Writing for social justice: Journalistic strategies for catalyzing agentic engagement among Latinx middle school students through media education

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of 15 Latinx sixth-grade students in Los Angeles who participated in a yearlong journalism-based media literacy program embedded in their social studies classes. Students researched, interviewed, wrote, and published articles on the Internet about social justice themes, like immigration, racism, and LGBTQ rights. The intervention uses critical pedagogy and social justice pedagogy. This study seeks to understand how key aspects of these philosophies emerge in students' reflections of their journalistic learning experiences. Deductive qualitative analysis of focus group data indicates that students experienced transformational, agentic experiential learning that allowed them to explore and question the world. The limited comments about funds of knowledge, local communities, and critical co-investigation suggest that these areas need additional attention during intervention implementation. The journalistic approach illustrates new ways educators can engage in critical and social justice pedagogy in middle school media education.

Keywords: *journalistic learning, critical pedagogy, social justice pedagogy, Latinx.*

INTRODUCTION

Latinx-identifying individuals are the youngest major racial-ethnic group in the U.S., and approximately one-third are younger than 18 years old (Patten, 2016). They represent a significant shift in the nation's demographics as schools endeavor to educate a wider variety of underserved students from diverse backgrounds.

Many Latinx students struggle to construct positive identities given the combative political climate that often casts them as unwanted outsiders. Alongside increasing hostile rhetoric against Hispanic populations in the U.S. (Fermoso, 2018), research reports increases in teasing and bullying of students due to race or ethnicity (Huang & Cornell, 2019). Additionally, Latinx middle school girls have historically experienced socio-cultural pressures that lead them to quit school (Daisey & Jose-Kampfer, 2002). Schools and their communities would benefit from engaging students in relevant learning experiences that encourage agency.

This study reports research focused on Latinx sixth grade students' experiences at an urban middle school in Los Angeles who participated in our research team's yearlong journalism-based media education intervention embedded in their social studies classes. Students researched, interviewed, wrote, and published articles on the Internet about social justice themes, including immigration, feminism, racism, gun violence, and LGBTQ rights. Through these experiences, students interrogated pervasive negative narratives while working independently and collaborating with one another.

The purpose of this study was to examine if and how critical pedagogy and social justice pedagogy emerged in students' reflections on their experiences with the journalistic learning intervention. Through students' voices, we sought to understand how this approach to media education benefits Latinx students, which parts of the intervention framework and undergirding foundational theories were most salient to students, and which components require closer consideration during program implementation.

JOURNALISTIC LEARNING IN MEDIA EDUCATION

Media literacy education asks students to produce media and use and critique it (NAMLE, n.d.). The participatory component of media education is essential for young people from historically marginalized groups who have been maligned, underrepresented, or stereotyped in mainstream media because it allows them to reject and rewrite negative narratives (Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2019). Additionally, participatory media education employing civics, like integrating social justice issues, supports students' civic and political engagement (Hogdin, 2019). Traditional high school journalism programs can also help students' civic development and engagement (Bobkowski & Miller, 2016; Clark & Monserrate, 2011). Yet, student media programs are not equally available to all: small schools and schools with higher levels of poverty are less likely than large schools and schools with lower levels of poverty to have student media production opportunities (Bobkowski et al., 2012). Therefore, one goal of media education should be to ensure all students have access to media production experiences, like journalism, and the civic and academic benefits these experiences afford.

Following these media education traditions, journalistic learning is a pedagogical approach that utilizes practices from professional journalism to support students' learning, motivation, and achievement in a core language arts and social studies classroom setting (Madison, 2012, 2015). The next section articulates the alignment between the journalistic learning framework (see Figure 1) and critical pedagogy and social justice pedagogy perspectives.

Figure 1. *Journalistic learning framework core components*

Journalistic learning uses local and current national events alongside students' funds of knowledge, or cultural and community knowledge, to cultivate enhanced awareness, confidence, and expression

through journalism's writing and publication process. Students think critically about their world by exploring it through self-directed and collaborative researching, interviewing, writing, and publishing (Madison et al., 2019; Wojcicki & Izumi, 2015). Journalistic learning calls for all students to be immersed in real-world issues through first-person encounters with experts, information, and events to develop a balanced and critical approach to complex problems (Madison, 2015).

Critical pedagogy

Though critical pedagogy has many conceptualizations (Breuing, 2011), its central goal is to situate students as agentic subjects in their own education and challenge the power structures that oppress them (Giroux, 2010). Freire (1985) argued that traditional classrooms perpetuate a culture of silence, reinforce oppressive self-conceptions that inhibit transformative learning, and employ a banking model in which teachers control and students passively receive knowledge. This model inhibits students' potential to "develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world" (Freire, 2018[1968], p. 73).

Freire's problem-posing model restores agency to students, recognizing them as sources of knowledge inside and outside the classroom, aligning well with a journalistic approach. Educators using this model understand students are "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire, 2018/1968, p. 81). Lessons and assignments allow students to practice exploration, questioning, and co-creation of knowledge through the formation of culture circles, in which students cultivate their voice. Emancipatory dialogue gives rise to Freire's (2018/1968) conscientization, or consciousness-raising, creating opportunities for students to see themselves as transformational agents in the world.

Like Freire, other critical perspectives have argued for tapping into students' experiences, perspectives, and interests as sources for empowerment and civic engagement because infusing life-related themes into coursework can make it more relevant for students. Thus, critical consciousness is an explicit aim of critical pedagogy. Though multiple models have been developed (Jemal, 2017), critical consciousness is conceptualized often with two components: (a) developing awareness and self-efficacy – a sense of agency – for critical reflection and (b) enacting an attitude and behavior toward critical action. The process

of journalistic learning provides a salient example of these in action.

Critical reflection and action in journalistic learning

As seen in Figure 1, journalistic learning incorporates four core components—voice, agency, publishing, and reflection. Agency and reflection are the two components aligned to critical reflection, undergirding students' preparation for critical action. In this approach, when students gain awareness of issues through secondary research and first-hand interviews, their potential for agency increases: they align their confidence, values, and sense of control to the writing task. Because many adolescent students experience stress, anxiety, and other adverse effects when writing (Cleary, 1991), cultivating student agency through a journalistic process is one way to motivate student writing and mitigate resistance (Madison et al., 2019). Especially regarding social issues with high personal relevance, journalistic learning facilitates exploration directly related to students' intrinsic and lived experiences, increasing persistence to create multiple drafts and share with the public.

Students' reflection throughout the process cements their growth in critical awareness, agency, and writing skills, facilitating new understanding about critical issues and their own potential for impact (Madison et al., 2019). Voice expresses students' perspectives and experiences, empowering students to discover and assert their values and convictions – the first part of critical action. The increased agency enables students to learn that their voice can make a difference and influence others. By learning about social justice topics from activists and crafting stories for an audience beyond their classroom, publishing allows students to see their agency take critical action: students see their efforts shared with an authentic audience of peers, family, and community members, which is essential for student investment in learning (Tate & Taylor, 2014).

Just as educational philosopher John Dewey (1997/1938; 2015/1916) urged educators to enable classrooms to be democratic spaces, journalistic learning simultaneously builds a foundation for critical thinking about differing views and openness to them (Madison et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, then, Dewey's idea of a democratic classroom emphasized communication (Dewey, 1997/1938). Aligned to Freire's aim at conscientization and Dewey's aim for democratic classrooms, the journalistic learning

framework and pedagogy build toward broader media education goals to equip students to take ownership in their learning and create and share new knowledge through inquiry- and project-based assignments (Kellner & Share, 2007; Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2019; Share, 2015; Thoman & Jolls, 2004). One journalistic learning goal is to align these traditions within media education to enable students, whose ethnic identities are often stereotyped or erased by mainstream media outlets (Chuang & Chin Roemer, 2015; Dixson & Linz, 2000; Gonzalez-Sobrino, 2020; Sui & Paul, 2017), to contribute their voices to the movement for social justice. Students can engage in critical issues through a social justice pedagogical lens, pushing back against narratives that may negatively affect their lives and communities.

Social justice pedagogy

While journalistic learning connects to critical pedagogy through process, it connects to social justice pedagogy through content and purpose. Social justice pedagogy, or "teaching to produce social justice" and "offer possibilities for transformation" (Moje, 2007, pp. 3-4), challenges society's norms and conventions, sometimes in challenging or uncomfortable ways (Bialystok, 2014; Mintz, 2013). Social justice pedagogy demands that students have access to mainstream knowledge and can question and challenge what is accepted as conventional (Moje, 2007). Implicitly, then, this approach recognizes students as contributors of knowledge with valuable experiences and insights or funds of knowledge. Funds of knowledge are the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" learned from local communities (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). Social justice pedagogy, through journalistic learning intentionally incorporates students' funds of knowledge, like personal experience with discrimination and bias, into their research on social issues to create knowledge that challenges the status quo.

In this study, the issue of access to literacy and media education for Latinx students is itself a social justice issue. To engage in critical reflection for critical action, students must be prepared with the necessary skills in research and writing. Because Latinx students start school "significantly behind their peers" (Gándara,

2017, para. 7), they trail in measures of academic success, achievement, and attainment, compared to Asian and white peers.[1] Bilingual Latinx students may also face educational gaps resulting from movement in and out of English as a Second Language or special education classes (Jiménez, 2004).

Historically, Latinx students who attend heavily segregated schools are more likely to be affected by sub-par funding, curricula, and personnel (Jiménez, 2003; Paul, 2004; Gándara, 2017). Along with school segregation, Latinx students face systemic social issues, like poverty and generational trauma from racism and immigration (Gándara, 2017), and institutional biases, like meritocratic, deficit, and assimilationist thinking that lower Latinx students' status (Bartolomé & Balderrama, 2001). Literacy instruction itself is challenging, as dominant views of literacy value white, middle- and upper-class logics and devalue transnational life experiences, hampering Latinx students' academic success and teachers' abilities to support learning (Jiménez, 2002, 2003, 2004). Developing Latinx students' agency for research and writing through personally and locally meaningful social justice topics is social justice pedagogy at two levels − closing an important opportunity gap and facilitating students' critical reflection and critical action.

Research questions

Journalistic learning is built on the theoretical foundation of critical pedagogy for critical consciousness with goals of social justice education in the research and writing process. Our study sought to understand the student experience in this media education intervention through the lenses of critical pedagogy and social justice pedagogy. These two research questions guided the process:

RQ1: How do key aspects of critical pedagogy (co-investigation, conscientization, culture circles, exploration, and questioning the world) emerge in Latinx student reflections on the journalistic learning experience?

RQ2: How do key aspects of social justice pedagogy (namely interrogating conventional knowledge and engaging funds of knowledge) emerge in Latinx student reflections on the journalistic learning experience?

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[1] Following other journalism organizations (e.g., The Associated Press and the Columbia Journalism Review), we do not capitalize white.

METHODS

We approached this study in a research-practitioner partnership, where the research team developed the classroom practices used in journalistic learning alongside practitioners. Given the two principal researchers' positionality, a third researcher, further removed from the program, led the study design and data analysis.

Instruction and instructional context: Journalistic learning in Los Angeles

The journalistic learning model investigated in this study paired a trained journalist with a classroom teacher to collaboratively plan and teach journalism skills. Students practiced identifying a story that reflected students' interests; researching what was known about the story; contextualizing through who, what, where, when, why, and how questions; seeking expert sources; preparing questions and conducting interviews; writing stories, and publishing digital stories and/or print media.

Sessions were facilitated by Mr. Ramirez[2], a former journalist and educator, and Carolina and Luz, two Latina recent college graduates who worked as instructional aides during journalism lessons. Carolina and Luz trained in journalistic learning and pedagogy before beginning instructional support with Mr. Ramirez. They collaborated with Ms. Ortega, the students' middle school Social Studies teacher, to develop student-centered lessons that integrate journalism skills.

While Mr. Ramirez and Ms. Ortega provided some direct instruction, lessons were highly interactive and centered on journalism's practical nature (see Table 1). For example, when students began their journalism projects, they were prompted to identify their questions and prior knowledge and maintain facts they discovered through online research and interviews (see Appendix 1). Ms. Ortega and Mr. Ramirez demonstrated interviewing by questioning one another. They solicited student feedback and critiques and asked students to critique one another. This prepared students to interview community experts, a foundational step in researching and writing their soon-to-be-published stories. Collaboratively, students wrote and published their stories online. They also created slideshows and gave oral presentations to share their stories with the class.

Mr. Ramirez often utilized culture circles, or discussion-based small groups, to foster self-expression. Teams reflect the collaborative nature of newsrooms and the pedagogy of journalistic learning to support student agency and success. Student teams selected story topics, researched prospective experts and community leaders, and conducted interviews in person or via videoconferencing. Students wrote their articles and engaged in peer-to-peer and teacher-led editing before publishing their work online to be read by authentic audiences, like family, community members, and others beyond teachers and classmates.

Table 1. *Journalistic learning instructional objectives and corresponding student actions and framework dimensions*

Instructional objectives	Example of student action	Framework dimension
Originate/advocate for ideas	Story pitches	Voice/Agency
Collaborate with peers	Paired and group work	Voice
Discussion/ presentation skills	Culture circles	Voice
Discern credible information	Research information	Agency
Engage with primary sources	Interviews	Voice/Agency
Synthesize findings	Write/edit	Voice/Agency
Share to authentic audience	Create a website	Publish
Self and teacher critiques	Debrief	Reflection

Participants

The school primarily serves students historically marginalized due to race, ethnicity, language, and systemic socioeconomic inequities. The student population is 100% Latinx, and 84% qualify for free or reduced lunch (Public School View, 2019).

Ms. Ortega invited all intervention participants to join focus groups near the end of the 2017-18 school year. Fifteen students − 14 girls and one boy − returned

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[2] All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

parental consent forms, assented to participate, and completed the focus group interviews. Participants were not compensated for their participation. According to the interview protocol and procedures approved by the institutional review board, focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed for qualitative analysis.

Procedures and analysis

Qualitative data were collected to answer our research questions and "discover how the respondent sees the world" (McCracken, 1988, p. 21). Focus group interviews effectively uncover shared knowledge and create opportunities for marginalized people to speak authentically about their ideas and experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Morgan, 1997; Southwell et al., 2005). Also, focus groups are an age-appropriate method for students because they reflect classroom interactions, support sharing opinions and ideas, reduce power dynamics with an adult moderator, and strengthen participants' confidence to contribute (Clark, 2009; Gibson, 2012; Hennessy & Heary, 2005)[3].

A white male researcher conducted the semi-structured focus groups. He attended and observed one journalistic learning class to establish rapport with students. The interviewer used semi-structured questions (Morgan, 1997) to ask about student experiences and personal development and engaged students in authentic conversation. (See Appendix 2.) When appropriate, the interviewer deviated from pre-written questions to probe student responses for further explanation or clarification. To ensure students could speak, focus groups were small; the 15 participants were randomly assigned to one of five focus groups, each with three participants. Interviews ranged from 18 to 25 minutes with an average length of 21 minutes.

After transcription, focus group data were qualitatively coded. To answer RQ1, data were coded thematically for evidence of critical pedagogy in students' statements, which included these a priori codes derived from Freire's (1985, 2018/1968) work: (a) critical co-investigation, (b) exploration, (c) questioning the world, (d) culture circles, and (e) conscientization. To answer RQ2, data were coded thematically for evidence of social justice pedagogy in students' statements, which included a priori codes based on Moje

(2007) and Moll et al.'s (1992) work, respectively: (a) interrogating conventional knowledge and (b) engaging funds of knowledge.

RESULTS

Critical pedagogy is foundational to journalistic learning's pedagogical approach. In this case study, the teachers and researchers also infused social justice pedagogy into their instruction. These research questions work to understand how those theoretical underpinnings played out in the classroom through students' explanations of their experiences with journalistic learning focused on social justice topics. This section explains our analysis of these theories in action, first with critical pedagogy then social justice pedagogy.

RQ1: Critical pedagogy

To analyze focus group data for evidence of critical pedagogy, we coded using five tenets in Freire's writing: students as critical co-investigators, conscientization, culture circles, exploration, and questioning the world. Overall, student responses evidenced all principles of critical pedagogy occurring while also indicating how those tenets can be improved to provide more meaningful learning experiences in media education and journalistic learning.

Co-investigation. Only a few responses reflected critical co-investigation, in which teachers and students share authority in the classroom. Students shared one clear example: students analyzed each other's work and provided feedback to their classmates. In explaining this process, Elena said, "we went on the website and everyone, like their group that they did it with, you would go up and you would, like, project your article on to the whiteboard, and like, we would have to score it." With Isabel, Elena explained that peer review included evaluating and providing feedback on eye contact, vocal delivery, and posture. In this way, students were empowered as knowledgeable individuals able to support their classmates' growth and the teachers were not the sole authority in the classroom.

Emilia expressed that journalistic learning provided students "more variety and more freedom" than other classes because topics were not imposed: "in language

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[3] Because authentic publication is a pillar of this intervention, student work is published online with students' names and photos. A web search using text from their articles may return results that direct readers to the students' webpage. While

sharing student work would contribute to this study, we decided not to include student work or quote it to preserve participant anonymity. This is especially important to protect those who may have vulnerable immigration statuses.

arts class they're like, 'oh, you have to talk about this topic and then you can do your own research.' But in journalism, it's more unique because […] you have more variety you can choose from." She added that students chose social justice topics and worked with students who shared the same interest: "So it's basically like we get more variety and more freedom with our writing." Students felt they directed their own inquiry and developed their own areas of interest.

Conscientization. To investigate conscientization, data were coded for evidence of students seeing themselves as transformational agents – witnessing changes in themselves and influencing others and situations. Data indicated that learning about social justice issues through journalistic research and writing supported students' conscientization. Students expressed wanting to help others facing oppression and some even described wanting to change systems of oppression. However, only a few connected the potential for journalistic writing to support that change.

Students' expressions of conscientization demonstrated understanding of an agentic self in the face of large social issues. Most of their statements reflected wanting to help. For example, Mateo shared, "I'm on the racism group, and I wanted to join that group because I want to stop racism because racism is still going on." Carla, in the LGBTQ group, expressed similar ideas: "I want to do something to help them because some places, like in Canada, I think it is, that they're being mistreated." Sofia shared that writing about social justice issues in their second story of the year had a different effect on students' agency than the first journalistic writing project that focused on personal interests: "the first one it was like, okay, we got fun through it, we got used to [journalism]. The second one was like, okay, it's serious. Okay, what can we do about it?" These comments indicate that students see themselves as helpers for these systemic issues.

A few students took helping a step further by clearly expressing their role in challenging social problems. One student, Luci, put it like this:

Like, I didn't know about this kind of thing, and now it's, like, getting bigger. And, like, we should, like, stop it, you know? Like, because it gets worse. And I guess, knowing about these topics, we get to do something in life. We get to change that. And then we should, like, know, get deeper into the details that have been happening with discrimination, homeless people, immigration, all those kinds of things. Like, we should know what's happening in there. That's what's important to me. Like, knowing that I get to learn about this stuff. And then someday change all that in the future.

Daniela and Olivia shared similar thoughts in another focus group. Daniela said that because of this intervention,

[I] know things that I never thought I was gonna know. And that I could help, even though I'm, like… People say we're still little and that we can't do anything, but knowing that we could do something and researching things that we could do is very important. Knowing that we could do something.

Olivia echoed,

Like [Daniela] said, people, think we are little. And we can't do much, but we as little kids have the power to think of what we could do in the future. And the most important thing is that we need to know what we can do to help homeless people, immigrated people, discrimination, racism – stuff like that in the future. We need to, like, know how to help that, so it could stop or calm down.

Daniela and Olivia's comments demonstrate their internalized sense of agency. However, like Luci, their focus is primarily on the future. They would benefit from understanding that their impact can start now.

One way to do this is to commit to publishing student work and making it accessible to authentic audiences – a core component of the journalistic learning framework. In today's digital age, that often means posting to a classroom blog or website that friends, family, and others can view. When asked if publishing their stories was important, Rosa, Natalia, and Ximena all agreed but could not explain why it was important to them. Olivia, Luci, and Daniela affirmed that publishing their stories influenced how seriously they took the project and caused them to work harder. Luci explained: "Yeah, because then, like, people, like would be, like, 'So let's try to be interested on this. Like, these kids are writing, we should make a change.'" Luci's comment suggests that publishing stories can inform and influence others' ideas and behaviors about social justice.

Culture circles. Culture circles, the tenet of critical pedagogy in which groups of students discuss and build knowledge together, manifested as small groups that worked collaboratively. Freire's conception of culture circles centered dialogue as the force behind problem-posing and solving; the culture circles in this intervention also required students to converse and create, building knowledge in groups of three to four students with shared social justice interests. Students' responses to culture circles – which they referred to as small groups and group work – reflected positive and negative experiences.

Students who had positive experiences referenced group members and their commitment as important

factors. Julieta and Sofia said that working in groups was generally good, with Sofia adding that it is "a little better as long as you have the people that will focus and do the work." Emilia, arguably the most enthusiastic about her culture circle experiences, said, "I think, like, working in groups was really fun. Like, this semester with, like, everyone's doing something and it's just not, like, yourself like the past semester." Others shared how working together with their group members supported the work they did: Isabel said, "It's more easier," and Ximena said that small groups "help you work on, like, teamwork." Natalia shared similar sentiments: "It's because we all work together. We all gather information. And we all try to put out the story, so we all try as best as we can."

Incohesive groups were evident in students' negative experiences with culture circles. Julieta shared her frustration with unfocused team members who unintentionally deleted part of their completed work. Similarly, Elena expressed frustration with uncooperative group members that nearly caused her to quit: "I was like, I'm so tired. I don't want to do this anymore. I want to leave class because… because it gets on my nerves." Elena mentioned that her uncooperative groupmates were boys. Gender came up among other students, too. Mateo said he did not like working with girls and, because his group was all girls, he preferred working alone. Sofia shared a gender-related problem with her small group, too: some of the girls worked well together but picked on the boy member.

Exploration. Focus group data showed that exploration occurred, and students vividly described opportunities to engage with unfamiliar ideas, information, and skills. Daniela summarized these intersections in students' experiences:

> Like, it was interesting facts […] and it makes us learn new things. That, like, first we didn't know what to do or, like, what do we do here? But right now, we know, like, that we research more deeply. We know we can write more things. And that these things are really important.

When asked if they developed new interests in topics, Ximena, Rosa, and Natalia enthusiastically agreed and shared what they think now. Natalia and Ximena, and separately Daniela, said that they watch the news more to learn about what is going on. This provides evidence that journalistic learning centered on social justice prompts students to explore new ideas even outside of school.

The clearest example of exploration for students was through interviewing experts, which Elena explained as:

> Well, you have to do research on the topic you're talking about. Research, and then you have to come up with questions you want to ask so you can find out more information. You have to ask questions that you don't, nobody knows the answer to yet […] that you can't find on a website that you have to ask the person to find those answers.

Luna shared, "since we didn't really know about our topics, we got to learn a lot more stuff because of researching and, like, interviewing." In addition to exploring the world, interviewing allowed students to explore themselves. Carla shared that interviewing was important to her because talking to expert sources is:

> like finding out what you want to be when you get older and finding other people that are, like, artists and singers and many more. We get to ask them questions, like if they actually wanted to be […] or they wanted to be something else and it never came true.

Exploring the world through interviewing other people led some students to self-exploration.

Questioning the world. Questioning the world presented in multiple ways, each demonstrating a deeper level of questioning. The first level was students seeing the world in ways they had not before, specifically regarding the social justice topics. Emilia's comments are evidence of first seeing the problems as an important step for students:

> I think since we know more about the topic, it's just not something like, Oh, it's just on the news, whatever. But, like, since we know something, we know about the topic, it kind of affects us more. […] We kind of just know it's not right or it is right.

In a similar vein, Daniela said:

> we had the opportunity to learn something new, to discover things that we were – we didn't even know existed, and that was a big problem for us. And this made us, like, um, realize that there is a lot of problems and that we never knew that we could have learned this since the beginning. But thanks to journalism, we now know.

Whether from watching the news like Elena and listening to speakers like Luna, or from broader awareness of issues they were interested in previously like Julieta, students' awareness of social justice issues from journalistic learning helped them begin questioning the world.

The second level to questioning the world was students expressing a desire to help those facing oppression and/or to create change. Luna said of researching and interviewing, "We got to learn stuff, and like, that's important because we need to know what's

going on around the world and how we can help it." Luci gave voice to not just helping but changing, saying, "That's what's important to me. Like, knowing that I get to learn about this stuff. And then someday change all that in the future." Luci also shared that watching the news makes her feel more informed and empowered to act: "I watch the news more […] see what's happening, like, you know, so I can make a change, you know? Us, like, people should make a change. And kids, too." In addition to changing the world, two students, Emilia and Anita, expressed that writing about social justice issues can change people. Generally, students focused on future-oriented rather than present-based change.

RQ2: Social justice pedagogy

The students' projects during media education intervention addressed social justice issues. However, learning about social justice topics does not ensure social justice pedagogy occurred in the classroom. Therefore, this research question aims to understand how students experienced social justice pedagogy in this intervention. Based on the work of Moje (2007) and Moll et al. (1992), the two areas we coded were: (a) interrogating conventional knowledge and (b) engaging funds of knowledge.

Interrogating conventional knowledge. Students who interrogated conventional knowledge showed evidence of analytical thought about what they learned. Moje (2007) writes social justice pedagogy "requires that educators teach students not only knowledge but also how to critique knowledge" (p. 4). Therefore, this code required evidence of students sharing critical comments and questions about what they learned or knew.

Students' interrogation of conventional knowledge appeared to be in nascent stages. Yet, there was some evidence of critical thought about the topics they researched. Some expressed not knowing or caring much about their issues before but finding interest – and shock – while researching. Like Elena, who said:

[E]ver since we started journalism, I've been looking more and more into it, and doing more research about racism. And I was like, wow. I never knew about any of these things. Yet, it's going on, and I didn't know any of it.

Luci's comments were also in the early stages of questioning conventional knowledge:

I wasn't that interested in discrimination or those kinds of things. But then when I started learning about, um, research about

discrimination, that's when I got really interested. I was like, 'Oh my god,' like, I didn't know about this. Like, I should, like, research more about discrimination and homeless people, you know, those kind of things… Now that, like, I'm focused on immigration, other things, I'm like, okay, so we've got to focus on this part. So, we get to know and change something right there, because, like, people should change.

Daniela made a similar statement. These comments suggest that engaging with these social justice topics acted as a catalyst for a few students to identify gaps in their knowledge and reconsider what they knew regarding these issues.

However, some students spoke about challenging a commonly held idea outside the scope of their social justice topics. As quoted above regarding conscientization, Daniela and Olivia challenged the conventional assumption that adolescents cannot instigate change. Their comments demonstrate the girls' agency in challenging a common assumption imposed on youth. Overall, the focus group comments did not yield large amounts of data showing the interrogation of conventional knowledge; however, the findings suggest that journalistic learning can be a starting place for that kind of critical, analytical inquiry to occur.

Engaging funds of knowledge. Funds of knowledge engage familial and community knowledge as valuable and meaningful, seeing community members as experts of community life. Although one goal of the intervention was for students to examine social justice issues occurring in their communities through journalistic learning, focus group data do not show that happening effectively. Students like Elena, Luci, Natalia, and Ximena discussed their social justice topics with their families or watched the news together; however, they did not share that these interactions engaged familial insight or community experiences in understanding their topics. Instead, the students shared experiences, as evidenced above, about researching issues online to prepare for interviewing experts.

Despite little evidence for engagement with familial funds of knowledge, engagement with the local community through interviews was meaningful for students. Students were enthusiastic about interviewing community experts, which Natalia called "my favorite moment," and Anita and Emilia identified it as the most important take-away from journalism class. Central to these comments about importance is the active and personal nature of the interviews. Students, like Luna, shared that they found interviewing important because "We asked our own questions." And Isabel said, "We got to ask questions about what we're writing about, and

they answered most of our questions." Students shared that they felt practicing and conducting interviews reduced their nerves (Carla, Natalia, and Elena), learning and practicing speaking techniques improved their presentation skills (Mateo, Sofia, and Emilia), and journalistic learning improved their writing skills (Daniela, Rose, and Sofia) and their confidence in writing (Olivia, Luci, Natalia, and Julieta).

These experiences also are not found in other classes: when asked how journalism class is different from her English language arts class, Anita said, "I think it's different because we get to interview people about what they learned about, and not just research them up. We get to talk to them about what they think about the topic." In these comments, students provide evidence of localized, experiential learning.

DISCUSSION

With a 10% high school dropout rate for Latinx-identifying students (Gramlich, 2017), educators are compelled to identify and implement educational strategies to foster a sense of agency and meaningful engagement. Educational methods and pedagogical practices can honor students' cultural affinity and interests and incorporate their lived experiences while also developing their empowerment. Social justice themes that integrate critical pedagogy, awareness, agency, advocacy, and authentic publication may be the missing links to making tedious skill development common to writing feel relevant and worthwhile. Students' enthusiastic response to the social justice topics in this study should suggest to educators that they may need to worry less when introducing contentious or challenging subject material to middle school students if they use an active and empowering learning process, such as a journalistic learning approach to critical literacy in media education.

Providing engaging and culturally responsive media education through journalistic learning benefits stakeholders and the public good. This study highlights the potential to develop students' critical awareness about social justice issues taking place in their communities. Students' insights highlighted multiple goals of media education that journalistic learning can bridge into other content areas, including critical thinking (Masterman, 1985), critical autonomy (Masterman, 1985), understanding the constructed nature of media (Share, 2015), and discovery (Madison, 2015).

Members of this Latinx middle school student sample described how they experienced critical pedagogy and social justice pedagogy through journalistic learning. They engaged in diverse and meaningful experiences, exploration, and questioning, cultivating critical consciousness and agency. Students shared how hands-on experiential learning in interviewing and writing increased their self-efficacy and interest in writing, important for critical reflection. As the next section elaborates, student focus groups suggested areas in which journalistic learning can improve, including: (a) intentionally engaging funds of knowledge and focusing on social justice within students' local communities, (b) discussing the role of publishing in the journalistic process, and (c) purposefully situating students as critical co-investigators in the classroom.

Implications for practice: Opportunities for program improvement

Although journalistic learning provides the framework for critical co-investigation to occur, focus group responses yielded little evidence of critical co-investigation. More intentional efforts to develop and discuss shared authority could support opportunities for metacognitive awareness of their role as critical co-investigators. Only one student shared that the process of publishing helped students see how their journalism directly impacts the people who read it, indicating that drawing that connection is possible. One way to better support student conscientization through journalistic learning is to build awareness of how journalism is a form of critical action by informing people and changing their minds and behaviors through reporting new information from multiple perspectives. This emphasis may shift students understanding about how social transformation can begin by changing people's minds.

It is noteworthy that a few students said they never viewed their published stories. Specifically, when asked if publishing was important, Carla said it was not. She, Anita, and Emilia shared that they had not viewed their stories online. This brings up the question of who pushes the "publish" button. Ms. Ortega completed that step for her classes. For some students, knowing their work would be published was meaningful, but others may need to complete this final step to feel ownership. The importance of being the agent to publish one's work is a question that can be asked of future research. It is possible that awareness of and readiness for critical

action requires more time and development of agency and critical reflection.

The positive experiences of some students suggest that culture circles can be meaningful pedagogical structures during journalistic learning about social justice. Elena was asked how her ineffective small group could be improved, and she said students should "practice agreeing." This student-generated insight suggests that working in groups must be developed, established, and practiced for the culture circles to be effective and meaningful. For instance, perspective-taking to find common ground can be practiced with low-stakes activities before more controversial issues are approached. Educators cannot expect that doing journalistic learning about a shared social justice topic will automatically result in effective collaboration; culture circles need to be implemented and practiced in order to improve the journalistic learning experience. Additionally, while it may be easy to dismiss gender-based problems in small groups due to adolescence, ways to improve those issues should be considered. Teachers can raise awareness about gendered issues and guide students on ways to structure group dialogue to disrupt gender norms.

Student responses indicated that critical reflection and questioning the world occurred for some students but not all. One improvement could be to build in explicit discussions and modeling about how to question the way things are. Situating this clearly in a framework of journalistic learning with guided practice may help students ask questions and encourage teachers to encourage critical questioning.

Though students may act on their funds of knowledge, implicitly, in journalistic learning, it appears that familial knowledge was not explicitly drawn on for the topics students studied. Although students brought home what they learned to engage with family, the opportunity for engaging funds of knowledge could be more intentional in future journalistic learning interventions. Professional journalism reinforces the importance of objectivity and neutrality, as well as relying on experts as sources, which enables writers to remove themselves from the story. However, some types of journalism, like solutions and community journalism, provide alternative approaches that create the opportunity for community members with lived experiences to engage as experts. In addition, it may also be important to guide students to focus their stories on how social justice issues are present within the local community, as opposed to taking a more global approach to these broad issues. This step would create

opportunities to engage familial and local knowledge in expert ways. It should be noted that students in the focus group referenced interviewing and writing about people from their families and immediate communities in their first journalistic project, which was outside the scope of this study. However, this indicates the potential for the journalistic learning model to tap into funds of knowledge.

This study focused on the Latinx experience specifically, so future research should consider these same questions for students of other historically underrepresented groups. This sample's participants included mostly girls, so future research should try to include more students of other genders to get a more diverse participant group. Future research might also explore if and how incorporating first languages and non-English news sources into journalistic learning impacts student experiences. While findings from focus groups should be generalized beyond this sample with caution, this study demonstrated that adolescent Latinx students are ready for the enhanced awareness, critical thinking, and empowered sense of agency to be advocates for social justice causes they care about.

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Table 1. *Journalism research and fact sheet*

Student Name:	**Social Justice Topic:**

Background:

What do I know about this topic? What personal knowledge or history do I know about this topic? What local [school, neighborhood, etc.] history do I know about this topic?

Main Points:

Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?

Or what? So what? Now what?

New Vocabulary:

Original Questions:

APPENDIX B
Focus groups interview questions

Except for the opening and closing questions (noted below), questions were asked in any order or omitted based on student responses. Follow-ups, clarifications, and probes are not included in this list.

- *Opening question*: Is there a moment from the journalism learning class that stands out to you as something memorable?
- What are some of the skills you learned? What are the most important parts of this program?
- What makes this different than other classes?
- Do you feel like you are gaining more confidence in writing? Are you more interested in writing?
- In what ways do you feel you as a person are developing through journalism?
- What was the difference for you between the first project [non-social justice topic] and the second project [social justice topic]?
- Are you paying more attention to these topics and news more outside of school?
- What was your experience working in groups? Has that been successful? What would make working in groups more successful?
- *Closing question*: Is there anything else you want to share that I didn't ask? Is there anything you would do to improve the program?