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# Black feminist photovoice: Fostering critical awareness of diverse families and communities in early childhood teacher education

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## ABSTRACT

In an undergraduate families and communities course situated at a university in the borderlands of the United States and Mexico, early childhood majors have used Black feminist thought combined with photovoice to generate projects that explore family and community experiences with power and oppression. As a professor, teaching assistant, and student enrolled in the course, we share our conceptualization of Black feminist photovoice, student trends and issues engaging with photovoice throughout the semester, and provide an example culminating project that focuses on colonization. By describing students' engagement with Black feminist photovoice, we illustrate how transformative spaces can be forged in early childhood teacher education, where students critically examine the struggles and empowerment of marginalized communities, and generate possibilities to serve as agents of social justice and change.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

Early Childhood teacher education programs have the potential to foster critical awareness of the oppressions children, families, and communities confront on a daily basis. Creating pedagogical spaces informed by critical social theory, such as Black feminist thought, not only allows students to trouble, complicate, and problematize taken-for-granted knowledge, but also opens dialogue for transformative education to occur, where students begin to generate possibilities to challenge oppression and create networks of support for diverse families and communities (Counts, 2004; Freire, 1970, 2005; hooks, 2010; Kumashiro, 2009).

Hooks (2010) posits that as feminist educators we must “arouse our collective will to continue freedom’s struggle, to continue to use our intellect and our imaginations to forge new and liberatory ways of knowing, thinking, and being, to work for change” (p. 170). Photovoice combined with Black feminist thought (Collins, 2008) provokes such liberatory action, prompting students to explore individual and systemic manifestations of power, how these circumstances impact the livelihoods of families and communities, and ways in which early childhood educators can act as agents of social change.

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In this article, we share what we have characterized as Black feminist photovoice, first discussing the varied uses of photovoice (PV) as a research and pedagogical tool and then providing a reconceptualized notion of it within a Black feminist framework. Next, we describe Black feminist photovoice activities generated in our families and communities course (whose students predominately represent Latina identities) and discuss student trends and issues when engaging in the projects. Finally, an example culminating project created by a student enrolled in the course, Elaine, is shared, which interrogates colonization in the United States (both historically and contemporarily) and how acknowledgment of this mode of oppression compels us to think differently about community and family relations. We conclude with reflections on Black feminist photovoice as a means to foster critical awareness of family and community livelihoods.

As Latina teacher educators at a university situated in the borderlands of the United States and Mexico (Michelle and Margarita), and a Latina preservice early childhood educator (Elaine), we find Black feminist photovoice to be a transformative tool that explicitly politicizes the field by encouraging critical reflection of power dynamics present in the lived experiences of the marginalized. Not only is Black feminist photovoice helpful to unpack race and gender oppressions, but it also encourages the interrogation of *intersectional* power (Collins, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991), where students begin to explore identity constructs surrounding class, sexuality, language, dis/ability, and nationality. This makes Black feminist photovoice an important pedagogical resource for teacher educators that can be utilized in various contexts across a range of geopolitical locations.

## Photovoice

Photovoice has been conceptualized by Wang and Burris (1997) within the public health sector as a critical feminist participatory tool to document the sociopolitical circumstances influencing the everyday lives of marginalized communities. Grounded in, but moving beyond Freire's (1970) use of the visual to foster critical awareness of power and oppression (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988), PV seeks to decenter gender bias often present in some forms participatory research (Maguire, 1987; Wang & Burris, 1997), calling for participants such as women and youth to create and interpret photographic images *themselves*. Through photography, critical dialogue is prompted not only by and among PV participants but also as a means to inform larger audiences, particularly policy makers, about public health concerns (Catalini & Minker, 2010; Downey & Anyaegbunam, 2010; Streng et al., 2004; Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004; Wang & Pies, 2004).

PV has predominantly been utilized as a tool to empower low socioeconomic and communities of color to document public health inequities and develop possibilities for social change through dialogic storytelling (Carlson, Engerbretson, & Chamberlain, 2006; Graham et al., 2013; Gubrium & Torres, 2013; Mejia et al., 2013; Ornelas et al., 2009). Freire's (1970) notion of critical consciousness and agency of oppressed peoples has been particularly useful in framing PV projects. As an example, Carlson et al. (2006) found that PV participants in a low-income, African American, urban context (where many had been previously adverse to allowing researchers and public health professionals access to their community) felt more at ease with a tool like PV that gave them the power to shape the direction of the stories told about them. Further, the researchers found that participants

gained greater understanding of how cultivating a critical consciousness through photovoice opened possibilities for social justice and change.

PV has also been utilized as a participatory action method to improve dialogue between Detroit policy makers and local Latina/o, African American, cisgender and transgender youth (Graham et al., 2013). Having been more vulnerable to violence because of their marginalized identities and social locations, participants used PV to document factors contributing to violence in their own community such as lack of monetary resources and the abandonment of businesses and houses in their neighborhoods. Through PV, participants were able to share with policy makers how unsafe environments created by structural oppressions promoted violence, while making suggestions for transformation such as the development of community education and recreational programs.

Similarly, Mejia et al. (2013), have utilized photovoice as a participatory tool of empowerment for Latina immigrant women to communicate their struggles with oppression in the United States and concerns with local public health. Researchers used the Chicana/Latina feminist concept *mujerismo/mujerista* as “a sensibility or approach to power, knowledge, and relationships rooted in convictions for community uplift” (Delgado Bernal, 2006, p. 6, as cited in Mejia et al., 2013). Differing from Wang and Burris’s (1997) PV method, where participants have individually chosen which photos to share for group discussions, *mujeristas* engaged in communal selection of photos and storytelling as a way to challenge patriarchal methods of group facilitation. As a result, the “community-researchers” enhanced their critical consciousness through collective storytelling while using the images produced to confront harmful Latina/o immigrant stereotypes.

Since its inception within the public health sector, photovoice has been employed with youth and those with marginalized positionalities within a broader range of fields including social work (Mollow, 2007), K–12 education (Zenkov & Harmon, 2009), geography (Sutherland & Cheng, 2009), and counseling (Smith, Bratini, & Appio, 2012), among others. In early childhood, PV has been used by children to share their experiences with place and space in rural and metropolitan Australian contexts (MacDougall, Schiller, & Darbyshire, 2009). Though not termed photovoice, Docket and Perry (2005) have used children’s photography to document their experiences transitioning to school contexts in Western Sydney. PV has also been used in early childhood teacher education to explore parallels between college practicum students and preschool children’s service learning processes. In a study by Hernandez, Shabazian, and McGrath (2014), awareness of community needs within service learning was a major theme across children and adult projects.

As a pedagogical tool, PV has been used in myriad higher education settings (Chio & Fandt, 2007; Cook & Quigley, 2013; Peabody, 2013; Schell, Ferguson, Hamoline, Shea, & Thomas-Maclean, 2009), which has allowed for a shift in teacher/student power relations, giving students control over photographic representations while professors act as cofacilitators in creating critically situated discussions. This has generated more meaningful learning experiences for students as they are central to informing the direction of course discussions (Cook & Quigley, 2013; Peabody, 2013). In our undergraduate early childhood families and communities course, whose student body is predominately Latina, students have benefited immensely from repurposing PV within a Black feminist framework. Engaging in abstract photography has allowed students to unveil oppressions occurring

in their own lived experiences while making profound connections to the struggles of families and communities who embody marginalized positionalities. This process has assisted in fostering discussions surrounding early childhood educators as agents of social change and ways in which they can support diverse families and communities.

## Black feminist photovoice and the (re)presentation of subjugated knowledges

While photovoice has been generated as a critical feminist participatory research and pedagogical tool (Peabody, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997), its interweaving with theoretical perspectives such as Black feminist thought moves it in new directions that facilitate the (re)presentation and interrogation of societal and institutional power. Fonow and Cook (2005) suggest that historically, “feminist scholars, particularly feminist philosophers, [have] analyzed ongoing debates, refashioned old concepts, and generated new ideas regarding a range of epistemological issues” (p. 2212). Extending upon this notion, feminists of color have theorized the epistemological perspectives of women living in the margins (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 2008; Lorde, 1984; Roth, 2003). Collins (2008) posits:

As an historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory—it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like—but the purpose of Black women’s collective thought is distinctly different. Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice. (p. 11)

Black feminist thought as social theory combined with photovoice, then, offers great possibilities for early childhood students to gain critical consciousness of the oppressions marginalized communities face on a daily basis.

Especially meaningful in providing a framework for students to understand power is Collins’s (2008) theorization of matrices of domination, which complicates intersecting oppressions occurring in the everyday lived experiences of the marginalized. Matrices of domination exist as structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power. Structural power is embedded institutionally (for instance within policy or higher education settings), functioning as oppressive apparatuses on a systemic level. When the oppressed devise methods of dissent against structural domination, disciplinary power is generated as a strategic technique by the dominant to continue to oppress the marginalized. Hegemonic power exists when oppressive thought and action is universalized (taken on by both the dominant and the marginalized alike), and interpersonal power is enacted through our everyday relations. While structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains are intersectional and embedded within social and institutional settings as modes of domination, moments of resistance and empowerment always subsist. These counteractions are revealed through often nonlegitimized (in academic terrains) art forms (Brown, 2013; Shaw, 2004; Tesfagiorgis, 1993; Wallace, 2004).

Hooks (1995) reminds us that “as black artists have broken free from imperialist white-supremacist notions of the way art should look and function in society, they have approached representation as a location for contestation” (p. 5). As an example, in the

1960s and 1970s, through visual aesthetics, Black feminists “contested society’s insistence on their subservience and vulgarity... redefining themselves and their gender. They used their talents to express themselves with honesty and courage” (Farrington, 2005, p. 5). Both historically and contemporarily, photography, specifically, has been honed by Black communities as a “political instrument, a way to resist misrepresentation as well as a means by which alternative images could be produced” (hooks, 1995, p. 60). Hooks further posits:

Cameras gave to black folks, irrespective of class, a means by which we could participate fully in the production of images. Hence it is essential that any theoretical discussion of the relationship of black life to the visual, to art making, make photography central. Access and mass appeal have historically made photography a powerful location for the construction of an oppositional black aesthetic. (p. 57)

As hooks suggests, photography has revealed subjugated knowledges and served as a tool of empowerment and resistance in oppressed communities. From photographic expressions, Black feminists have connected individual struggles with the collective, forging new imaginaries for self-empowerment and dissent (Brown, 2013; Shaw, 2004; Tesfagiorgis, 1993; Wallace, 2004). Black feminist thought, then, not only supports, but enhances the tenets of PV as a tool for confronting injustice. Interweaving the contributions of Black feminist thought with photovoice provides an additional space to unveil matrices of domination while representing the empowerment embodied by marginalized communities. Moreover, the blending of Black feminist thought with PV reconceptualizes it as a participatory pedagogical tool by prompting students to think critically about the lived experiences of the marginalized, fostering awareness not only within themselves but also amongst their peers who then engage collaboratively in meaningful discussions surrounding power and oppression. In this way, the (re)generation of knowledge is enacted by merging Black feminist thought and PV, encouraging multiple layers of critical reflexivity, consciousness-raising, and interrogations of normative thought individually and collectively (Collins, 2008; hooks, 1995, 2010).

### **Project design: Black feminist photovoice as a pedagogical device to unveil power relations**

Black feminist photovoice was carried out by the students enrolled in our early childhood families and communities course in four phases over a semester, one for each of the domains of power described by Collins (2008). For each activity, students were asked to work collaboratively in five self-assigned groups of four to abstractly represent each domain of power (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal) and how that domain was related to the course content. Groups were also asked to provide ways in which they, as early childhood professionals, might stop the cycle of oppression while serving as agents of change who provide support to families and communities embodying diverse identities.

Each of the four in-class PV projects coincided with course content, consisting of readings, films, lectures, and discussions on diverse family/community dynamics. This was an important foundational, and we believe, necessary aspect of the PV activities as it provided more depth of understanding of each family and community dynamic addressed

and also helped students to make explicit connections to Black feminist domains of power (Collins, 2008). Additionally, students read articles that used PV in various contexts so that they were informed of the many ways it could be utilized as a participatory method.

The first family and community topic the students engaged in was colonization as a form of structural power within early childhood settings. The film *Unlearning 'Indian' stereotypes: Native American history through the eyes of Native American children* (Rethinking Schools and the Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1977/2008) was watched, and a lecture was given on global and local forms of colonization based on the works of Loomba (2005), Said (1978), and Viruru (2012). Students also read and discussed Kaomea's (2005) 'Reflections of an "always already" failing Native Hawaiian mother: Deconstructing colonial discourses on indigenous childbearing and early childhood education' and Bigelow's (2009) 'Once upon a genocide: Columbus in children's literature'. Guidelines were then provided for students to begin engaging in Black feminist PV. Instructions included a prompt reiterating structural power as conceptualized by Black feminist thought and how it relates to colonization in early childhood, with specific focus on the articles read on the topic (see Figure 1). An explanation was also provided on how to participate in photovoice, emphasizing that students represent their ideas through photography abstractly (see Figure 2). Students mostly ventured outside the classroom to take pictures with instant cameras on the university grounds, collaboratively capturing abstract representations of structural power and colonization. When students returned to the classroom, they wrote detailed captions for each of their photos (usually 5–6 total), and then presented their projects to the class.

These procedures were followed throughout the semester to address the three remaining domains of power. To illustrate disciplinary power and the intersections of race, class, gender, and age, the lived experiences of Black and White teenage mothers struggling in the welfare system was explored through students' reading and discussion of several chapters from Polakow's (1992) *Lives on the edge: Single mothers and their children in the other America*. Hegemonic power as it relates to dis/ability was addressed through the use of Lester and Gabriel's (2013) *Performances of research: Critical issues in K-12 education*. Using scripts from the book written in playwright format, students performed powerful excerpts of children's real-life experiences being labeled as dis/abled and their parents' struggles to forge supportive partnerships with teachers and schools. For the final in-class project, students unpacked interpersonal power within early educators' relations with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) families and communities. Students read and discussed articles by Blaise and Taylor (2012) and Skattebol (2007), and were provided with LGBTQ resource materials from the Family and Equity Council (2008). They also watched and discussed parts of the film *It's elementary: Talking about gay issues in schools* (Cohen & Chasnoff, 1996).

## **Student trends and issues engaging with Black feminist photovoice**

### ***Seeing themselves in the content***

As illustrated in the previous section, prior to each of the four in-class Black feminist PV activities, students engaged intensely with course content. Through readings, lectures, films, and discussions, many students appeared to have profound personal connections to topics

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## BLACK FEMINIST PHOTOVOICE ACTIVITY I

### Structural Power

Structural power is embedded in social and institutional contexts (institutional contexts can include school, legal and political systems, to name a few) (Collins, 2008). An example of structural power can be found in laws that have historically denied people who are indigenous to what is now the United States the rights to their land and cultural ways of being.

### ASSIGNMENT

Through photovoice, please represent structural power related to your reading and discussion about colonization abstractly (e.g., there should be no photos that can identify you or your classmates). Then, represent a way that you, as early childhood educators, will resist continuing this cycle of oppression. Please write a description under each photo explaining its meaning. **Choose one of the following readings to focus on:**

#### **Structural Power Related to Bigelow Reading:**

In the United States, we have not only denied our role in the genocide (e.g., mass and brutal killing) of people indigenous to the land, but we have celebrated it with holidays like Columbus Day and Thanksgiving and also with curriculum in our early childhood programs that include the reading of books and planning of activities that inaccurately depict Columbus as a hero (Bigelow, 2009).

Hint: To represent structural power, think about the ways that early childhood programs perpetuate the inaccurate depiction of Columbus. What was the reality of what he was like and what he did to the indigenous peoples of this land? To represent how you will resist continuing this cycle of oppression, think about ways that you, as an early childhood educator, might rethink your use of certain curriculum or celebration of particular holidays.

#### **Structural Power Related to Kaomea Reading:**

Sometimes structural power can show itself in ways that are not as obvious. An example of this can be found in your reading about the Native Hawaiian mother and her family's experiences with her pregnancy, child's premature birth, and later when her child was pre-school aged (Kaomea, 2005).

Hint: To represent structural power, think about the ways that the author describes how dominant ideas about pre-natal care and her and her family's experience in the hospital (and then later feeling pressure to place her daughter in an early childhood program) did not allow for her and her family to maintain their cultural heritage. To represent how you will resist continuing this cycle of oppression, think about ways that you, as an early childhood educator, might make your program more inclusive of Native American families so that they can participate without feeling like they are losing their culture.

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**Figure 1.** Example Black feminist photovoice activity on colonization.

addressed. We found that Black feminist PV provided another layer for creative expression of the oppressions many students felt based on their own intersectional identities. One student connected her lived experiences with being labeled dis/abled as a child to a PV activity on hegemonic power. Based on her struggles with the school system and her group's engagement with Lester and Gabriel's (2013) performative text, one of the group's pictures portrayed a t-shirt with a blank name tag pinned to it. This was to advocate for the removal of labels that create harmful, hegemonic narratives about "disabled" children, particularly when some are viewed as less capable than their peers based on a few hours of evaluation or failure to pass benchmark exams and standardized tests.

Another student connected PV and disciplinary power to her struggles as a parent navigating the welfare system. In collaboration with her group, a picture was taken of wrists with a chain necklace placed around them, illustrating how U.S. welfare programs



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**Photovoice General Instructions:**

1. Only represent issues abstractly (e.g., no identifiable aspects of students should be photographed).
  2. Please address two ideas in your photos: one that shows your use of photovoice to represent your ideas about power abstractly, **AND** one that shows how, as early childhood educators, you will resist continuing this cycle of oppression and support diverse families and communities.
  3. Be sure to write a detailed description under each photo representation explaining its meaning.
  4. Please put each of your group members' names on your work.
  5. Be ready to present and lead a discussion on your projects as a group to the class.
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**Figure 2.** Photovoice general instructions for students.

often cause single mothers to feel imprisoned by the system. The group's picture was inspired not only by one student's lived experiences, but also by Polakow's (1992) discussions on how making a few cents or dollars over the poverty line forces many families off welfare support. This causes parents (who are often single mothers) to make difficult decisions about forgoing employment or advancement opportunities in order to receive much needed financial support and child care subsidies. Black feminist PV, lived experiences, and course content provoked students to collectively represent the complex circumstances involved in parents' struggles with poverty and the welfare system.

### ***Black feminist understandings of both/and***

Although not all students had personal experiences that connected them with the course content, from the beginning of the semester, emphasis was placed on exploring students' identities as intersectional and multifaceted. Collins (2008) explains that each of us experience *both* privilege in society (for instance in regards to race or class) *and* marginalization (e.g., if one is dis/abled, living in poverty, and/or is lesbian). Black feminist PV provides a way for students to confront these *both/and* positionalities (Collins, 2008) while making connections between their own privileged and marginalized social locations and those embodied by their peers and the children, families, and communities they serve. As an example, because of participation in the LGBTQ photovoice activity, a student who identifies as heterosexual was compelled to create a family night at his child care center that focused on embracing and valuing the many gifts that LGBTQ families bring to a center's community. Through critical understanding of his intersectional identity and how this impacts interpersonal power relations, the student had an opportunity to rethink his approach to supporting LGBTQ families.

As instructors who have taught in higher education settings for many years, we have witnessed students make powerful connections to course content; however, we have undoubtedly seen a deeper understanding of students' own intersectional identities when using Black feminist photovoice and how these understandings can not only assist in unpacking power, privilege, and oppression, but also how it relates to supporting and building strong and meaningful relations with diverse families and communities.

## Potential student resistance to Black feminist photovoice

While some students made strong connections to the course content and PV projects, similar to what might happen with any class discussion or activity centering on critical multiculturalism, there was at times resistance from students when their previous, often dominant understandings of power and oppression were challenged (hooks, 2010; Kumashiro, 2009). As an example, during class discussions on colonization, one student with race and class privilege vocally expressed that colonization had occurred in the past. She believed that the raping and pillaging of people and their land was merely the way things were back then and that there were no contemporary consequences to such actions. This student, however, was part of a group that days later constructed a phenomenal photovoice project addressing structural power and colonization. Self-pairing with four peers who were predominately of color or had other marginalizing identity intersections, the group collectively captured a photo of a flower in between a person's bare feet in muddy water. They explained that this was to illustrate the diluting of indigenous cultures as a result of historical and contemporary colonization. While we cannot be certain that the student with initially oppressive viewpoints on colonization was influenced by her engagement with PV and her group peers, at the very least, it opened an additional space for her to further contemplate critical understandings of structural power.

Later in the semester during a PV activity on hegemonic power and dis/ability, students learned that colonization of the mind can occur, making each of us—even the marginalized—susceptible to taking on oppressive grand narratives. As facilitators, it was imperative to make explicit connections between the notion of hegemony and previous course discussions surrounding colonization. The hope was that if students could make connections with one facet of power and oppression like hegemony (in this case, how it related to dis/ability), they would be more likely to see how it intersects with other modes of oppression they might be struggling to understand (such as colonization). We do not expect that dramatic shifts in students' thinking will typically occur after only a few class periods or even one semester (although they sometimes can); however, with exposure of strong content, facilitated discussions informed by critical theory such as Black feminist thought, and student-generated activities like photovoice, we have seen that transformative moments are possible.

## Example cumulative Black feminist photovoice project

Throughout the semester, the students' four in-class PV projects and the discussions that ensued inspired each of us in the audience to think more deeply about power, how it relates to family and community dynamics, and ways in which to generate meaningful relations and support for families and communities. At the end of the semester, as a culminating assignment, students completed a final PV project that addressed one of the topics covered during the semester (e.g., family and community dynamics related to colonization; the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and/or language; dis/ability; or LGBTQ). Students were required to use photovoice and provide written commentary about their ideas to (1) offer insight into their own identities and how they related to their chosen topic (Johnson, 2006; Nieto, 2010); (2) explain and give examples of their topic within each of Collins's (2008) four domains of power discussed throughout the semester;

and (3) a way in which they, as early childhood professionals and activists, could contribute to stopping cycles of oppression while building networks of support for diverse families and communities. In the forthcoming, Elaine, a 1st-year student enrolled in our families and communities course, discusses her final project.

### **Elaine's Black feminist photovoice project**

I chose the topic of colonization for my final photovoice project in Dr. Pérez's family and community course. Based on readings by Bigelow (2009) and Kaomea (2005), a film entitled *Unlearning 'Indian' stereotypes: Native American history through the eyes of Native American children* (Rethinking Schools and the Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1977/2008), and lectures by Dr. Pérez (Loomba, 2005; Said, 1978; Viruru, 2012), I learned that colonization occurs when a dominant force (in our case, Western/European societies) rips away the livelihoods of those who are native to the land. In our history of colonization and genocide in the United States, we have betrayed many indigenous peoples by forcing them out of their territories and taking everything they have even though we signed a treaty stating we would respect the right to their land. We have colonized Native American languages, such as Navajo, by forcing First Nation's peoples to learn English and have also attempted to strip them of their culture, making indigenous communities seem as if they never existed.

I can relate in some ways to indigenous struggles with language when I reflect upon my own Mexican/American cultural heritage, and this is why I chose to focus on colonization for my culminating Black feminist photovoice project. My first picture represents my identity (see Figure 3). The red, white, and green light bulbs symbolize the Mexican flag, which I feel connected to because of my Mexican/American heritage. Both sets of grandparents, who were born in Mexico, and my parents, who were born in the United States, speak Spanish fluently. Although my brothers and I were raised around Mexican culture and learned many customs from our elders, we were only taught the basics of Spanish to help us communicate with our grandparents; however, my parents did not regularly speak to us in Spanish. This is because they knew that in the United States, the dominant language supported has been English. Over time, my brothers and I were stripped of our native tongue and forced to learn English to please the dominant, and so we wouldn't be excluded from places where Spanish was not spoken or supported, like at school. This is a form of continued colonization in the U.S., because of the dominance of English over "foreign" languages.

### **Structural power**

Structural power refers to systemic oppressions (Collins, 2008). When I think about structural power and colonization, laws come to mind, particularly laws that exist to oppress rather than serve marginalized communities. For indigenous peoples and the Mexican families who originally lived in the southwest prior to its colonization by the Spanish, structural power allowed for the creation of laws that have forced Mexican/American societies to become foreigners in their own land (Takaki, 1993). Colonization continues to exist within current immigration laws, which not only deny Mexican immigrants legal residence, but have also forced them to change their cultural ways of being in order to follow the "law".



**Figure 3.** Identity photo. These light bulbs represent my family, who grew up in the Mexican culture. Colonization took place long before I was born and continues today. My grandparents were Mexican and spoke fluent Spanish. They taught my parents Spanish, but when my brothers and I were born, my parents did not teach us to speak Spanish fluently. In the US, as “minorities”, we have been forced to deny our language and culture to satisfy those who speak the dominant language, English.

To illustrate structural power, I took a picture of a lock (see [Figure 4](#)), because in order to unlock a door, a key is required. For those who are not from the United States, a green card (or key) is required to live and work in the states legally. Without a green card, children and families coming from Mexico or Latin American countries south of the border have no choice but to be deported against their will, making it risky to exist in what for many was once their land. This circumstance relates to structural power because the United States has created laws that prevent hardworking Mexican families to live and work in the states. They are not allowed to be here, or in some cases welcomed, unless they have a key. Even when they do have a key, at times, their cultural ways of knowing and being remain unaccepted.

### ***Disciplinary power***

Disciplinary power occurs when the dominant group maintains oppression over “others” even when structural power has been resisted. To illustrate disciplinary power, I took a picture of a cage (see [Figure 5](#)), because when someone is in a cage, she is not free. Those with marginalized identities who have been colonized in the U.S., such as children or parents who identify as Mexican/American or Native American, are often not at liberty to do what they desire (for instance to speak about or against colonization and have their viewpoints heard). Even though historically marginalized families and communities have been able to resist domination, in some ways, the dominant continues to trap them. The picture I took of a cage also relates to disciplinary power because oppressed people have not been given the freedom to express and embrace their culture in the United States. Throughout our history, both Native Americans and Mexican/Americans have had their



**Figure 4.** Structural power photo. This lock represents the necessity to have a green card to come to the United States to live and work. A green card (the key) is required to gain legal entry. Once someone has a key, the door can be opened. This picture shows how through colonization, Mexicans are now required to have a green card to be allowed to live and work in the United States. Without it, they have no choice but to go back to Mexico or be in the U.S. “illegally”.

culture stripped from them. They have been turned down for admittance to schools, excluded from national debates, or have been treated as nonexistent. Disciplinary power often cages one’s culture, perspectives, and even their very presence, despite countless efforts of resistance. When caged in, they have no place to run; they cannot move their arms when or how they want, or to stand up to make people listen. The dominant must be made aware of this form of disciplinary power and the role colonization has played in creating oppressive circumstances for the marginalized families we work with as early childhood educators.

### ***Hegemonic power***

Hegemonic power occurs when one’s state of mind causes her or him to oppress others. Challenging hegemonic power allows people to realize the role he or she plays in



**Figure 5.** Disciplinary power photo. This cage represents how marginalized families and communities have not been given the freedom to express their culture and have struggled to keep it alive. In our history of colonization in the United States, we have forced Indigenous and Mexican peoples out of their land for selfish reasons and have stripped them of their culture and language. This disciplinary form of oppression is similar to caging someone in, leaving them without freedom.

maintaining oppression (through her thoughts and actions), and instead support the cultures of diverse families and communities.

To illustrate hegemonic power, I have taken a picture of an all-white wall (see [Figure 6](#)). The wall symbolizes how people sometimes have a hegemonic, blank state of mind when the belief is held that the United States should only represent ‘White’ culture. Historic and contemporary colonization has led to the hegemonic state of color blindness, or when one believes that a person of color is just like everyone else; however, if a person is color blind, he or she does not truly ‘see’ a Mexican or Indigenous person for who she really is, discounting all of the wonderful cultural attributes she provides to our society. When early childhood educators are color blind, they can create a classroom environment that excludes rather than supports children and families of color (like in my experience as a child with language at school, where a hegemonic environment discounted the cultures of non-English-speaking children and parents). Hegemonic power, then, can lead to educators that



**Figure 6.** Hegemonic power photo. Through historical and contemporary forms of colonization, educators have focused on the culture of dominant groups, excluding the lived experiences of marginalized families and communities. The white in this picture represents the dominance of white culture and its values, and the exclusion—even sometimes erasure—of people of color.

have oppressive thoughts and discriminate, sometimes unknowingly, against children and communities of color. People who believe that one culture (e.g., White culture) is the only one that should be supported in schools are represented by the white wall in the picture.

### ***Interpersonal power***

Interpersonal power occurs in our daily interactions (Collins, 2008). To critically examine interpersonal relations, an understanding of ourselves as educators is needed; once we understand our own intersectional identities (and how they relate to power and oppression), we can understand our relations with others (Nieto, 2010).

To represent interpersonal power, I chose to take a picture of ducks swimming in a pond (see Figure 7). The duck in front resembles a leader, like a teacher, and the other ducks resemble



**Figure 7.** Interpersonal power photo. In this picture, the duck in front represents the teacher, who is a leader that recognizes her own identity, its relationship with power and oppression, and how this understanding can foster equity and respect for the diverse families and communities she serves.

families and students. Interpersonal power is represented by this photo because when a teacher can understand herself (in my case, my Latina identity and how language colonization in the United States has affected me and my families' loss of culture and relationship with schools), she can establish respect and have an understanding of the struggles encountered by the communities she serves. Understanding interpersonal power also supports an environment for teachers and families to work cooperatively as a team in order to reach a destination collectively (for instance to support equity for *all* families and communities).

### ***My role as an early childhood educator***

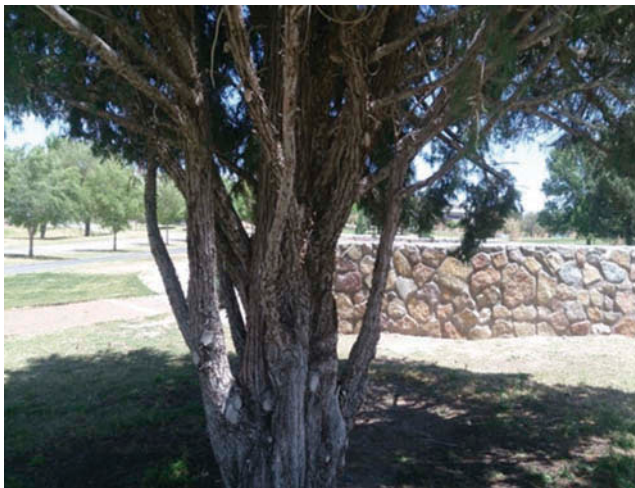
I took two pictures to represent how I can stop the colonization of Latina and Native American communities by fostering a network of support rather than excluding. In my first picture, I photographed different colored puzzle pieces, which represents the diverse identities of teachers and families (see [Figure 8](#)). I want to teach children and let the families and communities I work with know that we are all different (for instance with the languages and cultures we embody), but like a puzzle, when we unite together, our diverse experiences, struggles, and understandings of the world create a larger community of support where everyone feels included and part of something meaningful.

Another way I can help to stop the cycle of colonization is by teaching young children that even though we all have diverse identities, we share the common trait of being human, and therefore, every culture deserves to be honored and preserved rather than colonized. My second picture shows a tree that has several different branches expanding from the same place, the ground (see [Figure 9](#)). Every branch is different and represents each of our diverse identities, and the ground represents our common origin, the female's





**Figure 8.** Early childhood educators as agents of change photo, Part 1. Representation of early childhood educators serving as agents of change and support for families and communities. Everyone's individual identity is different, just like a puzzle piece. But when all of our differences are brought together, we form a diverse coalition of support.



**Figure 9.** Early childhood educators as agents of change photo, Part 2. Representation of early childhood educators serving as agents of change and support for families and communities. It will take much time and effort to stop colonization because not many have the power or authority to confront and dismantle these forces. However, as an early childhood educator, I know I have the power to teach young children that even though we are diverse, like the different branches of this tree, we are all human, and therefore, all children, families, and communities should all be treated equitably.

reproductive system. I want to convey to children that although we are all diverse, we come from the same place (a womb), and therefore, each culture should be treated equitably—no one should be excluded; no culture should be colonized because they are different from the dominant.

## Concluding thoughts

The most exciting aspect of critical thinking in the classroom is that it calls for initiative from everyone, actively inviting all students to think passionately and to share ideas in a passionate, open manner. When everyone in the classroom, teacher and students, recognizes that they are responsible for creating a learning community together, learning is at its most meaningful and useful. . . [ensuring] that we leave the classroom knowing that critical thinking empowers us. (hooks, 2010 p. 11)

These poignant words offered by bell hooks rang true for both us as instructors and for the students enrolled in our families and communities course. Elaine, in particular, felt that Black feminist thought provided a way to understand power and oppression, while photovoice cultivated her creativity and imagination in order to solidify and expand upon her initial understandings of colonization. Elaine has also passionately expressed that after learning about colonization through her culminating Black feminist photovoice project, she is inspired to change teachers' approaches to family and community relations. As an early childhood educator, she now feels compelled to better understand family and community struggles, make all children feel welcomed in her classroom, and take any measure possible to prevent the continued colonization of diverse languages and cultures that her students and their families embody.

As early childhood teacher educators (Michelle and Margarita), we have seen the value of exposing students to critical perspectives. Through engagement with Black feminist photovoice, we have witnessed students' powerful testimonies of their own past struggles as children experiencing race, class, sexuality, language, dis/ability, and gender oppression, and even recognition of their own privileged identities (for example as those who have had access to college, and for some, the privilege that comes with their White, heterosexual, and/or middle-class identities). Through peer dialogue generated by Black feminist photovoice, students are able to better understand and connect with the family and community dynamics present within early childhood contexts and generate new imaginaries for becoming agents of social change. In this way, Black feminist photovoice functions as a way for students to theorize power and oppression and acts as a transformative pedagogical tool for educators to actualize social justice within early childhood education and care.

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