CRITICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE THEORY IN ACTION: A PRACTITIONER INQUIRY INTO THE SERVICE-LEARNING CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE

Julie A. Jaynes
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Julie Jaynes

Candidate

Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies

Department

This thesis is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Thesis Committee:

Dr. Yoo Kyung Sung, Chairperson

Dr. Shelley Roberts

Dr. Pisarn Bee Chamcharatsri
CRITICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE THEORY IN ACTION:  
A PRACTITIONER INQUIRY INTO THE  
SERVICE-LEARNING CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE

by

Julie Aloha Jaynes

B.A., English-Philosophy, University of New Mexico, 2012

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
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Dedication

To Dr. Shelley Roberts, who has mentored and supported me unconditionally through my personal and professional journeys as a young teacher. Shelley’s steadfast dedication to educators and schools is truly remarkable, and I can only aspire to follow in her footsteps.
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ABSTRACT

Service-learning pedagogy can be found in K-12 schools and higher education classrooms across the country. Those programs and courses exist on a complex spectrum from charity to social justice; research presented here documents my efforts as a service-learning teacher to better align the program’s senior capstone class to the teachings from critical social justice theory. I used a practitioner inquiry approach to address the problem of an epistemology in the research process that recreated systems of oppression by excluding the knowledge and voices of the minoritized groups who are impacted by the issues being researched. My inquiry centers my students’ experiences while participating in community-based research activities and applying critical literacy skills to both the written word and the worlds around them. To understand their experiences, I collected student work throughout the school year and conducted focus groups. The community-based research methodologies created contact zone experiences, mirrors and windows through which students learn about people different from them and reflect on themselves from new directions. I found that students’ engagement with critical social justice theory...
supports critical literacy skills, enhancing their ability to identify, interrogate, and challenge social constructs, ideologies, underlying assumptions and power structures that perpetuate social inequalities and injustice. Finally, I argue that community-based research approaches create space for high school students to become knowledge-creators, promoting empowerment and self-agency while otherwise disrupting traditional banking approaches to education. I offer recommendations for assignments, curriculum timeline, and the role teachers play while students do community-based research and service-learning projects.

*Keywords:* service-learning, capstone, practitioner inquiry, community-based research, critical literacy, contact zones, social justice, mirrors and windows
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

Since the early nineties, service-learning has become an increasingly accepted pedagogical approach that has declared its place in American educational settings as early as elementary school and extending through higher education (Skinner & Chapman, 1999; Billig, 2000; Zlotkowki, 2002; Spring, Grimm, Dietz Jr., & Corporation for National and Community Service, 2008). Service-learning can be understood as a “teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (Generator School Network, 2013).

There is much research pointing towards the potential benefits of service-learning programs in both K-12 and higher education settings (Duckenfield, 2002; Spring et al., 2008; Zlotkowsk, 2002; Billig, 2011; Connor & Erickson, 2017). Duckenfield (2002) summarizes the benefits of service-learning as “increases in personal and social responsibility, communication abilities, social competence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a sense of treating others with kindness” (p. 45). However, it is also true that programs that are not designed or implemented well, such as failing to strategically incorporate reflection, can be detrimental to student learning by perpetuating stereotypes or deficit models (Connor & Erickson, 2017).

As a teacher and advocate for service-learning, my interest in conducting this study is to further develop my school’s service-learning program, so it better embodies Critical Social Justice Theory (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Having struggled with text-based research for years, I searched for better strategies to develop the critical literacy
skills necessary to critique social conditions applying a social justice analytical framework (Friere, 1970; Wallowitz, 2008). This study represents my learning journey designing and implementing community-based research (CBR) methods to help my students read their own worlds (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the following research inquiry: “What happens when I employ a community-based research framework in the service-learning capstone course that I teach?” I chose to use practitioner inquiry to explore this question because of the iterative nature of the framework allowing room for further questioning and discovery. This study seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations regarding service-learning practices and social justice education. I offer the unique perspective of a highly institutionalized high school service-learning program, in contrast to most service-learning research which takes place in higher education settings.

**Positionality**

I am a fourth-year teacher at a small charter high school in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I coordinate our school’s eleventh grade service-learning program and teach one section of our service-learning Senior Seminar and Senior Action Project class. I did not come into my teaching profession in a traditional manner. As an undergraduate at the University of New Mexico, I had the opportunity to take a capstone course nearly identical to the one that I teach today. My professor taught this course both at UNM and at the high school where I teach today, and she and I grew close throughout the semester class.
After graduating from UNM with my bachelor’s degree, I secured a ten-month paid internship position at a non-profit affordable housing developer through an Americorps program. In this position, I worked alongside other non-profits in Albuquerque that were engaged in both short-term and long-term solutions to homelessness. I stayed with that organization beyond the Americorps internship until my professor from UNM called me one day and invited me to lunch. She was planning her upcoming retirement and wanted to convince me to apply for her job as a service-learning teacher at a small high school.

My experience and network in the nonprofit world has proven invaluable in this position. In addition to my work for a homeless services provider, I had created a strong professional network amongst the other Americorps volunteers in my cohort. As a close-knit cohort, we struggled with difficult questions about service, institutions, and social change. We created a space that allowed for critiquing the nonprofit world that we were learning how to navigate while working passionately within it for a variety of good causes. While my journey to becoming an educator may have been non-traditional, it has given me the diverse, complex, and passion-fueled foundation that is necessary to work as a service-learning teacher.

In the context of my school, I am an “insider-outsider.” I am a young, white, female teacher from an upper middle class family in New England working in a southwest school that is 95% or more Latina/o students. I am not from this community, and enjoy many privileges that my students do not, though I have spent a lot of time in this community and feel confident in my constantly growing understanding. I am interested in better preparing our students for our service-learning program’s capstone
course and, in line with many trends in the greater service-learning educational sphere, incorporating more principles of community-based research into the capstone coursework.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Evolution of Service-Learning

According to a report published by the National Center For Education Statistics, “Incorporating service-learning into K-12 schools is a growing area of interest to educators...with roots stretching back to late-19th- and early 20th-century”(Skinner & Chapman, 1999, p. 2). Perry and Imperial (2001) asserted that “the passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1990 marked the beginning of an expansion of citizen service as a problem-solving instrument in American society”(p. 462). Skinner and Chapman’s (1999) report found that 64% of public schools arranged community service activities or opportunities, and 32% percent of all public schools had integrated service activities into curriculum. A similar report commissioned in 2008 found an increase from 64% in 1999 to 68% of schools reporting their students participating in school-recognized service activities (Spring et al., 2008), demonstrating schools’ commitments to incorporating service within the school setting. However, the 2008 study also revealed a reversal of the growth in service-learning being integrated into curriculum, with a decline from 32 to 24 percent of schools reporting curriculum-based service activities (Spring et al., 2008).

This decline correlates with the fact that institutionalization of service remains rare throughout schools that provide service-learning opportunities, meaning a lack of resources and infrastructure specifically supporting service-learning programming (Spring et al., 2008). Without institutionalization, service-learning programs are unable to achieve the full potential of possible critical learning experiences made available by service opportunities (Furco 2002; Jeandron & Robinson, 2010). The 2008 report also
found that while schools in low-income areas are still less likely than other schools to have service-related activities, the gap has decreased, as schools in low-income areas went from 36 percent to 26 percent less likely to have school-based service-learning activities (Spring et al., 2008). While service-learning maintains its influence on K-12 educational settings and has become more accessible to low-income communities, the service-learning pedagogy still struggles to enjoy the type of institutionalization necessary for students to access its full educational value.

Because of the prevalence of service-learning or service opportunities in K-12 schooling, students are more likely to enter higher education with service experience. Duckenfield (2002) has claimed that the legacy of increased access to K-12 service-learning includes improved reflection skills, leadership and teamwork skills, time-management skills, willingness to help others, and an increased demonstration of academic motivation.

Service-learning in higher education differs from K-12 models, as colleges require students to employ increased independence and responsibility for the design and implementation of their service projects (Furco, 2002). In addition to heightened responsibilities, students are also more likely to engage in applying advanced academic concepts to complex community issues, delving into deeper analytical frameworks, and participating in more advanced discourse when discussing the issues (Furco, 2002). Higher education service-learning models also put greater emphasis on the results or outcomes on service-learning projects, whereas K-12 models tend to emphasize the process and learning experience (Furco, 2002). In the introduction to a monograph focused on first-year college student success, editor Edward Zlotkowski (2002) reflected
on the necessity of first-year support programs to “...abandon the often unexamined assumption that significant academic learning takes place only on campus” (p. xiii) as an outdated framework, putting service-learning in a position to move universities and colleges forward in their pedagogical frameworks. The anthology goes on to describe, defend, and make recommendations for incorporating service-learning into first-year college experiences as a means to better support and motivate freshman.

Both K-12 and higher education service-learning programming have shared struggles that act as barriers to students fully accessing the educational benefits of service-learning experiences. In a three-year study of a capstone course at a university in California, McGill (2012) found the vast majority of stakeholders—alumni, students, faculty, and administrators—agree that service-learning capstones, or project-based senior classes, are valuable and contribute to learning. However, the study also illuminates some of the struggles that students face, including a lack of preparation for the capstone experience and challenges with high levels of independence demonstrated by students’ requests for more specific, targeted due dates for deliverables throughout the semester. Cummings’ (2000) study highlighted other restrictions, such as a 10-week course period, difficulty in sharing responsibilities, funder-based restrictions, and a general tension between democratic empowerment and administrative routines. In another study focused on a service-based capstone course, Cole (2010) found that, based on comments by teachers and administrators, there seemed to be a common appreciation for the program, but what was lacking was a concrete vision for what students would take away from the process.
To summarize, service-learning is a pedagogical approach that has been deemed a useful framework for all levels of learners. However, in K-12 and higher education settings, service-learning implementation continues to be challenged by the difficulties that result from fully institutionalizing service-learning as a framing pedagogy to inform teaching strategies by taking into consideration theories of learning and action, and student backgrounds and equity.

**Service-Learning: Social Justice Pedagogy**

Service-learning programs exist on a spectrum from “charity” models to “social justice” models, where the former focuses on providing service, such as feeding the poor, as opposed to inquiring why the poor have no food and then engaging in employing the answers to develop solutions (Stoecker, 2003). The “charity model” for service learning, which is the most common model being employed in the field of service learning, lacks the critical literacy framework necessary within the social justice model. The charity model tends to individualize social issues rather than reflect on the structural and historically situated root causes of the issue. Charity models can certainly have positive impacts on individuals in need, such as through direct services that address the necessities of daily life, but they lack a theoretical framework that would enable actual transformative change.

The charity model can also be understood as a deficit-based model, “...where students are seen as the ‘haves’ and the recipients as the ‘have nots.’” The focus is on the needs, problems, and deficiencies of individuals and communities” (Hess, 2007, p. 33). This results in students lacking an understanding of the community members as knowledgeable and valuable participants in problem-solving processes. The deficit-
centric charity model perpetuates systemic hierarchies by continuing to silence marginalized or disadvantaged groups of people, because the service-learning approach is not informed by a critical literacy framework.

Other theorists, including myself as a teacher in the field, assert that the social justice model of service-learning differs from charity models by emphasizing research and service that employs institutional and systemic analysis of the issues that communities face (Stoecker, 2003; Marullo, 2000). This model centers social change that alters the very structures in society that perpetuate injustices. Acknowledging that charity models can positively impact communities, we can also understand the social justice model as striking at the roots of problems instead of treating the symptoms. While charity models may seem harmless, they are always at risk of reproducing the structures that produced the conditions for the original injustice (Marullo, 2000; Brown, 2001).

**Service-Learning: Critical Literacy Pedagogy**

Service-learning has the potential to create learning opportunities for students to better understand and analyze the world around them. In order to capture this potential, service-learning pedagogy should design teaching strategies to go beyond passive research collecting information to active research generating information. Such a transition requires using a critical literacy framework (Freire, 1970; Wallowitz, 2008; Matteson and Boyd, 2017), which can be understood as an evolved concept of literacy as it challenges traditional static notions of education and skill acquisition. Matteson and Boyd (2017) describe this evolution:

Evolving from an understanding of reading and writing in the traditional sense to observing, evaluating, and analyzing the way the world operates—including the
ways people engage with society—critical literacies offer students an opportunity to build and hone their analytic lenses in reference to the world around them (p. 30).

Service-learning programs create perfect opportunities for supporting students’ development of critical literacy skills, because critical literacy happens when teachers guide students to critically reflect on their complex identities, the social and political context of their worldviews, and to interrogate and communicate their analysis of the word and the world (Camangian, 2010). With reflection as a widely acknowledged key component of service-learning pedagogy (Billig, 2000), teachers have the opportunity to employ a critical literacy framework by centering reflection around how to “...identify and challenge social constructs, ideologies, underlying assumptions, and the power structures that intentionally and unintentionally perpetuate social inequalities and injustices” (Wallowitz, 2008, p. 2). Critical literacy promotes the disruption of socially constructed concepts like race, class, gender, and sexuality through critical interrogation (Wallowitz, 2008). Camangian (2010) explained: “Sociocritical literacy practices build on cultural knowledge by developing sophisticated literacy capacities and meaning-making processes” (p. 183). Service-learning experiences, coupled with an approach to reflection that centers critical literacy, help students develop the skills to identify, name, and speak back to the issues that they are confronted with during service (Camangian, 2010).

**Service-Learning: A Community-Based Research Pedagogy**

While we know that learning many useful skills and unique information are by-products of participation in service (Deblasis, 2006), educators can use service-learning
programs to further implement pedagogies that promote more egalitarian approaches to knowledge and meaning creation. In order for service-learning programs to secure their identities on the social justice end of the spectrum, these programs should embrace community-based research (CBR) as a methodology that both promotes service activities and redistributes epistemological power. CBR can be defined as “…collaborative, change-oriented research that engages faculty members, students and community members in projects that address a community-identified need” (Strand et al., 2003, p. 5). The methods of CBR, such as field experience, attending community meetings as an observer-participant, and interviewing local stakeholders, push students outside of their comfort zones and promote the development of important professional skills while supporting their development of a more nuanced understanding of identified issues.

The evolution of service-learning towards a social justice model includes rethinking the process through which the service is designed, rationalized, and implemented. CBR theorists even push us as teachers and students to critically consider what constitutes the idea of “community.” For example, CBR theorist Stoecker (2003) defined community, in the context of CBR, as “…the community is the people living with the problem and those organizations that they democratically control” (p. 41). The second piece of this definition problematizes the concept of community, calling into question people's relationships to the institutions that govern or otherwise impact them. While understanding that service experiences provide students with spontaneous and valuable learning experiences, centering CBR promotes an egalitarian analysis of community issues by formalizing community-based knowledge, which problematizes power structures through each step of the process (Stoecker, 2003; Strand et. al, 2003).
Although Hess et al. (2007) claimed that students’ interaction with community as providers of knowledge and information is “not part of the current equation” (p. 33), the evolution in service-learning pedagogy towards CBR can actually be observed through the increasing presence of CBR in colleges across the United States. A Campus Compact report (2003) followed a number of colleges from 2000-2003 and found a 32 percent increase in implementation of CBR (as cited in Deblasis, 2006, p. 37). Higher education settings are adopting CBR, because it pushes students to employ their diverse skill sets in order to problem solve, and also makes them review and assess raw data that stems from the real world. Perhaps most importantly, CBR requires that students then use this data to make and implement solutions to the issues (Deblasis, 2006, p. 39). This moves away from unanalyzed service and towards an education focused on critical thinking and problem-solving within a variety of settings and contexts. Additionally, instead of reserving social justice work for those who choose to work in human services field, CBR explores the intersections of how all different people in their respective fields can contribute to a more just and progressive society (Deblasis, 2006).

Formalizing community knowledge also empowers communities to define their local issues and develop grassroots ideas for solutions. Hess et al. (2007) similarly claimed this new model for service-learning should form “...relationships that are non-hierarchical in nature, collaborative, and empowering to all stakeholders...so that together they can right injustices and correct inequalities” (p. 33). CBR has the potential to combine the traditional academic goals—teaching, research, and service—in a way that could actually achieve fundamental institutional, and even revolutionary, change (Strand et al., 2003, p. 5). To conclude, we can understand CBR as the methodology by which
service-learning pedagogy is shifting away from the charity model in order to move towards a social justice model.
CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Practitioner Research

This study seeks to contribute to the conversation regarding service-learning’s evolution towards social justice through the implementation of CBR as the centered methodology. I decided to employ practitioner inquiry to best demonstrate me and my students’ experiences as I attempt to move our school’s service-learning capstone course toward truly centering CBR.

Practitioner inquiry is a systematic examination and analysis of student learning that incorporates practitioner intentions and interpretations (Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Friedman, & Pine, 2009). This inquiry also publicizes my work as a public school teacher, opening the curriculum and practice for critique, but also for others to modify for their own use. Additionally, framing practitioner research within larger conceptual realms produces more complex analyses of students’ experiences, especially those that provide deeper analysis of tensions within learning experiences (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 22).

My personal theoretical framework has been an evolving critical social justice lens that started with an introduction to feminism in high school. My professional background consists of nonprofit work, a bachelor’s degree in English-Philosophy, a passion for women’s studies, and extensive experience with both college campus activism and grassroots community organizing. Because of this personal background and framework, I constantly and critically analyze my curriculum design and implementation, classroom assignments, facilitation of relationships with community partners, and...
interpersonal interactions with my students. It was from these daily “wonderings” that a researchable burning question finally began to formulate (Dana, 2013).

A problem that arose during my first year teaching this class was the contradiction between the critical social justice framework and the process for researching social issues. While the class was already using the critical social justice framework for issue analysis, the research process was dominated by internet searches, inaccessible scholarly articles, and static quotes and data from nonprofit organization websites. The goal was a critical social justice framework, but the research process reinforced traditional oppressive rules for knowledge-creation and epistemological hegemony.

This problem became an inquiry into best practices for implementing social justice models of service-learning, which led me to the existing research on CBR as a methodology that aligns with the tenets of critical social justice. I chose to frame my practitioner inquiry also through metaphors that are useful to other educators—windows and mirrors—in the context of critical literacy development. Inquiring about students’ experience with the service-learning capstone course through the lens of critical literacy will help to produce more useful and transferable implications for other educators.

**Contact Zones**

A part of the framework of this study is the concept of the contact zone, which can be understood as “...social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt, 1991, p. 34). This framework supports an analysis of these data that contributes to considering how educators can support students of color, especially immigrant students,
to maintain their sense of self and confidence, especially in contact zones. Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) frames the concept as a necessity to, before separating from one’s own culture, “…feel competent enough on the outside and secure enough inside to live life on my own” (p. 21). Her ability to truly embody and instill her cultural identity, or lo mexicano, allowed her to successfully move outside of her world and also reflect on and critique her own.

My contact zone framework also incorporates the foundational ideas of the “Students’ Multiple Worlds” concept, in which promotes the understanding that students’ ability to cross boundaries, such as between peers, family, and school settings, is a critical skills in a world where boundaries can cause or prevent success or survival (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998). By facilitating meaningful reflection and debrief opportunities in the safe space of our classroom, students can get some release from the stress of paradigm shifts, and the learning experiences of the contact zone can evolve from painful or awkward encounters to positive and enlightening traumas (Myers, 2016.) The contact zone framework for this study centers my students’ experiences navigating boundaries within and outside of their cultural community, understanding that these experiences can promote growth and resilience.

**Mirrors, Windows, and Critical Literacy**

Educators can create ways for students to look through windows at the realities of others and mirrors through which students can see their own lives reflected back to them (Sims Bishop, 1990; Style, 1996). Both outward and inward reflection are essential for students as they navigate the various personal and public worlds that they must exist in. In my classroom and research, I hope to create circumstances in which students use
critical literacy to observe the world through experience “windows” that allow them to learn about and experience new situations and contexts. Often these “windows” manifest as contact zones in which students are exposed to different communities that challenge them to understand the world differently. In contrast, “mirrors” are opportunities for students to learn about themselves and their respective communities. Lastly, I push students to analyze the “mirrors” and “windows” that they encounter through a critical literacy lens, interrogating the experiences with these “windows” and “mirrors” to expose the power structures, values, institutions, and ideologies present in their depictions (Wallowitz, 2008).
CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH CONTEXT

Research Setting

This study is set at a small public charter high school in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The school, which I will call Social Justice Academy for the purpose of this study, sits in the heart of the South Valley, a timeless agricultural community whose roots permeate into the aquifer of the Rio Grande Valley and where irrigation rights date back to some of the first settlers on this land. The South Valley is also home to many newcomers from south of the border; immigrants to this land find solace in a linguistic, cultural, and even geographic landscape that mirrors their own. The South Valley, with its combination of old and new mestizo traditions, seems to render the southern border of the United States an irrelevant attempt to sever ancient ties. This is a unique community, where 80 percent of individuals identify as Hispanic and more than half specifically as Mexican. These numbers stand in obvious contrast to the greater Albuquerque community, where 47 percent of residents identify as Hispanic and about 25 percent as Mexican.

Our school community, set within this broader more complex setting, is unique. Roughly 95 percent of our 550 middle and high school students identify as Hispanic, and all students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Roughly 80% of our students are English Language Learners, with Spanish as their primary language. The school embraces a full inclusion model, where learners of all levels participate in general education classes and access curriculum from developmental to honors levels. The school, founded in 1999, has seen significant growth, beginning first as a high school and more recently adding the
middle school as the community responded positively, as demonstrated by the consistently long waiting list.

Participants

Sample

The data collected for this study focused on a class of twenty-two seniors in my Senior Seminar and Senior Action Project class. The participants were former students who are now alumni of the high school. 100% of the participants identify as Hispanic or Latino and mirror the school demographic where 100% of the school population qualifies for free lunch because of socioeconomic status.

Recruitment

To recruit students to participate in my research, a colleague came to my class after students had completed their Senior Action Projects and presented their final exhibitions. She described the research, data collection, and publication process to my class in my absence; students were asked for permission to allow me to analyze their assignments and assessments generated during the past school year as well as to participate in focus groups during the summer following their graduation. She distributed and collected consent letters in order to minimize any coercive relationship between myself as the teacher-researcher and my students, the participants. Students were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any time and that participating in the study would in no way affect their affiliation with or reputation at the school. Final course grades would be turned in before commencement of the research project.

Two students of the class of twenty-four declined to participate. Seven total students participated in the focus group sessions. When looking for answers to my
research subquestions, I reviewed all students’ assignments (see Table 2). Some
participants’ stories and reflections are highlighted in this thesis to better illuminate my
research findings. Table 1 describes the type of topics these students researched and the
project actions they developed and implemented.

Table 1

*Highlighted Participants and Their Research Topics and Project Actions.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Project Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>Immigration and families</td>
<td>Advocacy: Organized a march and rally after the presidential election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariana</td>
<td>Prejudice against immigrants</td>
<td>Created a professional documentary featuring immigrants and their stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Youth homelessness</td>
<td>Participated in a youth organizing group through a youth shelter; created a professional documentary about youth homelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yolanda</td>
<td>Criminalization on women experiencing addiction</td>
<td>Presented to young people about mental health; learned and presented about Indigenous frameworks for healing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Immigration and access to resources</td>
<td>Co-created a website to compile local resources for immigrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andres</td>
<td>Food deserts and access to healthy food</td>
<td>Organized a healthy eating presentations for youth; solicited donations of healthy snacks for school event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>Food deserts and access to healthy food</td>
<td>Organized a healthy eating presentations for youth; solicited donations of healthy snacks for school event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrique</td>
<td>Children’s literacy skills</td>
<td>Created bookshelves for barbershops in the community surrounding the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayline</td>
<td>Eating disorders</td>
<td>Presented to several classes about eating disorders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>Street racing</td>
<td>Planned a car show at the school; co-planned a day at the drag strip specifically for teenagers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maura</td>
<td>Mental Health Education</td>
<td>Received training on mental health education; presented to students about mental health and mental illness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Service-Learning Program Overview**

Since its founding charter, service-learning has been a cornerstone of the school’s curriculum framework. The program has experienced its own evolution from a community volunteer program into a differentiated service-learning model designed to build youth leadership capacity. The school charter explains that the primary purpose of this component is “to not only experience the adult responsibilities and organization of a job, but also gain a deeper understanding of social issues impacting the community” (SJA Charter, 2009, p 40). As a cornerstone of the school’s curricular framework and with the necessary resources for successful implementation, the service-learning program enjoys a level of institutionalization that is lacking in many K-12 service-based programs (Spring et al., 2008). Participation in the program is required at each grade level, and each service-learning teacher coordinates one grade level plus a Senior Capstone.

*Figure 1. Service-Learning Program Overview. Each grade level has an inquiry focus connection to the different service type.*
Our service-learning program is structured as follows: ninth graders volunteer in elementary school classrooms, tenth graders are placed by the service-learning teacher at a local nonprofit, and eleventh graders may identify any business or organization with which to complete an internship focused on career exploration (Figure 1). Each year, students assume increased levels of responsibility for determining their placements. This is best demonstrated by the drastic change in eleventh grade, where students are tasked with identifying and securing their own sites. Students in grades nine through eleven attend service learning for three hours each week on Thursday afternoons, and the school provides bus transportation to their sites. However, students’ families are responsible for arranging transportation from the site at the end of the day. Overall, each year, students in grades nine through eleven complete around ninety hours of service through their placements.

Service-learning teachers see their respective grade level students once per week for an hour class period. This means in addition to coordinating placements for close to ninety students, which includes maintaining relationships with community partners and placement organizations, each service-learning teacher designs and facilitates activities that promote meaningful reflection, communication skills, and professionalism. The curriculum for this class time is scaffolded so grades nine through eleven learn new skills appropriate for the goals of the respective grade level with an overall goal of improving the students’ experiences while at their service-learning sites. Each grade level also incorporates a different type of inquiry focus connected to the type of service they are engaged in; service-learning teachers design inquiry projects to supplement students’ service. This often happens in collaboration with other content area teachers, which
further institutionalizes the program and improves students’ perception of service-learning as an important component of their high school education.

The Senior-Year Capstone: Senior Seminar and Senior Action Project

*Figure 2. Senior Capstone Year Overview. Fall semester focuses on exploring social justice using community-based research; Spring semester focuses on community action projects.*

In their senior year, students take the capstone Service-Learning course, and passing this capstone is a graduation requirement (Figure 2). In the fall, students are enrolled in Senior Seminar; our class syllabus explains that the objective of the first quarter of the class is “to understand the historical and sociological themes of Social Justice through readings, class discussion and activities, and written assignments. This class will explore social justice concepts including socialization, social identity, prejudice and discrimination, oppression and power, and privilege.”

These concepts are the foundational ideas of critical social justice theory as developed in our guiding text, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key*
Concepts in Social Justice Education, by authors Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo (2012). The authors distinguish critical social justice from mainstream social justice by its recognition that society is stratified along social group lines including race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Further, critical social justice acknowledges the deep roots of inequality, calls for critical thinking in regards to knowledge, and claims that those engaged in critical social justice must act on their understandings to create a more just society. The book was written specifically to help its readers understand critical social justice and inspire them to critical social justice practice, the combination of which they refer to as critical social justice literacy (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Critical social justice can be considered the theoretical framework for the full year of senior capstone coursework. Senior Seminar may be most accurately categorized as an ethnic studies class. Ethnic studies is typically defined as coursework rooted in “the knowledge and perspectives of an ethnic or racial group, reflecting narratives and points of view rooted in that group’s lived experiences and intellectual scholarship” (Sleeter, 2011, vii). With a similar intention, the curriculum for Senior Seminar is designed around the themes of social justice presented in the aforementioned guiding text, which explores the relationships between society’s dominant and minoritized groups. While the class does center one minoritized ethnicity like in most ethnic studies coursework, it instead focuses on teaching critical social justice. Of course, in order to teach this theory, students consider examples of various ethnic or racial groups to explore more specific

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1 “Dominant groups: The group at the top of the social hierarchy. In any relationship between groups that define each other (men/women, able-bodied/person with disability), the dominant group is valued more highly” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 184).
concepts within the theory. Our school intentionally offers a class of this nature, knowing that bridging students ethnic, cultural, and academic identities can improve academic outcomes through improved engagement in the classroom (Phelan, 1998; Ramirez, 2016; Sleeter, 2011). Students complete readings, written assignments, and group work to demonstrate their understanding of the themes of social justice and ability to apply them as a lens for analysis. This work is graded based on a “critical reading skill” rubric developed to measure students’ ability to synthesize and analyze through (see Appendix A). Over time, this rubric has evolved in include their ability to interpret and analyze experiences from their own life and worlds, removing the focus from written texts.

Following the first quarter’s focus on developing the critical social justice theory framework, students are tasked with identifying and researching a community issue. In the research process, students are required to incorporate interviews with various stakeholders, to attend community meetings or events that pertain to their research, to arrange opportunities to do service with a relevant organization, and otherwise to find opportunities to interact with their research topic in the community. The research process attempts to center local knowledge and CBR, culminating in the final Research Paper (see Appendix B) requiring summary of analysis of the issue their research focuses on, their positionality in relation to the research, and potential solutions to the issue.

As previously discussed, the curriculum and syllabus that had been developed over the years did not center CBR, but the centering of CBR has been the main impact of my inquiry into better aligning the implementation of the curriculum with the critical social justice theory it seeks to teach. This inquiry has illuminated my attempt to shift the research process from an acquiescence to hegemonic epistemologies to a model that
embraces and uplifts all community members, including students, as knowledge-creators. My inquiry is also impacted by my wonderings about my own positionality in this classroom and delivering this curriculum. I stand in the front of the classroom with much privilege and power, a representation of the existing privileges of whiteness and middle-classness. This is another tension driving this larger inquiry about fully employing critical social justice theory as a curricular and methodological framework.

In the spring semester, Senior Seminar evolves into the Senior Action Project class, in which students are required to implement a project that they develop in order to address the issue explored in their research the prior semester. In January, students turn the “potential solutions” section of their Research Paper into a Finalized Project Plan that outlines project goals, a timeline of tasks to be completed, and a rationale for the project plan. Class time during the spring semester consists of independent work time, workshops to teach basic organizing skills, and roundtable discussions to dig deeper into issue analysis. Walking into that classroom space might feel more like a college setting, where students are digging into highly individualized project or otherwise attempting to find common ground and develop project components as small teams.
CHAPTER 5. METHODOLOGY

Research Question and Subquestions

The goal of practitioner inquiry is to improve one’s teaching, not prove something (Dana, 2013). I chose action research as my approach to exploring the process and impact of implementing community-based research as a new strategy for developing the critical literacy skills necessary for embedding Critical Social Justice theory into the Senior Action Project. By changing the content, process, and product of the research assignment, I hoped to see my students effectively applying critical social justice theory to design their community action projects.

The central research question was: What happens when I employ a community-based research framework in the service-learning capstone course that I teach? The following subquestions were developed to address the main research inquiry question:

1. What “mirrors” could I create using community-based research for my students to see themselves? (Categorized as “mirrors”)

2. What “windows” could I create using community-based research for my student to understand and advocate for the needs of their community? (Categorized as “windows”)

3. What is the personal relationship between the students and the social issue that they choose for their action project? Does it change during the project? (Categorized as “Personal”)

4. What “boundaries” do my students need to cross in order to implement their action projects? How do they approach crossing these boundaries? What happens
when they cross these boundaries? What did they learn about themselves from facing these boundaries? (Categorized as “Boundaries”)

5. How does CBR and the SAP impact my students’ ability to apply critical social justice theory to issues that affect them and their communities? (Categorized as “CSJT in Action”)

These subquestions later became the categories by which I sorted data in order to identify themes.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

**Student Work**

Student work for all 22 participants was collected as data, including classroom assignments, assessments, and Senior Action Project portfolio contents. Most of the student work I collected for analysis was from the spring semester during the Senior Action Project process, with the exception of the research paper, which acts as the summative assessment for the fall semester. Although the focus on research begins in the fall semester with the assigning of the research paper and the CBR requirements, students mostly completed CBR activities in the spring semester parallel to designing and implementing their projects. The following table describes the major assignments, in chronological order as they appear throughout the year, that I reviewed and the subquestions that the data helped to address (Table 2).
Table 2

*Student Work and Data Analysis Focus*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>SubQ Connection</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Paper</td>
<td>Students are required to use data from interviews as cited evidence in their research papers.</td>
<td>Windows</td>
<td>Enrique: “Boys aren't raised the same as girls are. They are not introduced to books at a young age...Studies show that boys are their study habits aren't as high as girls are.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CSJT in Action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finalized Project Plan</td>
<td>Students describe their project design, rationale, and step by step plan for action to address their research topic.</td>
<td>CSJT In Action</td>
<td>Yolanda: “Instead they should support the programs that are used to fight the heart of the problem to cut that cycle out. Prisons should incorporate more harm reduction program in themselves to help stop women from continuing in the incarceration and addiction cycle.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Connections</td>
<td>Students are required to complete additional research throughout the Spring Semester and write a one page reflection. This can include CBR.</td>
<td>Mirrors/Windows</td>
<td>Jayline: “It felt good to talk to people about their disorders and have them know that there are people who understand what they go through on a daily basis. I noticed it was good for them to talk about their disorders to someone, and it made me feel good.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflections may reveal boundaries that students encounter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students are required to complete a minimum of 30 hours towards their project in the spring semester. Work logs document hours, including time spent and activity descriptions.

The final exhibition is the student’s opportunities to share all that they have done and all that they have learned about their community and themselves (see Appendix C for requirements).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work Logs</th>
<th>Final Exhibition</th>
<th>Mirrors/Windows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students are required to complete a minimum of 30 hours towards their project in the spring semester. Work logs document hours, including time spent and activity descriptions.</td>
<td>The final exhibition is the student’s opportunities to share all that they have done and all that they have learned about their community and themselves (see Appendix C for requirements)</td>
<td>Project tasks, and how students represent them, can help reveal the variety of project experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mirrors/Windows</th>
<th>Boundaries</th>
<th>CSJT In Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students share about their experience with their Community Partner, CBR activities, and project tasks</td>
<td>Students share with the audience the struggles that they encountered during the project process</td>
<td>Students explain explicitly the connection between their research topic and social justice themes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Karen “pude ver como todas las personas son diferentes pero an pasado por cosas iguales o similares al intentar formar parte de la cultura americana (I could see how all the people are different but have gone through the same or similar things when trying to be part of American culture)”

**Focus Groups**

Focus group sessions were conducted in order to discover preliminary answers to the research subquestions. Two focus group sessions were held at the high school at the
end of the school year and lasted around 20 minutes. The composition of the first focus group consisted of three students—Juan, Karen, and Ariana—who had all focused on immigration for their research and projects. I chose those students because of the connection between their topics and because two of them had participated in an ethnic studies organizing group, and I was curious to see how that impacted their experience with research and action. The second focus group consisted of four students—Maura, Andrea, Andres, and Ruby—who focused on a range of research topics, such as youth homeless, food deserts in Albuquerque, and mental health education. I chose the participants in this group, because I wanted to have a focus group that was different than the first with students who had focused on a variety of topics. Focus group participants became a sample group within my larger group of participants, with my data analysis honing in on their work and experiences. However, analysis of other students’ work was also included in this thesis because of its contribution to my learning. Each session was audio-recorded and transcribed.

These sessions focused on questions related to the theory of the “contact zones”: exploring how intersectionality impacted the seniors’ ethnic identity, community identity, action project, coping strategies and self-knowledge.

a. How do you describe your cultural/ethnic identity?

b. Has your view of your identity changed in the past year? If so, how?

c. How does being from the South Valley affect you? Does it affect how other people talk to you or treat you?

d. How has your cultural identity affected your experience doing your Senior Action Project?
e. Has your Senior Action Project put you in any situations where you felt like an outsider, like you didn’t belong or didn’t know what you should do? If so, how did you deal with this situation?

f. What have you learned about yourself while researching your issue or while doing your project?

Focus group sessions were rich in content, and the lively discussion likely resulted from the students’ high level of comfortability with both myself and each other. This setting allowed students to build off of one another’s ideas and opinions, and avoided the sometimes stifling dynamics of an individual interview.

I reviewed these data in order to find answers to my research subquestions. To do this, I reviewed students’ assignments (see Table 2) as well as the transcripts from the focus groups, for evidence of students experiencing mirrors, windows, boundaries, contact zones; for their ability to apply critical social justice theory to their experiences or research; and for their personal growth. I compiled these pieces of evidence into a research notebook organized by subquestions, placing each piece in the section the students’ response, reflection, writing, or commentary best illuminated. After compiling student work and pieces of the transcribed focus groups, I reviewed the data and took note of common themes that arose. This process revealed the emergent sub-themes (Table 3), such as students’ moments of empowerment, motivation grounded in ethnic studies, and data collection processes as driving students’ sense of agency. These sub-themes are discussed as sub-sections within the greater themes of windows, mirrors, contact zones, critical literacy, and critical social justice.
Table 3

*Coding Categories and Emergent Sub-themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Categories</th>
<th>Emergent Sub-themes</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mirrors</td>
<td>Ethnic Identity and History</td>
<td>Enrique: “Throughout this long process of my project, I learned that even though my community is not ranked as a good and or safe community, I learned that not all the people here are bad.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How CBR methodologies create mirrors</td>
<td>Debunks Negative Stereotypes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mirror Gaps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windows</td>
<td>Challenges to Opening Windows</td>
<td>Juan: “When I went to talk to legislators I told my story about it (immigration). They would tell me that they feel bad for me and all that, that they would try their best to help the immigrant community but I don’t know what they’ve done since.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How CBR methodologies create windows</td>
<td>Windows offer intersectionality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews widen windows</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Window gaps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact zones</td>
<td>Connect</td>
<td>Ariana: “When I went with Ms. R to the meetings, it was me and Laura, and it was like white people, and we had to get up and share our stories. We’re the only ones here who are like Mexican.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How students navigate cultural boundaries</td>
<td>Disconnect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling safe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reducing risk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Navigating Privilege</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Literacy</td>
<td>Issue and Action Analysis</td>
<td>Ariana: “Undocumented individuals have limited opportunities and resources, compared to U.S. citizens.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How students read the world</td>
<td>Understanding Social identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shapes evidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacy Gaps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Social Justice</td>
<td>Self-Agency</td>
<td>Maura: “By presenting a specific video called <em>Like any other Kid</em> in all of my presentations, I was able to stop any prejudgment the students may have had about people living with a mental illness.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How students discover their power</td>
<td>Students as Creators of Knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Limitations of the Study

As mentioned before, our service-learning program enjoys a level of institutionalization that most programs do not. This may make transferability of curriculum and assignments difficult for others working in the field. However, I attempted to draw more generalizable recommendations that can be applied across a variety of service-learning settings.

Best practices for practitioner research include analyzing each data set (student work, assessments) to look for lessons learned that can be applied to how to design the next step of a new methodology. However, due to complications with approval processes, the research process was delayed until the end of the research process. Instead of making immediate adjustments, I am able to use the results to inform the design and implementation of this year's CBR curriculum. Best practices for practitioner research also include involving students in the analysis of appropriate data and member checking the findings. Because of the timeline, I was unable to include these steps. However, I plan to share the thesis with alumni, current students, Service-Learning colleagues, and school staff.
CHAPTER 6. FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mirrors

One of the cornerstones of our service-learning program is giving students the opportunity to learn about themselves, their families, and their community outside of school and home. Throughout the four years in the program, students have multiple opportunities to develop relationships with individuals whom they may not otherwise encounter. In their senior year, at the beginning steps of the research process, I strongly encourage my students to identify a research topic, a community issue that affects them personally. I explain to them that the students that complete the most meaningful and impactful projects are students whose research and action are focused on issues that they have encountered in their own lives. The reason that these projects are more meaningful is because of the power in the type of reflection that is only possible when one is exposed to mirrors that allow them to see themselves, their families, and their communities from different perspectives. I have used many different approaches to facilitate this pre-writing brainstorm process, but the most useful so far has been a graphic organizer, such as the one depicted in Figure 3, which helps students reflect on root causes of issues that have been present in their lives. I also had students use a slightly modified version of this graphic organizer to analyze the significance of the positive moments in their family’s lives (Figure 4). This is a new approach that has resulted from constantly trying to move away from a deficit-based model of injustice issue analysis.
This exercise is an introduction to the type of root causes analysis that they eventually apply to their research focus once they have done some preliminary research. One beneficial aspect of using these visuals is that you can continue to dig deeper and deeper. For example, if we look at Figure 3, we can then ask: “What are the root causes to some people not having legal immigration status?” These deeper questions help students identify the structural and institutional roots at that lie at the bottom of many of the everyday issues that they identify.

![Figures 3 and 4. Graphic Organizers: Root Causes and Positive Moments. Students identify root causes of problems and outcomes of positive moments.](image)

Incorporating CBR methodologies throughout the research process has contributed to an increased number of opportunities for students to learn directly from themselves, their families, and their community. Many of the “mirrors” are created through the interactions that students have while engaging family, friends, and neighbors in discussions about community issues. For example, the first research assignment that students were given at the beginning of the research process was to interview two individuals regarding the community issues that they believe are important. Students are already somewhat familiar with interviewing adults, because interviewing service-
learning site supervisors happens throughout the ninth through eleventh grade experiences.

This assignment is not always the most effective, as oftentimes some students dismiss it as unimportant; however, an equal number of students engage in discussions with their neighbors or families regarding concerns about the community. In order to ensure all students have a positive experience with this assignment, my goal for modifying this assignment in the future will be to get greater student buy-in for the assignment by having them develop the interview questions instead of assigning them.

**CBR Methodologies Create Mirrors**

One way that I am able to create mirrors for my students is through encouraging them to interact with their community in meaningful ways that promote deeper relationships through shared understanding of struggle. Although we may interact with our neighbors and community members on a daily basis, soliciting knowledge from them creates opportunity for the discovery of common ground.

Karen, who was researching local resources available to immigrants, interviewed many different stakeholders involved in providing support for the immigrant community. Karen reflected during the focus group: “I talked with a lot of immigrant people that live around here, and most of them passed through the same stuff that I did, so I was like them. It’s not only me; a lot (of) people struggle with the same thing.” Although Karen likely suspected that others in the tight-knit and quite homogeneous immigrant community had shared similar life experiences, explicitly creating space to discuss those shared experiences impacted her perception of the scope of the struggles faced by the immigrant community. Karen went on discuss what it is like to struggle with learning
English as a second language, and having the courage to use that second language publicly. For her, knowing that so many people struggle with that fear helped her to overcome it, she explains “...because it teaches you to not be afraid to speak in English like I was.”

Students also find motivation while learning from their community about the issues that affect them personally. I often have students respond to short, simple reflection questions that help them consider their experience from different perspectives. For example, in a quick half-sheet “Do-Now” near the end of the semester, I asked students to respond to the question: “What has been especially satisfying to you about something that you have accomplished while working on this project? This could be an interaction with someone, feedback from a participant/teacher/community partner, etc.” One student responded, “Something satisfying that I have done is that I am working on a topic that doesn’t only affect me on a big way but also others.” In addition to an enhanced understanding of the research topic, both of these students had an opportunity to affirm that they were far from the only ones affected by their research topics, which can be an incredible moment of empowerment.

**Culturally Relevant History and Ethnic Studies Focuses the Mirrors**

A friend of mine had approached me with interest in supporting students at the school who were interested in doing community organizing from a Chicano studies perspective. He is a long-time community organizer who is passionate about working with young people and sharing knowledge about Chicano/Latino/Mexicano culture. I was happy to develop this collaboration. The group would meet during the regularly scheduled Service Learning time, and he would see the students weekly. Students who
were focused on issues that specifically affect the Latino community were invited to join the group, but beyond that, I helped him to identify students who had often struggled to find voice and leadership. Students’ attendance to these group meetings also fulfilled their “Community-Based Research Requirement” (see Appendix D), a requirement that pushed students to attend community meetings and interview community members, enhancing their research through incorporating CBR methodologies.

What happened aligned with the many studies about the positive influence of ethnic studies on students. In this case, students found a new sort of motivation by learning about their history, ancestors, and culture. Students were motivated by the idea of their Senior Action Project being situated in the context of a historical struggle. In a focus group session, Juan reflected on the group and facilitator:

He always tells us about our people and our culture, and like back in the day even with the Aztecs, how they organized a fight against the Spanish, when they came and invaded and took over their land. The way they fought back by organizing, and that’s what we’re trying to do, like organizing which can help.

This type of mirror was empowering as it enabled the students that were involved to see themselves from a new perspective, revealing a more accurate representation of their own historical context that stand in contrast to the narratives of history in the American education system that mainly represents dominant cultures. This approach allowed students to identify new sources of motivation rooted in their culture and heritage.

Later in that focus group session, two students who were participants in the group discussed what students need to know in order to develop good projects:
Juan: … Students need to know their backgrounds, a student trying to focus on immigration like me, they don’t know where they came from, their culture, and they don’t know where their parents came from, yeah they’re from Mexico but…

Karen: They don’t know the past.

Juan: Like their ancestors, what did they do? Once they have that knowledge of what their ancestors did, they probably could get an idea of what they could do. Doesn’t matter if you’re hispanic or Mexican or from wherever.

Both of these students were focusing on immigrant rights as their research topics, a topic that directly impacted them and their families. This group created a space where these two students, who often seemed hopeless, were able to process the complex and painful issues that surface when researching and advocating for immigrants’ rights. My role as the facilitator of this research class was to help students access opportunities that allow them to critically reflect on themselves and their research topics, and this group became exactly that space.

**Debunking Negative Stereotypes Changes Mirrors**

Growing up in a neighborhood that is highlighted in the news for being “dangerous” and “crime-ridden,” it is difficult for our students to embrace their pride for their neighborhoods and community (Delpit, 2012). The stereotypes that plague our school’s community are typical stereotypes pinned to communities of color living in poverty. Of course this community struggles with all of the issues associated with poverty—property crime, substance abuse, street violence, and more. And similar to other minoritized communities of color, this community can be characterized by its stories of
struggle and resilience, deeply rooted sense of pride, and a distinct sense of innovation and work ethic.

My students’ research and project journeys often led them to opportunities to challenge the negative stereotypes that they so regularly encounter. Enrique, a student who was often troubled by what the future might bring him and was prone to a deficit-based mindset, reflected during his Final Exhibition:

Throughout this long process of my project, I learned that even though my community is not ranked as a good and or safe community, I learned that not all the people here are bad. It is just that for one person’s actions all of the other people are thought of as bad people as well.

Enrique experienced many small moments of success, such as receiving donated materials for the bookshelves that he installed in two local barbershops, and those experiences had a very tangible effect on how he perceived his own community. Enrique explained how he felt really proud when he called a local book store to ask for donation. He recalled, “I gave the lady an elevator speech, and she immediately said she was willing to donate books for me. The next day I went to her store and picked up the books.” An elevator speech is a 30 to 60-second speech that students practice in order to introduce their research focus and project goals, and this consistently proves to be a helpful exercise. The action that he took, and the result of his interaction, created a mirror that offered a chance to see a side of his community that is so infrequently represented in the media and may be hard to experience otherwise. Not only did he bear witness to the goodness of others, but he acted as the facilitator in the matter, creating an opportunity to for him to feel pride in himself and his community simultaneously.
My students were also able to meet others who share their concern for the research that they were doing. Ruby, whose research focused on food justice and access to healthy, affordable food, remarked: “The most satisfying part is knowing that my issue is supported by those who I encounter even if sometimes it feels it is not important. Knowing that my topic is important to others in my community is a great feeling.” There is often a wide gap between school and community, and to have community members reinforce a student’s academic endeavors validates their sense of identity as both community members and students. Similarly, Karen’s project focused on informing the immigrant community about resources available to them, and in the process, she realized that she “…didn’t know that there was so much help for immigrants.” These opportunities to interact positively in their own neighborhoods help students combat the adverse effects of negative stereotypes.

While students’ projects focus on improving their community, they tend to also benefit from the discovery of resources and organizations. The connections that Andrea developed made her feel like she has access to the support that she needs because of the relationship with her partnering organization and the group that she began organizing with. Andrea reflected, “The only thing that has changed is like… knowing that there is a community that I can count on. And they have been giving me job opportunities, too, over the summer and stuff. So I feel confident knowing that I can, I guess, use my skills to work.”

As a senior in high school, there is much anxiety associated with the pressure of deciding on next steps after graduation. In a community that struggles with unemployment and the issues associated with economic disadvantage, our students are
rightfully nervous about what the future has in store for them. However, through this project, students like Andrea experienced an improved sense of confidence knowing that there are good people and organizations available to offer their support.

**Recommendations for Creating More Mirrors**

Helping students access opportunities to learn about others’ lived experiences that align with their own is to provide them a chance to explore firsthand the concept of social group membership. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) explain that one of the primary barriers to developing critical social justice literacy is understanding your relationship as an individual to the social groups to which you belong. CBR provides opportunities for students to identify the types of patterns that emerge amongst members of social groups, themselves included. These opportunities illuminate social group patterns that are “long-standing, measurable, and well documented” regardless of the common Western perception “that social group memberships such as race, class, and gender do not and should not matter, and thus must be minimized” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 25). CBR can be used to formalize community knowledge about shared experiences, giving students the chance to analyze their context in the world while using methodologies that challenge the hierarchy of epistemology and give insight into community knowledge.

Service-learning educators should create and formalize CBR methodology requirements that put students in these circumstances.

An ethnic studies and community organizing collaboration created mirrors for my students to consider themselves, the world, and their research topics from a different and underrepresented perspective. In a research review published by the National Education Association, Christine Sleeter summarizes the finding of several studies focused on the
impact of ethnic studies coursework on students of color. Overall, Sleeter (2011) found that ethnic studies classes help to improve students’ abilities in thinking and problem-solving as they became generally more intellectually engaged. These classes reflected students’ lives and realities, and also provide tools for students to become active participants in their communities and lives. The classes create a bridge between students’ academic and ethnic identities by creating mirrors that are often absent from educational settings for women and men of color (Style, 1996). The findings from these various studies align with my students’ experiences participating in the class, which were developed to support them with their research and projects. Ethnic studies creates quite explicit mirrors through which students can better understand themselves and their social and political contexts, an analysis which supports empowerment and agency.

The idea of creating space for ethnic studies within the research process is also supported by proponents of the concept of Students’ Multiple Worlds. This framework acknowledges that young people consistently negotiate between various settings including their families, different peer groups, classrooms, and schools (Phelan et al., 1991, p. 1). Based on findings from a 2-year longitudinal study, Phelan et al. (1991) asserted that “...in our culture, many adolescents are left to navigate transitions without direct assistance from persons in any of their contexts, most notably the school” (p.1). However, navigating these boundaries is also extremely instrumental in determining adolescents’ success in these various settings. The authors declared that in order to address this gap in support for students’ complex identities, “...we need to identify institutional structures which operate to facilitate boundary crossing strategies and which do not require students to give up or hide important features of their lives” (Phelan et al.,
1991, p. 34). Of course my students traverse across boundaries and borders on a regular basis, and this is especially true in the context of this study, in which students also navigate literal geopolitical borders, and as such educators like myself need to recognize the challenges that Latino students face as navigators of two or more worlds (Ramirez, 2016).

Bringing students’ lived experiences, along with their cultural traditions and ethnic histories, into the school and classroom settings promotes a synchronicity for students to learn more about the various settings with which they interact and reflect on themselves holistically. Ethnic Studies and Students’ Multiple Worlds frameworks acknowledge that social and personal identities are complex, and bringing those concepts into the classroom formalizes the validity of those settings as places where knowledge is created.

The group that formed out of a proposal by a colleague of mine proved to be an invaluable supplement to the curriculum offered in my Senior Seminar class. The facilitator is an insider from the Latino immigrant community and often conducted the class bilingually. He was able to offer a wealth of knowledge in a culturally-relevant manner and connect with them in a way that I, as a white outsider, am unable to do. Although my rapport with them is strong, his connection as an insider created powerful bonds that also worked to legitimize non-white voices in an academic setting. As service-learning teachers, especially as white teachers in predominantly non-white schools, we need to help create and support spaces where adults that look like our students can be in the role of educators, so we are not inadvertently reinforcing the message that people from their community are not educators (Delpit, 2012).
The mirrors that my students are typically presented with by mainstream institutions are influenced by the power structures of history including racism, classism, and xenophobia. In an analysis of 55 local newspapers, findings suggest an ongoing underrepresentation of Latinos in local news, consistent with the general underrepresentation of minorities in media (Harwood & Anderson, 2002). Additionally, a more recent study found that stories focused on Latinos mostly concern immigration and crime, and mostly depict Latinos using negative racial stereotypes; their results also suggest that Latinos are more likely than other ethnicities to be represented using only negative stereotypes (Sui & Paul, 2017). With an abundance of negativity surrounding Latino and low-income communities, CBR offers students an opportunity to consider their community as a place with knowledge and resources. As service-learning educators requiring CBR, our role is to help identify community meetings and events that demonstrate these community strengths. For example, encouraging students to attend events in the community, hosted by Latino professionals and community-members, creates these types of mirrors that debunk stereotypes and provide opportunity for students to reflect positively on their own identities. As demonstrated by student reflection, many students discovered the assets within their community that often remain invisible even to insiders. This demonstrates that this particular service-learning experience is not defined by deficit-based model (Ramirez, 2016) but rather helps students challenge the mainstream depictions of their minoritized worlds.

2 “Minoritized Group: A social group that is devalued in society. This devaluing encompasses how the group is represented, what degree of access to resources it is granted, and how the unequal access is rationalized. Traditionally, a group in this position has been referred to as the minority group. However, this language has been replaced with the term minoritized in order to capture the active dynamics that create the lower status in society and also to signal that a group’s status is not necessarily related to how many or few of them there are in the population at large” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 186).
Windows

Another cornerstone of our Service Learning program is giving students opportunities to encounter and understand their community. An “open window” assumes entry into another reality through observation, discourse, and engagement. As previously mentioned, there are specific requirements related to students’ engagement with CBR. Before using CBR, we created windows only by requiring traditional, text-based research leading students mostly to internet searches and struggles with highly academic peer-review articles. Now we require students to fulfill three of the following requirements to meet expectations and four to exceed expectations:

1. Attend at least 2 community meetings/events;
2. Interview at least 2 experts in the field;
3. Compete at least 6 hours of community service in a setting related to your research focus;
4. Watch at least 2 documentaries related to your research topic.

Challenges to Opening Windows

The first three requirements are more consistent with the intentions of CBR, which works to formalize community knowledge when researching issues, but we decided to include the third option for accessibility reasons. Conducting interviews with experts and attending community events requires transportation, which can be a challenge for some students, whereas watching documentaries is something they can do at school or at home. However, I have often attended meetings with students and helped to problem-solve transportation issues through carpool coordination in order to help students access the first two requirements, which are very important for the real CBR experience.
Another way in which our department addresses the accessibility concerns presented by CBR is by hosting a Roundtable discussion (see Appendices E and F) at our school during school hours. For this event, we invite a variety of community members, including nonprofit professionals, local politicians; more recently, we made the decision to include an open invitation to students’ parents or other family members. The Roundtable discussion event takes place before students have finalized their research focus in order to help them better choose a focus that they are really interested in. It acts as a prewriting brainstorm activity but incorporates community into the process. Our department is very aware of accessibility barriers, and the Roundtable Discussion is one means by which we hope to disrupt them.

**Windows Offer Intersectionality**

Incorporating this requirement creates unique opportunities for students to look through windows into the lives and experiences of others. During a focus group session, Juan reflected on his morning at the Cesar Chavez march:

There was this lady when we went to the Cesar Chavez march. She was saying that her dad worked with Martin Luther King Jr., and she was in all those types of movements, and he wrote a book about it. She was telling me that she really believes in our generation. They’ve been doing all that work since the old days, and she says that Trump just came to, you know, f**k it up, but we’re still here, and our generation can do something about it. Cesar also told me that elders are like libraries, so once one dies, it’s like a library closes.
By attending this event, he was able to experience a moment that introduced in a real life context the concepts of intersectionality and solidarity. Intersectionality ³ is a difficult concept to teach from the front of a classroom, but CBR creates moments where students can experience intersectionality in a way that usually only community organizers experience. Events like the Cesar Chavez March bring together people who care about many different causes in the name of solidarity across movements. This event gave Juan the opportunity to engage in an intergenerational and cross-movement conversation about community-organizing and power.

These windows are also where students confront contact zones, and often this occurred as they attempted to integrate into various existing community organizations. Andrea described to the focus group her experience joining a youth organizing group that consisted mainly of young people experiencing homelessness:

It was so hard. Because they come from a different story. Some of their stories I do kind of get them, but other parts I don’t. So it was hard to understand what they were going through. And I learned to to be like ‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’ No, you can’t do that to them because they don’t care. There was this event we did, and people starting saying that to one of the kids who were presenting, and he told one of the people who was in charge, ‘I feel like they’re pitying me.’ So it was a different experience.

Andrea’s experience working with this group gave her a whole new perspective on community service and its implementation. Working alongside the people directly

³ Collins (2000) and Crenshaw (1995) popularized the term intersectionality “to acknowledge the reality that we simultaneously occupy both oppressed and privileged positions and that these positions intersect in complex ways” (as cited in Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 115).
affected by her research focus; Andrea experienced a truly participatory grassroots space for confronting the issue of teen homelessness. Andrea later reflected on an in-class reflection: “Meeting new people at (the organization) is very satisfying. I met (supervisor) and she is really cool. The way she talks and is excited about ‘our’ future is so amazing.” In the context of this group, Andrea's successful participation is a combination of excitement from meeting new people, participating in problem-solving alongside constituents, and also receiving consistent support from her Community Partner, who was similarly engaged with the group. In this way, the Community Partner can help facilitate positive interactions across the contact zone, a model which really worked for Andrea.

During one of the focus groups, students brought up the importance of identifying a Community Partner from outside of the school. I asked them to elaborate on this opinion, and Ariana explained, “Because you get to meet different people, and people out there have different connections. Going to meetings, I got to meet other people. Ms. R introduced me to...this woman, and from that woman I got to interview a man from Nepal.” The emphasis on CBR in this research project pushed students like Ariana to seek opportunities for connections and network building, which is a hard but important social and professional skill to hone. CBR helps students to understand the benefits of building a support network, which is especially helpful for expanding one’s knowledge of the world.

**Interviews Widen Windows**

Four of my students participated in a workshop, in partnership with a local nonprofit that met weekly and mentored them through the process of creating a
professional documentary. The documentary process focused on interviewing people directly connected with the issue in order to develop better understanding and share their perspectives. These interviews were unique and powerful learning opportunities for my students.

For example, one student was researching and sharing the reasons that people immigrate to the United States. She believed that sharing immigrants’ stories, especially with people in positions of power, would help improve immigration policies in the U.S. She chose to focus on this issue, because her own father was deported back to Mexico years ago. For her, immigration existed mostly in the context of the U.S.-Mexico border. However, she reflected about the new insights found through her interview process:

I interviewed different people, focusing in on major aspects of immigration, like where people would immigrate from, and on their backgrounds. I interviewed refugees, and I didn’t know in some parts of the world those people migrated here for a stable country.

Though immigration to the United States is an issue that this student is very personally familiar with, interviewing immigrants from various backgrounds broadened her perspective on the issue and increased her depth of understanding.

For students focuses on issues such as mental or emotional health, CBR seemed to humanize the constituents impacted by the research focus as students have direct experiences interacting with them. In an Issue Connection, in which students connect reflect on a CBR experience or other data, Jayline reflected on her experiences interviewing people who have or had lived with eating disorders. She explained, “It felt good to talk to people about their disorders and have them know that there are people
who understand what they go through on a daily basis. I noticed it was good for them to talk about their disorders to someone, and it made me feel good.” CBR creates opportunities for students to identify solutions based on their research; in this example, Jayline noticed that just listening to the constituents seemed to have a positive impact on them. Instead of being prompted to participate in top-down service experiences, CBR allows students to identify solutions as an outcome of their research and learning process. This also demonstrates that CBR promotes higher-order thinking as students synthesize the information from a variety of sources.

**Recommendations for Creating More Windows**

The senior year and the employment of CBR shifts hierarchy in multiple ways, one of which is the evolution of the service-learning site supervisor into the “Community Partner”. Duckenfield (2002) reflects on the experience of teaching college students who have significant experience with service-learning. They tend to demonstrate advanced development of self-confidence and maturity levels because of their unique relationships with adults who were both mentors and colleagues (p. 47).

Since our students are actually entering their senior year in high school with these more sophisticated interactions with adults throughout their nine through eleventh grade service-learning experiences, they are similarly prepared to work alongside adults more so as “…co-workers in solving community problems” (Duckenfield, 2002, p. 48). Students consistently demonstrate strong relationships with their Community Partners, and as demonstrated above, have access to more complex knowledge and analysis because of their connections. Although it can be difficult as the service-learning teacher
to help student identify people willing to serve as students’ Community Partners, it is a critical piece of the students’ overall research and project journey.

The network I have maintained from both nonprofit work and community organizing in the city has been tremendously helpful with linking students to potential community partners. Additionally, because of my personal framework, I intentionally try to connect students with people who engage in community organizing that aligns with our critical social justice framework. Of course, this is not always possible, and I wonder how we can better engage more members of our students’ ethnic and racial communities as community partners. Changing the project requirements to allow students to work on components of their projects together has alleviated some of the stress of helping students identify and secure helpful and committed Community Partners, as they can work together and find support from their peers’ Community Partners.

Perhaps there is something in the literal name of the class, changing from Senior Seminar to Senior Action Project, which sparks students into action in the second semester. Although the results of students’ CBR activities in the fall semester were disappointing, the failure to complete the CBR requirement in the fall was not a predictor for further inability to do CBR and complete project tasks. Mateo, who struggled throughout the Research Paper assignment, was eventually able to successfully complete an interview with an immigration lawyer to learn more about his topic, immigrants’ rights, but that was the extent of his CBR undertakings in the fall. However, once January came around, Mateo jumped into action. I require that students log thirty hours of tasks
Figure 5. Senior Action Project Work Log. Students document what they did, when, and for how long.

towards their Senior Action Projects; Mateo logged over sixty hours of work towards his project. Figure 5 depicts a sample of Mateo’s work logs, demonstrating that Mateo was involved in many differing activities in relation to his project. While Dream Team meetings and attending Immigrant Day at the state legislature are activities focused on organizing around immigrant rights, his Work Log also shows his ongoing learning about the topic through his attendance at an Albuquerque Public School policy meeting.

Students are participating in CBR activities mostly in the spring semester and mostly parallel to their Senior Action Project tasks. This leads me to wonder if our curriculum should perhaps move some project-related tasks to the fall semester to better encourage students to complete the fall semester CBR requirements.

One way that we help students foster a professional relationship with their Community Partners is by setting time aside each week to have students email them with an update on their project process. By having them include me on the emails, I can help to clarify any miscommunications or respond to concerns that either the student or
Community Partner may have. This also helps me get a better feel for the student’s overall progress with their project and the amount of support they are getting from their Community Partner, knowing that some students may need more support from me because of their Community Partner’s capacity. In my experience, these relationships can be the most valuable pieces of the capstone course.

Community-based research, with the windows it creates, continues to disrupt traditional authorization for the creation of knowledge. CBR permits students to work outside of the confines of Western epistemologies, which limits our knowledge because it “...centers on the Eurocentric perspective in which many believe that the underprivileged, the poor, and the disadvantaged have nothing to offer because their opinions do not count or are devalued” (Hess et al., 2007, p. 33). Instead, CBR in the context of this class embraces the knowledge, feelings, and opinions of those most affected by student’s research focuses and informs students’ service and plans of action.

Unfortunately, my students struggled in the fall semester, while engaged with writing their research papers, to actually fulfill the CBR requirements, which include documentation of their experience. This documentation was due by the end of the semester. Unfortunately, the vast majority of my class did not produce this documentation for submission because, realistically, they did not meet the requirements. In the end, I decided to grant extra credit to the four students who successfully submitted their CBR documentation. It seems like students struggle with this requirement, because it is challenging and uncomfortable; seeking knowledge in unknown spaces is more ambiguous than completing tasks towards the goals of a service project. Moving forward, I am going to try forming small research teams of 2-3 students whose research topics
overlap. In my experience, students are more confident encountering contact zones when they do so as a pair or group.

CBR creates openings into new worlds for students in ways that would not occur if research were confined to textbooks, internet searches, and database reviews. Instead, CBR combines learning experiences with the chance for students to practice the act of crossing various borders and boundaries. The Students’ Multiple Worlds framework encourages schools to facilitate border or boundary-navigating experiences as a component of acknowledging the multiple worlds in which adolescents must exist. This goes beyond learning about other cultures to include the acquisition of skills and strategies necessary for working alongside unfamiliar types of people in unfamiliar social settings in Phelan et al. (Phelan et al., 1998). CBR creates windows into divergent settings in which students may experience discomfort, dissonance, silencing, or other negative feelings, but with the support of this class, they will have the opportunity to reflect on their experience and analyze the challenges and learning moments.

Contact Zones

In contrast to the model for the service-learning program in grades nine through eleven, where students have a “site supervisor,” the Senior Action Project requires that students identify and contract with a Community Partner. As outlined in the Community Partner Overview and Contract (see Appendix G), “the purpose of a Community Partner is to ensure that each student has an adult partner to provide input and feedback to improve their ability to implement their action project. In choosing a Community Partner, students are encouraged to identify someone who has a strong knowledge and experience in working to address the issue they have chosen. Students may also choose a
Community Partner that may not have specific knowledge about the issue, but may have knowledge and skills that are specific to the action project identified by the student.”

Some students decided to build on relationships that began in previous years’ service-learning sites. One student, Yolanda, did exactly that, and as a result, she was able to access that Community Partner’s existing professional networks. She reflected:

I love my community partner because they have really helped me network.
They have given me a great amount of resources. The lessons with Pamela have given me a whole different perspective to Western living and how to apply Native healing to our own life as people of color.

This student’s project evolved drastically from the research phase into the action phase. Initially, as described in her Finalized Project Plan, her project was centered around the following thesis:

The root cause of a big part of women who suffer with substance abuse (is) related to mental illnesses. Some of the most effective ways of treating is to target those root issues. Counseling and mental health treatment programs should be brought up more and considered instead of keeping women in prison. Women who suffer from substance abuse problems are more likely to continue being incarcerated and criminalization. Instead there should support the programs that are used to fight the heart of the problem to cut that cycle out. Prisons should incorporate more harm reduction program in themselves to help stop women from continuing in the incarceration and addiction cycle.

At some point after developing this plan, Yolanda’s community partner introduced her to a Navajo Ceremonial Healing Instructor. Having started her project by
giving a few traditional presentations on mental health, where the focus was summarizing symptoms of various mental illnesses, her project shifted entirely once she met this healer. For the final component of the project, the student was “...working with a native navajo healer on an alternative method of curing addiction and repairing the out of balance conditions that cause those cycles.” Because of a series of interpersonal relationships, Yolanda was given the opportunity to access a very different perspective on the root causes of her research topic. She became inspired and reinvigorated around the topic, because she felt like she had really identified the actual root causes to women of color being criminalized for their addictions.

Beyond merely connecting students to the resources that they need to complete service projects, Community Partners open doors to completely new worlds of knowledge for our students, knowledge that is often dismissed by academia and not easily locatable through conventional research methodologies. These educational moments would be unachievable without the relationships that students are able to develop throughout the journey of completing this research and action project, and this learning journey seems to be even more successful when students can leverage pre-existing relationships from their ninth through eleventh grades’ service-learning experience.

**Experiencing Disconnect in the Contact Zone**

Not all students leave their immediate community in order to achieve the objectives of their research or projects. However, when they do, they often experience the difficulties of crossing the border from one segregated section of the city to another. Two students who were partnering on a project to address food deserts decided to positively
impact the issue by offering some healthy alternatives at an after-school event that typically served pizza. Their rationale was that while students, of course, enjoy pizza and it is a cheap, easy option for the nonprofit partner organization to provide, the students at the school are often exposed to this type of fast food, because many parts of the community are saturated with fast food chains. One of these students actually counted close to 50 fast-food restaurants on a roughly 10-mile strip of a heavily used corridor in the area near the school.

In order to offer this healthy food alternative, the students contacted a variety of health food stores to solicit donations of healthy foods. Because the students were looking specifically for support from health foods stores, they had to leave the South Valley to solicit their donations. The two students reflected about their experience soliciting donations from health foods stores:

Andres: It was hard, because I’d never been to those kinds of stores. They’re just a different experience. When you walk in everything is so nice, it’s all fancy, not like Wal-mart here… And who attended me, it was white people, so it was also different, weird asking something for the South Valley. It was awkward.

Ruby: Yeah, you feel like they can’t relate, because they don’t know the South Valley. Like you ask someone around here, and it’s like, oh well, yeah I live here, part of the community. But if you go over there, it’s like a completely different community. So it’s not like they can relate to your project.

The second student here made the observation that the awkwardness of the interaction was rooted in the fact that these two students were coming from a marginalized community into a middle and upper-middle class white community in order
to solicit donations. Experiencing contact zones for students of color is difficult enough, but adding the power dynamic created by a request for donations exacerbates the hierarchical nature of the interaction. As I mentor students through the project process, I often consider that other parts of the city have more material wealth, and therefore are better options for soliciting donations. However, it seems as if the overall experience of soliciting donations from white privileged businesses has more adverse effect than the outcome justifies. Students should not be intentionally subjected to further demeaning positionalities when interacting with individuals or groups from privileged groups.

Other students whose projects included donation solicitations described similar sentiments in classroom reflections, sharing comments like “...with the stores some of them were rude about it, so I just need to find other stores;” and “...nobody is willing to help out, and it gets me mad;” and “raising money is the most frustrating, because I feel that people don’t want to help get money but they are willing to support.” With the complex nature of contact zones, and an objective of empowering students to discover and enhance their sense of self-agency, should donation or funding solicitation be encouraged as a major component of their projects? Does encouraging students to solicit donations and funding widen gaps in the contact zone instead of work to close them?

**Recommendations for Reducing Risk in the Contact Zone**

Creating protocols for and modeling how to productively “dwell in moments of dissonance” allows students and teachers alike the chance to reflect on experiences in the contact zone, even as we may struggle to name the source of the dissonance (Prieto & Villenas, 2012, p. 425). Incorporating reflection on dissonance also recognizes that all students have both the knowledge and capacity to derive more knowledge from their experiences with discomfort and dissonance (Prieto & Villenas, 2012). The opportunity
to reflect critically on experiences in the contact zone has the ability to shift what may have been a traumatizing experience into a meaningful learning experience, creating an opportunity for students to process even while undergoing a paradigm shift (Myers, 2016). It is imperative that teachers create room for students to openly discuss their time spent in the contact zone, especially in a way that allows them to discuss moving across social group lines like race, class, gender, and class. By the time students in my class start doing any CBR, they are already use to classroom discussions and assignments that critically interrogate these pieces of identity, and the hope is that they will grow in this analysis in their reflections of the lived experience of CBR.

**Creating a “Safe House”**

My particular classroom, which uniquely consists of 100% Hispanic/Latino/immigrant students, can be considered a “safe house,” or a space where the community is mostly homogenous in identity, with high levels of trust and shared understandings; a space where the legacies of racism and classism are put on hold (Pratt, 1991). The students in this class cohort also experience high levels of comfort with one another, a result of spending a little over three years together in a small-school setting.

This classroom “safe house” can act as a grounding space to allow students to reflect on experiences in the contact zone and potentially strengthen their ability to maintain a resilient sense of self as a member of a minoritized ethnic group. However, it is important to recognize that race and ethnicity are not our only social group memberships; it is almost inevitably true that for some students in the cohort, the classroom could not be considered a safe house. For example, a student with a disability,
a student who really struggles with English, or a student who is undocumented, may always feel disempowered in this space because of its location within a school.

I would argue that the mere fact that the classroom space is situated within an American public school setting could eliminate its potential for being a “safe house” for some students. Creating “safe house” settings for students is challenging, especially for educators working in other less homogenous school contexts, but it crucial for the type of critical debrief that supports positive growth from potentially traumatic experiences in the contact zone.

Navigating Privilege

One of the social justice themes embedded in critical social justice is privilege⁴. My students must navigate privilege in a variety of ways throughout the research and project experience, which is sometimes what they are used to in their daily lives and other times manifests itself in new experiences, such as visiting different parts of the city. However, understanding the concept of privilege can help students as they encounter privilege in the contact zone.

For example, Juan explained during the focus group how he connected the concept of privilege to the very motivation behind his project:

I think that if you’re gonna tackle an issue like that (immigration), probably people are going to ask you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ and you probably might want to show them up, like your parents are Mexican but you were born here, it’s not that hard for you. And you tell them that my ancestors have been going

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⁴ Privilege is defined as “…systematically conferred dominance and the institutional processes by which the beliefs and values of the dominant group are ‘made normal’ and universal” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 57).
through this for years. And I can make a difference, because now that I have it
easier than them, I can do something about it.

In order to navigate the questioning that he interpreted as somewhat antagonistic,
Juan applied the concept of privilege to his own positionality as a Mexican immigrant
who has had the privilege of growing up in the United States. Although in comparison to
many, he does not have much privilege, he recognizes that the privilege he does have is
greater than his parents, and ancestors before them, which motivates him to do the work
for justice that they really cannot afford to do. This perspective seems to be informed by
both the inquiry into social justice themes, but also by his understanding of his
relationship to his ancestors. He continues to employ a framework of fighting for justice
as a component of his heritage, drawing on his knowledge of his cultural roots for the
strength to fight for justice (Anzaldúa, 2012). Applying the social justice theories to their
experiences supports students’ abilities to develop nuanced perspective on themselves,
their communities, and their action projects.

In another focus group session, I asked my students to think back to the previous
semester and reflect on the social justice themes that we had studied. I asked them to
consider whether or not understanding those themes had affected their perception or
analysis of the world or their experiences. Of course I was curious to see which topics
most resonated with them and if they had experienced applying those concepts in any of
their worlds. One student mentioned the term microaggression, and I asked if they could
think of any examples. Another student immediately responded with the summary of an
incident that had happened at school with one of their teachers:
Ruby: ...they had to sign something for a class, and they said she said to sign it neat, it’s not like any of our parents are doctors. And I felt like that was like what are you talking about. Just because we come from the South Valley doesn’t mean that we have relatives or anything that can be doctors? What is that? What are you trying to say?

The students were able to identify this incident as a microaggression based on which part of the city they are from. Having access language that helps name injustices is empowering, because it makes the connection between systemic injustices and individual experiences, which helps to achieve the goal of a service-learning model that centers social justice instead of charity. Beyond providing a framework for understanding their research topics, the critical social justice framework promotes active critical literacy as it helps students to analyze the world beyond the word.

**Critical Literacy**

The third cornerstone of our service-learning program is developing the critical literacy skills that help students identify root causes of issues, reflect on their individual positionalities, and make connections between individual experiences and broader systemic issues. This critical social justice pedagogy requires designing curriculum that provides complex reasoning for a nuanced understanding of both their research topics and the world around them.

**Issue and Action Analysis**

Students are required to apply a critical social justice analysis to their research topics, and they must provide this analysis first within their Research Paper. In the Research Paper assignment, students are required to choose two themes from critical
social justice that are connected to their research topic and explain the connection. At the end of the year, as students present the outcomes of their action projects, they are required to explain how their projects addressed the social justice themes that they had identified as relevant. Providing this framework or lens for analysis promotes a much more nuanced investigation of the research topic and pushes students to synthesize information from a variety of sources, thus promoting high-order thinking.

One issue that consistently arises is making sure that students are using the same definitions. Since the class employs a very specific framework, it is crucial that students use the definitions as outlined by our guiding text. For example, in her final exhibition presentation, one student defined prejudice as a “preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.” However, in our guiding text, prejudice is defined as “Learned prejudgment about members of social groups to which we don’t belong” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 187). These two meanings have very different implications, with the latter providing a much more nuanced and complex understanding of prejudice that fits within the CSJT framework.

Although I constantly remind students to refer back to the text instead of internet searches when incorporating evidence into writing and presentation materials, it is an ongoing mistake that is connected to lower quality issue and action analysis. To better remind students to use the relevant definitions, an alumnus who was working in the service-learning office created a bilingual Spanish-English glossary of social justice terms as defined by Sensoy and DiAngelo’s (2012) critical social justice framework. This will hopefully help students avoid straying to other definitions from differing contexts.
Some students really struggle to access this type of analytical skill, but most are able to reach a “Beginning Steps” understanding of the concepts. For example, Enrique described his research topic’s connection to social justice as “Boys aren't raised the same as girls are. They are not introduced to books at a young age...Studies show that boys are their study habits aren't as high as girls are.” His first sentence demonstrates that he has a beginning understanding of the concept of socialization\(^5\), or more specifically gender socialization, while the second part demonstrates an inability to make explicit connection to the concepts. Even for a student who cannot necessarily yet access a higher-order thinking analysis of the issue, they are still able to make connections that reveal a nuanced understanding of their research topic.

In their Final Exhibition, students must share with the audience the social justice themes that connect to their research topic and, additionally, the action they took that directly impacted the social injustice they had identified. For example, Ariana connected the struggles that immigrants face in the United States to the concept of social inequality\(^6\): “Undocumented individuals have limited opportunities and resources, compared to U.S. citizens.” She then explained how hosting a “Know Your Rights Event” works to address the social inequality that undocumented immigrants face. She then explained how immigrants face prejudice and how the short film she created, which shares different immigrants’ stories, would help to combat negative perceptions of

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\(^5\) Socialization: our systematic training into the norms of our culture...the process of learning the meanings and practices that enable us to make sense of and behave appropriately in that culture (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 14).

\(^6\) Social Inequality- Characterization by the existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for different social positions or statuses within the group or society. Containing unequal distribution of goods, wealth opportunities, rewards, and punishments (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).
immigrants. She especially wanted to show her film to policymakers in order to have a positive impact on immigration policy.

Another student, Maura, reflected similarly about how her project was working against prejudice. She explained, “By presenting a specific video called *Like any other Kid* in all of my presentations, I was able to stop any prejudgment the students may have had about people living with a mental illness.” Requiring that students employ a CSJT framework to their issue analysis promotes high-order thinking and improves Critical Literacy skills by allowing them to connect to other concepts and issues. When students are required to analyze how their action projects address the social injustice, it pushes them to engage in critical reflection of their activities. This critical reflection moves their reflection from a place of individual, isolated positionality to one that acknowledges broader power structures and collective experiences, a necessary component of a social justice model for service-learning.

**Understanding Social Identity**

Although many students highlighted the CSJT concept of social identity\(^7\) as an important in understanding their research topics, I noticed that few of them were able to accurately employ this concept to better understand their topics. One student, however, did this difficult task very well, and in doing so really demonstrated an understanding of this concept and an ability to synthesize a variety of information. Karen provided the definition of social identity from the guiding and then used this concept to critically reflect about her experience interviewing immigrants about the resources that they need:

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\(^7\) Social identity: Our membership to various social groups including race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status/exceptionality, religion, and nationality.
pude ver como todas las personas son diferentes pero han pasado por cosas iguales o similares al intentar formar parte de la cultura americana (I could see how all the people are different but have gone through the same or similar things when trying to be part of American culture).

Through her project, Karen observed the immigrants’ shared interests and experiences, and connected that directly to the concept of social identity.

However, in multiple cases, students’ analysis of their research topic’s connection to the concept of social identity did not align with the CSJT definition, which resulted in a shallow issue analysis and action reflection. Jennifer, whose project focused on teen pregnancy and parenting, included the correct definition of social identity when discussing CSJT themes, but the reflection on her action project failed to demonstrate accurate understanding of this term. Thus, she was not able to accurately connect the impact of her project to the concept of social identity. Instead, she wrote: “The resources I listed will make them feel better about themselves because they will know that there is help for them.” In this analysis, it seems like Jennifer mistaking the terms “personal identity” and “social identity,” which is a very common and easy mistake to make because of the complexity of identities. Perhaps on some deeper level, especially being a young parent herself, Jennifer understands the significance of shared and collective experiences; however, she was never able to explicitly make this connection. The concept of social identity is foundational within CSJT, and while some students were able to use the concept for analysis, most students struggled with applying the term.
Critical Literacy Shapes Evidence

Once they begin their action projects, students are required to employ traditional qualitative and quantitative measurement tools as a part of the project documentation requirement. These tools both promote expansion of knowledge of the research area as well as help the student measure the impact of their project components. When students host events or give presentations, they are required to track how many people attended, using either headcounts or sign-in sheets, which provides them with quantitative data for analyzing impact. They are also encouraged to create surveys to solicit feedback about their project when they host events or present. If a component of a student’s project is to provide an informative presentation, they are required to include a pre-test and post-test for participants which they can use to analyze the effectiveness of their presentation.

By requiring that students measure their impact, we allow them to collect evidence of their impact and thus their agency as an individual. Michelle, who presented to several classes about mental illness, reflected: “The most satisfying (thing) about my project so far is actually doing my presentations and knowing that I am actually making a change because of the percentage of students who do not know about mental illness.” Having students measure the success of their projects is empowering and allows them to reflect on themselves as change agents and active participants in a world that often forces young people to be passive.

Continuing to engage students as researchers throughout the project process is empowering and motivating. Alan, whose project focused on creating a safer culture within the street-racing community, had planned a car show in coordination with our school’s Parent Involvement Committee spring-time event. In addition to creating a safe
space for teenagers to show off their modified vehicles, Alan used the opportunity to solicit opinions about street-racing from the event attendees. He explained, “Realizing how many people filled out my survey and how many people stayed around there (at the car show) made me feel like I am doing something with my project.” A small detail, like having attendees complete a short survey, had a significant impact on the outcome of the student’s event. Even during the event, it impacted how he interacted with attendees, as he walked around the busy room, introducing himself, explaining his research and project in order to ask people to complete the survey. The context of the event is also important, because this was not a contact zone, but was closer to the idea of a safe house; it was his community, his friends, and parents and families from our school community. Alan comfortably moved between various members of his community, codeswitching between English and Spanish, parents and peers, and felt empowered by everyone’s positive response to his research and project, even if they were not supportive of street-racing in general. Alan had taken ownership over his project and became a full active participant in knowledge-creation through his action project and community-based research.

**Recommendations for Scaffolding Critical Literacy in the Research Process**

It is important that K-12 service-learning programs move towards social justice models in order to scaffold the skills of applying critical literacy skills to experiential learning. This scaffolding is necessary to also enhance the potential for transformative service-learning and CBR experiences as students move into senior capstone courses and higher education settings. Currently, students now entering college with service-learning experience from their K-12 education tend to be “impatient with the scholarly traditions” (Ross & Boyle, 2007) that ask them to interrogate social problems and employ theoretical
frameworks for issue analysis. Although college students have experience with service, they tend to understand the idea of a class as a lecture-style, traditional setting, and can become very anxious or even disengaged with the ambiguity of service-learning placements and projects (Whitfield, 2005).

Ultimately, without critical literacy as a cornerstone of the program, it would lack the framework necessary to be a space for social change; program participants—teachers, students, and the school institution—would be at risk of recreating the power structures at the root of the issues the service seeks to address. Pairing the critical social justice theory with CBR and service creates equitable opportunities for real application of critical literacy to the word and the world.
CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STUDY

Discovering and Developing Self-Agency

Critical literacy as pedagogy is derived from the Freirean tradition of critical pedagogy that calls on educators to disrupt the “banking” concept of education (Freire, 1970). Freire (1970) likens this approach to education to storing and depositing files, but clarifies that in this process, “...it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system” (p. 53). When students have the opportunity to evolve from knowledge-learners to knowledge-creators, they feel satisfied. Several of my students commented on the satisfaction that they felt during the research process, specifically while engaged in CBR methodologies. In these moments, they move from the passive nature of a traditional educational setting to an active role in developing new knowledge or creating learning experiences for others. This class gives them the opportunity to be agents participating in the world rather than merely learning about it through textbooks and classroom-based projects. Creating roles for students as researchers can perhaps stand as the antithesis to the banking model of education.

Choosing a Research Focus

More than half of my class (15 out of 24) chose to focus on community issues that they were directly impacted by. Each year I encourage my students to focus on these types of topics with the objective of instilling greater sense of self-agency as they work to have a positive impact on these issues. Zimmerman and Clearly (2006) define self-agency as “one’s capability to originate and direct action for given purposes . . . It is influenced by the belief in one’s effectiveness in performing specific tasks, which is
called self-efficacy” (as cited in Gilbert, 2010, p. 21). Self-agency is realized when students find their ability to affect social change through practicing critical skills within the community (Gilbert, 2010).

Enrique, for example, stated that he chose his project “...because ever since I was a kid, I have hated to read. And I have never been a good reader.” His research focused on literacy rates in New Mexico, and his project was modeled after a project in New York City, called Barbershop Books, which is a “community-based program that creates child-friendly reading spaces in barbershops across America. We leverage the cultural significance of barbershops in black communities to increase boys' access to culturally relevant, age appropriate, and gender responsive children's books and to increase out-of-school time reading among young black boys” (About Barbershop Books).

This project was a struggle for Enrique, especially since he did not often experience success in an academic setting. At the end of the project, he reflected: “My biggest struggle about my project was that I created my own barriers. Made struggles for myself.” Because he had always struggled in school, he struggled with the project just because it was associated with school. His struggles in school were largely related to English language skills and literacy skills, so doing this project in his senior year represented the completion of a full cycle for him. Literacy had been a major barrier that he confronted throughout his school experience, and his project focused on removing that barrier for others.

Alan approached me hesitantly at the beginning of the year to ask if he could focus on street-racing, fearing I would say no because it is an illegal activity that has
proven to be quite controversial in the community. Many young people love street-racing as an extension of loving to modify their vehicles, while the rest of the community hones in on obvious safety concerns that arise with this taboo hobby. However, since this is a self-directed project that aims to address real issues in the community, I gave him the green light, so to speak. Aside from the formal skills acquired throughout the project process, Alan’s relationship with street-racing evolved. He reflected, “Ever since the beginning, I had this idea that street racing is the cool way to race now-a-days, but now looking more into this situation and the reality of street racing...made me realize that I enjoy my hobby way better at a track, safe from others then risking a lot on the streets.”

**Sharing Their Stories**

When students focus on issues that they have experienced firsthand, they are able to employ their personal stories to advocate for their issues. One student summarized the importance of sharing stories, specifically in relation to immigration, in a reflection: “...more people need to be educated about this certain topic because that’s why we have so much racism...people don’t understand the sacrifices or the obstacles immigrants face to get here.” For this student, storytelling became the center of her framework for addressing the issues that immigrants face in the United States. Her foundation of this framework of storytelling was directly connected to her experience with her father’s deportation process. Ariana explained: “We would go through the court proceedings and write letters to the judge saying what he was doing as a good citizen. And I feel like the judge didn’t take that into consideration and just right away deported him. So that’s why I went into the process of creating the stories to show political figures that not every human is a criminal.” This research and action project created an outlet for
Ariana to respond to the outcome of her father’s deportation process which she identified as being unjust. When students focus their projects on issues that have directly impacted them, they are moved from a place of victimization to a position that allows them to act as a change agent to create a more just society.

Of course, not all moments of story-sharing result in students feeling empowered or inspired. For example, when Juan attended Immigrant Day at the Legislature, he reflected: “When I went to talk to legislators I told my story about it (immigration). They would tell me that they feel bad for me and all that, that they would try their best to help the immigrant community but I don’t know what they’ve done since.” The last piece of this reflection mirrors the sentiment that has been present when students have interactions in the contact zone, when they interact with people who do not much relate to their research topics or otherwise appear to be uninterested in actually materially providing support. This type of circumstance seems especially prevalent for students whose research focuses on immigration, but really having any positive impact on immigration law is a complex and highly political process to engage in. Juan's project goal was to “spread hope in the immigrant community” and while marching with other immigrants to the Capitol building, or with other students in the city to protest the presidential election, both seemed to work towards this goal, his story-sharing with legislators were not as effective in achieving an increased sense of hope.

Personal story sharing in the context of advocacy is most effective in developing empowerment and agency when students are able to do so within their own community or within a space has similar values and beliefs. Ariana's experience contrasts Juan's experience discussing immigration in the contact zone:
Ariana: When I went with Ms. R to the meetings, it was me and Laura, and it was like white people, and we had to get up and share our stories. We're the only ones here who are like Mexican.

Me: How did they respond to your stories?

Ariana: They were really passionate, I guess you could say. They said at the end of the meeting, they came up and said your story is really powerful.

While these participants may have had a similar response as the legislators that Juan interacted with, such as thanking them for sharing their stories, Ariana's perception of their support was much more hopeful. Students benefit from sharing their personal stories that connect to their research focus when the setting includes participants with a baseline set of shared values and beliefs.

If the goal of this class is to nurture students’ confidence and sense of self-agency, then as the facilitator, I should prioritize helping them to identify spaces that will be supportive and responsive to the implications of their stories.

**Students as Knowledge-Havers and Knowledge-Creators**

Designing curriculum to create space for students as knowledge-havers and knowledge-creators, through CBR and service-learning projects, creates the type of educational opportunities necessary for critical personal transformation and empowerment as individual agents of social change. Figure 6 depicts how community-based research methodologies create effective critical literacy mirrors and windows through which students can navigate contact zones, identify root causes for social inequalities and injustices, and interrogate and challenge social constructs by applying critical social justice theory to reading their personal and public worlds.
Figure 6. Pedagogical Model for Integrating Community-Based Research, Critical Literacy, and Critical Social Justice Theory in Service-Learning

I continue the struggle to push the curriculum and its implementation to center Freire’s (1970) claim that “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 53). If my students are to become active researchers and agents of social change, I need to continue to critically engage with each piece of the curriculum and each step of the journey I send them on.

There is always tension as the class approaches the deadline for finalizing their research focus. As the teacher, I encourage them to select research topics that are present in their own lives in order to bridge the ever-present gap between school and life outside of school. Not only does this support student emotional well-being and academic
achievement, but it also helps them to transition to “...emergent critical community members who sought social justice” (Ramirez, 2016, p. 320). I often wonder how I can best help to facilitate students’ experiences as they cross boundaries not merely as passive students but as young people of color engaged in gathering and synthesizing community knowledge for in their work towards social change.

It was helpful for me to think about this by comparing Ariana, Alan, and Juan’s experiences with sharing their stories and interacting with community members. Ariana’s experience was at a local meeting with a large organization that is a local chapter of a national affiliate focused on community organizing, specifically focused on building local power. The vast majority of members of this chapter access it through their faith organizations, mostly various Christian sects. This also translates to a vast majority of the membership being older and white. This meeting was a contact zone experience for Ariana, who recounted that she and her classmate were the only Mexicans present, but she recalls the experience in a very positive light, knowing that they would be a resource for her project goals. This experience did have tangible positive outcomes as well, as she was introduced by an immigrant who was willing to be interviewed about his immigration story. I argue that the negative effects of contact zones are diminished in this particular circumstance because of an important shared value in the room, support for immigrant justice, and its ability to create a space that in some characteristics acts as a safe house.

In contrast, Juan’s interpretation of sharing his experience as an immigrant with legislators while visiting the state’s capitol left him skeptical that there would be any actual impact as a result of his interaction. Perhaps this is because of previous
experiences that he has had with politicians, but how he spoke about this interaction was different even from when he had other interactions that did not promise any tangible outcomes. For example, when he spoke about his participation in the Cesar Chavez day march, he spoke with enthusiasm and hope, although the day was merely a celebration and had not specific outcomes in mind. For my students, sharing their personal stories to advocate for themselves and their communities in the contact zone seems to be most positive when the others in the room were also engaged in actively supporting their cause.

Alan’s experience was very different from both Ariana and Juan’s because his event was really a safe house. The people at the event looked like him, spoke like him, came from similar neighborhoods locally and abroad, and they all enjoyed homemade tacos de carnitas y carne asada together. Alan’s report back from his experience as a facilitator at this event was one of the most positive, engaged, and excited moments during the course of the whole year. In teaching this class, and mentoring students through the project process, students are most likely to have this type of energized experience in spaces that embody characteristics of the concept of the safe house (Pratt, 1991).

As Spanish-speaking Latino youth navigating American social, political, and geographic borders with memberships to multiple minoritized social groups, safe houses create opportunities reminiscent of the place from which Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) found her strength to be a critical thinker and radical intellectual:

I feel perfectly free to rebel and to rail against my culture. I fear no betrayal on
my part because, unlike Chicanas and other women of color who grew up white or who have only recently returned to their native cultural roots, I was totally immersed in mine...I was totally immersed en lo mexicano, a rural, peasant, isolated, mexicanismo. To separate from my culture (as from my family) I had to feel competent enough on the outside and secure enough inside to live life on my own. Yet I leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because lo mexicano is in my system. I am a turtle, where I go I carry “home” on my back” (p. 43).

I include this full text because it had significant influence on the direction of my inquiry and continues to influence my understanding of supporting critical literacy skill development for my students.

In a society that so often disregards the experience and agency of people of color (Freire, 1970; Anzaldúa, 2012; Style, 1996; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Sui & Paul, 2017), there is often resistance from members of dominant groups against the notion of creating curriculum or spaces that exclusively highlight certain social groups (Sleeter, 2011). However, service-learning educators must look beyond these reactionary and non-critical critiques and push for academic institutions to participate in allowing communities to experience safe houses in which members can take risks and experience freedom from oppressions that dominate daily life. This means embracing event and meeting spaces such as Alan’s event, and encouraging students to create and facilitate them, is implicitly transformative and disrupts hegemonic power structures.

Teacher as Ally

Our service-learning program’s capstone class frightens, excites, emboldens, and empowers students with its critical literacy framework and focus on learning beyond the boundaries of the school walls. I certainly experience all of these emotions throughout the
year as well, but likely for different reasons. I am passionate about this program in its entirety and love the productive chaos of non-traditional transformative education. Of course, I continue to question my own positionality, but feel confident that shifting the paradigm of students’ positionality from “student” or “learner” to “researcher” and “change agent” frames my journey as a social justice educator. The beauty of practitioner inquiry is in its cyclical nature, pushing us to embrace critical reflection as an embedded piece of our educator identities.

From the moment my class shifts into students focusing on their individual research topics in about mid-October to their graduation in May, my role evolves from teacher to co-organizer for each of the 22 students in my class. Knapp claims that “The educator’s primary roles include structuring suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, ensuring safety, and facilitating learning” (as cited in Cole, 2010, p. 13). However, being a teacher for the Senior Action Project class goes far beyond those characteristics.

These projects require a significant amount of time and energy from the class facilitator in order for the student to get the most out of it. This is especially true if their relationship with their Community Partner is not very close, or if their Community Partner has a very busy schedule, which is very common with professionals working in nonprofits and social services. Students’ projects require a great deal of logistical support, from opening up the school on a Saturday for a student-led soccer tournament to staying late into the school night so that everyone in the line can have a free consultation with an immigration lawyer. But realistically, supporting students’ enactment of the agency that
we have long sought to develop in them requires the steadfastness of adult allies\textsuperscript{8}, and that is the role of the Senior Action Project teacher.

The sustainability of this class relies on two main factors: first, our school currently employs four teachers, one for each section of the senior capstone class. Three of those teachers, myself included, coordinate one grade level of service-learning ninth through eleventh and teach on section of the capstone. The fourth teacher was hired to accommodate the fourth section of the class; this is the first year that the school has needed four sections as it experiences growth throughout the student body. Hiring this fourth teacher demonstrated the school’s commitment to sustaining the quality of the service-learning program.

Secondly, the four of us work very collaboratively throughout the year to best serve our students. We discuss ideas for each other’s students who are struggling to find Community Partners or develop project ideas, and when students need rides to attend community meetings or events. When another teacher has a conflict and cannot attend their student’s event, one of us steps up to take their place. Because of the collaborative nature of our department, our students also know that they can come to our office and get support from any of us on their research or projects. The comradery within the service-learning department undoubtedly helps to balance the trying logistical challenges and time commitments throughout the school year. Even now, as I conclude my thesis, my coworker messages me to let me know that she will figure out coverage for my classes tomorrow if I need to take time off.

\textsuperscript{8} Ally: “…a member of the dominant group who acts to end oppression in all aspects of social life by consistently seeking to advocate for the group who is oppressed in relation to them” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 158).
Future Study

The Senior Capstone Course has begun its evolution towards truly centering community-based research as the predominant methodology students employ during the research process. Table 4 demonstrates the past, present, and hopeful future structure of the class to allow room for centering CBR.

Table 4

*Evolution of the Senior Capstone Course Towards Centering Community-Based Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Quarter</th>
<th>2nd Quarter</th>
<th>3rd Quarter</th>
<th>4th Quarter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past</strong></td>
<td>Critical Social Justice Theory readings and written assessments</td>
<td>Alumni panel reviewing past projects; students choose research focus; trip to UNM for library database research and campus tour; Research Paper due early December</td>
<td>Identify a Community Partner; Project Proposal due early March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Present</strong></td>
<td>Critical Social Justice Theory readings; issue analysis; written and group presentation assessments</td>
<td>Community Roundtable Discussion; students choose research focus; CBR requirements; trip to UNM library and interviewing workshop; identify community; Research Paper, with potential project ideas and Community Partner Contract, early December</td>
<td>Finalized Project Plan, signed by Community Partner, due end of January; weekly emails sent to Community Partners; 2 issue connections due; presentation of first project component early March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Future</strong></td>
<td>Critical Social Justice Theory</td>
<td>Trip to UNM library and testimonio⁹</td>
<td>Community Roundtable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁹ Testimonio refers to people, usually from a minoritized group, sharing their life stories (Prieto & Villenas, 2012). Haig-Brown (2003) describes testimonio as “the life story presented is not simply a personal matter; rather, it is the story of an individual who is also a part of a community. A testimonio presents the life of a
In order to create more time and space for students to focus on CBR, students’ access to the concepts in critical social justice theory needs to be scaffolded. Service-learning teachers have already begun the process of integrating CBR methodologies into their respective grade level inquiry focuses (see Figure 1), and they are even becoming familiar with the term community-based research. But while the service component of our service-learning program enjoys full institutionalization, critical social justice theory is only employed as a theoretical framework for curriculum in the Senior Capstone Course. What if students had access to this framework before their senior year? If students could begin the journey of developing a critical literacy lens by studying critical social justice theory in their ninth, tenth, and junior year classes, the first quarter of Senior Seminar could focus more on using that framework for issue analysis. Giving students this framework would also help to open up the contact zones that they encounter while at their service-learning sites by improving their critical literacies skills, or their ability to “read” the situations that they are exposed to. Like any skill, scaffolding the teaching of critical social justice theory so students are more prepared for CBR and issue

person whose experiences, while unique, extend beyond her/him to represent the group of which she/he is a member” (as cited in Prieto & Villenas, 2012, p. 415).
analysis in their capstone course is the ideal route for continuing to evolve the service-learning program towards a social justice model.

Building on the idea of better scaffolding the skills emphasized in the capstone class, what would happen if we had students explicitly and intentionally reflecting on their self-agency and growth as knowledge-havers and knowledge-creators? Would students better understand the critical literacy pedagogy, critical social justice pedagogy, and the community-based research pedagogy, if they hear those terms explicitly? Developing assignments that incorporate that language with the explicit goal of supporting development of students’ self-agency, including understanding themselves as knowledge-havers and knowledge-creators, is the first step to actualizing these pedagogies in a holistic approach. Technology has the ability to make this kind of growth-analysis easily accessible to our students. What would a digital service-learning portfolio, dedicated to students’ reflection on their growth and self-agency, look like at each grade level?

My future study will focus on continuing this trend of centering CBR as the methodology through which all of our students can best access the concepts of critical social justice theory and the skills of critical literacy. Because our department engages students at each grade level in our high school, the objective really becomes centering these three pedagogies throughout the students four-year journey through the service-learning program.
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Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.
## Senior Seminar Critical Reading Skill Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Critical Reading Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The student demonstrates Advanced or Honors Level Work in the following skills:</td>
<td>In addition to demonstrating the ability to do all of the skills in 4 independently. Student can synthesize and analyze the underlying importance of the readings to better understand Social Justice themes as relates to the community and is able to provide examples from real life and from additional reading student finds that have not been assigned by the teacher that relate to the issue of social justice discussed in the reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The student demonstrates Mastery in the following skills:</td>
<td>Critical Reading Skills: Student can analyze the underlying importance of the readings to better understand Social Justice themes as relates to the community. Student can independently identify and include author’s argument as it relates to the author’s point of view and is able to provide evidence from the reading and examples from his/her own real life that relate to the issue of social justice discussed in the reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The student demonstrates Proficiency in the following skills</td>
<td>Critical Reading Skills: Student can describe and interpret the underlying importance of the readings to better understand Social Justice themes as relates to the community. Student can recognize and with help, can include the author’s argument as it relates to the author’s point of view and is able to provide evidence from the reader as it relates to the issue of social justice discussed in the reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The student demonstrates Nearing Proficiency in the following skills</td>
<td>Critical Reading Skills: Student can somewhat describe the underlying importance of the readings to better understand Social Justice themes as relates to the community. Student has a difficult time explaining and including the author’s argument as it relates to the author’s point of view and does not include evidence from the reader that relate to the issue of social justice discussed in the reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The student demonstrates Beginning Steps in the following skills:</td>
<td>CR Skills: Student has difficulty summarizing the text independently. Student is unable to include the author’s argument as it relates to the author’s point of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The student did not do enough work to assess the following skills:</td>
<td>CR Skills: Minimal to no work was turned in.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Senior Seminar Research Paper

**Objective:** Students will:
- explore the connection between Social Justice and their issue.
- examine different perspectives on root causes of their issue.
- document how the issue presents itself and impacts society
- examine what is being done to address their issue on local and state levels.
- provide ideas for action steps that can be taken to address the issue.
- identify a community partner who has knowledge about their issue.

**Section I: Introduction:**
- Connect your research findings to the themes of social justice that we explored in the first quarter. Explain how the themes of social justice (socialization, prejudice and discrimination, privilege, etc.) are connected to the issue you are have researched.
- State your position/thesis statement.

**Section II: Issue Analysis:** This section should contain information about the extent of the problem (see required components below). All of this section needs to come from your research including statistics, data, interviews, and professional articles. Make sure you define unfamiliar terms and concepts.

- Definitions and Key Terms: Define your issue and provide definitions for important terms related to your research.
- Who is affected by this issue?
  - How many people are affected by this issue? (Include statistics)
  - What is the minoritized group affected by the issue?
- How is the community (South Valley, Albuquerque, New Mexico) affected by this issue?
  - Does this issue ever lead to other issues?
- What are some of the root causes connected to the issue?
  - Identify at least one counter-argument to the root causes you have identified, supported by evidence.

**Section III: Potential Solutions:** Resources: professional articles, 1-2 interviews with people who work with your issue, supplemental materials from agencies or on line that detail services provided to the public concerning your issue.

- What is being done to address your issue on a national or international level?
- What is being done to address your issue on a local (Albuquerque) and/or state level?
What does your research state are effective practices for addressing the issue?

**Section IV: Opportunities for Action and Conclusion:**

- Based on your research, develop and describe 2 ideas for action you could take to positively address the issue.
  - Interview at least one community expert to identify 2 ideas for actions that will positively address the issue. Describe those ideas for action and cite at least one interview.

**Section V: Community Partner Agreement**

- Include Signed Community Partner Agreement

**Research Paper Basic Requirements**

- Page Requirement: 4 page minimum (not including cover page, works cited, pictures, graphs and tables, or your community partner contract).
- Paper must include at least 5 sources:
  - Must include at least 2 primary sources (the required interview for Section IV counts as 1)
  - Secondary sources must include at least 1 academic article
- Each sectioned should be labeled
- Paper must be typed, edited, and free of spelling and grammatical errors.
- Paper must use a common font (such as Times New Roman), a font size of 12 pt., 1” margins and be double spaced.
- Paper must exhibit proper use of MLA citation.
- Paper must have a works cited page.
- Please do not use end or footnotes, only parenthetical references.
- Page #s in lower right hand corner
- Name and date in upper right hand corner single spaced – **Drafts only.**
- **Cover page is needed for final draft!**
- Indent paragraphs
- EDIT

**Primary sources:** Interviews; Information from a public meeting; Observation notes; Government documents or public records

**Secondary sources:** Academic journals; Professional articles; Books; Newspapers; Magazines

*Make sure you are looking at the rubric in order to earn a higher grade! For example, in order to earn a 4 you must include evidence that supports a counter argument related to your chosen issue.*
Appendix C

SAP Exhibition Presentation Checklist

Your powerpoint or Prezi slides must contain the following information to be complete:

☐ Title Page
☐ Primary Issue
  - State the issue that was addressed in your SAP
  - Include why you choose this issue
☐ Key Findings
  - Include evidence from your research paper, FPP or other sources that connect the research to your SAP issue - make sure to cite your sources!
☐ Project Goal
  - Describe the goal of your project
☐ Project Plan
  - Include your original plan
☐ Component #1
  - Describe this component
  - Include various forms of documentation of this component (pictures, sign in sheets, screen shots of interviews, websites, guides etc.)
☐ Component #2
  - Describe this component
  - Include various forms of documentation of this component (pictures, sign in sheets, screen shots of interviews, websites, guides etc.)
☐ Component #3
  - Describe this component
  - Include various forms of documentation of this component (pictures, sign in sheets, screen shots of interviews, websites, guides etc.)
☐ Community Partner
  - Explanation of who your community partner is and why he/she was chosen by you to be your Community Partner.
  - Describe your relationship with your CP - what worked and what was a challenge
☐ Goals Met?
  - Did you meet your goals? Why or why not?
  - Who benefited from your project (Include who your target audience was and HOW you know they benefitted.
☐ Type of Service
  - What type of service was each component? (Direct, indirect or advocacy - provide an explanation of each type of service and how your project components connected to this type of service)

☐ Evaluation Tools
- Describe what type of tools you used to evaluate your project (qualitative or quantitative) and how you used the information to change or better your project

☐ Project Success
- Describe what was successful about your project and how you know it was successful
- Include how your evaluation tools helped you learn what you did well and other anecdotal evidence (Share stories about things that happened that prove that your project was a success based on what you heard your target audience saying or other small, personal accounts from your interactions with people during your project)

☐ Project Struggles
- Describe what you found to be a struggle during the implementation of your project and how you overcame these struggles

☐ Social Justice Themes
- Include how the proposed actions relates to themes of social justice (see Themes of Social Justice Rubric for specifics on how to earn a certain grade)
- Accurately identify the correct definition of the social justice theme by citing evidence from the social justice reader.
- Analyze how the action steps of the project positively addressed the theme of social justice.

☐ Personal Rewards
- Describe what was rewarding to you personally about this project.

☐ Reflection
- What did you learn about your community?
- What did you learn about yourself throughout this process?

☐ Audience questions slide

MAKE SURE TO REFER TO THE SOCIAL JUSTICE THEMES RUBRIC AND THE PROJECT PRESENTATION RUBRIC WHEN YOU ARE PREPARING YOUR POWERPOINT OR PREZI
Appendix D

Senior Seminar Community-Based Research Requirement

This quarter, you are required to complete research outside of school and beyond the internet in order to really understand your research issue on a local level. First, you must:

1. Interview at least 2 people involved with this issue:
   a. One interview must be with an expert that works on this issue
   b. One interview must be with someone directly impacted by the issue
   c. Complete the provided “Interview Form”

Next, choose two of the following options (2 options for a 3, all options for a 4):

2. Attend at least 2 community meetings/events
   a. 1 page minimum reflection, typed double-spaced. What was the meeting/event about? Who was there? Where was it? What did you learn? What new insights did you gain about your research topic? What questions did this meeting raise? (This is a good opportunity also to ask someone after a meeting for their contact information so that you could interview them about your research topic.)

3. Watch at least 2 documentaries related to your research topic
   a. 1 page minimum reflection, typed double-spaced. What was the documentary about? Who produced it? What did you learn? What new insights did you gain about your research topic? What questions did this documentary raise?

4. Compete at least 6 hours of community service with an organization related to your research:
   a. 1 page minimum reflection, typed double-spaced. What was the meeting/event about? Who was there? Where was it? What did you learn? What new insights did you gain about your research topic? What questions did this meeting raise? (This is a good opportunity also to ask someone after a meeting for their contact information so that you could interview them about your research topic.)
Appendix E

Community Roundtable Invitation (English and Spanish)

Dear Community Member,

The Service Learning Department would like to invite you to support our seniors as they identify the community issues that they are interested in researching for their Senior Action Projects. The Senior Action Project is an important part of our students’ journey to complete high school and move forward into the world as individuals committed to making our community a better place. The goal of this discussion is to bring community members, educators, students, and families together to further reflect on the issues that affect our community. The Service Learning Department would like to invite you to participate in our round-table discussions on Wednesday, October 18th from 9:00-11:00 or 1:00-3:00. We are asking for participants to commit to at least a full 2 hour session. Our intention in inviting you as a family member is to help support our students with making connections and digging deeper into the social issues that they are considering for their research. All family members are invited and encouraged to attend; bringing community together to identify the issues that we all face is the first step towards creating solutions.

Thank you for all that you do already to support your child, family, and community. We would love to see you there!

Estimados miembros de la comunidad,

El Departamento de Service Learning del South Valley Academy le gustaría invitarle a apoyar a nuestros estudiantes en el grado 12, a medida que identifican los temas de la comunidad que están interesados en investigar para sus Proyectos de Acción Senior. El Proyecto de Acción Senior es una parte importante del viaje de nuestros estudiantes para completar la escuela secundaria y avanzar hacia el mundo como individuos quienes puedan hacer nuestra comunidad un lugar mejor. El objetivo de esta discusión es reunir a miembros de la comunidad, educadores, estudiantes y familias para reflexionar sobre los
asuntos que afectan a nuestras vidas. El Departamento de Aprendizaje de Servicio le invita a participar en nuestras mesas redondas el miércoles, 18 de octubre de 9:00-11:00 AM o 1:00-3:00 PM. Pedimos a los participantes que se comprometan a por lo menos, una sesión completa de 2 horas. Nuestra intención al invitarle como miembro de la familia es ayudar a apoyar a nuestros estudiantes en hacer conexiones con las temas que están considerando para su investigación. Todos los miembros de la familia son invitados a asistir. Queremos reunir a la comunidad para identificar los problemas que todos enfrentamos como el primer paso hacia la creación de soluciones. Gracias por todo lo que usted hace ya para apoyar a su hijo, familia y comunidad. Nos encantaría ver a ustedes en la discusión.
Appendix F

Community Roundtable Agenda

**Agenda**

**Welcome, Snacks, Name-tags (5 mins)**

**Full Group Discussion (15 minutes):**

1. What do you think are the most important issues affecting Albuquerque and the South Valley?

**Split into 4 small groups (Community Members+2 Student Facilitators):**

1. 2 Rounds of Issue Discussion
   a. As a group, choose an issue from the board to focus on
   b. Respond to the following questions concerning this issue:
      i. Who is most affected by this issue and why?
      ii. What are some of the root causes of this issue?
      iii. What community strengths can we use to combat this issue?

2. Share-Out of Issue Brainstorm

---

**Agenda**

**Bienvenidos, Refrigerios, etiquetas de nombre (5 minutos)**

**Discusión completa en grupo (15 minutos):**

1. ¿Cuáles son los problemas más importantes que afectan a Albuquerque y el Valle del Sur?

**Dividirse en 4 grupos pequeños (miembros de la comunidad + 2 facilitadores quienes son estudiantes):**

1. 2 rondas de discusión de problemas
   A. Como grupo, elija un problema de la primera discusión para enfocarse
   B. Responda a las siguientes preguntas sobre este asunto:
      - ¿Quién es más afectado por este problema y por qué?
      - ¿Cuáles son algunas de las causas principales de este problema?
      - ¿Cuáles son algunas fortalezas de la comunidad que podemos usar para combatir este problema?

2. Compartir
Community Partner Overview and Contract

South Valley Academy Senior Action Project

Community Partner Overview

Course Summary
Through the SVA Senior Action Project, students work individually to analyze community assets and challenges, identify an issue, research that issue, develop a plan to address the issue, and implement the plan through the Senior Action Project. Senior Action Projects may range from direct and indirect service to advocacy. Students are also required to identify and work collaboratively with a Community Partner in order to implement their project.

Role of the Community Partner
The purpose of a Community Partner is to ensure that each student has an adult partner to provide input and feedback to improve their ability to implement their action project. In choosing a Community Partner, students are encouraged to identify someone who has a strong knowledge and experience in working to address the issue they have chosen. Students may also choose a Community Partner that may not have specific knowledge about the issue, but may have knowledge and skills that are specific to the action project identified by the student.

The amount of time Community Partners devote to a project varies. At a minimum, Community Partners must do the following three things:

1. Read, and where appropriate provide feedback about, and sign the student’s Finalized Project Plan.

2. Communicate regularly with their student partner about the work on the action project. However, students are required to take the initiative in communicating with the community partner through phone calls, email, text and in person. Through this communication, it is hoped that the Community Partner will be able to provide feedback to the student about their work and possibly give them specific ideas on how things may be improved or what else the student should be doing in order to be successful.

3. Write a letter of support stating your involvement and your knowledge about the students work at the end of the project i.e., what worked? What needed improvement?

Beyond these three activities, involvement of the Community Partner is flexible. Some Community Partners have done the minimum and played a very important role in the project. Some Community Partners have take a very collaborative approach and worked closely with the student to accomplish the project goals including being present and involved in some of the project activities. All Community Partners are also invited to attend the Senior Action Project Final Exhibitions April 25 and 26, 2017.
Community Partner (Print)                  Community Partner (signature)

Organization: _____________________________________________

Phone #: ___________________                  Email: ___________________

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR SUPPORT OF OUR STUDENTS!!