, CxRxPx, that involves a combination of transformative pedagogies that strives for a common goal of being "educationally medicinal, student centered, decolonial and organic" (Cuauhtin, 2019a, p. 26). Examples of these transformative pedagogies include, but are not limited to: *pedagogies of love*, *healing pedagogies*, *pedagogies of authentic care*, and *humanizing pedagogies*. Only at this point is Ethnic Studies pedagogy an "organic anti-prescription to neocolonial education" (Cuauhtin, 2019a, p. 28).

Ethnic Studies pedagogy therefore equals CxRxPx. Cuauhtin (2019a) states, "Below, a table summarizes these various pedagogies and building blocks of the CxRxPx as a concise and accessible reference for educators. Also included is a semi-poetic description of several letters in the "Rx" to help elaborate the relevance of each in this approach" (p. 28). It's essential to note that "Rx" is particularly significant with the fourth macroscale since its role is helping to heal identity through Ethnic Studies. Please study the building blocks and semi-poetic description of

the letters as it relates directly to the purposes of fostering critical consciousness amongst students.

*Table 1*  
*Ethnic Studies Pedagogy as CxRxPx*

<p><b>Cx:</b></p> <p>Cultural, Community-Based, Critical, Caring, Compassionate, Collaborative, Creative, Contextual, Conscious, Competent;</p> <p><b>Rx:</b></p> <p>Relevant, Responsive, Reaffirming, Revitalizing, Regenerating, Remembering, Restoring, Realizing, Roots, Racial Identity Development, Reflectively, Reflexively, Rigorously, Resistantly, Reclaiming, Remixing, Reimagining, Repertoires of Reciprocal, Rehumanizing, Relationships;</p> <p><b>Px:</b></p> <p>Pluraliterate, Pluradiscursive, Power-Balancing, Post+Colonia!, People, Planet, Praxis, Purposeful Pedagogies</p>
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*Note:* Reprinted from *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* (1st ed., p. 28) by T. R. Cuauhtin, 2019, Rethinking Schools.

Table 2  
*Ethnic Studies Pedagogy (ESP) as CRP-X*

<p><b>Rx:</b></p> <p><b>Relevant:</b> related to students as holistic human beings, with deep roots, dynamic presents and futures.</p> <p><b>Responsive:</b> responsive to who students are, where they're at, and what they have to work with daily.</p> <p><b>Reaffirming:</b> sustaining, validating, appreciating, and celebratory to who students are as human beings.</p> <p><b>Revitalizing:</b> when more than sustaining is needed; life, livelihood, liveliness, vitality is awakened by</p> <p><b>Regenerating:</b> currents of energy and ancestral memory of "stolen generations" courageously.</p> <p><b>Revealing:</b> cultural genocide in the ancestral legacies of many Students of Color, demasking hegemony.</p> <p><b>Restoring:</b> helping to heal and make whole again, restorative justice, humanizing</p> <p><b>Racial Identity Development:</b> understanding the pervasive social construction of race and our place in it.</p> <p><b>Resistantly:</b> transformatively, critical of oppression and motivated by social justice, knowledge + action.</p> <p><b>Reclaiming:</b> People of Color stories, narratives, legacies, knowledges, names, identities, and exponentially more.</p> <p><b>Reimagining:</b> how things can be, a world where many worlds fit, we are the change, representing</p> <p><b>Reciprocal:</b> completing the circle of community, transformationally, with self-determination,</p> <p><b>Rehumanizing:</b> preparation, instruction, facilitation, assessment; the glue between it all are the respectful <b>Relationships</b>.</p>
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*Note:* Reprinted from *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* (1st ed., p. 29-30) by T. R. Cuauhtin, 2019, Rethinking Schools.

## **Practical Implementation of Cuauhtin’s Ethnic Studies Framework in the Classroom**

Having now been well-versed on numerous decolonial pedagogies and their symbiotic relationship to the macroscales of the ES-FW and Freire’s concept of critical consciousness, *what are specific examples of teacher pedagogy in the classroom? How are teachers fostering critical consciousness through curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities, and rituals?*

### ***Classroom Practices Focused on Developing Students’ Connection to Indigeneity, Self-Love and Rehumanization***

One pedagogical example focuses on the radical decolonizing concept of self-love to counter colonization’s primary strategy of self-hate. Educator Mictlani Gonzales advocates for indigenous ways of knowing—specifically using humanizing pedagogies—to establish a rehumanization process amongst students. She interweaves culturally humanizing pedagogy (CHP) and *Nahui Olin*, an indigenous *Nahuatl* concept, to bridge the academic achievement gap and also, importantly, growth in self-love, hope, purpose, and sense of identity.

*Nahua Olin* is a *Mexica* cosmology for everyday life that is symbolic of the cyclical movement of nature with respect to all four directions; it imbues ancestral cultural concepts like community, knowledge, education, and self-introspection with the goal of striving toward a state of equilibrium with the self. *Nahua Olin* comprises of four Aztec scientific energies: *Tezcatlipoca* (reflection, introspection, self-love), *Xipe Tote* (transformation), *Huitzilopochtli* (our self-will), and *Quetzalcoatl* (stability and consciousness that serves to make us balanced human beings).

Gonzales strategically uses *Nahua Olin* as a culturally responsive approach that “supports the development of harmony and balance within my students’ minds, bodies, spirits and communities...and provides my students with a regeneration of intergenerational wisdom to draw

on to produce positive and focused decision-making in their day-to-day interactions” (Gonzales, 2019, p. 236). Furthermore, the rehumanization process actively occurs in two ways: engaging students in developing historical consciousness that exposes structures of colonialism and giving them multiple opportunities to engage in self-love and intergenerational wisdom. For example, allowing personal reflection on a daily basis allows students to continuously learn about themselves. Lastly, support students to navigate colonized society through critical literacy development so they can act upon negative issues that limit opportunities. Mictalani emphasizes *Tezcatlipoca* crucial to students combating internal oppression and colonization since self-love through critical reflection disrupts stereotypes (Gonzales, 2019).

### ***Classroom Practices Focused on Developing Students’ Critical Hope and Reimagination of Reality***

Another pedagogical example is highlighted by educators Dueñas, López J., and López E., (2019), who share their experiences of implementing decolonial and humanizing pedagogy as a tool for developing critical hope amongst Chicano students at Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles. As Ethnic Studies teachers at the high school, they aspire to provide students with tools to critically evaluate issues (critical consciousness) that are relevant to them. The teachers use humanizing pedagogy to develop relationships of dialogue and care that are holistically engaging and rooted in acknowledging students’ feelings, dreams, and hope through critical dialogue and storytelling. They also implement particular decolonial pedagogy, with a focus on the work of Patricia Espiritu Halagao. Halagao advocates that “inspiring hope for change is at the center of a decolonizing curriculum” (Dueñas, López J., and López E., 2019, p. 230). A decolonizing curriculum, therefore, must

provide students with a critical thinking of one's history, must be feelings-based, must create an academic and social space, and must have a social-action component.

As scholar-educators, the authors “ask students to use their imagination and reimagine their lives beyond the struggle and beyond just emotional and material conditions” (Dueñas, López J., and López E., 2019, p. 230). A transformative way they accomplish this is through a final book project in which students publish a personal writing piece. The intention is to use the student-created book next year and also read the narratives of prior students. Prior students are also invited to speak to current Ethnic Studies classes, which makes it more personal and promotes dialogue between students as stories of resilience and possibilities of hope are shared. The assignment prompt changes every year but three major themes always remain: resistance, resilience, and reimagination. Students write in a letter-writing format that allows them to “collectively envision a more utopian world and develop their social agency to be co-creators of their lives today as well as their future possibilities” (p. 231). The aim of the Ethnic Studies course is rooted in reimagination as decolonization. Students' personal investment in storytelling allows them to move from the literal and metaphorical margins to the center ((Dueñas, López J., and López E., 2019).

### ***The Importance of Counter-Storytelling in the Classroom***

Moreover, Fernández highlights counter-stories as a methodology for teaching Ethnic Studies. A counter-story is an “alternative or opposing narrative or explanation” (Fernández, 2019, p. 34) to a sanitized, master narrative that has been historically repeated as the truth in our education system and socio-political, cultural context. She uses the backdrop of the Anti-Ethnic Studies Law against Mexican American Studies (MAS) in Tucson, Arizona in 2017 to emphasize how the implementation of MAS is a direct counter-story to the colonial praxis of power.

In response to that case, Fernández and other like-minded individuals created the Xicanx Institute as a grassroots, urban, education collective as an act of resistance to further the decolonial project and counter legitimate forms of knowledge to rehumanize Ethnic Studies. The first pillar of the Institute is to further educators to be critically conscious which involves making explicit connections between pedagogical practice, power relations and lived experiences of People of Color and critically understanding social injustices. Additionally, since curriculum is always political, it's essential to be culturally responsive and rehumanizing by focusing on themes of social justice, youth empowerment, and emancipation. Fernández (2019) summarizes the Institute's model as a "decolonial framework that seeks to name the world and the sociopolitical, economic and racial policies and processes that have impacted our movement as a way to engage in praxis to begin to rethink our educational systems and dismantle these practices that dehumanize our youth and communities" (p. 37).

The creation of the Xicanx Institute, as a result, represents how trained teachers are implementing decolonial pedagogies, specifically counter-storytelling, to generate critical consciousness among students to recognize oppression in its multiple forms and then take action in the classroom and beyond to interrupt cycles of oppression (Fernández, 2019). However, Fernández unequivocally asks, "*how do we do this as high school teachers?*" (Fernández, 2019, p. 34). She provides potent examples of teachers successfully implementing decolonial pedagogies or decolonial barrio pedagogies, as Fernández (2019) labels them, in specific lesson plans. Decolonial barrio pedagogies "counter deficit ideologies and encourage rehumanizing, anticolonial practices" that focus on cultural resilience and critical literacies and skills for students to make transformative change in their communities" (p. 37).

An example of a specific decolonial pedagogical practice consists of the teacher presenting a visual or auditory prompt, “how is the past alive in the present?” Students are shown three powerful images and tasked to engage in dialogue and observe connections between the images. For instance, an image of Indigenous people being attacked by dogs in the 1500’s by Spanish conquistadors is contrasted with a photograph from the 2017 Standing Rock protests where Indigenous people were attacked by dogs from a private security firm. After engaging in further critical observations, students reframe the initial question to, “how is colonization still alive in the present?” Students dig deeper into analyzing practices of humanization and dehumanization both current and in the past while expanding perspectives on how repetition of the same oppressive tactic has had a massive impact on a specific group’s consciousness.

As a result, students not only recognize forms of oppression but importantly work to interrupt cycles of oppression via the awareness that the oppression still presently exists. Counter-stories to mainstream historical narratives, therefore, represent a powerful tool for students to begin the process of disrupting the status-quo narrative they have traditionally been taught. This process is jump started by developing a humanizing approach to both teaching and learning that centers the lives of students and unpacking examples of cultural resilience to spotlight counter-stories of specific groups’ strengths.

Another example of counter-storytelling methodology in the classroom comes in the form of a lesson plan on colonization, specifically the colonization of the mind. Students read Frantz Fanon’s text on colonization and the levels of consciousness to enlighten themselves about conceptual incarceration. Per the XITO institute, “the definition of a colonized mind is a form of conceptual incarceration that is a by-product of deculturalization” (Fernández, 2019, p. 35). With that being said, students brainstorm examples of colonized mindsets and begin the process of

decolonizing their minds. “These types of exercises allow students to begin to name how and why we think the way we do with the end goal of developing a critical consciousness with which to view the world and to move ourselves and communities toward liberation” (Fernández, 2019, p. 35).

Furthermore, visual images are an influential classroom mechanism to tell a counter-story. One example of this is tasking students to observe symbolic visuals by contrasting the song, “Strawberry Fields Forever” by La Santa Cecilia as a counter-story to the Beatles’ version. As a result, students gain criticality of the working conditions faced by migrant farm workers who pick strawberries. This exercise not only allows students to hear stories about their own lived experiences but has greater transformative potential for praxis in the form of student activism, action projects, and participatory action research.

The last counter-story strategy highlighted by Fernández as part of her work with the Xicanx Institute has to do with the practice of “talking back” to a text. Students document their own analyses or perspectives using blackout poetry, meaning they closely read and focus on words or phrases that resonate a narrative or theme they specifically want to highlight. This entails the literal blacking out of original text to allow other text to emerge at the forefront. A specific example of this is a student “talking back” to Amy Tan’s *Woman Warrior*. It’s important to note that this strategy can also be implemented by teachers as hooks to new units (Fernández, 2019). Counter-storytelling, in all its forms, has evolved to be a “praxis of critical consciousness that supports students to read their world and critique, analyze, and change the social conditions under which they live. This process of retelling and disrupting the status-quo often becomes so threatening to the stakeholders of white supremacy” (Fernández, 2019, p. 37).

### *The Importance of Social Justice-based Classroom Practices*

While counter-storytelling is a powerful practice of decolonial pedagogy that cultivates students' critical consciousness, there are numerous social-justice oriented practices that also constitute under the equivalent umbrella and serve the same purpose. There exists a strong argument that critical consciousness is at the forefront of social justice teaching since it

“is a heightened awareness of the world and the power structures that shape it. Our critical consciousness increases as we come to perceive contradictions and oppressions in the world. We come to notice the difference between those who have and those who do not and ponder the reasons why” (Stysliger, M. E., Stowe, J., Walker, N., Hostetler, K. H., 2019, p. 9).

These practices are nuanced and overlapping and, hence, should be perceived as a constellation of mutually interdependent tools for increasing students' critical consciousness.

For instance, a couple of strategies consist of conducting a privilege walk or using critical reader response journals to help students foster more self-awareness and self-reflection. This allows students in a guided inquiry to think deeply about their initial personal responses to a text. Another strategy to foster critical consciousness is selecting texts purposefully, ones that provide a metaphorical and importantly real window, door, and mirror for students to see themselves and others. The doors, moreover, allow students to “walk in” to a different dimension and engage in the world from the perspective of others in new ways; the hope is to inspire them to promote change. Reading texts critically, furthermore, is another important strategy because it teaches students to uncover the oppression of the *isms* by asking critical questions. The Article-of-the-Week and multivoiced journals are specific examples.

*The Importance of Practices Transcending the Classroom: The Development of a Social Justice-based Community Action Plan*

More importantly, connecting classroom content to the real-world by inviting guest speakers, taking field trips, and simply engaging in stories and conversations are beneficial to understanding the world. “Students try to make meaning with others, shaping their own thinking as well as the thinking of others during the process” (Stysliger et al. 2019, p. 13). The final strategy is supporting students’ inquiry and drive for activism; in other words, students should be engaged in authentic learning purposes that are directly linked to creating meaningful change in their communities. Social justice educators should build critical consciousness through intentional practices that “blur the boundary between schools and communities” in efforts to revalue our common humanity (Stysliger et al. 2019, p. 13).

This concept of blurring the boundary between schools and communities has been a common theme among the decolonial pedagogical practices mentioned already. An influential example that perfectly represents Freire’s critical consciousness and praxis (reflection and action) in a larger context is the successful student-led campaign to ban rifle ranges in the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) (Gómez & Ochoa, 2019). This was achieved through implementation of fruitful community organizing and social activism; practices students directly applied from taking the Ethnic Studies course on campus. The Ethnic Studies course is broken down into seven transformational units: Building Community and Humanizing for a Learning Sanctuary, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Identity, Attacks on our Identity, Human Rights: Recognizing Injustice and Rehumanizing Students, Social Movements and Historical Figures and Creating Change and Contemporary Issues.

Teacher-organizers at SDUSD, Gómez and Ochoa, confess that they “believe education must go beyond the four walls of our classroom. We must read the word and read the world in order to change it” (Gómez & Ochoa, 2019, p. 293). Based on these concepts of igniting self-love and self-advocacy, the authors organized the Ethnic Studies course around Paulo Freire’s five-step liberation process that was adopted by Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s Definite Dozen. The steps consist of: identifying a problem, analyzing what factors contribute to the problem, coming up with a plan to face the problem, implementing a plan, and evaluating the plan to determine if objectives were met or need to be revised. (Gómez & Ochoa, 2019).

Under this framework, the goal for Ethnic Studies is for students to learn about their own self-identities, analyze current issues that impact their communities, and find solutions. Hence, theory becoming action is a fundamental pillar of the course because it “humanizes our youth by transforming their apathy into self-empowerment” (Gómez & Ochoa, 2019, p. 294). It allows them to no longer feel hopeless but rather provides hope and regeneration to be agents of change. “Ethnic Studies engages historically marginalized students by providing purpose, reaffirmation and a sense of self-love that ignites self-empowerment and advocacy that often neglects their identities and their stories. By moving theory into practice, education fulfills what it was set out to do: provide the tools for change and liberation” (Gómez & Ochoa, 2019, p. 296).

The diversity of classroom examples illustrated—in the form of curriculum development, lesson plans, activities, and rituals—is testament to the decolonizing practice of fostering student’s critical consciousness within the lens of Cuauhtin’s Ethnic Studies Framework. The four macroscales and double helix of the ES-FW seamlessly intertwines with previous conceptualizations of an Ethnic Studies Framework, and importantly, to Freire’s critical pedagogy. Furthermore, teacher pedagogical examples utilize Freire’s problem-posing approach

to education that includes essential elements of praxis (reflection and action), development of holistic humanity, critical examination of the processes of violence and power, and social-justice oriented self-empowerment among students that leads to actionable community change.

Ultimately, this process is revolutionary for both educators and students because they become co-creators of their world in which they seek authentic liberation.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the review of the academic literature, there are glaring gaps in knowledge. For instance, although Freire's concept of critical consciousness is a common foundational denominator amongst the definitions of Ethnic Studies, a single agreed-upon definition still does not exist. Since there is no general consensus of the definition amongst scholars, educators, and activists, it therefore makes it difficult to discuss improving the system of decolonial pedagogy and practices in the classroom without rooting the conversation to an exact definition to fall back on for context. Furthermore, this gap in literature is naturally exacerbated by the fact that Ethnic Studies, as a common curriculum in California high schools, is still relatively new. It has only been in the last ten to fifteen years that the momentum to implement Ethnic Studies as core curriculum has picked up steam in the Bay Area and across California.

Although Cuauhtin's theoretical conceptualization of an ES-FW is exceedingly robust, it is still relatively new and therefore unknown in the broader context of mainstream Ethnic Studies conversations in the State of California. The ES-FW was published in 2019. Therefore, there is a lack of studies highlighting Ethnic Studies framework from theory to practice in the classroom. Even though the conceptualization of Ethnic Studies as a theoretical framework is strong, there are limited examples of real pedagogical practices in the high school

classroom. For example, there is little information about how teachers are implementing the four geohistorical macroscales in curriculum, lesson plans, and daily activities and routines in order to build critical consciousness among students. Moreover, there are very few studies depicting the implementation of action steps, successes, and drawbacks of theory to practice.

The purpose of this study was to understand how teachers are teaching critical consciousness as decolonizing practice within Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework at an alternative education high school. The purpose explores how four teachers are building critical consciousness among racially marginalized students through implementation of Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework, specifically the elements of the four geohistorical macro-scales of indigeneity, dehumanization, hegemony, and regeneration. Furthermore, another purpose of the study is to understand the implementation of this Ethnic Studies Framework through the pedagogical actions teachers are constructing in the classroom—curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities, and rituals—to generate a sense of critical hope and actionable social justice among students.

### Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how teachers were teaching critical consciousness as decolonizing pedagogy within Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework at an alternative education high school. This phenomena examined the pedagogical actions teachers were implementing in the classroom—curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities, and rituals—to generate a sense of critical hope and actionable social justice among students (Freire, 2005). Using the lens of Paolo Freire's critical pedagogy within Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework, the methods of inquiry included phenomenological reflection on teacher pedagogy connected to the four geohistorical macroscales of indigeneity, dehumanization, hegemony, and regeneration (Cuauhtin, 2019).

I used phenomenological procedures to explore decolonial pedagogical practices implemented by teachers at a small alternative high school with a high population of racially marginalized students. By examining teacher pedagogical practices, I examined how Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework guided and constructed specific pedagogical actions in the classroom such as curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities and rituals. Therefore, the one guiding central question in this study was, *How were teachers at an alternative high school teaching critical consciousness as decolonizing pedagogy within the lens of an Ethnic Studies Framework developed by Tolteka R. Cuauhtin?*

#### **Description and Rationale for Research Approach**

The dominant philosophical worldview that shaped my approach to research, as well as views on the research topic, was transformative. A transformative worldview places central importance on the study of lives and experiences of diverse groups that have traditionally been marginalized. Cresswell (2014) states, “of special interest to these groups is how their lives have

been constrained by oppressors and the strategies that they used to resist, challenge, and subvert these constraints” (p. 10). It focuses on inequities based on gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic conditions that generate unbalanced power relationships related to inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation (Creswell, 2014). Since the transformative worldview is inherently intertwined with politics and issues of power that have historically disenfranchised groups of people, it also calls for a specific “political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever levels oppression occurs” (Creswell, 2014, p. 9-10). Therefore, this action agenda for reform is collaborative, provides a voice for participants, raises their consciousness—and importantly—constructs a plan for change to improve their lives (Creswell, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the transformative worldview aligned well with issues of power and oppression in education, and Cuauhtin’s Ethnic Studies Framework as development of critical consciousness and form of authentic liberation for Students of Color (Cuauhtin, 2019; Freire, 2005). For instance, Ethnic Studies as a discipline focuses on representing the histories and lived experiences of marginalized groups of people in the United States through the education system. Hence, it not only explicitly examines issues of power and oppression experienced by marginalized communities but also importantly creates a “change agenda” for students to resist and challenge these forms of domination. How teachers are fostering this critical consciousness among students, can therefore, be attributed to the transformative worldview’s perception of “collaboration” and “giving voice” to the marginalized to “create a plan for change to improve their lives” (Creswell, 2014, p. 9-10). This change agenda occurs when Students of Color develop critical consciousness to critically examine processes of power and violence, and as a result, grow social-justice oriented self-empowerment amongst themselves that leads to

actionable community change. Essentially, this evolution per Freire's critical pedagogy, leads to racially marginalized students' authentic liberation (Cuauhtin, 2019; Freire, 2005).

The relationship between emotions and educational research is another issue that fits well within the transformative worldview. Diaz-Strong, Luna-Duarte, Gomez, and Meiners (2013) summarize that traditional research methodology encourages the researcher to detach or hide feelings that arise during the research process. Instead, the authors declare that the development of these feelings are valid and make a researcher human. Our feelings demonstrate how "affect not only is used to regulate political practices such as immigration policies, but also shapes our investments and labors as scholars, including our resistance to retaining the veneer of objectivity in scholarship and our desire to move beyond research to support and participate in justice movements" (Diaz-Strong, Luna-Duarte, Gomez & Meiners, 2013, p. 5).

While in the process of developing my views on the research topic and conducting interviews with teachers, I experienced complications of negotiating feelings. As a First Generation Woman of Color, feelings of exclusion and alienation arised based on my experience as a former Student of Color in the California public school system. The white-washed school curriculum, for instance, did not personally allow me to develop critical consciousness and therefore attain authentic liberation as a racially marginalized student. These negotiated feelings consisted of anger, frustration, and alienation of how Students of Color still remained in oppressive shackles within the education system. On the other hand, the complicated relationship between emotions and educational research allowed me to deshackle "the veneer of objectivity" and transcend "beyond research to support and participate in justice movements" (Diaz-Strong et al., 2013, p. 5). Since a core element of the transformative worldview is participating in a political change agenda, the researcher should be accountable to stopping the cycle of inequity.

Interviewing teachers about their pedagogical actions in the classroom, therefore, allowed me to become an active agent in the Ethnic Studies movement that demands critical consciousness and praxis as a revolutionary tool for authentic liberation (Cuauhtin, 2019; Freire, 2005).

Lastly, I used the qualitative method of phenomenological research to understand my views on the research topic. Creswell states that, “phenomenological research is a design of inquiry coming from Philosophy and Psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants... This design has strong philosophical underpinnings and typically involves conducting interviews” (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). This method was the most appropriate for pedagogical actions teachers were implementing in the classroom—curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities, and rituals—to generate a sense of critical hope and actionable social justice among students. The phenomena studied was implementing teacher pedagogical actions based on Cuauhtin’s Ethnic Studies Framework; and specifically, the development of critical consciousness.

### ***Research Sites and Entry into the Field***

The school setting where this research was conducted was at a small alternative education school in an urban, suburban setting in Northern California. I refer to the school as Milan’s School. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the school and teachers. This school serves 73 students ranging in grades from 7th grade to twelfth grade. There are 98% Latino students, 0.82% African-American students, 0.5% White students, 0.2% Asian students, and 0.2% biracial students. The majority of students attending this school came from disadvantaged backgrounds including, but not limited to: poverty, lower socioeconomic status, belonging in a racially marginalized group, and experience of trauma (K. Foster, personal communication, November 30, 2021). Other factors that contributed to students attending

Milan's School include disciplinary issues, truancy, expulsion from traditional middle school or high school, and County Probation.

During this study, I was a social studies teacher at the school that served all students. Furthermore, I taught an additional Government and Economics class for eleventh and twelfth grade students. After conversations with the site principal, she approved the proposed study. This study did not disrupt the school day or standard student services.

Teachers at Milan's School were recruited for participation in the study, which was approved by the principal. The school was purposefully selected because I have been the social studies teacher at the site since the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic school year. Teachers were purposefully selected because I taught at an alternative high school where a total of four subject-specific teachers, excluding myself, were teaching a small population of 73 students. These four teachers were asked to participate in the study. All teachers had a valid State of California teacher credential, ranged between the ages of 30 to 40 years, and had been teaching for more than two years at the school site. In addition, half the teachers were female and self-identified as Latina while the other half were male and self-identified as White.

I interviewed the subject-specific teachers about how they were teaching critical consciousness amongst students through pedagogy including curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities and rituals. This allowed me to assess teachers' understanding of and implementation of fostering critical consciousness amongst students as an effective decolonizing practice within the lens of a specific Ethnic Studies Framework developed by Tolteka R. Cuauhtin. The purpose of recruiting teachers helped identify the development of critical consciousness amongst students as a decolonizing practice that is used for liberation.

First, I received permission to recruit participants. Teachers at Milan's School were then

asked to participate in the study. I announced a request for teachers at a weekly staff meeting to participate in two individual interviews and distributed the interview questions. Additionally, I reviewed the form at the staff meeting, explaining that the study is confidential and that teachers may opt out at any time. Lastly, I announced that interested teachers should contact the researcher after class to arrange an interview date.

Prior to the study, I received permission to interview teachers from the school site, and teachers were provided verbal consent and then written consent. On the day of each interview, the specific teacher and myself met at a location most convenient for the participant, either in my social studies classroom or the classroom of the participating teacher. I then provided a brief verbal statement about the purpose of the interview and the study overall.

The interview questions then began (please see Appendix B). As needed, I facilitated the conversation providing verbal prompts such as, “please elaborate,” “can you tell me more,” etc. The interview cycled through the questions and follow-up questions. Once all was completed, I thanked the interviewee for their time, and once again provided reassurance that everything discussed will be kept confidential. The interviews were recorded on my iPhone and then transcribed automatically via a secure phone application, called Otter, on my phone. The interviews were used as qualitative data for the study. Additional documents were collected by me during the first and second interview with the specific teacher. These documents included curriculum-building material such as unit plans and lesson plans as well as rough sketches of daily activities and rituals implemented in the classroom.

I collected data through qualitative open-ended interviews. I recorded each interview using her phone as the recording device. Throughout the interview, I wrote key phrases having to do with what the participants described as *decolonial pedagogy*. Similarly, I went through each

individual interview immediately after the interview took place, and wrote analytic memos for each interview. I then categorized the participant's experience with teaching critical consciousness as decolonial pedagogy as an overall efficient or inefficient classroom practice. The idea was that there should be a pattern in both efficient or inefficient classroom practices. During the interview process, I also took note about teachers' thoughts and the tone in which they spoke about transcending theory into practice; specifically fostering critical consciousness among students via decolonial pedagogical actions in the classroom. It was important to learn what their beliefs and values were regarding decolonial pedagogy and critical consciousness as teachers in a school setting of majority Students of Color.

I used all three of Maxwell's (2013) strategies for qualitative data analysis: writing analytic memos post interviews, categorizing strategies, including coding and thematic analysis, and connecting strategies, or narrative analysis. It's important to note that "there is no cookbook or single correct way for doing qualitative analysis; your use of these strategies needs to be planned (and modified when necessary) in such a way as to fit the data you have and to answer your research questions" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105).

Memo writing was included in the methods post interview. I was able to capture the mood, facial expression, and tone of the interviewee. Often, I found that just listening to a recording of the interview did not have the same tone. By marking down how the interviewee looked based on body language, I was able to see a pattern in interviewees. Furthermore, memo writing also helped me to remember where the interview took place and what the circumstances were like during the interview in case that had an effect on how the interviewee answered. Memo writing, moreover, gave me the flexibility to jot down any unfiltered, raw thoughts about the

interviewee's body language, tone, or phrases that significantly caught my attention in-the-moment.

Before I began interviewing, I created a list of words and phrases I expected to hear during the interviews. These potential code words included: indigenous, connection to roots, coloniality, dehumanization, self-empowerment, connection to roots, normalization, Whiteness, build, hope, social justice, transformation, curriculum, lesson plans, InLaKech, daily activities and rituals. This worked as a mini hypothesis based on my own experiences and insights developed about the research topic. If others used similar words, I asked follow up questions with hopes of a more in-depth response, and was then able to know where to categorize their interview. Maxwell (2013) states that “similarities and differences are generally used to define categories and to group and compare data by category” (p. 106). During interviews, however, I put my own list out of sight, and concentrated on the interviewee and the language they used. When a word or phrase was mentioned that I felt needed to be remembered, I wrote it down. After the interview was complete, I took those words and when I listened to the recording and transcribed the interviews (each interview was recorded and then transcribed for coding). This process was repeated for each interview.

Coding was used before, during, and after each interview as a mechanism to organize the data into broader themes and issues (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, peer coding was used during the open coding process. I asked a peer—specifically a learning coach at the school site—to review the words I had written based on the interviews, and my peers generated their own list based on effective and ineffective decolonial pedagogy. Afterwards, I used my initial codes to create a concept map where my codes became themes in order to form the central findings of the

research. Concept mapping consisted of grouping the coded words from the audio and transcribed interviews into multiple sections.

During the open coding process, I also created substantive categories to understand the descriptive nature of participants' concepts and beliefs (Maxwell, 2013). Since the realm of decolonial pedagogy is expansive, I anticipated participants responding to questions using diverse language and terminology. Therefore, I compared and contrasted the language—such as words and phrases—participants' used during the interview process.

The substantive categories during the open coding process naturally led me to use connecting strategies. Maxwell (2013) states, “connecting analysis attempts to understand the data (usually, but not necessarily, an interview or transcript or other textual material) *in context*, using various methods to identify the relationships among the different elements of the text” (p. 112). Using connecting strategies, hence, proved to be a more holistic approach in analyzing interview transcripts and categorization of codes in context instead of fragmented units. Because each experience in teaching critical consciousness as decolonial pedagogy is highly subjective, I used a data analysis matrix that combined similar experiences (classroom practices). That made finding similar keywords and phrases easier to keep track of throughout the process of interviewing and analyzing notes and quotes from my interviews.

Lastly, I used focused coding by looking for similar or the same words used by the interviewees. These words were either the most frequently used words, or stood out as the most significant words or phrases used by the interviewees to describe their implementation of decolonial pedagogies and consequent development of critical consciousness. By finding these patterns, I was able to determine the language teachers use when describing decolonial classroom practices.

*How does who you are shape what you know about the world?* Researcher bias is one aspect that will influence data collection, especially considering the researcher's background. I identify as ethnically Indian, a Woman of Color in the United States, Muslim-American, and a former student in the public education system in California. Therefore, my positionality as a person of Color, will undoubtedly affect my research process due to how I experienced a whitewashed public school K-12 school experience growing up in the county where I conducted research. Since my cultural, linguistic, and faith background were not represented nor allowed space to empower me during my experience as a former student, I had a deep personal investment in understanding how teachers were implementing decolonial pedagogy with the aim of teaching critical consciousness within a specific Ethnic Studies Framework as a tool for authentic liberation. Therefore, another bias is that I wanted to select data that stood out to me as appropriate and efficient decolonial pedagogy more than other classroom practices. To eliminate the threat of researcher bias, I used an open-ended script during the interview series that minimized indicators of research bias (Maxwell, 2013).

Additionally, another validity threat was reactivity. Since eliminating the *actual* influence of the researcher is impossible, Maxwell (2013) instead recommends that, "what is important is to understand *how* you are influencing what the informant says, and how this affects the validity of inferences you can draw from the interview" (p. 125). With that being said, participating in an interview series with coworkers on teaching critical consciousness as decolonizing pedagogy may have increased socially desirable responses and thus not accurately reflected teachers' true opinions about the topic. One way to eliminate this threat was to actively solicit feedback about the data and conclusions from the participants in order to minimize indicators of reactivity. Moreover, since the school site where I conducted the qualitative data analysis already had a

commitment to implementing decolonial pedagogy, intensive, long-term investment in participant interviews could translate to mitigating the effects of validity threats. As a result, conducting further interviews on a consistent basis could extrapolate more complete data about specific situations where critical consciousness is being taught as decolonial pedagogy within Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework (Maxwell, 2013).

## Chapter 4: Findings

The conceptual and language framework of decolonial pedagogy is expansive, interdisciplinary, and rooted in Freire's work of developing critical consciousness, praxis, and the quest for authentic liberation via education. Although the teachers at my school site do not recognize all the traditional conceptual and language frameworks of Freirian decolonial pedagogy, I found, as the first major theme, that the teachers collectively embody practices that in many ways represent a shared vision for serving and improving the lives of their student population in a way that could be appropriately described as decolonizing. Fostering students' critical consciousness, for instance, remains a core component of the teachers' perception. It is important to note that most teachers had broad, ambiguous views on decolonial pedagogy but still shared overlapping concepts, with the exception of one teacher.

The second theme highlights the collective pedagogical strategies to forefront student empowerment and agency in learning. Strategies included curriculum building, philosophical teaching values, and centering students' lived experiences. Third, and across the board, the teachers clearly identified community-building as an imperative decolonial practice. All teacher participants heavily emphasized sharing power in the classroom through ideals of collectivism based on social-emotional learning practices. One topic teachers primarily emphasized as the foundation of social-emotional learning practices was relationship-building with students. Teachers explained that once this groundwork is established, teachers then use social-emotional learning that encourages students to "become the best versions of themselves."

The second and third themes of student empowerment and agency and attention to community-building align well with Freire's concepts set forth in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2005), including the development of critical consciousness.

### **Creating a Shared Vision for Decolonial Pedagogy**

The data collected in this study points to the malleable nature of understanding what *decolonial pedagogy constitutes*. Teachers held various manifestations of decolonial pedagogy's conceptual and language frameworks based on their own philosophical, academic, professional development, and personal knowledge that established a collective and implicitly negotiated vision for decolonial pedagogy at the particular school site. Even though teachers have not followed a standardized model of decolonial pedagogy rooted in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, they had still constructed a cooperative vision for decolonial pedagogy grounded in critical consciousness.

A few of these shared concepts among teacher participants included limiting traditional, White, male perspectives within the curriculum and, instead, adopting a multiple narratives approach. Other shared concepts focused on students to generate self-empowerment and honor their voice and choice. The teachers explained that honoring student voices means meeting students where they are culturally, socio-emotionally, and academically in their lived experiences.

### ***Hesitation about Defining Decolonial Pedagogy***

It was interesting that several of the research participants expressed feelings of hesitation and nervousness both before and about the interviews we had planned together on the topic of decolonial pedagogy. And since the term is both expansive and rooted in academic language, it appeared as though it created a stressful anticipation about getting the definitions "right." For instance, Rene, the English teacher, said he was slightly nervous a couple days before the interview and asked to review the interview questions in order to prepare. The Math teacher held similar sentiments. When asked to define decolonial pedagogy during the interview, for instance,

this teacher paused for a few seconds and responded nervously, “Decolonial pedagogy... Can we come back to that question?” Only after she had confidently defined what Ethnic Studies meant to her did she seem visibly calmer and comfortable enough to circle back to defining decolonial pedagogy.

***Examining the Structures and Impacts of Colonialism and a Multiple Narratives Approach***

One way in which half the teachers defined decolonial pedagogy was by tying it to the colonialism initiated by European conquest of the Americas nearly 500 years ago. Using that as a starting point, these teachers often defined decolonial pedagogy as examining the structures and impacts of colonialism globally on communities of color with a special focus on the Indigenous peoples of the contemporary United States. The impacts of colonialism reverberated across multiple disciplines, including but not limited to the psychological, economic, political, social, and cultural spheres of knowing and doing. The first thoughts that came to Rene’s mind—who identifies as a heterosexual White man—in regards to defining decolonial pedagogy, consisted of the following:

I think of colonizers, right...Europeans coming to the Americas. And ignoring indigeneity, the ways that we're done doing harm, and saying, do it this way, or increase the harm...just the dead impact of race in the world and where we are today.

Another teacher, Carla, elaborated more from Rene’s understanding of the definition and implementation of decolonial pedagogy to include a well-thought out response. She noted the importance of primarily unpacking the structures of colonialism so that students can critically analyze its pervasiveness and impact on society today. Once students have developed that criticality, she emphasized incorporating a multiple narratives approach that amplifies the lived experiences of historically marginalized communities. The purpose of the development of

criticality and a multiple narratives approach is for students to foster their own understanding of particular topics being studied in class without any bias from the teacher. Carla noted:

I think there's a two part definition. So the first part would be to see the structures and the impacts of colonization...And I think the second part is bringing in other views like other societal norms, other societal cultural practices, and really understanding that our society is just one facet of the way society could work, period, right. So like, you could zoom out and see the colonizing web structure, infrastructure, and direct impacts on people. And then you could also zoom out even more and bring in the real views and historical views and like really, kind of without any bias of your own...But like presenting it in a way, that's where students can make their own judgments of that.

Carla further highlighted the significance of contextualizing the multiple narratives approach in curriculum as a means to empower students with critical thinking skills. She continued:

Relating that in moments, bringing ... their own processing of the impacts and the and the different aspects of life that it affected for so many people. And then connecting that to history, right?... I think one of the most important things about a real education is allowing students to really be their own critical thinkers, whether or not it aligns with your own personal beliefs. I'm very much, very strongly like, sit in that and have moments that caught myself, like being Oh, here's my bias, let's sit back and let them process it for themselves presented with facts. Right.

Carla was confident and firm in her conceptualization of decolonial pedagogy. Importantly, it is meaningful to note that her direct and calm composure in clearly defining her version of decolonial pedagogy aligned similarly to Freire's concept of critical consciousness. Moreover, most teachers agreed that decolonial pedagogy should have a semblance of a multiple narratives

approach even if they did not use the exact academic verbiage to articulate this. Karim, the special education teacher, discussed the dire need to diversify the curriculum to make it more reflective and inclusive of the student population by stating,

So focusing on authors historical figures that look like our students that talk like our students. I think it's removing some of the traditional male dominated white culture from the literature and providing students with authors of color. Female authors, so we do a really good job of that in English. Rene moves away from the white male author, stereotypical classic author, and he focuses more on people that represent the students he's teaching. So I feel like when you're trying to teach Hemmingway to a first generation Latino student, you're kind of like shoving white culture down their throats.

Moreover, Tanya questioned the curriculum she was exposed to when she was a student; for example, the “glorification of White culture” and ways of being and the silencing of everyone else that does not come from a European or Caucasian background. Decolonial pedagogy, or “Ethnic Studies” as she labels it, should be an avenue to self-empower for all students by expanding the curriculum to include and celebrate the perspectives and lived experiences of people of color. She mentioned,

Ethnic studies it's the study of cultures from a non like, Eurocentric point of view...And it's always like, white victim, right? And it's just, I think it's a way to kind of challenge that...Teaching ethnic studies would be to empower people of color, to empower everyone really. Because it's, it's not saying don't teach, like any Eurocentric or anything white. It's just kind of saying, what about everything we didn't do, all the people, we didn't hear about? What about all the people, all these other points of views.

The throughline for most teachers describing decolonial pedagogy included the harmful impacts of colonization on communities of color and how the education system has perpetuated some of those negative effects by focusing entirely on White experiences. Instead, a multiple narrative approach—building curriculum and daily lesson plans with an emphasis on marginalized communities’ experiences—embodied most teachers’ understandings of decolonial pedagogy.

### *Student Self-Empowerment*

Student self-empowerment is inclusive with a multiple narratives approach. Without students experiencing a reflection of themselves, families, communities, and backgrounds within the curriculum, self-empowerment can be difficult to root in an infertile soil that only sustains one perspective. In other words, students must have an opportunity to cultivate self-empowerment through a multiple narrative approach that allows them to thrive, reach their full potential, and ultimately take control of their own decisions. For instance, Tanya explained how a multiple narratives approach leads to inclusivity and self-empowerment of all students:

I think that's kind of empowering, especially to our students...I can see it being empowering for everyone, not just people of color, just everyone in general. And it's inclusive. Where before it just kind of felt like a very exclusive education...So then it's kind of normalizing the fact that we should continue this cycle, because that's what we're seeing. That's what we're reading about. Whereas if we were to get ethnic studies and learn about all the other cultural leaders who have been around, then it just kind of like, oh, yeah, like, then me too, then I can do that, too. Whereas before, it's like, okay, well, I don't fit that mold, not like that.

Most teachers defined decolonial pedagogy outside the scope of academia. Rather, self-empowerment for both students and their families in the education system highlighted the

importance of providing them with equitable access to and opportunities for decision-making and self-autonomy. For instance, since Karim is the special education teacher, he works to provide a culturally-responsive level of comfort and support to Spanish-speaking families that have traditionally been marginalized or silenced in meetings due to a language barrier. To confront this pervasiveness of Whiteness in the education system that restricts the self-empowerment of some parents, he instead amplifies their voices, and ultimately creates fertile ground for self-empowerment to grow and thrive through using specific strategies. He explained in-detail by stating,

So ways in which I try to decolonize Special Ed is by using our family outreach coordinator, so to connect with families. As you know, at the school, we have a lot of Spanish speaking families. So it's bringing them into the fold, and empowering the parents of special ed students to have a voice in the meeting...So part of decolonizing, Special Ed is front loading with Spanish speaking parents and letting them know what's coming up in the meeting...I'm an advocate for them, and taking time in the meeting to hear from them. So it's less of me talking to them, and more of us having a back and forth conversation.

It is evident that most teachers align self-empowerment of the community—specifically students and their families—as an integral component of decolonizing pedagogy that functions both inside and outside of the classroom.

### ***Centering Students' Lived Experiences by Honoring their Voice and Choice***

Another overarching shared concept of decolonial pedagogy's conceptualization common amongst the teachers consisted of centering students' lived experiences by honoring their voice and choice. This concept, again, follows a domino effect in that the previous factor (student self-

empowerment) directly impacts this trajectory. Self-empowerment of students, for instance, is inclusively bound by teachers' pedagogical actions. In this context, this translates to educators explicitly centering students' lived experiences by honoring their voice and choice in curriculum-building, activities, projects, rituals and overall school culture. Therefore, most teachers emphasized how significant it was to meet students where they are culturally, socio emotionally, and academically as part of decolonizing pedagogy. Since most students at the alternative high school identify as Students of Color hailing from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, Rene (the English teacher) modifies the curriculum to address his students' lived experiences instead of imposing only "whitewashed," California-State standards that may have little relevance to students. He explained,

So as I look for curriculum, as I try to develop curriculum, I try to keep students' voices and choices in mind. So I tried to keep them at the center...Being able to analyze, increasing vocabulary, taking what they already know, from their own personal culture. And I don't mean that in the prescriptive like cliché way, like, Oh, you're Guatemalan. So here's this Guatemalan food, you know...What are you interested in reading? We all know that we're here ultimately to create community and become better versions of ourselves. So what would you be interested enough in to motivate you to learn these skills that will help you?

Moreover, Rene, like many teachers, deeply reflected within himself to express how his mindset and demeanor as a teacher impacts students' self-confidence vis a vis centering their lived experiences. As a result, students' voice and choice as part of a school community is honored and uplifted instead of marginalized or silenced; the latter representing what traditional mainstream high schools are used to. He articulated,

So we have our classroom...And then I don't know, whatever community we've created together, we've created a place where students do not feel fear of expressing their lived experience. So it's not hidden...I'm not propagating a system of power run, pushing or silencing them, or their ability to speak forth what they want to learn or what happened to them over the weekend, or how, for lack of a better word, fucked up everything is...Like I feel okay, at least I'm being a part of a system that's creating space for students to be feel like that they're there, their words are being heard, that their opinions matter, that their emotions are honored, that they feel validated in and how they're living their life, at the very least.

The majority of teacher participants shared similar sentiments about meeting students where they are by utilizing material that is relevant, engaging, and important for students. It is about centering students' lived experiences locally in their respective neighborhoods and cities by providing them with tools necessary to critically acknowledge and analyze what is happening in the world around them. Karim provides an example of this when he explains the value of teaching about sea level rise occurring in the majority Spanish-speaking, low-income neighborhood in the city of Santa Martinez. He stated,

They focus more on actionable science versus theoretical science, and actionable science that can then benefit the communities they live in. So in that way, it's removing this white male dominated culture, we need to focus on these particular concepts and shifting it to actually, we need to focus on what's important for you and your community. So sea level rise in Santa Martinez right, that's an issue that I think teaching science in that way as decolonizing.

Based on evidence collected, it is apparent that most teachers deeply link decolonial pedagogy as centering students' lived experiences in order to create a more authentic learning experience for students. One reason this has been successful at the alternative high school is attributed to the fact that most teachers honor students' voice and choice in curriculum building and beyond to generate a community of learners who feel validated in expressing themselves.

### **Decolonial Practice as Student Empowerment and Agency**

Considering that teachers conceived a shared vision for decolonial pedagogy at their school-site, there was sufficient evidence from most teachers that a form of pedagogical practice that embodied this vision was generating student empowerment and agency. Teachers recognized the value of building curriculum in a manner suitable for students to explore and examine the truth about processes in the world—without a colonial, hegemonized lens—and therefore become critical thinkers. Self-empowerment of students, moreover, was strongly attached to moving away from curriculum that centered traditional, male, White voices to one that celebrated inclusivity of counter-narratives. An influential factor of developing student empowerment and agency was entering students' lived experiences in curriculum, lesson plans, and daily activities as a way to honor student voice and choice. The act of honoring students' choices allowed opportunities for students to feel empowered in the process of learning. Last but not least, most teachers advocated for student agency through the development of a community network.

### ***Student Exploration, Counter-Narratives, and Developing Critical Thinkers***

Most teachers focused on the significance of presenting course material in a manner that allows students to examine oppressive historical structures and processes. The point being that students can develop critical thinking skills such as asking questions and connecting the impacts

of history to present conditions. Student self-empowerment occurs, as a result, of them forming their own opinions, after analyzing subject-specific content regarding issues. Most teachers agreed that presenting counter-narratives to widely-held and accepted ideals ensures students to “think outside of the box” and therefore challenge preconceived notions of being and doing in the world that ultimately lead to students feeling a resurgent sense of agency. Carla, for example, shared information about two science units she facilitated that fall under this category of decolonial pedagogy. The one she carefully illustrated was regarding the vaccine unit. She thoroughly described,

When we talked about when I opened it with first just their questions and curiosities, and how they felt about a vaccine coming out in January, right this just one year ago...And so from there, we moved into the history of vaccines in the United States. And not just the history of vaccines, but also inoculations...And so I had students look at smallpox, polio, and one more, but I can't remember.

Carla introduced a counter-narrative to the traditional story of Indigenous peoples in the Americas being slaughtered by raging diseases; inoculation against diseases could have actually been widely spread amongst the Indigenous but was purposely hidden from them. She continued:

The Chinese first founded inoculation in 1080 by using the inoculation method of swabbing. And most people around the world had known that, but indigenous people in the United States didn't, as they were getting caught, you know, kind of just like, pulverized...There were signs, and there's recordings of this in history, that there were fliers up in English saying how you could inoculate yourself around smallpox, but they weren't ever made accessible to indigenous people. Why? Because it was probably an easy way for them to get rid of some of the resistance.

She summed up by explaining how critically understanding the past, through historically silenced counter-narratives, allowed students to deeply explore the history of vaccines and ultimately become critical thinkers. She stated:

I had students explore them on their own, and unpack that on their own as they explored the timelines and what happened and who was affected by this... and deeper thinking questions... Viral virology was used as colonizers were able to take over the United States, because by sheer numbers, native people should have had enough people resisting just by sheer numbers... So like really looking at the mistrust in the government from day one, right. And of course, like, people who were enslaved weren't really inoculated either, but that was just by proxy, of not caring.

It is evident that Carla was precise in describing the process, step-by-step, on how vaccines have deep rooted, harmful links to colonialism that affected millions of people. By using the specific example of the relationship of Indigenous peoples in the Americas with Smallpox, this teacher gave students the opportunity to critically scrutinize mainstream perceptions of truth with a juxtaposition of a powerful counter-narrative. These mainstream perceptions, for instance, consist of those events and processes in history that have been deemed superior and supposedly correct simply due to the fact that they were written from the perspective of the victors. She continued,

As your science teacher, I'm not pushing an agenda. You should get vaccinated or you shouldn't... I'm just presenting the facts here. Here's one of the many, many reasons there's mistrust in the United States, from the indigenous community and also from the black community, and also from the Latino community, and so on and so forth. Right?

And why there's so much resistance. Let's dig deeper into the history right about them...And so, by laying out the facts, it allows them to make assessments.

Carla bridged the gap about how deep exploration of vaccines allowed students to generate their own critical opinions, and ultimately form personal decisions, regarding the COVID vaccine.

She continued:

I tried to present a variety of perspectives around the mistrust ... So we did this, like deep exploration of both the mistrust in medicine, what a virus really is, what a vaccine really is, and what's in a vaccine. And then from there, they can make their own decisions... You know, Bella, really thought there was a microchip and so we had to do some deep, deep digging and look up Snopes. And look at how big microchips are. And like, how big a needle is... So the post it reflection was like where somebody admitted it was like, maybe I'll get it now. Like, she was like, Hell, no, I'm never getting it. And actually, she has had it (the vaccine) at this point.

It is important to note that Carla provided an example of the entire cycle of student self-empowerment: examination of truth, development of critical thinking skills, and creation of opinions on specific issues. Another teacher also emphasized the importance of student agency; for instance, strengthening students' critical thinking skills by allowing them to make their own decisions as informed citizens. Rene mentioned,

I have to allow students to make their own decisions, because they're a different person than I am. And so that means showing, you know, from teaching politics, it would be the alternative viewpoint, right, and let them decide where their own beliefs lie, be able to show them the skill of how to vet a source, right, to be a more critical, critical consumer of media. So I think that's important. Like that would be a belief I have is like to be

overly critical with the information that you're taking in to be a part of yourself to inform your decision, right?

Per the evidence collected, student self-empowerment and agency are central components to what most teachers define as decolonial pedagogy.

### ***Counter-Narratives, Inclusivity, and Victimhood to Self-Empowerment***

Another shared facet of decolonial pedagogy as student-self empowerment and agency amongst most teachers was using counter-narratives in curriculum-building as a form of fostering inclusivity of students hailing from all backgrounds. This means carefully analyzing which stories and events in society have been given an esteemed status as the truth-bearer at the expense of silencing marginalized voices. One participant described mainstream, traditional narratives as being heavily attached to the annals of Capitalism and broadly White culture. She stated, “What comes to mind to me is ranking. Competition. What is that like? Overworked? Yeah. And this is probably the saddest one, but like, non flexible, non changing and greed.” Most teachers agreed that this mainstream traditional culture is glorified in our public education system because U.S. society has direct links to its origins; meaning, the culture that European colonizers brought to the Americas, including Capitalism, dominates as the de facto culture perpetuated in classrooms. As a way to challenge the superiority of this traditional culture, and its narratives, most teachers taking part in this study use counter-narratives to instead demystify these so-called truths. They do this by teaching counter stories of marginalized communities during historical events. The stories, cultures, traditions, languages, and ways of thinking and doing in Black and Brown communities, for instance, are incorporated in curriculum and lesson plans to create an atmosphere of inclusivity for all students. For example, one pedagogical action teachers agreed on was allowing English Learners to submit assignments in their native

language, which, at the school site, is Spanish. Karim, the special education teacher stated, “We celebrate bilingualism, you know, we want you to submit things in Spanish, or English, you know, whatever is your like, preferred method of expressing yourself.” Another teacher highlighted how she amplified the often-marginalized culture of many of her students by honoring their traditions by creating a physical Dia De Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) altar in her classroom. By doing so, students whose families are originally from Mexico and Guatemala not only felt acknowledged but, importantly, heard, included, and engaged. Tanya mentioned,

I want to create an altar, and I was gonna do it anyway. But I just wanted to get that conversation going. And a lot of them (students) practice that at home as well. And they actually taught me some things that I didn't know about, like certain candles, so one of them actually taught me what the candles were for and what they meant...And other students, they were just really happy. Like when it all kind of came together. Like they would just stand around and stare at it.

Moreover, most teachers continued to illustrate the significance of providing counter-narratives while also being conscious of what type of counter-narrative is taught to students. Instead of only focusing on marginalized communities' struggles and hardships, there was consensus to instead spotlight narratives of resistance and joy. Karim mentioned,

But I'm very explicit about but we're not victims, right? Because I think that's when people try to decolonize education, they can get tripped up a little bit when they just hit kids over the head with, you've been victimized this way...Knowing what we know, what do we do about it, we don't sit back and take it, you know, we have to, again, empower ourselves. And that's where I think reaching out into the community, making things actually happen going from theoretical to, you know, actual, is so important.

Most teacher participants agreed that victimhood is not the only story for minorities. On the other hand, decolonial pedagogy is self-empowerment in the form of providing racially minoritized students counter narratives that will uplift and celebrate their people.

### ***Centering Students' Lived Experiences and Honoring Student Voice and Choice***

Based on the data collected, there was a stark throughline amongst all teachers that centering students' lived experiences and honoring their voice and choice led to their self-empowerment. By centering students' lived experiences, teachers were transparent about creating pedagogy that meets students where they are academically, culturally, socioeconomically, and emotionally. To an extent, all teachers were critically aware about their students' lived experiences and therefore did not follow the prescribed, traditional, often-whitewashed curriculum. Instead, teachers described decolonial pedagogy as sharing the balance of power in the classroom through a reciprocal relationship between teacher and student that allows for the latter to feel acknowledged, heard, and represented in the learning process. This is achieved through intently listening to and honoring student voice and choice in content creation. For instance, as the English teacher, Rene keeps students' lived experiences at the forefront while building curriculum. He stated,

So as I look for curriculum, as I try to develop curriculum, I try to keep students' voices and choices in mind. So I tried to keep them at the center. And this is where English does have a lot in the present day. Have a lot of flexibility, especially in our model, the content can be just about anything. But the skill involved finding the right words, right? Being able to analyze, increasing vocabulary, taking what they already know, from their own personal culture.

Since English has less content than Social Sciences or Science, he has more wiggle room to creatively and authentically center students' lived experiences in his curriculum. He described two units he conducted—on poetry and food—that engaged students with a definitive choice in the learning process. Primarily, he described the poetry unit, categorizing students' voice, choice, and interest as decolonizing pedagogy. He mentioned,

We moved into a poetry lesson and a poetry unit. And again, they could write poems about anything they want. But we worked on word choice. And figurative language is actually hard content... And we looked at other people, expertly expressing their emotions live on stage, through the use of slam poetry. We did slam poetry, brackets, where they got to choose their favorite slam poems, and we showed them off and we voted on them, we found the best ones that we all love and created...Again, we had conversations about this, they were able to experience it. And that felt, I guess, in my own definition, decolonization. It's that inclusivity, your voice matters, your choice matters. Your interests matter.

Rene proceeded to describe his current unit on food,

Now we're going into food, where again, students can do whatever they can. Write whatever reason they want to why it's important to them. And they can choose whatever food they're interested in...They're learning to write recipes and, and writing splendidly, they're practicing the skill of explanatory thesis and where they're posting something and backing it up with their own lived experiences. And we're defining that more clearly by taking what they already know. And putting into words, so their words match what they know.

It is apparent from these examples that students are given the opportunity to showcase their cultural and linguistic preferences by literally speaking them into existence in the classroom. Other teachers shared similar sentiments about recognizing student voice and choice in the curriculum. For instance, Tanya uses the strategy of engaging in dialogue with her students, thus elevating their voices, to gauge what they are interested in learning about. As a result, not only is she acknowledging their interests and choices, but fostering their self-confidence by meeting them where they are academically, culturally, and perhaps even personally. She explained,

I talked to my students a lot about what they want to do. They helped me a lot. So I make them feel like part of the process...Even though I have an idea already, I asked them anyway, because sometimes they have really great ideas. So yeah, and then in the process, I remember I tell the students a lot like 'I don't know everything.' Sometimes I learned stuff from you. And I think that's decolonizing education.

Like most teachers, Tanya defined honoring student voice and choice as decolonizing education. She provides a specific example about how she engaged in dialogue with students to create a math unit on NASA logos. She further explains,

Yeah, I guess student voice and choices is where I would say I probably do the most of that...So I talked to my students a lot about, you know, what, what sounds more interesting to you....So now we're doing logos, and our students are very creative...So it creating logos with math versus doing a unit on NASA as it was actually really something I was interested in...And I had these conversations with like a bunch of students, and they all chose the logo.

It is evident from the data that centering students' lived experiences by honoring their choice results in student self-empowerment and agency. Additionally, most teachers envisioned how

doing this makes the learning process more relevant and interesting for students. For instance, students can focus on real-world issues that affect their families and communities; as a result, the learning is not only authentic to their lived experiences, but importantly, gives them the opportunity to expand their agency beyond just the four corners of the classroom. Students then have the potential of creating positive change in their lives and communities by being self-empowered through this specific learning process. Karim, for instance, provides an example of this trajectory of student self-empowerment. He stated,

So a good example is we had probation officers and SROs come on our campus and students spoke out. And, you know, so that kind of made it uncomfortable for them. We listened to that. And we politely ask if we'll call you as needed, but you don't need to show up every day unannounced, that makes the students feel like they have control over what's going on in their campus. And in the moment, they're empowered...So I think using a lot of student voice and guiding what we do is beneficial to us as a school and teachers, but it's also a process of empowering the students.

He provided another example of how students choosing a topic of focus relevant to their lives transpired them to feel self-empowered to change their own set of circumstances. He explained:

We did a documentary for my first year. And we brought in a filmmaker to help support the class and support me. And the students chose the topic. The topic was probation, youth probation and its interaction with students...Students were then empowered to interview probation officers. And really cool, what happened in that process was they interviewed the youth judge...So by doing that, I was able to give these two girls a voice directly to speak to the power. And so in that way, again, student voice and choice on the documentary subjected student voice and choice on who we would interview, and then

student voice and choice on the questions that they wanted to ask the judge. So it's all very organic.

He proceeded to describe how students felt empowered through the process. He stated:

It provided a space and opportunity for them to share ideas with community members that can actually benefit not only them, but they're the community at large, so now they're empowered. Or through the process, they were empowered to change their own set of circumstances. So that's one that we did that I felt hit that shift of the power dynamics, and now we're putting the judge on the hot seat instead of just putting the kids on the hot seat.

### *A Community Network*

Another way most teachers perceived decolonial practice as student empowerment and agency was via a strong community network, which means centering students' lived experiences by contextualizing the learning process outside of the classroom. For instance, bringing in allies from the local community, such as guest speakers and leaders, to discuss issues impacts students' lives. As a result, most teachers viewed the development of student self-empowerment and agency as directly connected to sources outside of traditional textbooks and handouts. The data from this project highlights this source of student empowerment as the community itself. Real people and their experiences, that constitute the local community, are perceived by teachers as additional bearers of knowledge and wisdom that students can learn from and with. For example, the special education teacher emphasized bringing community members to speak their truth to students as decolonizing education,

And I think that's where we're successful at this school is not only are we kind of mission aligned; we speak with one voice as a staff, but we find allies in the community that we're

able to bring in that are also mission aligned. So like this filmmaker, I think part of decolonizing education is, and you did this in your own class by bringing in people from the community to speak their stories and their truths as opposed to like a video of some guy in the East Coast speaking his truth. So I think that in-person community members are a really important part of decolonizing education. It again, it makes it more real, makes it not so theoretical.

Furthermore, the science teacher accentuated the role of network connections within a community as a vital pillar for generating student empowerment. In addition to bringing in guest speakers to have students hear real stories from real people, she explained that empowerment also occurs through an integrated approach of connecting students with resources and opportunities to become change agents within their own communities. She pointed this out poignantly:

Which is where change starts, empowerment starts, usually with yourself in your community. And so, having a school that has a well represented network, connected to the community, in a variety of roles, really helps students to start to see the players. You know, like the bigger picture of how the society functions at your local community level, and who you would interact with, or who you would write to or who you would call in order to start to enact change, right?

This teacher also explained a community network as an origin of assisting students toward a specific path in their academic and personal journeys. Since Students of Color navigate numerous systemic barriers, it is important for students to be connected with other successful individuals in the broader community who can help guide them on their path. Therefore, student empowerment comes from an interconnected web of mutually beneficial threads within

community relationships that supports them in navigating life. Student empowerment, Carla also pointed out, should not be geared towards students necessarily creating a transformational change in their communities. Rather, it is about them simply living the life they want to live. She voiced that,

Life's a climb. And hopefully there's people reaching to help you as you climb to where you want to be. And so having people of color, who've already been empowered, who've already been supported, whether it was in the classroom or not, maybe it was family...And then you can be that person for the next person, right...But we're like helping them guide them along this path of life and being like the support that they need, so that they can believe in themselves. Because if we have to live in this structure, it is so important to be empowered enough not only to have the skills to navigate the system, but also to have the belief that you have enough skills that you have enough.

Carla emphasized the importance of building students' self-confidence through this process. She stated:

So like empowering them in those academic skills, and then also empowering them in their self confidence. So like unpacking all the things that are going to be barriers for them on the way...And then from there, maybe you can enact change, maybe then you're like, 'Okay, I'm the pathway to being a lawyer, I'm on the pathway to being an activist in my community, I'm on the pathway. But now I have this network. And I'm caught every time I feel like I'm falling.'

It is evident that most teachers view the benefits of having access to a strong community network so that students can feel self-empowered, within their communities and with their backgrounds, decisions, and personal journeys as they move forward in life.

### **Sharing the Power: Decolonial Practice as Community-Building**

The emphasis on community, furthermore, continued to prevail as the recurrent theme for defining decolonial pedagogy amongst all teachers. Building and maintaining a sense of community where all people, students and staff, feel a sense of belonging and are emotionally invested in the wellbeing of each other was constituted as decolonial practice. Academics and community-building, thus, are mutually interdependent and equally important factors for a healthy, thriving school community. Collectivist practices, moreover, are not only valued but implemented within pedagogical techniques and activities. All teacher participants highlighted the significance of sharing power in the classroom with students. Sharing power involves implementing reciprocal relationships and a handful of social emotional learning practices that cultivate community-building.

#### ***Sharing the Power***

One strategy toward community-building all teachers shared was balancing the power in the classroom, which meant straying away from a traditional sense that the teacher possesses and conveys knowledge upon students (as empty vessels). It is important to note that all teachers unanimously agreed that an important pillar of decolonial pedagogy is having reciprocal relationships of knowledge and ways of being with students. Most teachers used the phrase “I’m not the sage on the stage” to emphasize how they felt about balancing power in the classroom. Karim flatly responded to the question of how he envisions the purpose of a teacher to be as,

A facilitator. It's not necessarily I have this wisdom, and I'm giving it to you. It's more like, we both want to explore this together. So it's the power dynamic...It's balancing the power...So I think people have unique wisdoms, and those need to be shared. So my role as a teacher is to create space for people to share those unique wisdoms...It's like, I'm not

a sage on the stage, right? I'm not this genius that's going to impart my wisdom to you all...It's sharing the power in the room.

Similarly, Tanya described her role as teacher in the following way, “I think it's to support the students' learning and not so much ‘I'm not the sage on the stage.’ We're equals... I tell them that all the time... I'm not above you.” Rene used similar terminology (i.e., “sage on the stage”) while expressing his thoughts about the role of the teacher. He specifically focused on his teaching philosophy as well as his perception regarding how to teach Ethnic Studies. He affirmed,

Ethnic Studies doesn't have to be like, we're in a room and we have a textbook. And here's what the indigenous people of Chile like. It doesn't have to be, sage on the stage like filling these empty vessels and teaching them about culture. I don't imagine it needing to be like that.

It is evident that most teachers do not view themselves as the sole proprietors of knowledge. Rather, there exists a strong pull toward sharing the power dynamics that maintains equality of personhood amongst all individuals. Tanya summed it up perfectly by coupling the comment of “the sage on the stage” with “a guide on the side.” As a result, most teachers held firm reactions about creating and maintaining reciprocal relationships with students that, in return, cultivated a sense of community. Although Carla agreed with the other teachers, she contextualized her definition of sharing the power dynamic by juxtaposition. She emphasized the importance of implementing collectivist practices like collaboration to create an authentic sense of community where everyone helps each other; this is in stark contrast to the American concept of individualism. Carla mentioned,

But I think we should 100% acknowledge that we live in a society...And the reason why we work together is because everyone fulfills different roles. And so like honing in on

that sense of community, and that we all lean on each other in some way, right?...So it's like decolonizing that the teacher has the power structure in the classroom. I don't try to wield power over them ever. I think that's a very dangerous place to be as a teacher. I think it's really harmful. And I think it's one of the main causes of the school to prison pipeline, actually.

She also provided a specific example of how she deconstructs this power dynamic; allowing students to work collaboratively with one another on assignments and projects. Specifically, she historically contextualizes the field of science as one that has perpetuated individualism instead of fostering a community of knowledge seekers and learners:

Well, they (science community) don't allow collaboration, I often encourage working together. And I think collaboration is something that in science in particular, can be really tricky. Because researchers will collaborate. But there's always a lead author, right? So there's always ownership of the idea...But I try in my classes to encourage paired collaboration, and they choose their partners, because why not for the rest of your life, you're going to be paired with people probably that you don't always get along with.

Carla connected this pedagogical action of collaboration to student development of critical thinking. By collaborating with peers, for instance, students can learn the importance of interpersonal relationships, awareness about social injustices and eventually skills, such as organizing, to challenge the status quo that benefits from passive citizens in the Capitalist workforce. She stated,

Another decolonizing aspect, because the way schools were structured was to create citizens that work, right, and they sit down, they stand up when they're told, they punch in, they punch out, they follow the rules. They never disrupt, they never critically think

they never push back. That's why so many corporations hate labor unions. And so I think like allowing that to really be fostered in the classroom, as a collaborative.

Undoubtedly, there is evidence in the data that clearly paints a picture of all teachers perceiving decolonial pedagogy as community-building rooted in sharing the power dynamic with students. More precisely, sharing this power dynamic with students also relies on shaping and harvesting students' social and emotional needs.

### ***Social Emotional Learning Practices***

Decolonial pedagogy as community-building also takes the form of building rapport with students. The building blocks of a thriving community are interpersonal relationships of trust and wellbeing, a foundational layer that cultivates social and emotional learning. Building healthy, reciprocal relationships with students, therefore, is part of social and emotional learning. All teachers agreed that decolonial pedagogy also consists of social and emotional learning. Most teachers recognized that respecting student integrity comes first and foremost; prioritizing human needs and emotions instead of just expecting students to be subservient. Tanya described how she tries to align her attitude and demeanor towards students in a socially, emotionally responsive manner instead of relying on punitive measures. She recalled a specific moment when she responded when a student angrily confronted her and said an epithet. Tanya stated,

I think teachers probably take that as like, 'Okay, do what I say or else get out,' but it shouldn't really be like that. Maybe something's going on? Maybe you need your space for now? And I'm not going to be in your face until I get what I want...I'm pretty sure she said fuck you to me. And she never talked to me like that before...But it's just building relationships is really what it is. Like, who is the person? And how do you matter? And how do I let you know that you matter?

Most teachers agreed that the purpose of school extended beyond students learning academic content and skills. A subcategory of decolonial pedagogy, therefore, was teaching students the social and emotional skills to navigate life independently. As the special education teacher, Karim emphasized this concept by stating,

I see the purpose of school is to prepare people for life. And provide them with skill sets that they can use to live independently, post, school, after school, and I also see the purpose of school is social and emotional development. In fact, I think the social and emotional growth that happens at school is as important and sometimes for some students more important than the curriculum.

In addition to social and emotional development, Karim emphasized creating a school community where students learn important skills that will help them thrive throughout their lives. Learning new content is essential; however, this is partially antithetical for students to learn without possessing the fundamental skill level to grasp new information in meaningful ways. Therefore, Karim along with most teachers, agreed that decolonial pedagogy includes implementation of social and emotional learning practices that encourage students to become independent learners. He emphasized, “The curriculum is important, but it's more like the process of learning more than necessarily what you're learning, right? Creating independent learners versus a dependent learner. That's more important. I think then, any fact that you might teach them is teaching them how to be independent learners.” Carla expanded the scope of social and emotional skills to include transferable skills. She contextualizes skills students already use as part of their daily behavior, consciously or subconsciously, and transfers them into the context of skills implemented in a science classroom. These transferable skills are strong indicators of

students being self-aware about their own academic, social, and emotional skills they can relocate and use in various situations. She explained,

And also bringing their skills from daily life into the classroom. Like one of my favorite things to tell kids when they're like, I can't do this...Like it has a name, but I'm like, 'You guys do it all the time outside,' like, 'I saw so and so walking with so and so.' And I know that there are girls over there you guys are investigating, and I'm like, 'You guys are doing that all the time.' We just call it something different in science, that's it. But you are investigating all the time you're analyzing, you're like, inferring, you know, like...Those are transferable skills, you just use them here.

Another social emotional learning practice as decolonial pedagogy teachers agreed upon included building students' self-confidence and perseverance while normalizing failure. Tanya, for instance, pointed to the fact that it is important for students to envision school as a place where they can bring their wisdom, talents, skills, and knowledge and feel self-empowered. She explained that students need a strong mindset that allows them to believe in themselves. Students develop self-confidence and coping mechanisms that provide them with tools to face external and internal challenges. Tanya explained,

I think the purpose is to feel like you can do something, right...And I want you to learn how to get through those challenges. What are the tools that you're going to need? What are you going to tell yourself? How are you going to talk to yourself throughout the process?

Tanya also described the purpose of school:

I just think it's like, my number one thing is always to be creative. That's the purpose I see. For them being here is to be creative. Learn how to get through challenging

situations, challenging material, learn how to learn, really, because that's all this is, that's all we're doing here...There's always an opportunity to be creative. There's not just one way to do things.

It is apparent that emphasis on student development of social and emotional skills is paramount to building a community. A vital component of community-building as decolonial pedagogy, therefore, is social and emotional learning. Another social and emotional learning practice most teachers agreed on was normalizing failure for students. Often, when faced with failure, we focus on negativity rather than celebrating positivity. Most teachers shared similar sentiments about mitigating the harmful effects of failure by normalizing it and instead shifting focus on students' ability to self-persevere. Through this process, students strengthen life-long skills of resilience in the face of adversity. The development of these social and emotional skills amongst students, teachers pointed out, constituted decolonial pedagogy since students are breaking the bonds of internal repression that perhaps allowed them to think they are not enough or capable to follow their goals. Rene sums up his thoughts on this matter by stating,

It's okay to fail...It's okay, you came to school and did nothing today but you came to school. It's okay that you wrote down one sentence, that's better than nothing like normalizing not being able to do something all of a sudden makes you more willing to try, like feel empowered to try like that. And we all got you. I fail every day at my job...And I don't know what other way to be other than persistent...I'm gonna try this again, be reflective, be persistent, be reflective, be persistent. And normalizing that as my high and low with students.

Normalizing failure is part of a healthy classroom community where failure and success are acknowledged and honored as normal fabrics of life. Most teachers said they begin class with a

brief social emotional check-in to gauge students' emotional well being before addressing academic content. A specific example Rene implements in his classroom each day is the ritual of highs and lows. He provides a thorough explanation by describing,

So one thing that I've done in my classroom for the better part of 12 years now is start every classroom with asking students, how are they? So it comes in a couple of different forms...Hey, everybody, name something good that's going on your life, talk to an elbow partner, allowing me making mindful choices of allowing students to interact in a non academic manner, the beginning of class to kind of feel more comfortable in the space that we are with the people that are around us, because we're human, and we're social...And so I've gotten to a place now where it's evolved into highs and lows. So I share my own high or my own low at the beginning of every class.

By implementing this ritual of highs and lows, Rene proceeds to describe how that directly creates a strong sense of connection and community within the classroom. He stated:

And it allows me to then allow students to connect with each other...like there's a sense of community that's developed with just that impromptu bulleted list of what's going on in our lives...it's a nice ritual to start that I think does represent that decolonization. We in this room are our culture and I'm being culturally responsive to you because I want to know what's going on in your life.

Findings from this study show that all teachers perceived decolonial pedagogy as community-building. One form of community-building teachers suggested included developing interpersonal relationships with students that balanced the power dynamic in the classroom. Another method of community-building consisted of implementing diverse social and emotional learning practices.

## Conclusion

Per the data collected, there were implications that each of the themes answered my research question, how are teachers at an alternative high school teaching critical consciousness as decolonizing pedagogy within the lens of an Ethnic Studies Framework? It is important to note that decolonial pedagogy—in itself—is a massive field of study that encompasses numerous pedagogical approaches. With that being said, teachers shared a common vision for decolonial pedagogy, still rooted in critical consciousness, that served the unique demographics and backgrounds of the student population. Moreover, the second theme of decolonial pedagogy as student self-empowerment, directly answers the research question because self-empowerment goes hand-in-hand with students' development of critical consciousness. Self-empowerment, per Freire, is a byproduct of students generating critical consciousness that allows them to feel empowered in their identities, decisions, and ultimately leads them to creating change in their communities. Decolonial pedagogy as community-building, furthermore, also answers the research question since forming reciprocal relationships of knowledge and ways of knowing are essential components of creating a culturally-relevant, thriving culture within the school and classroom environment.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This study sought to discover how teachers are teaching critical consciousness as decolonizing pedagogy within the lens of an Ethnic Studies Framework developed by Tolteka R. Cuauhtin. This qualitative study found that (1) teachers created a shared vision for decolonial pedagogy and that this pedagogy featured practices that focused on (2) student empowerment and agency, and (3) sharing the power in the classroom as a means of community-building.

Both the literature review and my research findings identified the importance of developing student empowerment and agency as critical components of a purposeful experience that allows students to thrive both inside and outside the classroom. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005) is heavily ingrained with fostering student empowerment—he specifically uses the term critical consciousness—that ultimately leads them (the students) to take actionable community change (Freire, 2005). In order to cultivate student empowerment and agency, criticality or the development of critical thinkers must first be established through analysis of power relations. Certain pedagogical actions highlighted in the literature review via Freire's pedagogy and Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies Framework heavily overlap with how teachers are implementing their shared vision for decolonial pedagogy at the school site. These pedagogical strategies that emphasize student empowerment include counter-narratives and contextualizing what is important for students in the curriculum and collaborating together with the community as a legitimate source of knowledge on topics.

Another important similarity between the academic literature and my research findings is that teachers are embodying Freire's *problem-posing approach to education* by explicitly sharing the power in the classroom with students. A humanist, revolutionary educator engages students in critical thinking, and a “quest for mutual humanization” (Freire, 2005, p. 75) in which there is

a dialectical, reciprocal partnership with students. In this dynamic, nobody possesses ownership of knowledge. Rather, both the teacher and student co-create knowledge together. Teacher participants defuse the “the sage on the stage” concept and instead embrace a mutually reciprocal rapport of knowledge and ways of being with students at the school site. Through this process, feelings of belonging and inclusion within the school community blossoms since *all* individuals are validated.

### **Implications for the Literature**

This study adds to the conversation in academic literature by demonstrating that teachers working within diverse school settings can construct a shared vision for decolonial pedagogy that best serves their respective student needs and interests. There is no blueprint for decolonial practices; one strategy is just as likely to be effective as it is to be ineffective depending on school setting, administrative leadership, teacher professional development, demographics of students, etc. Since teachers do not necessarily have a shared conceptual or language framework of decolonial pedagogy, the discrepancy among definitions can make it challenging for what *constitutes* decolonial practices in the classroom.

Another reason this research adds depth to the conversation in academic literature is that the findings labeled decolonial pedagogy as social-emotional learning practices. This was surprising and unexpected because the literature review relied on content-related decolonial pedagogical actions more so on building and cultivating students’ social and emotional learning skills. The significance of this unexpected finding is that social-emotional learning practices that generate healthy, reciprocal relationships of knowledge and knowing between teacher and student are perhaps just as important as content-related decolonial pedagogy. Social-emotional learning practices, furthermore, symbolize the fertile soil that must be nourished primarily in

order for students—especially from racially marginalized backgrounds—to then learn and process material taught via decolonial pedagogy. Social and emotional learning practices should be a foundational tool for creating and maintaining the rapport between students and teachers.

It is of paramount significance that the research findings revealed concrete pedagogical actions teachers are implementing in the classroom to teach critical consciousness as decolonial practice. Moreover, the findings bridged the gap between the theoretical conceptualization of decolonial pedagogy and the actual implementation of it in classrooms.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

Teachers should be required to learn the theoretical conceptualization of decolonial pedagogy, such as Freire’s problem-posing approach to education and concepts from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. With this strong conceptual framework, teachers at various schools can implement their shared vision of decolonial pedagogical practices in their classrooms related to curriculum-building, lesson planning, daily activities, rituals, and social-emotional learning skills. As a result, teachers will enhance the learning environment for *all* students by way of implementing specific pedagogical strategies that allow for students’ development of critical consciousness, self-empowerment, and ultimately, actionable social justice within their communities. It is important to note that, historically, racially marginalized students benefit immensely from teachers’ implementation of decolonial practices (Cuauhtin, 2019a).

Moreover, there exists monumental research and interest about Ethnic Studies, especially within the past decade. However, the research requires schools, districts and the State to create more accessible ways for teachers to actually implement it in classrooms. Due to the nature of the teaching profession, the majority of teachers simply do not possess time to read, study, and filter through pages of research, but could be more accessible if summarized and promoted

during staff meetings or department collaborations. It's also important to note that each school or district should tailor specific decolonial practices to better suit the needs of its student demographics so as to co-construct a shared vision to be used in classrooms.

This customized, shared vision for decolonial pedagogy directly contributes to social change because it automatically increases educational equity for *all* students, especially racially marginalized students who have historically been “left out” and do not see a reflection of their experiences in the whitewashed state curriculum. Decolonial practices that raise students' critical consciousness also contribute to social change because they allow students to honor the humanity within themselves—and others—to critically evaluate global and local social justice issues. Through that process, students feel self-empowered to intervene in their own realities; in other words, they become active agents of change in their communities. Most importantly, decolonial pedagogy improves the lives of students and constantly interrupts and subverts the traditional education system and fights against oppressive systems.

### **Limitations of the Study and Future Research**

A limitation of the study was the time-constraint. If I had another full semester of three to four months to collect data, I would have interviewed the teacher at Juvenile Hall in order to get a better perspective of how she teaches critical consciousness as decolonizing pedagogy to incarcerated students. Since statistics show that most students at Juvenile Hall in the County hail from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (“Marin County Juvenile,” n.d.), whom have most likely faced discrimination, the perspective from the Juvenile Hall teacher would have offered more insights and shed light on more patterns. Due to the time-constraint, I was not able to observe teacher-participants in their respective classrooms to witness how each is implementing decolonial pedagogy in small, big, direct, and indirect ways. It would have been helpful to

thoroughly link connections between the ways in which teachers share a common vision for decolonial pedagogy at the school site. For the same reason, I would have also collected materials such as teachers' copies of particular decolonial practices such as specific curricula or activities.

My participants provided a limited or biased perspective because they are all philosophically, academically, and personally deeply invested in anti-racist, social-justice-related work. They are also very conscious of their racial and gender identities that have given them—or not allowed them—certain privileges in life. Therefore, my participants provide a biased perspective because they already implement decolonial practices in some way, shape, or form in their classrooms while the majority of teachers at a larger traditional school might not be as engaged in these practices. With that being said, I am missing the perspective of teachers who are not at the same academic, philosophical, and personal interest level toward working with and improving the lives of all students via decolonial practices.

To better understand the conceptual framework and implementation of decolonial pedagogy, future research must consider the importance of social-emotional learning practices. Based on my research findings, it is obvious that social-emotional learning is an interconnected and integral foundation for decolonial pedagogy to flourish because it focuses on the whole student and their growth as humans. This begs the question, to what extent and in what ways is social-emotional learning embedded as part of professional development training for teachers learning about and implementing decolonial pedagogy? Future researchers should begin with a comprehensive review of the academic literature since social-emotional learning practices were not a common theme in this study's literature review. With that being said, future research might also advance this line of study by focusing on the practical uses of decolonial pedagogical

implementation such as exploring observations, training models, and professional development opportunities. Building upon this recommendation, school leadership and teachers can collaborate together to build a plan—an action plan—on how to customize a suitable shared vision of decolonial pedagogy, along with steps for practical implementation.

### **Conclusion**

Upon reflection, I acknowledge my deep personal investment in decolonial pedagogy, as a tool for improving the lives of students and revolutionizing education, rooted in my identity as a First Generation Muslim Woman of Color. As someone who grew up in a homogeneously White county, the silencing of my identity in public schools led to my inspiration for this research topic. By examining other ways of teaching, knowing, and being outside of the traditional education system of the United States, educators can uplift the stories, experiences and spirits of Students of Color.

Since it can be argued that the education system in the United States is still grossly colonized at different levels, the intellectual and practical purpose of the thesis are inherently interconnected. Why? Because teachers themselves have been educationally institutionalized in a colonized manner which therefore makes it difficult and time-consuming for them to learn about the theoretical underpinnings of decolonial pedagogy and relearn new ways of teaching in the classroom. Therefore, my study would contribute to the intellectual conversation by first allowing administrators and teachers to focus on unpacking the meaning of decolonial pedagogy to form a shared conceptualization of it. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* should be used as building important foundational knowledge of the subject matter before diving deeper into individualized concepts like critical consciousness, cycle of praxis, etc. It would be challenging

to implement a shared vision of decolonial pedagogy if everyone at a school site is not on the same page, conceptually and linguistically and regarding its practical uses.

I took the challenge of writing this thesis with this essential question: how are teachers teaching critical consciousness as decolonizing practice within a specific Ethnic Studies framework? I discovered that Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been the throughline for the construction of the academic disciplines of decolonial studies and ultimately, Ethnic Studies, since the global decolonization movements of the 60's. Decolonizing pedagogy, therefore, is mutually inclusive with Ethnic Studies as a tool of empowerment and authentic liberation for all students, particularly Students of Color. This form of empowerment—through development of critical consciousness—ultimately leads to students taking actionable change in their respective communities. Through this research process, I wanted to gain an intellectual and practical understanding of how teachers put theory—critical consciousness rooted in Freire's work—into practice in their classrooms. Based on my research findings, this gap of theory and practice was bridged in meaningful ways. Teachers at Milan's School use specific pedagogical actions in the classroom—more or less based on Freire's pedagogy—that foster students' critical consciousness.

Although decolonial pedagogy is firmly rooted in Freire's core concepts, its expansive and interdisciplinary nature provides space for school districts to shape and implement specific pedagogy that best suits their needs. Decolonial pedagogy, therefore, cannot have a master blueprint for reproduction at schools and neither can it be rigidly boxed in with certain rules. As long as any school receives thorough training and professional development about the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of decolonial pedagogy, it can be implemented into real classroom practices—curriculum, lesson plans, activities, and rituals—in unique ways that benefit all

students. Cuauhtin's Ethnic Studies framework, moreover, is complimentary with this constructivist vision of decolonial pedagogy because it holistically integrates Freire's vital components with a wide-reaching, inclusive matrix (See Appendix C: The Ethnic Studies Framework by Tolteka R. Cuauhtin). This matrix provides schools a sweeping ability to dissect processes of violence and power that have historically plagued communities of color since colonization began in the 15th century. Importantly, the matrix also contributes to the advancement of tangible social justice; the double helix of holistic humanity and critical consciousness enable students to critically analyze oppressive structures to then make an actionable difference in the world around them.

As we continue to battle the COVID-19 pandemic with rising racial justice movements across the United States, it is even more important for school districts to "walk the talk" regarding implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles. One resounding manner in which this can be accomplished is through a federal or state-wide policy for research on decolonial pedagogy. This is an important first step in at least getting the conversation on decolonial pedagogy started (then followed with mandated training and continuous professional development). AB2016, the bill that requires graduating high school students to take at least one course on Ethnic Studies in California, can be viewed as another milestone in the right direction. However, I propose that school districts adopt the State Ethnic Studies curriculum, and provide education on Freire and Cuauhtin's theoretical frameworks to better understand the purpose.

As Freire (2005) mentioned so emphatically, "liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79). Students begin adopting the concept of humanization as conscious beings and prioritize the problems of human beings in their relations to the world through critical consciousness. They begin to perceive their

reality as one they can truly reimagine and transform. Therefore, if the purpose of education is authentic liberation for both students and teachers, to what extent and in what ways are we—educators, scholars, and activists—accomplishing this task? This research study aims to improve the lives of *all* students, and specifically for historically marginalized students, because it pursues liberation on multiple levels. Liberation for teachers to stray away from the traditional model of education that enforces a whitewashed, rote-memorization curriculum to one that uplifts the stories of communities of color. Liberation for educator leaders to implement transformative pedagogy that allows criticality of the impacts and harms of colonization, and in turn, classroom practices that rehumanize students' experiences. And, significantly, liberation for students to explicitly view themselves in content material and in-school as worthy, dignified human beings that are self-empowered.

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**Appendix A**  
**Informed Consent Form**

## **Dominican University of California Consent to be a Research Participant**

I understand that Fatima Hansia is a graduate student in the School of Education at Dominican University of California. She is conducting a research study designed to better understand how teachers at an alternative high school are teaching critical consciousness as a decolonizing practice within the lens of an Ethnic Studies Framework developed by Tolteka R. Cuauhtin. I am being asked to participate in the study because I am a credentialed teacher that teaches the diverse student body population at Milan's School.

### Procedures

If I agree to participate in the study, the following will happen:

1. I will participate in two one-hour interviews, which will include questions about implementation of decolonial pedagogy involving curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities, and rituals. Additionally, the interview will ask questions about practices involving fostering students' critical consciousness and self-empowerment.
2. All names, personal references, and identifying information will be eliminated in the final thesis and no subject will be identified by name, thereby ensuring confidentiality regarding the subject's responses. Interviews will be recorded on the researcher's iphone that is password protected and interview notes will not include any names or identifying information (e.g., specific grade level taught, address, phone number, personal references). One year after the completion of the research all written materials will be destroyed.
3. Milan's School will be furnished with a written summary of the relevant findings and conclusions of the thesis, but the thesis will not include anyone's name or any identifying information. This thesis will not be available for up to six months.

### Risks and/or Discomforts

1. My participation involves no physical risk, but there is the possibility that some psychological discomfort may occur due to the personal nature of the questions in the interviews.
2. I have the right to refuse to answer any question that causes discomfort or seems to be an invasion of privacy. I may stop the interview at any time and I may refuse to participate before or after the study without any adverse effects on my standing at Milan's School.

### Benefits

There will be no direct benefit from participating in this study. The anticipated benefit of this study is a better understanding of how teachers at an alternative high school are teaching critical consciousness as a decolonizing practice within the lens of an Ethnic Studies Framework developed by Tolteka R. Cuauhtin.

### Questions

I have talked to Fatima Hansia about this study and have had my questions answered. If I have further questions about the study, I may call her at [REDACTED] or her research supervisor, Dr. Katie Lewis, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education, [REDACTED].

If I have any questions or comments about participation in this study, I should talk first with the researcher and the research supervisor. If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. I may research the

IRBPHS Office by calling (415) 257-0168 and leaving a voicemail message, by FAX at (415) 458-3755 or by writing to the IRBPHS, Office of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dominican University of California, 50 Acacia Avenue, San Rafael, CA 94901.

Consent

I have been given a copy of this consent form, signed and dated, to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to be in this study or withdraw my participation at any time without fear of adverse consequences.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of the Research Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of the Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

## **Appendix B**

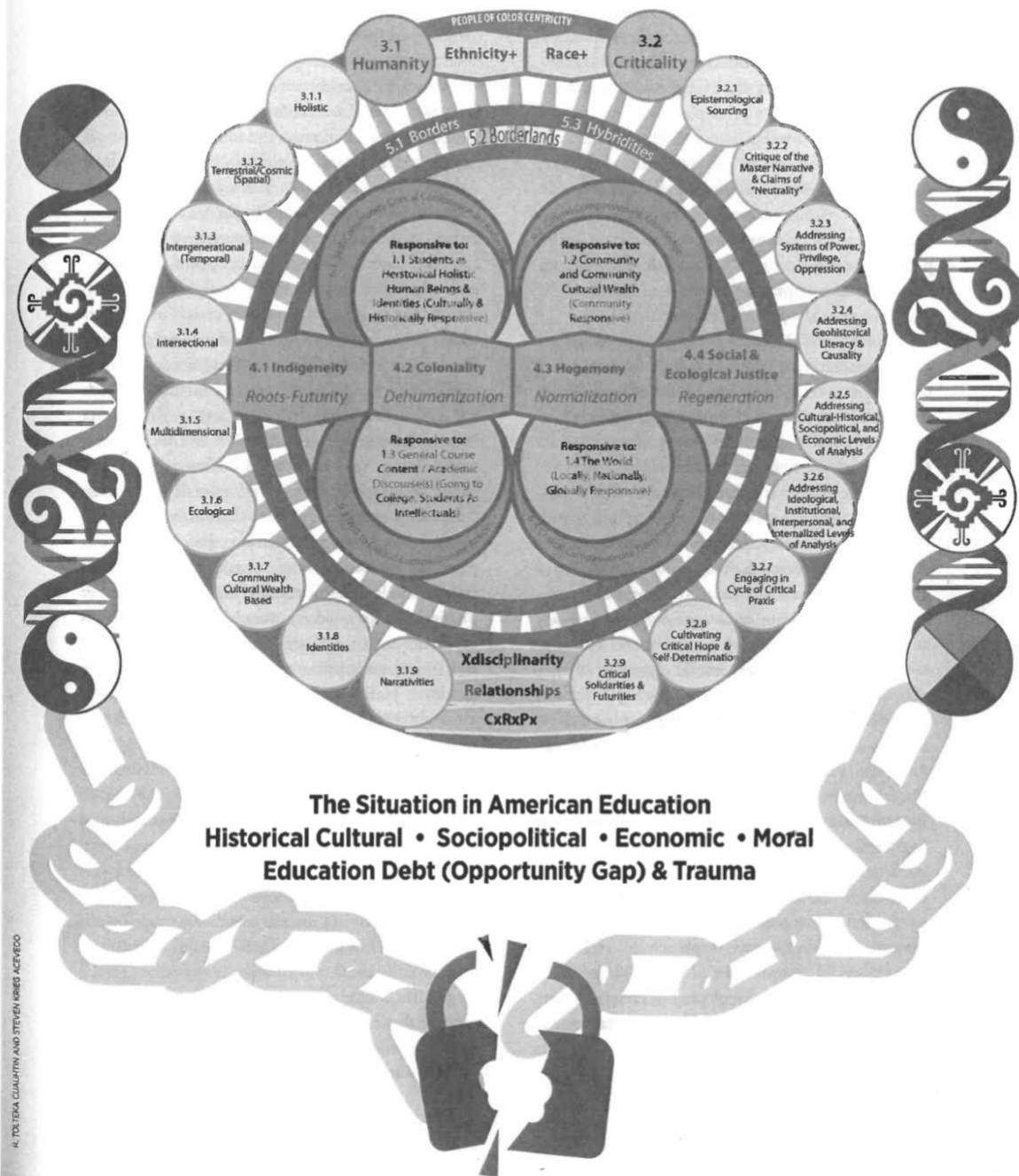
### **Initial Interview Questions for Teachers**

1. How do you envision the purpose of school?
2. How do you define decolonial pedagogy and the purpose of Ethnic Studies?
3. How do you intentionally and purposefully incorporate decolonial pedagogy in your classroom? Curriculum, lesson plans, daily activities, rituals?
4. Would you be able to share a story of a specific time when this occurred successfully in the classroom? And/or a time when you could have improved the situation?
5. On a curriculum level or daily basis, how do you teach students to acknowledge, learn and think critically about social injustices occurring in the world?
6. In what ways do you incorporate Indigenous ways of thinking, knowing and doing in the classroom? If so, to what extent does this foster students' cultural connections to their roots?
7. How are you decolonizing the curriculum to include counter-storytelling and multiple narratives?
8. In what ways are you teaching about patterns of oppression, power and violence in connection to students' diverse identities and realities?
9. In what ways do you deconstruct notions of Whiteness in the classroom and build a sense of self-empowerment among students?

**Appendix C**

**The Ethnic Studies Framework by Tolteka R. Cuauhtin**

# The Ethnic Studies Framework (ES-FW)



**The Situation in American Education**  
**Historical Cultural • Sociopolitical • Economic • Moral**  
**Education Debt (Opportunity Gap) & Trauma**

R. TUDERA, CAULPTIN AND STEVEN NIREB ACEVEDO