



Does Critical Literacy Developed by a Creative Persian Writing Curriculum Empower Self Perception of Women of Color Immigrated to Iran?

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Extended Abstract:

Modernization of a society depends on the greater demands for accountability which caused a movement based on the idea that schools should not merely impart information and ask for data memorization. Education should equip the students with critical thinking which places marginalized voices in the center. It has addressed the underrepresentation and silence of people of color in curricular inequalities. Critical literacy serves disenfranchised students in their academic and everyday lives to confront capitalism which has benefitted from the majority of the population remaining silent and not fully literate. Thus, to make room for voice expression and self-perception empowerment for women of color who live or used to live in such a system, it is important to carry out further educational research on the ways in which women of color from working-class communities have received literacy education. Hence, an innovative instructional approach such as critical literacy requires serious consideration and further investigation. The current study is designed to provide valuable information for literacy teachers to employ as they design curriculum, and select and prioritize instructional materials and practices in the classroom. More specifically, this information is designed to inform educators on the differences between using critical approaches to mentoring student writers and readers and initiating them into the writing process, and simply instructing in the traditional or instrumental

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ways that often have been used in large public schools. Furthermore, this study intends to fill a gap in the current educational research on literacy instruction in curriculums of Teaching Persian to Speakers of Other Languages (TPSOL), particularly for working-class women of color immigrated to Iran. That is, this qualitative study investigates practices of critical literacy in a Persian writing curriculum promoting development of literacy and voice and raising critical consciousness and social agency of the participants, by making use of a theoretical framework of critical pedagogy which was developed out of Freire's (1972) work and used to apply critical theory to the classroom. This critical education theory is associated with democratic principles and social action, and serves the empowerment of socially and economically oppressed populations. For emancipatory purposes, teachers and students have been co-investigators in dialogues working mutually; that is why dialogue has played a pivotal role in critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy seeks to provide all students with counter-hegemonic environments – “intellectual and social spaces where power relationships are reconstructed to make central the voices and experiences of those who have historically existed at the margins of public institutions” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 12). Critical pedagogy leads students and teachers to question traditional passages and internalized beliefs, and to take social action against social injustices. Therefore, critical educators come up with a humanizing education starting with the experiences and personal lives of students, which helps students and teachers to further develop a voice affirming their cultural, class, racial, and gender identities. The present study employs a critical narrative research method. By making use of a semi-structured narrative interview, it explores the experiences and insights of four former students of color from a women's Persian writing curriculum and its impact on their literacy, voice, and confidence development. Participants involved foreign Persian-learners who were all native-like speakers of English emigrated from the US to Iran. Under purposive sampling four participants were selected; they were women of color from the working-class who finished both their Persian learning classes and Persian creative writing curriculum at Bent Al-Hoda School in Qom, and used to study in the US public schools. At the time of this study they were from 18 to 20 years old. Former students were selected intentionally instead of the current members of the curriculum. In fact, former students have completed their experiences with the curriculum and have had some time to reflect on those experiences. The setting of the study was a private language center in which

women's Persian writing curriculum of 24 sessions were held in six months. The women voluntarily attended weekly literacy sessions of getting to know writing genres, of reading texts from marginalized perspectives written in or translated into Persian, and discussing the texts and writings. In addition

n, 6 monthly public reading sessions were held to which the students could take their parents and friends. The curriculum was for foreign women living in Qom who learned Persian in Bent Al-Hoda School. After the narrative sessions, data were transcribed and stored on a secure computer. The transcripts from the narrative sessions were analyzed by looking for repetitive themes and patterns from the participants' responses on their perceptions and experiences with the curriculum and the critical literacy approach. Also, themes and patterns were found regarding how the participants believed the curriculum and the critical literacy elements were helpful in changing them. Themes were recognized in their responses and the method of coding was employed. Since raw field notes were "the undigested complexity of reality" (Patton, 2002, p. 463), patterns and identified themes expressed by participants in their narratives were established. Next, specific responses under those themes were coded, particularly as they related to issues connected directly to the experience of critical literacy and its impact as empowering and changing. The findings from the curriculum and the perceptions of the participants indicate that critical literacy is an effective approach to literacy instruction as well as voice and agency development.

Keywords: critical literacy, Persian, women of color, empowerment

1. Introduction

Most schools around the world largely maintain the function of traditional literacy, where students simply have decoded and comprehended rather than questioned or countered texts. The traditional literacy curriculum has bolstered further hegemonic practices in schools of most countries including the US and has done little to change the inequalities which marginalize women of color. Furthermore, the implementation of rote instructional approaches has increased especially for students of color attending public schools located in underprivileged, working-class communities (Darder, 1991, 2012, 2015; Morrell, 2009; Ravitch, 2014).

Darder (2012) states that schooling in the US has been traditionally based on realizing the hegemony of capitalism and the hidden curriculum of schooling serves to preserve the power and advantages of the dominant culture. The hidden curriculum has worked to marginalize women and maintain “male-dominated gender relations” (McLaren, 2002, p. 207). Accordingly, this hidden curriculum of schooling has not allowed the voices of women of color from working-class backgrounds to find room for expression.

In this regard, Sadker et al. (2009) asserted that teachers less frequently engaged with female students and provided males with more feedback while females were asked fewer questions. The authors also mentioned that teacher time, energy, and attention were unevenly distributed in favor of male students. As a result of thousands of observation hours in various classrooms, they reported that the amount of sexist lessons and teaching practices was “startling” (Sadker et al., 2009, p. 9).

On the other hand, when women find an opportunity to engage critically their life experiences and everyday world, they play an important role in creating a counter-hegemonic atmosphere so that they can develop their voices, empower themselves and one another, while they become critically conscious of the words and the world around them (Darder, 2012, 2015; Muhammad, 2012; Winn, 2011; Wissman, 2009). Therefore, education systems which have not enabled women of color from low-income, working-class backgrounds to express their voice are in dire need for a gendered-lens for critical literacy.

Critical literacy is an innovative classroom approach that places marginalized voices in the center, it has addressed the underrepresentation and silence of people of color in curricular inequalities. In fact, critical literacy serves disenfranchised students in their academic and everyday lives to confront

capitalism which has benefitted from the majority of the population remaining silent and not fully literate (Lopez, 2011; Morrell, 2009). Thus, to make room for voice expression and self-perception empowerment for women of color who live or used to live in such a system, it is important to carry out further educational research on the ways in which women of color from working-class communities have received literacy education. Hence, an innovative instructional approach such as critical literacy requires serious consideration and further investigation.

The current study, for one, is designed to provide valuable information for literacy teachers to employ as they design curriculum, and select and prioritize instructional materials and practices in the classroom. More specifically, this information is designed to inform educators on the differences between using critical approaches to mentoring student writers and readers and initiating them into the writing process, and simply instructing in the traditional or instrumental ways that often have been used in large public schools. Furthermore, this study intends to fill a gap in the current educational research on literacy instruction in curriculums of Teaching Persian to Speakers of Other Languages (TPSOL), particularly for working-class women of color immigrated to Iran.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Critical pedagogy

Out of Freire's (1972) work, critical pedagogy (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993) was developed which was used to apply critical theory to the classroom. This critical education theory is associated with democratic principles and social action, and serves the empowerment of socially and economically oppressed populations (Darder, 1991, 2012, 2015; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2009). Since there are many concepts tied to critical pedagogy; there is no one certain set or definitive collection of principles (Bartolomé, 2009). However, critical educators have had the same vision of education as humanizing and emancipatory (Darder, 2004, 2015; Freire 2000). For emancipatory purposes, teachers and students have been co-investigators in dialogues (Bartolomé, 2009; Giroux, 2009) working mutually; that is why dialogue has played a pivotal role in critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy seeks to provide all students with counter-hegemonic environments – “intellectual and social spaces where power relationships are reconstructed to make central the voices and experiences of those who have

historically existed at the margins of public institutions” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 12). Critical pedagogy leads students and teachers to question traditional passages and internalized beliefs, and to take social action against poverty, classism, sexism, racism, and other social injustices (Darder et al., 2009). Therefore, critical educators come up with a humanizing education starting with the experiences and personal lives of students, which helps students as well as teachers to further develop a voice affirming their cultural, class, racial, and gender identities (Giroux, 2009).

Delving into critical pedagogy frameworks reveals the critical pedagogy concepts which informed the present research: (a) rejecting the banking concept of learning that considers learners as empty vessels to be filled with information (Freire, 2000); (b) acknowledging that learners are active subjects of history and agents of social change (Bartolomé, 2009; Darder, 1991; 2012; 2015; Freire, 2000); and (c) understanding that learning should begin with the students’ lives and experiences, encouraging students and teachers to further develop a voice affirming their cultural, class, racial, and gender identities (Darder, 2012; Giroux, 2009; hooks, 2000, 2003).

At last, using critical pedagogy to teach critical literacy includes “working with learners to use language to name and ‘problematize’ the world” to “take everyday ideological constructions of social relations, of class, race, and gender relations, and to question them through reading, writing, and dialogue” (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 12).

2.2.Critical literacy

Providing a clear-cut definition for critical literacy is challenging. It is an approach for critically involving with the formation of language and literacy and its relation with individual and social empowerment (Jongsma, 1991; Macedo, 2006; Shor & Pari, 1999). In fact, it is an instructional approach which critically questions socially constructed and hegemonic ideas; it is a way to analyze everything someone reads, hears, sees, and believes (Lopez, 2011; Morrell, 2009; Shor & Pari, 1999). Via reading, writing, and dialogue, students are encouraged to higher-order thinking, then they start to make their own meaning of the world through critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Lopez, 2011; Shor & Pari, 1999). Critical literacy is a process done with mutuality between teacher and students (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Shor & Pari, 1999).

Critical literacy is an emancipatory approach to language and the process of literate-becoming that challenges asymmetrical power and structures of inequality in working classes (Jongsma, 1991; Lopez, 2011; Morrell, 2009; Shor & Pari, 1999). In a learning milieu where critical literacy is utilized, several tenets would be observed: (a) sharing students' personal stories and life experiences; (b) using passages from different perspectives especially marginalized ones; (c) dialogue; and (d) writing assignments to empower social action. These tenets help raise critical consciousness, and better understand oneself and the social inequality in particular.

There have been a lot of previous studies in terms of critical literacy in second and foreign language classrooms. SoYoung (2011) in a case study examined the effectiveness of critical literacy practices with Korean EFL college students. The results indicated the significant positive correlation between students' use of critical reading and their writing strategies. It was found that other factors such as course grades, course requirements, instructors, group members, culturally-mediated expectations, English proficiency, the purpose of learning English, and attitudes toward the critical reading were important in promoting students' involvement in the critical reading practice.

Moreover, Ko and Wang (2009) investigated Taiwanese EFL teachers' perception of the significance of critical literacy in EFL teaching and found that the practice of critical literacy was seen as important and feasible on the teachers' side. The results showed that factors like students' English proficiency, students' autonomy, teaching resources, cultural difference, and political labeling must be considered by teachers when they put critical literacy into practice. Falkenstein (2003) found the practice of critical literacy faced several obstacles such as lack of time on the teacher's behalf, insufficient classroom time, large class size, and cultural expectations of education.

In more recent researches, in Ontario, Canada, Lau (2013) developed a critical literacy program based upon Cummins' (2001) Academic Expertise, Janks' (2010) synthesis model of critical literacy and carried out an action research on middle school recent immigrant English language learners. The results indicated that by carefully providing language scaffolding and classroom structures and conditions, students could be engaged in critical discussions of real issues. Thus, students could work, formulate, evaluate, and question reading and writing about real-life concerns in an equitable environment.

Rogers (2014) evidenced that if teachers were provided with opportunities to practice critical education, they would uniquely design critical

literacy education. That is, top-down education is in disagreement with tenets of practicing critical literacy and that teachers should be given intellectual freedom to implement critical literacy. Janks (2014) asserted that teachers need to be empowered enough to link the passage they bring to class to students' everyday lives, to encourage students to do researches and to help them seek possibilities to make positive differences. Vasquez (2014) argued that "a critical literacy curriculum needs to be lived" (p. 1). Current social and political conditions should be taken into account to help students and teachers understand and act upon those conditions.

In line with Hooks' (2000) concern about how being of color in the US meant to be marginalized, critical literacy curriculums serving women of color provide writing experiences that could be empowering and liberating. They can place women of color at the center, which could help them become aware of "counter hegemonic or misaligned classroom practices" (Muhammad, 2012, p. 210). However, an exhaustive search of the literature shows that there is lack of empirical research documenting effective critical literacy instruction for students of color who used to attend public schools in low-income areas of the US. Also, as TPSOL is brand new in Iran, the same lack of research is discernable. So, it can be concluded that as a fledgling domain of research, probe into TPSOL through critical pedagogy is in dire need of more extensive attention.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and insights of former students from a women's Persian writing curriculum with respect to the curriculum's changing impact on the development of their literacy and sense of changing. The change referred to how their experiences supported development of their voices and how this fact empowered them in their personal lives. The curriculum was for Persian learning women living in Qom who learned Persian in Bent Al-Hoda School. The participants were selected from women of color who used to attend high-density public schools in the US and used to live in working-class neighborhoods back home. Accordingly, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How did the participants experience the curriculum? What were the main features of the experience and why? What were its difficulties and why?
2. From the participants' perspectives what aspects of the curriculum were the most significant to develop their overall literacy?

3. What relationships and practices of the curriculum had changing impacts on participants regarding their personal sense of empowerment and self-perception?

4. Method

4.1. Participants and Research Setting

The participants for this study involved foreign Persian-learners who were all native-like speakers of English emigrated from the US to Iran. Under purposive sampling four participants were selected; they were women of color from the working-class who finished both their Persian learning classes and Persian creative writing curriculum at Bent Al-Hoda School in Qom, and used to study in the US public schools. At the time of this study they were from 18 to 20 years old. Former students were selected intentionally instead of the current members of the curriculum. In fact, former students have completed their experiences with the curriculum and have had some time to reflect on those experiences.

The setting of the study was a private language center in which women's Persian writing curriculum of 24 sessions were held in six months. There were no grades or tests given. The women voluntarily attended weekly literacy sessions of getting to know writing genres such as poetry, fiction, or journalism, of reading texts from marginalized perspectives written in or translated into Persian, and discussing the texts and writings. In addition, 6 monthly public reading sessions were held to which the students could take their parents and friends with them. The curriculum was for foreign women living in Qom who learned Persian in Bent Al-Hoda School. They were all either born Shi'a or converted to Shi'aism.

4.2. Instrument

In order to find answers to the aforementioned questions, observations were done during public readings and a semi-structured narrative interview was used. Such interviews rely on biographical information, life-stories, or oral histories (Mirhosseini, 2020). The interview questions were checked in terms of language and content by three experts, university professors of Persian as to the content validity of the instrument. The participants were contacted by email and telephone and were informed about the purpose of the study and invited to participate. Upon their agreeing to participate, a written consent was procured from each participant and the audio-recorded narrative sessions were arranged by telephone. It was a one-to-one interview within the sample population, which

functioned as qualitative information. Besides, each interview took around 90 to 120 minutes. Each follow-up narrative session was also 90 to 120 minutes. Sometimes to make clarifications 10- or 15-minute follow up phone calls were made or emails were sent.

5. Data Collection Procedure

The creative writing curriculum, under investigation, is for foreign Persian-learning women in Qom. The curriculum is based on literacy education and utilizing the critical literacy practices. It includes reading Persian written or Persian translation of works of marginalized people in general, and of women and colored ones in particular. Additionally, it involves the members in writing their own stories, journals, poems, etc. Not only the participants of the curriculum get to know various genres, styles, and authors but also they discuss and analyze both the author's works and one another's writings in weekly sessions. They also have the opportunity to read their writings aloud to a group of live listeners once a month in public readings.

This qualitative study employed critical narrative methods. Data were gathered focusing on the experiences of former members of the curriculum. The single-gendered education system of Iran as well as the purpose of the study required that participants were English-speaking, Persian-learning, female, of color and from working-class backgrounds, and that they used to attend schools in the US. Four former students participated in this critical narrative study.

Data collection was conducted through narrative sessions with the women who participated in the creative writing curriculum of Persian. Also, the researcher observed public readings where current members of the curriculum presented their writings. This observational data further informed the story of the curriculum.

The goal of the study was to better understand how critical literacy has been used to engage female English-speaking students who participated in a Persian writing curriculum, through learning from the experiences of other women. A critical narrative research method was employed. Using the data, an analysis of the transcribed narrative sessions and observation data was constructed including all the elements that comprise a complete story (Hatch, 2002).

5.1. Narrative sessions with former members of the writing curriculum

Audio-recorded narratives were gathered, using specific questions to uncover their experiences and perceptions of the writing curriculum and the critical literacy approach. The tenets of critical literacy were imbedded in the questions to lead the narratives, therefore the term “critical literacy” was not used. However, features of critical literacy outlined in the literature review informed the content of general questions as prompts. Participants were asked to share their perceptions of the curriculum’s changing impact on them.

There was an initial narrative session lasting 90 to 120 minutes for each participant. There was a 90- to 120-minute follow-up narrative session with each participant as well. Additionally, emails were exchanged as the participants thought of other points to be made. Sometimes 10- to 15-minute follow-up phone calls were made to ask the women to explain about the emails or information from one of the narrative sessions. Both narrative sessions used parts of the research questions to focus and clarify, as participants talked about their involvement in the curriculum and its impact. The field of inquiry was sufficiently open so each participant could have the freedom to tell her story and to explore the areas that arose during the session.

5.1.1. Guidelines for questions

Guidelines for developing the questions in the narrative sessions were outlined by Hatch (2002): Questions should be open-ended, focused on the study’s objectives, clear, using familiar and neutral language, and respectful of the privacy of the participant. Initial questions and questioning were directly relevant to the main research questions of the study.

5.2. Observations

Two public readings were viewed at which women who were current members of the curriculum presented their writings. They were observed by a non-participant observer (Creswell, 2014). The observer sat on the sidelines and watched and recorded the sessions. The general protocol used for the observations was to sit off to the side and script what was seen, recording ethnographic field notes, and “notemaking,” with coding and analysis completed afterwards. These observational data were used to inform the story of the curriculum itself and the narratives of the participants.

6. Data Analysis

After the narrative sessions, data were transcribed and stored on a secure computer. The participants selected pseudonyms because of privacy. The transcripts from the narrative sessions were analyzed by looking for repetitive themes and patterns from the participants' responses on their perceptions and experiences with the curriculum and the critical literacy approach. Also, themes and patterns were found regarding how the participants believed the curriculum and the critical literacy elements were helpful in changing them. Themes were recognized in their responses and the method of coding was employed. Since raw field notes were "the undigested complexity of reality" (Patton, 2002, p. 463), patterns and identified themes expressed by participants in their narratives were established. Next, specific responses under those themes were coded, particularly as they related to issues connected directly to the experience of critical literacy and its impact as empowering and changing.

7. Results

The goal of this qualitative study was to better understand both how critical literacy was used to engage female students who participated in a Persian writing curriculum and its impact, according to participants. First observations and their findings from public readings and next the narrative sessions with the four participants and their findings are presented.

7.1. The Public Readings

The public readings of the women' writings were important. In these monthly sessions the current members read their Persian writings chosen by their teacher for other students, teachers, parents and friends. The listeners applauded after each woman read. The enthusiasm of the listeners visibly affected each woman, as each would smile and get excited. After the public reading session, other students could come to readers and ask them to share their experiences.

After viewing two public readings, the findings for the public readings are presented in three categories: (a) development of voice, (b) live listeners and authentic purpose, and (c) mutuality.

7.1.1. Development of Voice

In the public readings the women could use their voices, as a space was provided for them to share aspects of their identities such as gender, race, and class. The courage of the women was tangible in how they smiled when

applauded and the tone of reading their narrative indicated a sense of accomplishment, though some were visibly nervous.

7.1.2. Live Listeners and Authentic Purpose

Participants of the curriculum could present their writing to live listeners in the public readings which gave validity to their words. Most often in schooling experiences, the only reader of student writing has been the teacher. There also was authenticity in their purpose for writing—to create a space for them to share their personal stories through a memoir piece.

7.1.3. Mutuality

According to the observations, the mutuality was evident in the interactions. The teacher from the writing curriculum spoke with the young women as friends. There was warmth, connection, and camaraderie expressed in their interactions with each other.

7.2. Participants' Voices

Kate, Beth, Jane and Sara – pseudonyms – are former members of the creative writing curriculum in Persian for English-speaking women. The narrative sessions conducted with them provided space and time for each participant to reflect back on the writing curriculum and to express their experience, perception, and how this participation changed them in terms of literacy development, the development of voice and consciousness, and the process of social agency and empowerment.

7.2.1. Kate

Kate used to attend a high-density school in Los Angeles. Kate identified herself as Muslim Afro-American, and at the time of the narrative, she just turned to 19 years old. She grew up in the US but moved to Iran since she was 14 because of her parents' Islamic Studies. Her mother is a homemaker and her father was a baggage handler at the airport. Kate began her Persian classes at 15. She recently was a member of the writing curriculum for six months. She said while participating the curriculum, they were asked to visit and write about places such as museums. It allowed her to see the world in another way. The curriculum gave her the space to take command of her writing; they were not told what to write. The curriculum was helpful in developing her voice and her

writing because it was a safe space to be herself, write, explore and be creative and honest. Regarding her literacy learning in the curriculum, Kate felt she was a good writer when the curriculum started. However, she said the things read in this curriculum were written by women and there were lots of ethnicities within the writings they read.

Kate expressed that exposure to Persian translation of female authors of color inspired her in a way she had never known in her schooling experience back home which encouraged her to seek more women authors of color to read on her own. This exposure helped her expand her writing topics, too. She saw how writing could be used in real life.

Also, she explained students at her school back home were not given much choice in what they studied, but this curriculum was like, “What do you think? What do you want to know? What do you want to talk about and write about?” It improved her overall confidence as a Black woman in a White dominated world. She felt a personal sense of social agency and empowerment were developing in her.

Kate related once she was asked to recite Quran in a religious ceremony. She said:

I had the ability to recite to a room full of people without getting nervous. I think the curriculum gave me confidence and voice.

7.2.2. Beth

At the time of this study, Beth was 18 years old and about to begin a bachelor’s degree at a university in Tehran. She grew up in Maywood, California but moved to Qom less than 2 years ago because her mother who was a cashier, got married to a man just converted to Islam living temporarily in Qom. Beth self-identified as Muslim Black American. She had attended schools in the US. She started taking Persian classes since she got here.

The high point of the writing curriculum for Beth was having the freedom of writing topics and not being concerned about using wrong Persian structure as she might have done. As a structured, formulaic format was often required in schools back home, the writing curriculum helped her develop her Persian writing and creativity. She described a session that she wrote a piece and shared it with her teacher. At the end, the teacher asked her to read it aloud to the group because it was

“Such a true reflection of my voice.”

It affected her as she learned she had something to say that was relevant and worth hearing.

Because of her experience of the writing curriculum, she could help her brother as he wrote his school essays. Beth explained that the number one thing the writing curriculum gave her was confidence.

In terms of literacy development she said it gave them deeper understanding of how a person's background influences what they write; e.g. she explained how they read, analyzed, and discussed a text during a session, they would explore the word choice of the Persian writer or translator and who was the target audience.

In her last year of high school, she had to give several presentations. She was surprised that she had not been nervous, and she attributed this to the practice she had had when reading aloud in the Persian writing curriculum.

Although I was kind of shy, I spoke up when I disagreed, to voice an opinion or to ask a question.

7.2.3. Jane

At the time of the narrative sessions, Jane was 20 years old. She self-identified as Filipino and had grown up and studied in the US. She was born Sunni but decided to convert to Shi'ism. Jane had lived with her mom who is a book keeper and her younger sister until she left for college and immigrated to Iran to pursue her studies regarding Shi'ism. Her parents divorced when she was eight. Both of her parents completed some college in the Philippines, and both were 25 years old when they immigrated to the United States. Her family wanted her to stay local but she wanted to leave the country so she could have experiences she would not have had if she had stayed. Jane said it was a difficult decision to apply to college out of the US.

When she first attended the Persian writing curriculum, she was scared to share her writing with anyone. But during the first sessions she attended, she realized that if she was going to become a better writer, she had to develop her voice and share it. When Jane had just completed her first year of college, she noticed that a lot of freshmen were still trying to find themselves, whereas she felt she knew who she was and what she wanted.

She said

The curriculum allowed me to learn how to speak my mind and say what I wanted without feeling like I would be judged.

In terms of her literacy experience while in the writing curriculum, she realized that she was drawn to journalism. In addition, Jane learned a different approach to reading, one that she found immensely helpful. She said before the curriculum, she would read books as just an audience, as a reader, but now she got to read Persian books as both a reader and a writer and it is different. Jane learned that understanding the writer's purpose helped her be more critical about what she read and also equipped her to express her own intent as a writer.

The kind of teaching and learning she experienced in the writing curriculum was not a norm in her schooling. She explained that classrooms were isolating spaces, with desks in rows, and teachers who expected students to be silent and do their work. However, in curriculums like this, students get to have a voice in what they discuss, write, and in what they read. Schools do not give that freedom and you have to follow too many rules; it's really stifling as a learner.

Jane also felt male students were called on much more often than female students in the US schools. Since male students tended to have higher confidence and raised their hands in class more often, teachers unintentionally called on them more frequently. She explained that this was troubling to her throughout her secondary schooling.

The Persian writing curriculum provided a safe space where Jane never felt shut down as a woman and could voice her opinions often and freely during discussions and in her writing.

It helped me grow as a writer because I was routinely sharing my writing and receiving feedback from other women and the volunteers.

Her confidence as a writer and as a woman really grew from reading aloud to the group. She believed the curriculum helped her know herself so much better, it helped her have the courage to get through her first year in the college.

7.2.4. Sara

Sara started to take Persian classes when she was 14 years old. At the time of these narrative sessions, she was 18 years old and just finished the writing curriculum. Sara had grown up in the US. She self-identified as Muslim Pakistani American. Her parents had immigrated to Iran when she was 13 to raise their child in a Shi'a country. None of her parents had attended college. Her mother used to work at a restaurant and her father was a sanitation worker. Sara explained that her family had noticed she was becoming confident and

outgoing as she attended the Persian writing curriculum. She said she always wanted to write but she didn't have the motivation. However, this curriculum helped her focus on something productive and writing paved her way to get through the difficulties she was going through.

Regarding literacy development she said the opportunity to read her short stories aloud had an impact on how she felt about her own voice. Having a group of listeners, not just the teacher grading her writing, taught her she needed to be confident in the message and purpose of writing. She also said the prompts for writing were focused but also open-ended enough to provide a space for the women to choose their own topic and structure or genre. At schools back home, she could not really write a creative piece as her writing assignment. There was a strict rulebook that she had to follow or she would be graded down for not following it.

Since participants were not graded in the curriculum, as they used to be in school, Sara explained this allowed for frankness when dialoging and sharing topic ideas. The Persian writing curriculum gave her the freedom to experiment and take risks with the group and in her writing when using her voice. She was given a platform to speak her mind in another language. Her voice was being nurtured in these spaces and she learned that her voice matters.

She believes

The curriculum provided a friendly environment where dialogue was a core pedagogical practice.

The all-woman environment of the curriculum was also empowering in Sara's development of self and voice. She said the women mostly were Muslim English-speaking (especially of color) who struggled with the same discriminations and challenges she did and she could identify with their stories; this environment gave Sara new perspective on the need for schools to provide a more equal space for learning. She thought teachers called on boys with higher frequency at schools in the US and this caused to silence women in classrooms. She ascribed the many leadership skills she had gained to the all-female writing curriculum because she didn't have the fear of boys being overly competitive.

When Sara began attending the creative curriculum, her greatest challenge was her fear of reading aloud in front of the other participants; she could not imagine sharing her writing in the public readings. Over time, she built enough confidence in herself and her writing, and trust in the group to be able to do so.

7.3. Summary of Narrative Themes

Four major themes emerged from the narratives provided by the participants of the study who were the former members of the Persian writing curriculum. Those themes included (a) literacy learning in the curriculum; (b) US schools' inequities regarding race and gender; (c) confidence development; and (d) establishing voice and social action.

7.3.1. Literacy development in the Writing Curriculum

For the participants in this study, the development of literacy in the writing curriculum was different from literacy instruction in public schools of the US. Some subthemes were emerged for this one including the choice freedom, purposeful writing, reading works of women authors of color, and dialogue.

Choice freedom. The women had an autonomy in choosing topics and structure. They could write about their experiences and areas of concern and interest. Kate said it encouraged her to be creative and honest and to dialogue fully and write about the topics that interested them. Beth discussed the freedom she felt to choose topics and the structure she wished to use. She explained the curriculum helped her develop both her Persian writing and creativity.

Purposeful Writing. Beth learned to recognize how her background influenced what she wrote, and for whom she wrote. The other participants experienced this deeper understanding of writer's purpose and listeners, too.

Reading works of women authors of color. As they read all women authors and many of the authors were of color whose works were written in or translated into Persian, Kate, Beth, Jane and Sara spoke about relating personally to these stories and to the women's lives. In fact it helped them believe in themselves. Beth said this exposure to women who had similar backgrounds inspired her writing, particularly her narrative writing.

Dialogue. The participants shared how taking part in dialogues helped them with their development of voice, writing skills, and confidence. It offered them many opportunities to ask questions, get and give feedbacks, encourage others, and find common grounds as writers and as women. Sara said putting herself and her writing out there to others was very helpful.

7.3.2. US schools' inequities related to race and gender

The participants noted a dearth of female authors and those of color in their school curricula. Jane said no female authors of color were read at schools back home. Sara said they read very few women of color which was discouraging for her as a woman of color. Kate and Sara both spoke about gender discrimination as institutionalized practices in their classrooms back home. Sara believed teachers needed to put more energy and effort toward this, to make the classroom a more equitable space. Sara explained the writing curriculum gave them a safe place to share their opinions and ideas freely.

7.3.3. Confidence Development

Because of the importance the writing curriculum placed on the women developing their voices and supporting their thoughts and writing, the participants spoke about its impacts on how they felt about themselves. Kate said she felt fearless as a result of the confidence she gained to write about controversial issues. She said this growth of confidence led her to recite Quran at a religious ceremony before a lot of people.

7.3.4. Establishing Voice and Social Action

The participants said the writing curriculum created a space for each to develop her voice in a way that pointed her toward social agency and action. In developing her voice, Beth described how reading a journalistic piece aloud in a session was a pivotal moment because she realized what she had to say was relevant and worth hearing. When Kate first joined the Persian writing curriculum, she was nervous to share her ideas and writings, but she learned to say what she wanted to say, to speak her mind, and not to worry about being judged. Sara attributed her voice development to take risks and speak her mind in the Persian writing curriculum.

8. Discussion

Now that everyone is dealing with challenges of today's information technology which tends to produce and promote knowledge, being equipped with critical thinking is of more importance. Teaching critical thinking can open new windows to education. Curricula should focus on improving students' meta-knowledge as well as drawing their attention to different purposes of critical thinking. Thus, syllabus designers and material developers should bear in mind that language learners need course books and materials invoking critical

thinking. Moreover, critical thinking issues should be included in teacher education since they have a huge responsibility in the classroom.

Critical pedagogical principles are the examination foundation of a writing curriculum with literacy education that utilized critical literacy elements. In this section, at first the findings from the curriculum are discussed. Secondly, a discussion of the public readings is presented including the lack of visibility of women, particularly women of color, in public schooling of their homes. Thirdly, the findings from the narrative sessions with the four participants of the study are discussed in terms of development of voice and consciousness, and their empowerment pointing to social agency. Finally, the overall conclusions from this study are shared.

The critical literacy elements included routinely and prominently in the curriculum: (a) relevant passages, (b) student written passages and writing tasks helping them to empower, and (c) dialogue and mutuality. Literacy learning and voice development of the participants are supported by one of these.

In terms of relevant passages, the writing curriculum used only passages written by women in Persian, or written by female authors of color which were translated into Persian. Among the carefully selected passages were short stories, memoir excerpts, journalistic pieces and poems. As all members were female and most were women of color, the writing curriculum was designed to recognize the importance of the women relating to the experiences and the identities of the authors in question. Passages representing “a non-dominant perspective” (Wolfe, 2010, p. 371) were chosen. Such passages, which are called mirror texts, are core to critical literacy learning. They promote engaging learners by including relatable people and topics, or themes. Use of these relevant passages is in agreement with Darder’s (2012) bicultural mirror and bicultural affirmation. In fact, the stories of authors of color in this case presented the participants’ culturally familiar stories, as working-class females of color who deal with or used to deal with the tensions resulted from dominant/subordinate divide.

The curriculum tried to provide a variety of writing tasks allowing the women to explore their own identities and beliefs about the world; and change their understanding of self and the world. Freire and Macedo (1987) in *Reading the Word and the World* emphasized, “Reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work” (p. 23). The data from

the narrative sessions and observations indicate that the practical writing activities caused the participants to produce texts that involved rewriting their understanding of themselves and their world.

Writing stories and experiences of their own lives placed the women at the center of the classroom as “social actors” (McLaren, 2002), which is in contrast with the traditional banking approach to schooling in the US that views students as empty vessels to get filled with knowledge by the teacher (Freire, 2000) and sees students as passive receivers of knowledge.

The purpose of writing was to make their writing public in the form of sharing in a small group and reading aloud to them all. In addition, the curriculum provided a space where the women could take their own texts through a critical writing process of drafting and sharing, revising and further discussing. This process allowed the women to seek advice from peers and teachers, and learn from the writings of others gradually. The narratives with the participants revealed the writing process in their Persian curriculum to be helpful to develop their ideas, agency, and voice.

Besides, in the writing curriculum, the women had space and time to dialogue with each other and the teacher, to share their ideas on local and global events and their own lives which is in line with critical pedagogy because according to Hooks (1994), “Sharing experiences and confessional narratives in the classroom helps establish communal commitment to learning” (p. 186). Mutuality, relationship between teacher and students, is an important principle in critical pedagogy which creates counter-hegemonic spaces for all students, especially for those from racialized communities (Darder, 2012; Darder et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the former participants of the curriculum shared their challenging experiences in public schools back home. They claimed the classrooms were mostly a disciplinary system of rote reading and writing, and formulaic writing assignments. About this, Darder (2015) contended, “The traditional classroom exists as an arena of domestication, where abstract knowledge and its construction are objectified, along with the students” (pp. 69–70). This type of schooling was critiqued repeatedly by the participants of the present study. In fact hegemonic education has no real interest in changing the ineffective literacy experiences of working-class people of color. As Finn (1999) verified, “Our schools liberate and empower children of the gentry and domesticate the children of the working-class, and to a large extent, the middle class as well” (p. 189). The curriculum utilizing critical literacy elements is in

contrast with the formulaic, traditional literacy that is a dominant narrative in US public schooling.

On the other hand, the public readings provided a space for the women to share their writings. Sharing their writing routinely was very important because members showed gaining visibility as women which helped them break the silencing and invisibility they experienced in schools back home. Having created a space in a small group, the writing curriculum honored the personal narratives and other writings produced by the members, in ways being in line with what Hooks (1994) named their “authority of experience” (p. 84).

The participants reported that such space strengthened their confidence, courage, and development of voice. In fact each woman attended the Persian writing curriculum with a voice already and it was not giving her voice. Whereas, the curriculum provided a space and multiple opportunities so that participants could both discover and share their voices through a pedagogical process supporting their social agency and empowerment (Darder, 2004; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

As a result, participants become more conscious of what they wish to say and why, and how they wish to say it. This reflects Freire’s (2005) conscientization or critical consciousness; i.e. a better understanding of one’s self and the world leading to action, which is a critical pedagogical principle. Through reading aloud in front of others, the creative writing curriculum devised a space for women to share their interests, concerns, identities, hopes, and dreams. In fact, sharing publicly the many aspects of themselves also encouraged the participants to write, because they knew the writings would be shared with a group of listeners.

Nevertheless, the underrepresentation of women, the rarity of females in textbooks and curricula in public US schools were mentioned by the participants in this study. Besides, for women of color, the assigned passages and writing assignments should reflect and affect their lives. This underrepresentation in curricula is even more complicated for women of color because they see less of themselves, as the female authors whose works are read are mostly white. In fact, making students of color invisible in the curricula causes an invisibility which can lead to internalized negative feelings of self (Darder 1991, 2004, 2012; Matias, 2016).

On the contrary, the narrative sessions conducted with Kate, Beth, Jane, and Sara provided space and time for each to reflect on the writing curriculum

and the ways that participation in it affected their lives as well as their literacy development regarding voice, conscientization, and social action.

The writing tasks helped the participants to produce texts, to explore their identity, and to develop their voices. Kate attributed her voice development to exposure in the writing curriculum to various authors inspiring her to look for more women authors of color. Kate became fearless in what she said and wrote as a result of the writing tasks, exposure to relevant passages, analysis of those texts, her own writings, and sharing them.

For Beth, the freedom to choose her own topics to write about in the curriculum led her to realize she had relevant things to say that were worth hearing. Analyzing works of authors from similar backgrounds encouraged her to tell her own story via narrative writing. From there, she noticed she began to share her opinions more and to speak up when she did not agree with someone or something.

For the participants, the development of their voices was important to not only their writing, but also the way they viewed themselves and their world. Macedo (2006) argued that, educators in a liberating education must “create structures that would enable submerged voices to emerge. It is not a gift. Voice is a human right. It is a democratic right” (p. 4). The narratives of the four participants can associate the curriculum to Macedo’s critical imperative.

Moreover, as the participants were exposed to relevant passages and empowering writing tasks, their voices developed, so they reflected on the ways they also gained critical perspectives of what they used to read in schools back home and the ways they were marginalized.

In the writing curriculum, the participants began to realize the gender inequities in the classrooms back home where teachers often paid more attention to male students. Also, they became critical of the writing assignments they used to have at their schools, which they considered overly structured, formulaic, and lacking real purposes. They also felt they developed voice and critical consciousness helping them reflect on their home public school experiences and inequalities. This result of a critical literacy approach is consistent, based on Finn (1999), to “conscientizing people who are getting shortchanged and organizing them to use their talents and passions in their own self interest is what Freire was all about” (p. 205).

Finn (1999) also stated “to acquire powerful literacy, one must feel powerful” (p. 204). In this regard, in the narrative sessions, the participants conveyed that they felt a level of power in the form of confidence, as a result of

developing their expression of voice. When Sara started the writing curriculum, she was challenged with depression and, when it came to the writing tasks, she felt very afraid to do it wrong. However, with the encouragement of other women and her teacher, she began reading aloud at the public readings.

Evidently, the creative writing curriculum utilized critical literacy elements supporting the development of voice, consciousness, and empowerment leading to social agency for the participants. They tried to discover and understand who they were, through writing tasks which gave them room for writing about and get to know more about aspects of identity. They were able to reflect on the unfairness they used to be exposed to as female and of color in their schooling back home. The experience of writing about their lives as women was helpful for them to change.

9. Conclusion and Implications

The lives and cultures of the students should become the center of the classrooms and pedagogies (Darder, 2004; Matias, 2016; Nieto, 1995), and educators should teach in a culturally relevant manner (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In fact, culturally relevant teaching should involve training students about the “culture of power”, that certain identities are privileged in society while others are placed in the margin. Culturally relevant teachers should be critically conscious of possible biases and try to decenter Whiteness, maleness, and middle-classness, and emphasize on aspects of their students’ identities that have been marginalized historically. This helps confront the current and historical fact that children who are not White, male, middle- or upper-income are exposed to different forms of oppression and discrimination in school (Darder, 1991, 2012; Delpit, 1988; hooks, 2000; Kumashiro, 2000). Getting to know this culture of power leads students to dialogue, examine, and criticize what is expected in public schools and dominant society (Delpit, 1988). Such writing curricula allow for such dialogue and critique, using critical literacy elements, countering the formulaic traditional literacy which remains dominant in US public schooling.

Also assigned passages should reflect the lives of the students. Educators should provide the space and means for their students so they can explore their individual identities and challenge what they have been told and taught, and the conditions which caused their marginalization. For each woman of color, this space must encourage and support her voice development to critical consciousness, in ways pointing to social agency and so on.

Finally, the majority of the speakers of other languages who learn Persian in Iran are Shi'a Muslims who used to live in non-Muslim countries and they are mostly of color, so they most likely have been exposed to a sort of discrimination. That means they might have been marginalized in their former as well as their current communities. Thus, TPSOL as a branch of Language Teaching can help them get critically conscious to emancipate themselves. Further, TPSOL educators are able to influence their students in terms of their identity and voice through a critical pedagogy approach

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آیا سواد انتقادی کسب شده از یک برنامه‌ی آموزشی خلاقانه‌ی نوشتار به زبان فارسی در زنان رنگین پوستی که به ایران مهاجرت کرده اند درک از خود را بالا می‌برد؟ (پژوهشی)

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چکیده

مردن سازی جامعه به مطالبه‌ی هرچه بیشتر پاسخگویی بسته است که منجر به جنبشی شده است مبنی بر اینکه مدارس نباید صرفاً اطلاعات را منتقل کنند و از دانش آموزان بخواهند که آن اطلاعات را حفظ کنند بلکه آموزش باید آنها را به تفکر انتقادی تجهیز کند. این تحقیق کیفی با استفاده از چارچوب نظری آموزش انتقادی به بررسی تمرین‌های مربوط به سواد انتقادی در یک برنامه‌ی آموزشی نوشتار به زبان فارسی و تاثیر آن بر افزایش سواد و آگاهی انتقادی و فعالیت اجتماعی می‌پردازد. این تحقیق با استفاده از مصاحبه‌ی روایی به بررسی تجارب و نظرات چهار زن رنگین پوست که قبلاً در برنامه‌ی آموزشی نوشتار فارسی مشارکت داشتند و تاثیر آن روی افزایش سواد و اعتماد بنفس آنها می‌پردازد. آنها قبلاً در مدارس پرجمعیت مناطق کم درآمد آمریکا تحصیل می‌کردند. برنامه‌ی آموزشی برای زنان خارجی‌ای است که در مدرسه‌ی بنت الهدی قم فارسی آموختند. عناصر مربوط به سواد انتقادی برنامه عبارتند از خواندن متنهای مرتبط، خواندن از منظر انتقادی، نوشتن داستانهای خود، و خواندن آنها برای حضار. برای یافتن الگوهای تکرار شونده‌ی نظرات و تجارب آنها از برنامه و اینکه آیا سواد انتقادی آنها را توانمند می‌کند یا نه از تحلیل موضوعی استفاده شد. یافته‌ها حاکی از آن است که سواد انتقادی رویکردی موثر است و به رشد اجتماعی کمک می‌کند.

کلیدواژه‌ها: سواد انتقادی؛ فارسی؛ زنان رنگین پوست؛ توانمندسازی.