



# Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA

## Research Briefs

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### Holistic Critical Race Pedagogies: Embracing Wholeness Through Resiliency Circles

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Critical Race Pedagogies (CRPs) allow us to engage in liberatory pedagogies for students who have historically been at the margins (Lynn, 1999). As a formerly undocumented, first-generation, Guatemalan student and academic with Mayan roots, I have seen society's assimilationist ideologies demand marginalized populations to adhere to specific norms based on colonial legacies that are often enforced through Euro-centric curriculum, policy, and pedagogical practices in schools (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). I argue that a CRP allows us to combat the continued trauma-inducing silencing of the voices and experiences of Students of Color (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Transformative pedagogical practices are needed to provide students with the opportunity to engage in critical thinking development that provides them with the language and tools necessary to name their lived experiences. As a student of Mesoamerican and indigenous healing practices, I also argue that we must pay careful attention to the process in which students engage with critical material.<sup>1</sup> It is not sufficient to provide students with theoretical tools and concepts, but we must address the whole self and being of the students. In this piece I offer a pedagogical framework, which I am naming Resiliency Circles, that is useful in fostering spaces that honor students' experiences in becoming critically aware through a holistic lens.

#### RESILIENCY CIRCLES AS HOLISTIC CRITICAL RACE PEDAGOGIES

Because racism is felt on a material, physical, emotional, and spiritual level, it is important that we create specific pedagogical frameworks that address students' entire being (Solórzano, 1998). Drawing from the Mayan concept of *Inlak'ech* — a concept that highlights our mind, body, soul, and emotions as well as our relationships to others and the environment — I have developed the pedagogical framework of Resiliency Circles. Resiliency Circles are part of a CRP framework that validate the mind, body, soul, and emotions of students, in essence, their holistic selves. This framework is based in mindfulness and the honoring of Indigenous epistemologies and teachings shared by Indigenous elders, which is a direct challenge to the Euro-centric ways of teaching and learning in U.S. classrooms (Coronado, 2012). Resiliency Circles aim to decolonize traditional pedagogical practices and create a holistic space for students to critically discuss systems of power and oppression, but to also connect to their own epistemologies of resiliency and that of their communities. I argue that we must create brave and healing spaces<sup>2</sup> where our students not only analyze critical knowledge but also connect with their whole selves as a form of decolonization, healing, and empowerment in ways that traditional schooling has not taught or allowed.

By challenging existing teacher-student power relations, the prevailing banking method of education, and embodying a social justice mission of education, these circles provide students an opportunity to continue becoming aware of their own history and community memories which may help foster what Yosso (2005) names “resistant capital.” Through Resiliency Circles, we engage in communal discussion about topics such as racial segregation and historical and contemporary educational inequality in schools. Through these discussions we are also intentional in taking into account the effects of intergenerational trauma that has occurred through colonization, diasporas, racism, and other forms of oppression. However, an important component of a Resiliency Circle is that we also take into account the intergenerational resiliency that has existed simultaneously for the marginalized communities that many of these students identify with (Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). While topics discussed in Resiliency Circles may vary, always present is the exploration of students’ holistic selves. In other words, as students name their realities with theoretical frameworks, such as Critical Race Theory, we pay close attention to the emotions felt in the process. As a holistic CRP, culturally marginalized practices such as story-telling, art, and poetry are

validated and used to process students’ intellectual awareness and connection to all parts of the self, including emotions and the body. In facilitating Resiliency Circles, I have seen the awareness and/or validation of social inequality and the “naming” students’ realities bring many reactions, which are not only intellectual but also emotional and physical. Reactions have included crying during a Resiliency Circle. This is important to highlight because a Holistic CRP honors all students’ emotional, physical, and intellectual reactions and sees them as a valid form of healing in the face of continuous violence to Communities of Color. It is important that we engage in such practices so that we continue to create spaces that empowers students in a socio-political climate that denies Communities of Color their own humanities through violent, racist rhetoric and policies.

Informed by Talking Circles, such as those conducted in Indigenous communities, a Resiliency Circle is started in a sacred, respectful, and mindful manner. It is established that everyone in the circle is both a teacher and a learner regardless of established power dynamics in the education system. Resiliency Circles as a framework, function in a variety of spaces for a variety of students, including high school, college, and graduate students. Beginning with critical discussion, we engage with a particular topic.

An example of a discussion topic is the historical and contemporary analysis of the educational system and the impact of its policies and practices in our communities. While we are discussing the topic intellectually, we are also connecting it to each of the member’s experiences navigating the education system. We examine how those experiences have impacted their identities, life, and communities. The dialogue is not only intellectual, as emotions about these experiences are expressed through culturally relevant, decolonial mindful practices such as art, poetry, music, and body movement. Then we analyze what we have learned about the intergenerational trauma and also the intergenerational resiliency of our ancestors. For example, while studying educational inequity, I present to students information about the various movements that have existed for educational equity such as the East LA Walkouts<sup>3</sup> and the fight for Ethnic Studies on college campuses. In Resiliency Circles we spend time discussing resiliency development and different strategies to persevere as they navigate often hostile educational institutions. The dialogue about our own resiliency development and of our communities is an integral part of these circles. As students leave the circle, they can explain different forms in which they have engaged in resiliency and how their communities have as well.

During the circles, we integrate our stories and our families' as part of the culturally relevant tools used. We reflect on concepts such as, *Living in the Borderlands* (Anzaldúa, 1987), *Community Cultural Wealth* (Yosso, 2005) and the Mayan concept of *Inlak'Ech*. We share ideas about developing practices utilizing sacred and ancestral teachings to build community, honor our ancestors, to navigate our lives as People of Color in the academy. Finally, we discuss how these learning have transformed us and how it will lead to our purpose in the healing, transformation, and empowerment of our communities. Throughout this process, we share stories and tools of the decolonization of the self and of healing historical unresolved traumas of colonization.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Holistic CRPs, such as Resiliency Circles, provide an opportunity to cultivate deep personal and social awareness while honoring the bodymindspirit (Lara, 2002). The holistic pedagogical practices validate many of the students' values, ancestral wisdom, and narratives as profound holistic dialogue is created. Opportunities to acknowledge and give voice to all parts of the self are not just an added component but a vital one in education and in the mental, emotional, and physical well-

being of Students of Color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). I have found that when students are given the opportunities to truly explore themselves holistically and give voice to their experiences, they see others in the same process. Through these spaces there is a deep connection to each other — students feel seen, accepted, and understood. Holistic CRPs are a form of liberatory and transformative resistance through community building. As these spaces are provided, meaningful and powerful relationships emerge with their own selves and each other. Through Holistic CRPs, there is awareness and empowerment as one realizes that they can make a difference and be an instrument for social justice in their communities and society. Paulo Freire calls this a “profound Rebirth, as people become aware, they can no longer remain as they were” (Freire, 2009, p. 61). As educators, it is our responsibility to continue creating spaces through culturally relevant frameworks and Holistic CRPs, to not only provide a brave space for our students but to also practice reflexivity as a commitment to our own transformations, especially in times when Students of Color and their families are feeling figuratively and sometimes literally fragmented.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> My framework of Resiliency Circles is informed by cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998), which includes my professional experience as a counselor, K-12 teacher, and college professor at two and four-year institutions for the past 20 years.

<sup>2</sup> Brave and healing spaces are those that challenge students to think critically and also validate thoughts, feelings and emotions.

<sup>3</sup> See Center for Critical Race Studies Research Brief No. 13 for an in-depth discussion of the East L.A. Walkouts.

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