

Youth Dialogue Circles: The Importance of Discussing Identity to Foster Healing

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Abstract

This paper examines how making space for dialogues on identity in school settings is a valuable tool for fostering youth empowerment. To do so, I co-facilitated with a school adjustment counselor five youth dialogue circles. Each session focused on a different aspect of identity, such as race, gender, beauty, age, and family. By examining the youths' experience in these dialogues, I revealed that youth are interested and invested in engaging in dialogues on identity. Students felt they had space to reflect on and make sense of their identity-related experiences, and were inclined to reciprocate active listening to their peers. In conclusion, students experienced a sense of healing by discussing identity, by gaining better understandings of themselves, others, and their social world.

Introduction

I had just entered fifth grade, situated in my hometown of New Paltz, New York, a predominantly white school district that, like many other small towns neighboring New York City, took an identity of being an inherently liberal and progressive community. I was incredibly excited to be entering this new stage of my life both socially and academically. Early on in the school year, my social studies class began a project in which we would present on an African country we “visited”, basing our experience on research we would do over the span of a week. I immediately knew I would do Somalia, as I wanted to explore my own culture, and more importantly, change the narrative that my peers were developing in the country.

Coincidentally, this project was being proposed around the same time that the movie Captain Phillips came out, centering on a white boat captain and his crew being held hostage by Somali “pirates,” and served as one of the few representations of my culture that was circulating across the United States. I was unfortunately made aware of this by the jokes a few of my classmates were starting to make to me, asking whether or not my mother was a pirate. This felt like the perfect opportunity to showcase the beauty of my culture and the individuality of African countries, a point that so often gets neglected in mainstream education.

Because we were to pick a country out of a hat, and then trade with peers if there was a place we were particularly interested in, I wasn’t disappointed when I got another country. I quickly asked my teacher who was assigned to Somalia, and when she told me it was a boy named Ryan, who happened to be one of the very students making these pirate comments to me, my stomach sank. I took a deep breath as I walked over to him, choosing my words carefully when asking him to trade countries. He immediately responded “No, I actually know a lot about

this country.” My pleading efforts had no impact, and I begrudgingly began my research on Ghana.

The day of the presentation, I braced myself for what could possibly come up. At that moment all I could do was conduct my presentation and await Ryan’s perspective on my culture. What came next was a series of insulting, racially charged, and inaccurate claims about Somalia. The words “AK-47,” “dangerous,” “wartorn,” “famine,” and even words not even remotely related such as “malaria” were spewed from the front of the room, as well as the remark that it was the most terrifying experiences of his life. I looked around the room to see the intrigued faces of my classmates, taking in his words as true.

Suddenly, a part of my identity that I associated with lively family reunions, memorable myths and music, was now reduced to a culture of violence and chaos. No one would ever know the complexities of why famine or destruction occurred, and especially the role of Western nations. My face was hot, I was on the verge of tears, and my stomach was in knots. I turned to my teacher for truly anything; to stop Ryan's presentation, a look of frustration, a comment negating the harmful words he spoke. Instead, I saw her blank face.

I prayed that my teacher would follow up with educating students on not only the complicated truths all countries hold, but to also hold Ryan accountable for the ignorant and racist nature of his words. Instead, she did absolutely nothing to acknowledge it. I felt that although I knew in my heart what was happening was unfair, my teacher invalidating my obvious discomfort made me feel alone and yet again, that my emotions were taking up too much space.

This was the catalyst of my awareness that school was not the illuminating and emotionally safe environment I had hoped it would be. The result of these types of incidents

created in me the tangled feeling of wanting to be both seen and invisible at the same time.

Whether it was impatience I was met with by certain teachers when asking a question that I noticed my white peers didn't experience on the same level, or my curriculum not reflecting any aspects of my identity, I began to gradually disengage from my classes.

It wasn't until I decided to attend a seemingly conventional summer camp before entering the 9th grade, that I began to radically heal from the harm done to my relationship with identity, through dialogue. Courses offered at Odyssey Teen Camp consisted of everyday activities such as sports and boating, but also classes titled "Sex 101," "Destroy the Patriarchy," and "Identity Circles." I experienced culture shock in these spaces, as I had never had such transparent conversations about race, gender, sexuality, and oppression. What made this even more powerful was that the adult counselors in these spaces made no effort to correct me, but simply listened and offered guidance or support during these conversations when it was appropriate. I would read poems and essays by bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and even attend a viewing party of Beyonce's visual album, "Lemonade."

Those few weeks both healed the extremely hurt and confused part of me that felt uncomfortable with and somewhat afraid of my Blackness and queerness. I entered high school protected by the empowering energy from that summer, determined to continue my journey of self-exploration and coming to terms with the realities of our society. This growth ebbed and flowed, as do all major transitions in life, but I can confidently say it was cemented when in my final two years, I attended an incredibly diverse Quaker school, that took advantage of its privilege as a private school, and allowed teachers to create their own curriculum. The lack of state mandates provided me with classes such as Reading Radical Women, in which we solely focused on literature created by women of color. I felt protected and heard by the majority of my

teachers, and became extremely invested in my classes, including non-dialogue based ones such as Algebra II. This significant shift in my relationship with school had much to do with the comfort and curiosity I felt having so much room to discuss complicated subjects ever present in our society, as well as seeing my identity reflected in my courses.

The experiences I've had in my educational experience, in conjunction with the healthy identity development I was able to achieve when attending Odyssey Teen Camp, have solidified my commitment to making school a time that actively inspires and empowers youth rather than contributes to the damage done by it and other institutions. I attempted to enact this in my Praxis project in which I contributed to an existing dialogue program at University Park Campus School (UPCS). By holding voluntary drop-in identity-based dialogue circles in the school environment, I intended to give the diverse student community the opportunity to take up space, heal, and gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.

The mainstream education system creates a narrative that a student's behavior and decisions determine their fate in society. In actuality, the racial hierarchy is reproduced by teachers and administration in a way that brews feelings of frustration, poor self image, and a lack of agency and control in students. By having the opportunity to make sense of students' lived experiences, as well as see how aspects of their social world are shaping their understanding of themselves, we can mitigate the harm done to our youth.

My Praxis research consisted of the following questions: 1) What does it look and feel like for 14-18 year olds to participate in identity-based dialogues ?, 2) What do 14-18 year olds gain from identity-based dialogue circles while facing obstacles in their social world?, and 3) How does awareness around identity and society enable healing? I wanted to understand whether and how dialogue can be a tool/mechanism for disrupting these patterns and creating

empowerment within youth, as well as showcase the importance of making space for these types of discussions to be built into the school day.

I investigated these research questions by holding five sessions of dialogue circles run by the current adjustment counselor at UPCS and I. Each session focused on a different aspect of identity: race, gender, family, being a young person, and beauty. By gathering field notes and analyzing audio recordings of participating students, and participating in these conversations alongside them as a facilitator, I examined the impact of these dialogues to see how much they provide a similar empowering experience to what I experienced at Odyssey Teen Camp.

My predecessor learned about the practice of dialogue circles through the book *Race Dialogues: A Facilitator's Guide to Tackling the Elephant in the Classroom*, in which authors Donna Rich Kaplowitz, Shayla Reese Griffin, and Sheri Seyka (2018) explain what dialogue circles are and how they assist in positive identity construction. The book also provided the general lesson plans that we both utilized as facilitators (Appendix A). These lesson plans provided thoughtful prompts that started off broad and light, and then gradually became more focused and personal.

Dialogue itself is defined as “a discussion between two or more people or groups, especially one directed toward exploration of a particular subject or resolution of a problem” (Oxford Languages). The ‘circle’ component that Kaplowitz et. al. address in their book adds structure to dialogue, as they are defined as a facilitator and a group of around 10 to 15 participants sitting in a circle, reflecting on a prompt or question provided by the facilitator.

Students would be in the room when I arrived, in whatever room was available at that time. The first two circles were in the relatively spacious teachers lounge located in the basement of the school, where we sat around a larger rectangular table. The majority of the circles,

however, were held in Ms. Tran's office. It was a small yet cozy space, where we sat in a circle of chairs and our faces were lit by the fairy lights that strewn the walls surrounding us. After chatting for a few minutes about how students' days were going, we began the dialogue with me asking for verbal consent to record, and then going around the circle to share their names, pronouns, and answer to an icebreaker that either myself or Ms. Tran would brainstorm. I then introduced the topic, for example, Gender, and reviewed the group norms for the circle. Once we all seemed on the same page about our expectations for a safe and productive dialogue about the topic, I read the first prompt which often asked us to create a group definition of the topic, and compare the definition we created with the formal dictionary definition. Each prompt, including the definition ones, followed the process of each participant having the opportunity to share their answer uninterrupted. Rather than group members responding to what they say (outside of validating their experiences), the next group member answered the same question. Students also have the opportunity to pass if so moved, to respect their emotional capacity and comfort level. Once the prompt moved through the entire group, I would ask the next prompt.

This structure brought a sense of emotional safety and nurturing that the current school system often does not make space for, specifically related to identity, in traditional classroom settings. Even when identity is surfaced in traditional classroom settings, there often isn't a structure to ensure that all students are uninterrupted, have trust in confidentiality, as well as know they won't be met with debate. Looking back at my own experiences regarding identity in school as a young person, the structure also helps protect marginalized youth from harmful and uncomfortable situations when practicing vulnerability.

Literature Review

Literature exploring the concepts of identity development, dialogue, and cultural reproduction have aided greatly in the development of and connection to my Praxis. African Diaspora Studies researcher Erin N. Winkler asserts that in regard to positive identity development, although dialogues around race and racism are often reserved for higher learning, youth at the middle and high school level benefit socially, emotionally, and academically from discussing race. According to Winkler, frequent, honest, age-appropriate conversations about race and racial differences are associated with lower-levels of bias in children, who by two or three years old are already using racial categories to reason about people's behavior (Winkler, 2009). Yet despite these studies, educators continue to create "colorblind" curricula that avoid, deny, and undermine the role that race and identity as a whole plays in the classroom, as well as the capacity of third and fourth graders to discuss these topics.

Supporting positive identity development is the practice of dialogue that Donna Rich Kaplowitz, Shayla Reese Griffin, and Sheri Seyka (2018) explore in their book *Race Dialogues: A Facilitator's Guide to Tackling the Elephant in the Classroom*. The authors name the key tenets of successful dialogue in this race-focused facilitators guide, stating that dialogue is conducted face to face, consists over a long period of time, is intended for learning, in order to deepen one's understanding of shared reality and conflict. These dialogues are meant to be facilitated by individuals who have a critical awareness of boundaries and how to conduct conversations of an emotional and personal nature (Kaplowitz, et. al, 2018).

I am also interested in my own research on the topic of dialogue circles to contribute to the field of healthy identity construction studies, as it sought to support and uncover how young people having the space to talk about identity assists in youth having lower-level bias towards

not only groups of people, but themselves. The majority of research I've examined to support my own, outside of *Race Dialogues* which defines identity more broadly, focus on more widely discussed identity markers like race, sexuality, gender, and class. While these are extremely important aspects of one's identity, factors such as the generation and time period we exist in, our family lives, as well as societal beauty standards, are also vital parts in our identity development that need to be recognized in youth work. Without surfacing these topics, research on positive identity development and healing fail to provide a full picture of youth identity development, as well as the ways in which we can improve on the matter.

Conceptual Framework

Positive Identity Development

Social theorists define positive identity development, or positive social identity development, as “the process of naming and accepting key aspects of who you are as an individual” (n.a., 2024). My personal definition expands on this by adding “with the tools to externalize negative societal messages related to identity”, as we will always be exposed to perspectives that make us feel less than, no matter how positive our foundational understandings are.

Identity development happens throughout the course of our lives, but is especially shaped by our early experiences and messages we receive related to different aspects of identity. Without normalizing the differences that exist between our identities, we end up ignoring them; youth absorb negative ideas about the identities of themselves or others that larger society has made marginalized. Youth develop more positive understandings about identity when they receive

accurate as well as celebratory depictions of multiple identity groups. Because language, culture, and history are great vehicles to learn about groups of people, school is a necessary environment for young people to develop these positive understandings.

Winkler's research expands on the theory of positive identity development (2009) by positioning it as a form of youth empowerment. Acknowledging that children are incredibly aware of the problems in our society at a young age, regardless of if they have the language or not to make sense of it, situates them as curious and capable of having conversations related to identity. Being cognizant of making these discussions more accessible to youth through the language we choose to use, the comfort and authenticity in which adults facilitate these conversations embody, as well the validation we provide to youth in their perspectives and experiences both empowers and inspires them to continue exploring these topics in a positive way.

Healing-Centered Engagement

Assisting in positive identity development is the nature of healing-centered engagement, to which Shawn Ginwright theorizes from a social justice lens (2020). Healing centered engagement (HCE), very much embedded in *Black Youth Rising* (Ginwright, 2009), is Ginwright's specific approach to improving one's mental wellness by taking into account the trauma brought on from systemic, collective injustice. A specific component of HCE that is reflected in the dialogue circles is on the importance of building *empathy*. As a facilitator of a space that navigates personal experiences and varying degrees of trauma, it is crucial to build empathy with youth by demonstrating vulnerability. Ginwright encourages adults and facilitators

in spaces with youth to take the emotional risk first by sharing their stories, giving youth the courage to engage in telling their truth, as well as exercise their emotional literacy skills.

Ginwright also speaks to the importance of *critical reflection* in healing for youth. Within this framework, healing means addressing how systemic factors are embedded and intertwined in individual trauma. Without critical reflection of institutional injustice, it is natural for youth to internalize shame and blame, letting it impact their self-esteem. Critical reflection offers a lens to analyze and challenge the societal structures that perpetuate trauma, providing youth with agency to try to externalize that harm and work on creating a new narrative for themselves.

Bringing in Tara Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth aids in the critical reflection process for youth, as it shifts our thinking about marginalized communities from a deficit mindset (what people lack by not conforming to the standards of our white-centered institutions) but puts the onus on the institutions to change their understanding of knowledge. Yosso's use of the word "wealth" emphasizes the strength that comes from having students with diverse lived experiences and cultural awareness, and the power and knowledge that comes from those backgrounds.

The components of HCE that I address above (empathy and critical reflection) have assisted me in framing my research around healing, but to truly encompass all aspects of what I see as necessary elements in the healing process around identity, I needed to expand on Ginwright's approach by adding in the additional theories of *counter-storytelling* and *catharsis*.

Tying together Ginwright and Yosso's ideas brought me to the conclusion that voicing our ideas and creating our own definitions on concepts we feel the dominant social narrative has failed to accurately and fairly capture. After critiquing dominant narratives to understand what

has been lacking in the representations and depictions of identity, especially those that are marginalized, we let what doesn't serve us fall to the wayside by practicing *counter-storytelling*.

As critical race theory has continued to develop in both activism and scholarly work, counter-storytelling has become a major component of what it looks like in practice. Counter-storytelling is intended to center the experiences, stories, and perspectives of marginalized communities, whose truths can often differ from or be seen as less important than dominant social narratives (Castelli, 2021) . Through creating platforms that give marginalized communities a place to express their lived experiences in a variety of ways, we validate their right to take up space in a world that often positions their existence as part of the background.

The freeing nature of counter-storytelling, and personal storytelling in general, brings about a sense of *catharsis*. This can almost feel like a reward for all of the hard work that is asked of us in order to heal. Looking to author and educator bell hook's book *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (2009), sharing stories through writing and speaking about herself allowed her "wounded spirit" to heal. "By telling stories I had entered a redemptive space. I had entered a world of soul retrieval" (p. 51). Speaking out provides us with a release; release of pain, anxiety, shame, and the feeling that we are alone. We also experience catharsis when practicing this type of vulnerability by seeing evidence of our bravery and courage in ourselves from doing something challenging.

In making space for identity to be fleshed out and discussed from a place of empowerment, students are actively fighting back against systems of oppression that try to maintain power and control through silence. Silence allows the biases and stereotypes our society bombards us with in our everyday lives to be absorbed and to fester, and cause damage to our

senses of self. Diminishing the all-too-common colorblind narrative that school systems enforce, as well as speaking to the result of lower-level bias in children who engage in conversations related to race and racism, is imperative in supporting youth in their healing.

When looking at examinations of student achievement gaps based on race throughout the past few decades, it is apparent that there has been a victim-blaming narrative, as if students have the ability to choose their fate. Schools' approaches to academic assessment, teaching approaches, and rule enforcement undeniably carry harmful elements when not working actively towards mitigating identity-related bias. There is a deep need to acknowledge teacher and administration culturally irrelevant curriculum, and "color-blind" approaches to identity-related conversations are damaging students of color, their relationship with education, and even on white students who are starting to develop their own biases. While it is vitally important to hold institutions for creating change and foster empowering spaces for youth, these dialogue circles are intended to support resilience, confidence, and healing in students to protect and uplift themselves and each other while existing inside these institutions.

Methods

Methodology

My Praxis project employs critical analysis in order to expose through description and interpretation the ways that students' relationships with and understandings of identity are constructed and maintained through the use of a dialogue circle.

The most impactful methodologists on the conduction of these dialogue circles were the authors and researchers of *Race Dialogues: A Facilitator's Guide to Tackling the Elephant in the Classroom* (Kaplowitz, et al, 2019). The guide provided me with the procedures I would follow

during the circle. For example, I positioned myself as both a facilitator and participant to share the experience with students and build trust in the space. I also ensured that after prompting each question, one student would volunteer to start, share their answer uninterrupted, and then choose the direction and therefore person they pass the question to. This is essentially how the authors of *Race Dialogues* describe dialogue circles functioning effectively.

My use of field notes, a widely used research practice, also assisted me in the process of exploring my research questions. The ways in which youth talked with each other in these circles was not always explicitly verbal; body language such as nodding, expressing sounds of validation or concern, as well as the act of interrupting versus making space for others, helped answer my query of how youth ages 14 - 18 engage in an identity-based dialogue program.

Epistemological stance

I look to social constructivism when thinking about my epistemological stance (n.a., 2022). When researching what an epistemological stance was, I found this to be a well-cited perspective when looking at identity work. This perspective emphasizes the role that social and cultural factors play in the development of identity. In turn, we move away from using pre-existing modes of knowledge to validate understandings, and embrace the fact that knowledge can be constructed from social interaction with each other and our environment. Dialogue circles produce knowledge by gaining deeper understandings of our reality, ourselves, and identity, as well as the role that our social and cultural worlds play in these understandings.

This honors the experiences and perspectives that youth have, and allows them to build on and create understandings of identity and their social world that differ from or challenge dominant narratives of knowledge, such as 'Eurocentric masculinist epistemology' (Stripper, 2016). Historically, academic discourse has been shaped by Western, white, elite men, giving

them the control to decide what is and isn't valuable knowledge, which discounts the power that the lived experience of marginalized communities have in knowledge production.

My Site

I am building on the Praxis project of Clark Alumni Bea Gerber who last year, researched a series of dialogue circles for 9th-12th grades (ages 14-18) attending University Park Campus School, coordinated by the adjustment counselor, Huong Tran. My project will be a continuation of the existing dialogue based program at the school run by the previous adjustment counselor, Lauren Colwell. The current adjustment counselor for the school year of 2023-2024, Huong Tran, will serve as the site coordinator, semi co-facilitator, and mentor of these dialogue circles.

The demographics of UPCS can be adequately addressed by my predecessor Bea Gerber, who sourced this information in the writing of their own thesis: "This public school [UPCS] serves around 240 students, grades 7-12, from the Worcester area. They have a student to teacher ratio of around 14:1, and 91% of students identify as students of color. Of these students, 69% learned a first language other than English, 21% are "English language learners" (as labeled by the district), around 14% have disabilities, 86% are considered high needs, and around 80% are low income. [UPCS] boasts a 100% graduation rate for its students, and averages around 42% for proficiency in both English and Math on state wide exams" (Gerber, 2023, p. 12). This demographic data was reflected in the participant population of my circles, in which the majority of students attending identified as people of color and lower-income.

To give more context to the school culture, partnership exists between Clark University and UPCS, as the middle and high school was created in the mid 90s in an effort to bridge the gap between Clark and the Main South community. This resulted in many of UPCS' educators

having graduated from Clark's Masters in Teaching program (Shulkin, 2018). Because of this, many teachers have been exposed to culturally responsive teaching and critical race theory during their undergrad and graduate experience, as I have in the majority of my education courses. There is an emphasis in the curriculum on looking at how our identities interact with our environments, in which students prepare themselves to be working in communities different from the ones they grew up in.

The predominately white and non-local nature of Clark's teaching programs creates a dynamic of white educators working in a majority POC school community right out of college. While students may have an understanding of this dynamic and reflect on how they show up in these spaces as an educator, learning continues to happen in the process of teaching. I speak on this as an observer of my white peers and predecessors of the Community Youth and Education program engaging in youth work and teaching in the Worcester community.

Despite the potential harm that comes from this type of racial dynamic, awareness and transparency around culture and race can be felt in UPCS. Firstly, the principal of the school, Principle Snow, was enthusiastic and quick with signing off on my conduction of this project. She was familiar with my predecessor and the circles that occurred the year prior when giving me her signature. Additionally, when I had circles with students about identity when their adjustment counselor, Ms. Tran, was in the room, I perceived no uneasiness in talking about a topic like race in front of one of the "adults". This comfort was also shown through teachers allowing Ms. Tran to pull out students for these circles that she had explained to them were identity related.

On the off chance that she did experience any pleas regarding taking their students out of class, it seemed strictly related to teachers not wanting students to miss a lesson they deemed

important. Through conversations with Ms. Tran about organizing these circles, it didn't appear that any teachers had qualms with the nature of identity-based circles as they practice "culturally sensitive" teaching styles, in which the cultural and racial identities of students are considered in the classroom. This could be attributed to the progressive education that UPCS educators received that emphasized the value in discussing identity.

It became clear to me over the past year that if I had conducted these circles at a different site, such as the schools I attended as a young person with a predominately white student and teacher population, I could very well have been met with resistance from not only faculty, but also the participants. It is important to acknowledge that the comfort and familiarity around discussing identity that I felt existed in UPCS played a role in how these circles went, especially during this specific time in educational history, where conservative policy makers relentlessly attempt to ban critical race theory in primary and secondary education in Florida, positioning it as a conduit for "racism" towards white children. If met with fear and discomfort from faculty, these circles could have looked extremely different, and I would most likely be exploring different findings throughout the paper.

My Positionality

As a queer, Black, Somali-American woman, I found that I shared certain identity markers with the students I will be working with. I can safely assume that there will be shared experiences in being people of color and the children of immigrants in particular with my participants. I think that these aspects of my identity will position me as an overall insider to students, and hopefully will serve as a way to mitigate the potential power dynamic that comes from age and education level. However, a way in which I differ from the demographic of this

school which positions me as an outsider, as well as me lacking a personal understanding of their reality, is in my growing up as middle class and in a predominately white town. Having a white father who attended graduate school and made a comfortable living throughout my childhood gave me a respectable person in the eyes of mainstream American society to protect me from the racism I endured through holding individuals accountable for their harm. I understand that the student's I'm working with may not have shared that experience, and I own that my privilege in this sense has made me less aware of aspects that could be common in their day to day lives.

Growing up in a predominantly white town deprived me of a community for many years, as well as exposed me to a lot of ignorance amidst my white peers, administrators, and teachers. While I am certain that these students have been exposed to some form of bias in their education experience, as it is unavoidable under the current public school model, I must go into this understanding that our relationship and journey with race and racism may look very different. Additionally, I have spoken English my entire life, which has made attending school in the United States more easy and comfortable than that of students learning English as they go.

Because of both the similarities and differences between myself and my participants, it is crucial in maintaining the integrity of these dialogue circles that I avoid holding expectations or asking leading questions relating to what obstacles they have and haven't faced. Additionally, while it is imperative that I participate in these circles with vulnerability through sharing, this is ultimately their space to unpack, not mine. In being cognizant of all of these potential blindspots, I can successfully share the ways in which I have healed and grown from the world interacting with my identity but also provide a space where students know they are not alone, and that there is beauty in all of the aspects they are made up of.

Participants

Huong Tran (referred to as “Ms. Tran” in the remainder of my paper), UPCS’ adjustment counselor, served as the organizer of the circles, selecting students and communicating with their teachers in order for them to attend circles during class time. She also co-facilitated three of the five circles with me by guiding students to engage in prompts, as well as participating in the dialogues herself. Ms. Tran was often the only other adult in the space with me, aside from her intern Ali who participated in two of the circles. As for who these dialogue circles served, the participants were 16 high school students attending UPCS, between the ages of 13 and 15. The majority of students in attendance were of color (as is Ms. Tran). To paint a clear picture of the circles for readers, I will provide brief descriptions of seven of the 16 students who participated in these circles, specifically those whose data I included in this paper. I only mention their identity aspects if they themselves or Ms. Tran communicated them to me, to avoid making assumptions.

I chose to focus on the data of these particular seven students as the words they shared helped me decide what direction my research should go in. The themes of radical healing and HCE surfaced through the catharsis and critical reflection that I participated in and witnessed during these circles. A portion of these students attended the majority of the circles, and were often vocal participants. This can be attributed to either their interest in discussing identity and attending these circles, or they are more naturally vocal participants in group discussions. Because I have not observed them in their classrooms or outside of school, I am unable to make a strong claim. Those that I included in the data who weren’t very vocal in the circles, or only

attended one or two of them, made comments that stood out to me and connected to the themes my paper focuses on.

I did not write about the remaining nine students for a few reasons, such as they weren't able to attend the majority of the circles. Factors that impacted some of these students coming to the majority of the circles were absences from school, having important lessons at the same time that their teachers didn't want them to miss, and the inconsistent nature of the dialogue circle schedule due to myself and Ms. Tran's schedules.

Another reason I did not include the nine was because they provided me with data that would tell an incredible story, but one that covered very different themes than those I included in my key findings. Additionally, some of the nine were very quiet in the circles, which resulted in my collecting limited data from them.

Mariana¹ (she/her) participated in four of the five circles (Beauty, Age, Gender, Family). She identifies as Dominican and queer. She brought a very introspective eye to conversations as well as a great sense of humor. Mariana was very vocal in these circles and played a role in how the conversations moved.

Marcus (he/him) participated in three circles (Age, Race, Beauty). He identifies as biracial (half Black, half white). He was also a very vocal participant, and showed self-reflection and honesty in how he communicated.

Jose (he/him) spoke frequently and candidly throughout the circle, attending four of them (Age, Family, Beauty, Race). He identifies as queer, Hispanic, Native American, and an atheist with a Christian upbringing. Jose brought insight on society and social media to the discussions which allowed for us to zoom out of our personal experiences and see how we are shaped by our social world.

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout paper when referring to students

Andy (she/her), one of the youngest participants in the circles, attended two circles (Gender and Family). She identifies as Hispanic and queer. Andy brought wisdom to our circles, attempting to see things from other perspectives and give people in and outside of our space understanding.

Josh (he/him), also another of the youngest participants, only attended the Family circle. He identifies as Hispanic. Josh was very thoughtful in his answers and brought up points on family dynamics that many participants were able to relate to.

Sofia (she/her), who only attended the Beauty circle, identifies as a woman. She had bubbly and kind air about her, and was a fully engaged participant in our dialogue.

Julius (he/him) attended one circle as well, which was on Gender. I was informed by Ms. Tran that he identifies as trans. Julius was resistant to participating in the beginning, but gradually became more comfortable and vocal as the circle went on, sharing a thoughtful perspective on gender.

Data collection

This project employed qualitative ethnographic data collection tools, such as audio-recording, written observation, and analysis.

Audio recordings: The participants who consented to be a part of the research study were audio recorded throughout the entirety of the five 60 minute long sessions.

Field Notes: My observations were recorded in the form of field notes and journal entries written after each session. They primarily focused on how I felt the circle went and major themes that surfaced. I also noted non-verbal aspects of the session that enriched the analysis of the overall meeting. I also reflected on how I did as a facilitator (i.e. were students engaged, did they

participate, did they seem comfortable, did I explain concepts well or were students confused, etc).

Data analysis

The data I am analyzing came predominantly from the transcriptions I created from these dialogue circles. When analyzing these transcriptions, I referred to my conceptual framework as a lens to look through when making my data. This included enacting and thinking about the structure of dialogue circles, positive, and in turn, negative identity development, as well as how to allow for radical healing. I also attempted to measure the comfort or lack of comfort in participants when engaging in vulnerability and transparency in these identity-related dialogue circles. This came in the form of students answering the prompt or passing, as well as even how sensitive in nature what they shared was. This also looked like my field notes documenting nodding, affirming sounds such as ‘hmm’, as well as engaging in eye contact with participants more, showing active listening to their peers. This ties back to my conceptual framework in the sense that youth empowerment and healing can come as a result of the structure of dialogue circles, as well as specifically navigating positive identity development in these spaces.

I also anticipated students feeling more comfortable having these types of conversations outside of the dialogue circles, and as a result, are more mobilized in their personal lives than they were before these circles to make social change. Also, present in my conceptual framework is the idea that there is inherent power in community, and that unity brings forth justice movement. Looking at Shawn Ginwright, who shares the sentiment that personal healing and gaining a more positive sense of self, as well as a more developed understanding of the power structures they engage with on a daily basis, allows for youth to walk through the world with

more confidence and tools to improve the world around them. In turn, they will foster hope, empowerment, and motivation to create social change for themselves and those in their shared reality.

Findings

This project was rooted in the idea that unlearning harmful mindsets around identity fosters healing. I define “harmful mindsets” as understandings of identity that are rooted in negative bias, usually developed during our formative years. This thinking could relate to our own identities or identities of others, and develop due to media exposure, hearing adults such as our parents comment on identities, and also the lack of exposure to different identity groups. From literature on the subject, such as Winkler’s findings on positive identity development, as well as my own personal experiences, I have known that it is vital to create a better future for our world through making space to discuss our own experiences with and understandings of topics such as race, gender, sexuality, etc. and reshape them with compassion and justice.

While our society has grown so much in terms of the level of representation and openness around identity, youth in this generation remain bombarded with images and perspectives that challenge their relationships with themselves and others. Understanding that the ways in which society practices “-isms” helps to externalize the harmful experiences we’ve had rather than let them inside and impact our self esteem. Doing this in community with those who can relate to and differ from each other's experiences allows students to support each other in their healing and unlearning as well.

The actions and interventions I engaged in as a facilitator were setting intentions, explaining why we are here, and reviewing group norms related to how we behave in the space

before every circle. Although the students were incredibly respectful and mindful of how they communicated with each other, it was important to provide guardrails to ensure confidentiality, avoid debates, and give everyone the opportunity to speak. Having the dialogue circle structure, in which one person responds to the prompt uninterrupted and then moves through the circle assisted with the group norms as well.

Being a facilitator as well as an equal participant was also a vital part of my actions. In order to be someone they were comfortable with rather than an outsider asking them for their time as well as sensitive information, I needed to build connection and trust with students by being vulnerable and fully engaged in the conversation myself (Ginwright, 2020). To make sure the focus was still on students, who the dialogue circles were intended to serve, I also had to be thoughtful in how much space I took up as a participant as I was already taking up a decent amount of space as a facilitator. This meant being more brief in my prompt responses and selective of how much detail I gave in my answers to prompts.

It was also necessary when conducting this praxis project to accept the hard truth that sometimes things don't go at all as planned, and you simply have to try to make the best of it. This came in the form of me dealing with a health issue that resulted in some circles needing to be rescheduled, conflicting winter and spring breaks with Clark University and UPCS, snow days, and student absences. All of these factors impacted the flow of the circles as there was sometimes a month in between them, what participants were available to join, as well as the amounts of students per circle. Additionally, there were times where I was the only adult in the room (the last circle was myself and two other students for the entirety of the circle), which was not a concern for me as I had lesson plans to keep conversations on track. However, at times

when students felt moved to go off track and surface more sensitive topics such as past eating disorders or complicated family dynamics, there was no “script” for me to follow, solely my gut.

However, regardless of what unexpected situations came up, each and every circle demonstrated that students were interested in having these conversations, and that dialogue was providing them some degree of catharsis and healing; from telling their stories, critiquing our social world, and taking control of the narrative around identity. This was reflected in the depth of our conversations as well as the respect and care participants showed themselves and each other.

Catharsis In Telling Your Story

Leading and participating in these vulnerable, personal discussions this year was inherently cathartic and therapeutic, for myself and for the students involved. While I understood that group discussions could have this effect, especially for young people answering such intimate prompts that normally aren't brought up so explicitly in their everyday lives, I was in no way prepared to feel more like a mental health counselor than someone doing youth work at times. Outside of the identity “buzzwords” that I prepared and created prompts for, such as race, gender, and sexuality, were topics related to body image, mental health, and harmful family dynamics.

If I had not been in therapy for the past few years with a natural interest in social-emotional work, or had even conducted these circles a few years ago, I am unsure if I would have been emotionally prepared to respond to these comments with care and thoughtfulness, but also a certain level of boundaries. There were moments where I deeply resonated with or was affected by the painful experiences of students, and had to find the balance of being genuine and letting them know “I see you” or “I feel for you,” without oversharing my

adult feelings and experiences. Striking this balance made me think of my therapist, who possesses the amazing, yet I'm sure tricky, skill that is maintaining an emotional connection with appropriate boundaries. I still was able to participate at a satisfying level, and gained a better understanding of where my wounds around beauty standards, my racial identity, and my experiences as a queer woman come from as well as how I can give them better care. I also ended the circle feeling motivated and inspired, knowing that these students are doing the hard work at such a young age, as many of us grow into adulthood without having a chance to unpack these layered topics.

Participants in the circle shared this profound sense of catharsis as they shared their stories and listened to each other in these dialogues, most evidently in the Family circle. I began the session by asking participants to write down three terms that come to mind when they think of a typical family, followed by three descriptors for their own families. The words used for typical consisted of "love, trust, blood, mom, dad, kids, calm, trust, dinner, rich, togetherness", while "bond, trust, forgiveness, arguments, disagreements, forgiveness, not blood related, trust, love, uneducated, difficult, forgiveness, unconditional love, protection, trust, hardships, friends, mentors, teachers" were shared for our own.

The non-traditional nature of this list, such as including "friends, mentors, teachers", as well as more arduous terms like "arguments, difficult," and "hardships," surfaced the fact our own families felt more complicated than how we depicted a 'typical' one. After constructing these telling lists, I read out the prompt "What do our answers reveal about the way society constructs 'family' compared to how our families actually look?" This question sparked rich engagement among the students, serving as a catalyst for me as the facilitator to pivot away from these prescribed prompts and let the remainder of our time function as a free-flowing

conversation. This choice allowed for students to lead the conversation in directions that were relevant and of interest to them.

For example, I was the last person to answer the question I posed above, expressing my own experience of how my family looks changed over time: the words I used that day were very different from the ones I would use a few years ago, due to growth in my familial relationships. Josh, who shared right before me, responded “I’ve experienced that.” I nodded and gave a small, affirming smile, turning my head back to the computer in order to read the next prompt. Before I could do so, Andy jumped in by saying “I feel like parents don’t really show much - like once [you] start getting older they don’t show as much as they care for you... They’re like ‘yeah, I’m your parent,’ but sometimes when you need them the most, the person that you think you’re closer to, they like...they don’t really seem like they care. Or they’ll say something and it’ll be out of tough love and you’re like ‘Did you really have to say that?’ or something like that.” I then responded resonating to what she shared, followed by Josh, and then anyone else who felt moved to speak about their parents. When sharing a disagreement I once had with my mom, I was even innocently interrupted by a student exclaiming “Wait, Anisa - you convinced your mom she was wrong about something?!” followed by resonant group laughter.

Grievances about parent-child dynamics continued for the next fifteen minutes, something my prepared prompts didn’t account for to this degree. Students analyzed how culture, specifically Hispanic culture, could play a role in why their parents communicate more harshly than how they feel white American parents do with their children: “It’s just like - the times that they’re [parents] raised in... it was acceptable. I said this earlier: very very acceptable to just be like, not rude to people but voice what you think and have it fly under the radar. But now it’s like, people have gotten more sensitive, and I feel like you can’t really be doing that,” expressed Josh.

Many participants chimed in on this point, including myself, who voiced that this could also apply to African parents, and non-American parents in general.

Jose, who had been quiet for most of the conversation, shared a specific personal story in response to Josh's point: "I feel parents always have an expectation of their child, and if you like don't live up to their expectations, you're like scared of disappointing them, but when you do live up to those expectations, you're like not actually feel it yourself, and like they always higher up the expectations when you meet it. Especially when it comes to like looks - like i used to be a little bit on the chubbier side and my mom would always make snarky comments...but when i'm skinny again, she would start like making comments again, like do you want me to be big or do you want me to be skinny?"

Frustration and hurt from parents' judgemental comments turned into deeper investigation of where this behavior comes from, such as the role that mental health and childhood experience play in the making of our family members. There was a shared understanding that non-Western upbringings don't promote mental health awareness and therapy, making it a topic riddled with stigma and shame. Students expressed mothers' "trauma-dumping" on them at times as a result of not having a mental health professional to lean on, while others shared that their fathers shut down their emotions due to toxic masculinity: "men in general have that ideology of needing to be a bigger - a man, so emotions can't show, none of that," said Mariana.

This 25 minute free-form conversation was the most vulnerable I had seen students engage thus far in the circles. Laughter to soften harsh, relatable truths, as well as all eyes on participants when it was their opportunity to speak, demonstrated students' commitment to give each other the same respect that they had when speaking their truth. It was freeing to me as well

to be in a space where we all felt safe enough to share such raw perspectives and experiences related to our family lives; a major, yet invisible aspect of everyone's identity.

Seconds before the bell rang, I rushed to close the circle and give us an opportunity to reflect on all that we learned from this discussion. "What went well, what is something you learned or realized during these circles?" I hurriedly asked. Josh ignored the ringing bell and flood of afternoon announcements, raising his voice and sharing "what went well was I was - I was able to voice what I was thinking, and it feels, like, good." The group nodded in agreement. As Josh simply put it and the others agreed with their head nods, it does feel good to voice difficult and painful experiences. It is something that young people do not always have the opportunity to do for a plethora of reasons. The eagerness, respect, and vulnerability brought into this circle reminded me why I wanted to run dialogue circles as my praxis project in the first place: young people are hungry for spaces where they can learn about themselves and others by speaking their truth, and to experience the cathartic release that these conversations allow for.

The Power of Youth Practicing Empathy

Because these circles functioned in a group setting, where I as the facilitator was also a participant, the students carried a large amount of agency in how the circle moved, in turn, providing care and understanding to each other. Throughout every single circle, I saw students engage in affirming, trusting, sharing, and understanding with each other. While the group norms we repeated every circle such as "take space, make space" and "take the message, leave the story" to ensure confidentiality, created necessary guardrails for emotional safety, I often wondered what would happen if I didn't voice the norms, as the students incredibly respectful behavior seemed to come naturally. This could be because of who those specific students were,

their pre-existing relationship of respect with Ms. Tran who allowed me into that space, or how I conducted the circles; most likely a mix of all of the above.

Students held each other and ensured a safe space to share vulnerabilities by being quick to share when they resonated with a peer. For example, in the Beauty circle, Marcus made a comment that essentially spoke to how social media shapes our perception of beauty and positions it as very physical and appearance related more so than “what’s on the inside.” Mariana showed agreement to what Marcus said as well as active listening by expanding on the point he made during her turn: “Yeah, I agree, I feel like... the world has shaped into like...we’re infiltrated into the perspective of like this is what beauty means, and we’ve been shaped with that...I think it means its physical [beauty]... that counts, but it’s also like happiness.”

Showing affirmations of each other’s points also came in the form of body language such as nodding, “hmms,” and eye contact. These circles being across grades resulted in some students giving this kind of care without having a pre-existing relationship with other students in the space.

An example of safe-space making and community can be seen in the second circle I facilitated, on beauty. One of the prompts I had prepared was for students to participate in a five minute pair share, telling their partner about a time in their lives when they felt the most beautiful and why they felt that way, in whatever way beautiful meant to them. They would then summarize what their partner expressed with the whole group. When we gathered back in a circle, the first student to speak for their partner Mariana, was Marcus: “Alright, so what Mariana talked about was that she separated her definition of beauty into two sections, she said at her quince was when she felt the most physically beautiful about herself, and whenever she does an act of kindness, that’s what makes her feel internally beautiful.” The distinction Mariana made

between physical beauty and internal beauty was the catalyst for our conversation diving deep into beauty in who we are, not just how we look. Students continued to position their answers into these “two section” formats. Ideas such as being connected to God, experiencing cultural and coming-of-age events such as quinceaneras, as well as giving and receiving kindness, were incorporated into every student’s answer. It was clear in the participants’ body language, including my own. Myself and other students shared eye contact during moments of supportive laughter and smiles when we struggled to explain an idea. Physically, I noticed we all leaned in more while someone was speaking, such as towards Mariana or Sofia when they shared their opinion on the link between beauty and happiness. It was clear that we felt there was something refreshing, and well, ‘beautiful’, about this conversation, due to the fact that it was so different from our reflections on mainstream society’s rigid view of the concept.

The connection between us during this conversation as well as the depth we reached on the complex subject of beauty derived from the empathy exercised in these discussions. We practiced communicating our thoughts and feelings, deeply listening to and understanding each other's perspectives and emotions, and bonding over our mutual desire to live in a more compassionate and less superficial society.

Critical Reflection of Dominant Narratives: “They don’t think it adds up, but it really does”

Tying back to my conceptual framework, one of my most prominent as well as expected findings was the role that cultural reproduction and dominant narratives in society have played in the students’ identity development, in primarily negative ways. Youth in the dialogue circles expressed how many experiences they’ve had at a young age in which demonstrating gender

expression, being openly queer, or simply existing as people of color resulted in interactions ranging from microaggressive comments to ostracization. These experiences occurred in school (preschool onward), through media exposure, as well as interactions with family, friends, strangers, and media exposure

Unsurprisingly, these implicitly and explicitly harmful interactions in identity resulted in insecurities and even “self-hatred” related to body image, gender identity, sexuality, and race. While students were very self-aware and knew that the situations they went through are a reflection of mainstream society's faults and not their own, they have still absorbed them to some degree, impacting their identity development.

A moment that illustrated this internalization powerfully was during the Gender dialogue circle, in which we first described how our gender identities are seen from mainstream society's eyes, and then from our own eyes. “On one side of this paper, we’re gonna write three words that we think society would use to describe our gender - if they saw you walking on the street,” I instructed the group. “The other side of the paper, are three words we wanna use to describe our own personal relationship with our gender.” After a few minutes of silent brainstorming and writing, we shared our six words in total with the group, going in a circle. To give context, the majority of students who attended identified as queer and cisgender (at least from those that I knew about). I was informed by the adjustment counselor that one of the students who attended, Julius, identified as trans. Through the societal lens, students used the words “small, gentle, feminine, woman, rude, vulnerable, dependent, masculine, stud, gay, not masculine enough, man, appearance”. Through their personal lens, they expressed “fierce, independent, versatile, kind, helpful, strong, independent, strong, secure, masculine, yourself as a person, resilient.”

There was a clear sense of insecurity and “not enough”-ness in the societal descriptions when compared to how students experienced their gender identities personally. Language such as “fierce” and “independent” were used by cisgender women in the space, which clash with the descriptors they used relating to society: “small” and “vulnerable.” Julius, a transgender boy in the space, had used the word “masculine” when describing his own relationship, yet “not masculine enough,” when looking at it from a societal lens.

These contrary word choices exemplify how students did not fit in with, or feel represented by societal understandings of gender. It was in their own relationship with gender that they were able to give themselves self-acceptance and compassion. Using other empowering and multifaceted examples of adjectives such as “versatile, helpful” and “strong” showed the layered nature of gender identity and expression, and that to them, it holds so much more than the biased thinking that mainstream society operates on.

Although they expressed positive attitudes when speaking from their lens, it was also evident that mainstream society's ability to make assumptions about who we are through biased flash judgements, still impacts how we feel and our confidence in expressing our true selves. Andy, a Hispanic student who openly identified as queer, as well as one of the youngest participants in the group, showed frustration and a degree of hurt when talking about a situation she dealt with where a parent of a friend made a judgemental comment about her gender expression and style.

Andy: Um, kinda like agreeing with Jessica, I feel like they [people] um they kinda look at you and see what you dress like um, maybe an action that you've done and how you did it, and base you off of that, they like - there was just one thing. I went to a party and I took a picture with my friend and it was me and my other stud friends. And we took a

picture, and her mom - it was a girl and her mom - she was telling me about how her mom was like “is that a girl or a boy?” Like knowing that we were females, but like just said that to be smart, and I feel like a lot of that stuff happens like they say stuff just to be like smart-mouthed, instead of getting to know you and just say something just based on how you look.

While Andy showed comfort in her sexuality and gender when she used the word “stud” to describe herself and her fellow masculine-presenting POC queer female friends, it was also present that the comment of the parent and spotlight put on her gender expression made her feel irritated and uncomfortable. Because the parent expressed this to be “smart” rather than showing genuine curiosity about Andy’s gender, this clearly was an unpleasant interaction for her as it made Andy feel judged based on how she looks.

We further explored the notion of judgment and negative interactions that have clashed or impacted our relationships with our identities in the Race dialogue circle, the final topic. This circle was the smallest out of the five I conducted as it was the start of exam season for the high schoolers, and teachers expressed to Ms. Tran that it was important for them to be in class. The two students who were able to attend that afternoon were Jose and Marcus, who had both attended at least two of the five previous circles. The intimate nature of this circle allowed us to dive deep into a range of topics as we only had three voices in the circle. While race was the central theme of this topic, it was important to make space for culture and ethnicity to come to the surface, as those factors are closely related to racial identity.

To begin this conversation, I provided students with a Social Identities chart to reflect on what identities we feel impact our lives the most and least, as well as to practice understanding what privilege and marginalization look like in our society (Appendix B). We each spent about

five minutes filling out our charts, ticking off the boxes that addressed not only race and ethnicity, but religion, ability, body type, and so on. One of the questions I asked after we came back together and began discussing our charts, “Which ones [identities] have you received the most negative messaging about, and from who?” sparked memories from all of us. Marcus, a mature and amiable freshman, proceeded to share painful truths about his identity development related to his Blackness. We have similar stories in that we both grew up half Black, half white, in predominantly white communities. His words moved and hurt me, knowing how much I could relate to what he went through.

Marcus: It really just takes you growing up in a town - like - pretty much the white suburbs, without a lot of people of color, and not a lot of media to look up to, not a lot of people to look up to, for you to realize (laugh) how - excuse my language but... how evil some of these kids can be bro, like crazy,... like people just literally hate you for how you look, like especially cuz it was more subtle... when i was growing up, but even my friends, predominately white ... it'd be a lot more microaggressions and stuff like “wow your hair is so different,” “you talk so loud,” “your lips are big,” stuff like that. They don't think it adds up, but it really does... Because for a while I really just didn't really like, like my race or my ethnicities at all, like I'd always just hate myself like “Why - why am I Black why did I have to be born Black, why can't I just be normal.”

I was struck by what Marcus said. Like me, to know that the racism and othering you experience is wrong, yet still infect your self-esteem like a virus was all too real for me to process in the moment. You can know logically that this narrative fed to your society, and fed to Marcus's white friends who didn't consciously understand the harm they were piling up on him,

is wrong and has played a role in this country since its formation, yet your heart gets too tired to fight back and keep telling yourself it's not true.

My journey of healing this hurt that Marcus candidly expresses as “why can't I just be normal,” from race to sexuality, came in the form of speaking my truth in safe spaces to drill into my head that how I was treated was not okay, that I am not alone, and there isn't anything wrong with me. Without having this opportunity for us to speak their truths, I would have never been able to connect with Marcus on this hurt and celebrate how we feel about ourselves now due to positive experiences regarding our Blackness.

Marcus: But I think now, like, especially because like we - I - live in Worcester now, it's just like a colorful city, that I've definitely come to terms with like my race and I'm kind of proud actually, because I realized like how much - how much culture, how much community we have between races.

Hearing each other's hurt allows for validation and perspective shifting, while hearing each other's growth inspires and empowers each other, on both sides of the conversation. As what Ginwright spoke to in his explanation of HCE, taking a deeper look at the structures we exist in takes the blame and shame off of ourselves and shows us that we are not alone in our struggles. Healing requires critical reflection of our social world, as it undeniably impacts our understanding of everything in and around us.

Changing the Narrative Through Counter-storytelling: “Peace equals happiness and happiness equals beauty”

When looking at participants’ experiences in these circles, I found that the Beauty circle most clearly illustrated the power that community dialogues have to reshape understanding of identity in ways that provide empowerment and agency to youth.

In a time period where the media is saturated with depictions of unrealistic body images and beauty standards, and the extreme sexualization and adultification of young girls and women, mainstream discourse on beauty is riddled with complicated and impossible expectations. As discussed earlier, participants in this circle have made a clear distinction between internal and external beauty. However, it was clear in the circles that they thought mainstream society pushes internal beauty to the wayside, obsessing over appearance and making looks the dominant narrative. On top of that, the narrow standards of what “is” and “isn’t” beautiful when it comes to appearance, perpetuated by social media which youth are immersed in, breeds insecurity and low self-esteem. Jose spoke on this matter frankly by expressing “I feel like beauty has just changed...especially like by like social media cause like in the 2000’s it was like stick thin, but now, it’s like you have to have a tiny waist, big hips, have an ass, have tits, or anything like that...Like that’s impossible to get without surgery and then it’s like “oh so you have to pay to look like that, it’s just money and plastic””.

There were many nods and “hmmm”s. Sofia responded to Jose’s point with “I feel like the media portrays beauty, like Jose said, like small waist - they don't really care much about what’s going on internally, they just like wanna see like what you look like, ya know? And based off that they’ll tell you like you’re beautiful or you’re not.” We were all in agreement that these standards are unrealistic and harmful to our world, as well as the fact that we aren’t allowed to be

the deciders of what beauty means. After surfacing the current situation of beauty in mainstream society, we started shifting what beauty looks like under our own terms, leaving harmful expectations at the door.

Midway through the dialogue circle, after students finished sharing their partners' answers about time in their lives when they felt the most beautiful, I asked the question "Based on this activity, what do we value in this community?" Mariana expressed "I think we strongly value peace, this group. I feel like us specifically are like yeah... if I'm peaceful, I'm happy, and if I'm happy, it's beauty." The nods and "hms" after this comment, followed by a moment of silence made for a unifying moment when myself and the students felt connected in our understanding of beauty, a concept that can be so largely tied to insecurity and self-doubt. These circles allowed us to share and build together healthier, more empowering understandings of concepts such as beauty. We were changing our idea of beauty to be something about how we feel rather than what we look like. Sofia hammered this point home by sharing after Mariana "I feel like how we...from what I heard that was said, how we feel dictates - like, I don't know how to explain it - how we feel on the inside dictates how beautiful we feel on the outside."

This shared perspective on beauty rejects the limited and judgemental perspective we have been spoon-fed throughout our lives. These dialogue circles allowed for us to counter-storytell as a community, owning the ideas we have based on experiences we've had in our lives. Not only did we ask for a world where mainstream society understood the expansive and abundant nature of beauty, we created that world in our circle for those 60 powerful minutes.

Conclusion

Summary

The research derived from my praxis project is intended to highlight the healing and empowering role that identity-based dialogues can play in youth's identity development. Each circle explored a specific aspect of identity: race, gender, beauty, age, and family. My expanded version of Ginwright's HCE helped me make sense of what transpired during these dialogues, as I witnessed students having the cathartic opportunity to speak their truth and listen to others, build empathy, critique dominant narratives in society, and collectively engage in empowering counter-storytelling. Referring back to my research questions, I was able to see the ways in which youth engage in identity-based dialogue circles as well as understand the necessary role that critical societal awareness plays in identity-related healing. The reflection, validation, connection, and healing that came from this unpacking serves as evidence that young people are not only interested in these important conversations, but are in deep need of having them, and fully deserve more opportunities to do so.

Collective Analysis

The points made in my findings all fit into the larger idea of radical healing. Starting with my own experiences in my youth regarding identity, and ending as both a facilitator and participant in these conversations with high schoolers was a full circle, as youth are still undergoing negative identity development due to all that comes from institutional injustice. However, another truth, one far more comforting, was that youth continue to question, challenge, and explore these narratives and are actively trying to reimagine them. Having a collective space to do that allows for healing through connecting, validating, and affirming our experiences.

Theoretical implications

This research adds to Winkler's notion of positive identity development by holding conversations about both personal and institutional narratives around identity, and attempting to create less biased ones. Ultimately, Winkler claims having these discussions has resulted in lower-level bias in youth. While I feel strongly that these circles can assist in that process, I found that these dialogue circles had the ability to lessen negative beliefs and feelings we have about ourselves more so than groups of people, allowing for personal healing. I also think adding topics such as beauty and family into the mix surfaced a cathartic release and community building opportunity for myself and the students, demonstrating how identity work can be broadened and focus on topics that are impacting students' personal and social lives. Additionally, these dialogue circles relate to Ginwright's work on healing, in that youth showed clear links between how dominant social narratives perpetuated by our social institutions affect their day to day lives, as those they have had harmful interactions with related to identity have projected those narratives.

Implications for practice

As someone connected to youth and social service work, especially when they are combined with social-emotional skill building, these circles solidified my belief that talking things through can have profound impacts on people's lives. While five 60 minute dialogue circles with those 16 students will probably not change the entire world, I do believe for myself and the participants that different aspects of the experience will stick with us and inform how we communicate with ourselves and others. I would like to continue doing identity work with youth

on a broader and more consistent scale, such as expanding these dialogue circles to go on for a longer period of time and to cover more identity related topics.

The implications from this project that I want, or rather, *need*, is for identity work to become normalized in educational settings. To have conducted these circles within a school culture like UPCS that is open to having these dialogues during class time, as well as teachers who are practicing, or at the very least are familiar, with culturally responsive teaching, has given me hope for the future of education. There should be mandatory training for teachers to create safe spaces in their classrooms, have well-rounded understandings of their biases and growth points, and teach a culturally responsive curriculum. There should be counselors who have deep understandings of identity, youth empowerment, and mental health to be leading these discussions with youth individually and in group settings. I want everyone involved in youth work to believe in these circles and identity work as a whole, and recognize that creating spaces for youth to engage in healing identity work could change the trajectory of their lives.

Limitations

While I do feel like discussing beauty and family were more unique aspects of identity research I've read, I did notice that the lesson plans I provided didn't touch very much on disability (both physical and developmental) as well as neurodivergence. These are incredibly prevalent aspects of identity that if we did discuss in the circles, could have created or at least inspired more research on discussing these topics with youth. If I could do the circles again, or if I do similar dialogue circles in the future, I will make a point to learn more about personal and societal understandings of disability and neurodivergence, and build it into the curriculum.

A limitation of this project was also the inconsistent nature of these circles. Because of the conflicting schedules of myself, Ms. Tran, and the students' classes, made it difficult for the same students to be at every circle. It also made it impossible to meet every week and gain momentum that could have resulted in a richer study of identity based dialogue circles. Having a more consistent group of students would have also possibly allowed for more vulnerability and comfort in these spaces, and have led to more data and therefore more supported findings.

I also did not conduct pre and post surveys on students' understanding of identity while conducting this project. By doing so, I cannot accurately measure how much healing as well as change students experienced by being a part of these circles. If these circles were to be conducted again, it would be imperative to conduct pre and post surveys for students as it would strengthen the findings derived from this work.

Closing

We all need healing, whether that comes from discussing our relationships with our race or sexuality casually at dinner with family and friends, or in a formal dialogue circle in a community or school setting. As human beings, we all are impacted by our interactions with our institutions, peers, family, and so on, and are unable to control the harm done by them regarding the most vulnerable aspects of who we are. However, we are in control of how we move through that and rebuild ourselves. Creating more spaces for us to do that has the power to heal our relationships with ourselves and others. The younger we start the work, in an effort to mitigate more harm from developing, the better.

Appendix

Appendix A: Facilitator Lesson Plan (ex. Gender)

Gender

- Begin with introductions and definitions (15 min)
 - Intros with quick icebreaker
 - **Center ourselves around why we are here**, what we bring to the space, and what we are working together to create
 - *We are not here to ignore or erase gender or people's experiences with it, we are here to learn from each other with open minds, to build trust and respect, and to gain greater understandings of our worlds from what we share and hear in this space*
 - **Gender is difficult to talk about**, and what is most important to having a quality dialogue is to drop our assumptions, to try to remain open and avoid getting defensive, active listening, focusing on impact over intent, taking responsibility for our actions, and being ready and willing to make changes based on how our actions impact people. If anyone is uncomfortable at any time and wishes to leave the room or bring up this discomfort to the group, that is more than welcome.
 - (Race Dialogue book)
 - This is not a debate, we are taking part in dialogue where we are all committed to growing together and communicating with an open mind. We are accepting the fact that everyone has different experiences and that we are contributing to a body of knowledge with no one 'truth'.
 - **Group norms**
 - We will collectively create these to go along with the centering I added above. I will present a list I have come up with/used before and then ask them to build off of that to save time
 - Ex: (from Race Dialogue book)
 - Take the learning, leave the story
 - Be mindful of how much you are speaking and leaving room for others to speak
 - Speak from your own experience
 - Listen actively
 - Prioritize your impact over your intent
 - Listen to learn, instead of to respond
 - Leave room for people to grow in their thinking
 - Accept and expect discomfort while we learn (comfort zone, stretch zone, panic zone)
 - Don't expect everything to feel "finished"
 - I am going to invite participants to **help create a definition of 'gender' together**, and what is not stated from this definition that is stated in the one that follows will be shared with the group. **We will be sure to cover that gender is a spectrum and fluid and changing, and that sex and gender and sexuality are not the same thing. We discuss how these definitions feel and what we can learn from them.**
 - **Definition:** gender: the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and characteristics that a given society categorizes as 'masculine' and 'feminine'; not defined by one's biological sex

Beginning activity: (25 min)

- I will ask each student to take a sticky note and write down on one side **3 words that they think society would use to describe their gender**, and on the other side, **3 words that they would use to describe their personal relationship to their gender**. These could be attributes, expectations, stereotypes, any words that describe gender in society's eyes and their own. I might go first and give mine as an example (I might say that even though I do not identify as a woman, I believe much of society perceives me as one, and that 3 words I think society would describe women as would be weak, emotional, and sexual. The 3 words I would use to describe my own gender and relationship to it would be dynamic, beautiful, and intuitive).

We will then go around the circle and students who are comfortable will **share their words** and listen to everyone else's. Then I will ask some questions to prompt dialogue.

- *What did you hear when people shared?*
- *Did any words in either category stand out to you, shock you, or feel relatable? Why?*
- *Were there any common themes in the words that were chosen within each category? What were they and what does that say to you?*
- *How did the answers of people with a different gender identity from your own differ from your answers?*
- *What were some of the differences in the words we chose to represent society's views vs our own? Why do you think those differences exist and what do they say about the way society views us vs the way we see ourselves?*

Final activity: (15 min)

- This section will try to **make some connections between our personal views of gender and society's perceptions**. I will have created a list of all of our words that we used to describe our genders and the words we chose for how society would describe our genders and written them on a large piece of paper. In this activity, I will ask students to speak on the ways those attributes influence the lives of the people who carry those labels.
 - *Can you think of a time where you acted or existed differently than any of the words that were used to describe how society views your gender?*
 - *What happened when you acted differently?*
 - *If we see our own gender differently than how we think society sees our gender, where do we learn these "rules" and "roles" that we are supposed to live by? Why do we think those roles and rules exist?*
 - *Do these labels and roles make life easier or harder for you? Can you think of any experiences where expectations based on your gender influenced your opportunities or the way you were treated?*

Closing (5 min)

- Exit questions: I will send the talking stick around in the circle and encourage each student who feels comfortable to share a brief answer to one or all of these questions:
 - *What is something that went well?*
 - *What is something you would change?*
 - *What is something you learned or realized during the circle?*
-

Appendix B: Social Identities Chart used in final circle on Race

	Group(s) you belong to (write below)	Group(s) you belong to with <u>more</u> social power (X if true)	Group(s) you belong to with <u>less</u> social power (X if true)	You think about this identity <u>a lot</u> (X if true)	You <u>don't</u> think about this identity a lot (X if true)	You have experienced <u>discrimination</u> or <u>bullying</u> for this identity (X if true)	This identity has the <u>greatest</u> how others see you (X if true)
Race(s)							
Ethnicity(ies)							
Gender identity (or your relationship with gender)							
Religion							
Sexual Orientation							
Socio-Economic class							
Ability							
Native Language							
Citizenship / Nationality							
Body Type							

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